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Ateneo Municipal de Manila.

Salón de Estudio.
What is this? You must be asking yourselves, holding on to a much smaller, and yet much thicker version of *Fabilioh!* the Ateneo Alumni Magazine.

Welcome to the third year of *Fabilioh!* and to this new issue that we hope will have a repeat at some point in the magazine’s history. This time, rather than present alumni news or university plans, we want to share with you the actual product of our alums. And since it is summer, we’d like you to have an even more awesome summer by making this issue something you can bring with you in a travel bag. This is this issue’s most simple wish: that you read your Ateneo author.

As you turn the page, we give you a movable feast of 6 short stories in Filipino, including an excerpt from a novel, from Julz Riddle, and a link from Tony Perez, who was generous enough to share with you his own novel. Included are 10 short stories in English, led by no one less than Horacio de la Costa, sj, whom perhaps you have met as a historian.
or essayist; in these pages, we share him with you as a fictionist. These 17 works were all written by Ateneans and run through a very long span of history.

Why, though? And, why now? I hope I am not being facetious when I reply: well, why not? And if not now, then when?

As Editor, my plan was simple: one, to entertain you and show you the breadth and depth and height of the author who is educated at the Ateneo. These stories are riveting, compelling, compassionate, true, authentic, and some even heartbreaking. The individual writer is a seed that blooms when placed in fertile soil. It is my argument that Ateneo was, and continues to be rich soil.

Two, much is said about what Ateneo has done for scientists and athletes, but the history and heart of the university lies in its liberal arts, in its deep roots in the humanities. How many of us grew up with the poetry of Wordsworth, Hopkins, Villa, and Tinio? And how many of us have a monologue by Shakespeare ingrained in our hearts? How many of us
were forever changed by the philosophy of Fr. Roque or the music of Fr. Manoling? The Ateneo writer must be recognized and we are honored by the authors who have agreed to share with us their stories. Let me admit as well, that these are but a fraction of what’s out there, by writers in English and Filipino. We hope that this collection will be enough to whet your appetite. And a warning: these are not stories for the faint of heart. These are grown-up stories for people who understand the complexity of the world.

And why now? Fiction leads us to places far away so that we may return to ourselves, anew. We live in troubled, troubled times, and yet every artist knows that every time is troubled. What to do then? Make art. Not just because it makes sense of chaotic times, as all art forms are ways by which we make meaningful sense of chaos. But more importantly it is because stories and storytelling become even more crucial in a nation trying to find itself. An imaginary world is a place to critique the real world, so that we may change what we can and keep what we must and foolishly and yet bravely, begin to change our own world. We learned this too, from the author Rizal, he who was also, an Atenean.

We wish to thank all the authors, the original publishers, and the families of the authors who agreed to let us run their stories. So, place this issue in your travel bag now, or in your everyday bag, and take it out when caught in traffic, or caught in line, or when in need of a mental extraction. Come, read, and taste and see the goodness of stories.

Enjoy!

RICA BOLIPATA-SANTOS, PH.D
Editor-in-Chief
CLASE DE DIBUJO.
CREATIVE IMAGINATION

JUNE 23, 2017, SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST SACRED HEART OF JESUS

Creative Imagination. This is what I have in mind while I write this message. I am reminded of the Ignatian Contemplation where Ignatius invites the exercitant to penetrate a Gospel scene—to see, smell, touch, hear, and taste—in order to gain a ‘sentir’ or a sense experience of our Lord as if one were truly there. And to be transformed by this method of prayer.

Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, sj, the former Superior General of the Jesuits, while addressing the Presidents of Jesuit Universities several years ago, mentions this: “The globalization of superficiality challenges Jesuit higher education to promote in creative new ways the depth of thought and imagination that are distinguishing marks of the Ignatian tradition.”

I have learned that this “depth of thought and imagination” can be expressed in the simplest form of language. The simplest words can easily connect and they carry with them the deepest meanings like “faith, hope,
and love.” I learned this ‘technique’ from the Jesuit masters themselves, my teachers at my Juniorate year in the mid-80s, Fr. Jim Donelan, sj and Fr. Joe Galdon, sj.

I now remember with a smile how Fr. Jim checked our written works at aim. He would project each piece from a projector on the board and the whole class including himself would analyze it with surgical precision. He had this principle of the “fat content.” He would count the number of words in our essays, then count the ‘fat’ words. The more ‘fat’ you have in your written work, the lower your grade. ‘Fat’ here points to useless, needless, and senseless words that we used in our essays. I must admit that that exercise was fun but a bit humiliating to a class of young aspiring Jesuits.

Fr. Jim’s (also Fr. Joe’s) message was simple: We write in order to communicate, to be understood. They taught us that good essays (and sermons) are direct and simple.

The Fabilioh! Team has decided that this issue be a literary one. Para maiba naman daw. We meant to surprise the readers from what you expect it to be in the past issues. But more importantly, we chose to publish them for their intent – to nourish our love and our resolve to build our own nation.

We have collected awarded short stories from our fellow Ateneans. I cite one here because of its social impact.

“The Children of the City” by Amadis Ma. Guerrero (ags’52; ahs’56) describes the plight of the urban poor and how its violent and apathetic culture can destroy the lives of the innocents. Immediately after losing his father in a violent strike, Victor sees his mother with another man. In a sink or swim mode, the lonely and isolated Victor finds a menial job as a newspaper boy. He finds a good friend, Nacio, but also loses him in a fatal car accident. The story unfolds with the hardships of his tasks, the sleepless nights in the streets, the beatings he endured, and the peer pressure that puts him in a tension between “being one of the guys” and “just being himself.” The story is open-ended with a question in my mind, “How will Victor make out?”
We read this literary issue in our present context that is plagued with violence—the Marawi War, the Resorts World Tragedy, the terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, not to mention the Refugee Crisis and the ongoing wars in the Middle East. Our creative alumni and alumnae writers, given their own perspectives, carry their weapons of pen and paper, not guns and bullets. They have something to say to all of us in their chosen field of art and expression. Their stories stir our imaginations and challenge us to creatively respond to plunge the depths of reality and exert effort to change it for the better. Víctor challenges us to immerse ourselves in a world that is plagued with imperfections, to “be in the world but not of it.”

May this Fabilioh! issue from the creative imaginations of our fellow Ateneans stir in us creative tensions in our lives to change ourselves, love our country, and build it.

In our Lord,

NORBERTO MA. L. BAUTISTA, SJ
Director, Office of Alumni Relations
This school year we celebrate two milestones: the 50th anniversary of the Rizal Library and the opening of Arete, the university’s creativity hub. How fitting, therefore, that this year’s first issue of Fabilioh! is a literary feast of 16 short stories and a novel from our very own homegrown Ateneo authors.

You might find it strange to hold an alumni magazine with not much news or plans, no mention of sports, no listing of accomplishments and feats. In this issue, we offer you a different kind of menu for a different sort of hunger that visits us every so often: the hunger for stories. For the moment then, I hope you will suspend your expectations of what an alumni magazine ought to be. For this issue, we hope to enter different dimensions of our lives through this one creative faculty given to us: the imagination.

The 17 stories in this literary collection span decades and begin with graduates from the time when Ateneo was still an all-male college to the present millennial generation of writers. This span of time simply proves
that there is something perhaps in the air or the water here on campus. The Ateneo artist has thrived and continues to thrive, I do believe, because our very core, which can be found not just in our curriculum and instruction, is firmly anchored in the liberal arts. But apart from philosophy and method, the artist comes alive in the Ateneo because of the way it is built. The campus is full of corners where meditation and rumination are encouraged. There are areas where lively debates can be held and walkways that stimulate deep and critical thinking. On any given day, you are certain to find musicians jamming under a fire tree. Poetry readings abound, as well, and you won’t find it strange anymore to see how our events are punctuated with prayer and performance. To the Atenean, every space is creative space. Give an Atenean any platform and he or she will make it a stage. We stand Ateneans on a hill, a ridge, a critical vantage point that empowers them to see more and to ask more. This is the Ateneo that we all know and love. True, the creative genius is rooted from within, but that creative genius requires a playground, as well.

Imagine yourself an artist in front of the Rizal Library. While the first Ateneo library may be traced to the first school established by the Jesuits in the Philippines, it was only in 1967 that its university library was given the name of its most illustrious alumnus, Jose Rizal. In the decades that followed, the Rizal Library has nurtured and supported the works of Ateneo alumni and faculty. The library does not just house a fantastic collection of material. It is much more than that. The very existence of a library and the continued support of its growth speak of the university’s reverence for scholarship. This love for the written word and the intrinsic value for quiet are necessary ingredients in the building of an elegant mind.

In a few months we shall open Arete, by the grace of God and by the generosity of so many who believe in the value of creativity, innovation, and collaboration. The idea is for Arete to provide spaces for celebrating and nurturing creative practice in all its forms. While it houses the Ateneo Art Gallery and the 850 seat Hyundai Hall and The Doreen Black Box that showcases excellent visual and performing arts, it is also the home of the...
Fine Arts Department of the Loyola Schools, under which are Creative Writing, Theater Arts, Information Design, and Arts Management.

Areté is envisioned as the hub that will foster what we call trans-disciplinary thinking and action. It is an iconic space that will converge people from different academic and non-academic fields so that they can apply themselves to the multi-faceted act of creation and greater innovation. It is with this intention that the various creative practices are given space and freedom. For instance, there is a Literary Arts room in the George S. Ty Learning Innovation Wing, which can be one space among many for writers to come together to quietly work on manuscripts and current projects or gather in small groups for readings and author’s interviews. It is also the home base for visiting authors on campus. More than just a space for the arts, the Arete will house factories for putting our ideas to action, fab labs or makerspaces for the makers and geeks. In short, more playgrounds and evolving spaces wherever they can be discovered or found for the multi-dimensional person that is the Atenean.

There is much to look forward to in the years ahead. I hope that while you read the works of these Ateneo authors here, you will be reminded of our rich legacy as creative beings. I hope you are as excited as I am to see what will become of our students and faculty and alumni when they begin to engage with the old and new spaces on campus. I wish you all a fruitful and creative new school year.

JOSÉ RAMÓN T. VILLARIN, SJ
President, Ateneo de Manila University
To the Atenean, every space is creative space. Give an Atenean any platform and he or she will make it a stage. We stand Ateneans on a hill, a ridge, a critical vantage point that empowers them to see more and to ask more. This is the Ateneo that we all know and love. True, the creative genius is rooted from within, but that creative genius requires a playground, as well.
“CHIQUITO!” SHOUTED A YOUNG, DETERMINED, FEMININE VOICE.

Dropping his baskets on the crowded pavement of Manila’s busiest market place, a young Chinese boteya buyer turned with an embarrassed smile. A Japanese miss in a blue and white uniform skipped up to him. It was Yori Arimoto.

“Why do you ignore your neighbor in the street?” she reproved severely.

“I am very sorry, Miss Arimoto.” Chiquito’s fingers fumbled frantically at the frayed edges of his jacket. “This dirty and despicable creature is not worthy to appear before the public gaze in your honorable presence.”

The young lady wrinkled her nose at him. “Is there a place in the rumble seat for my books?”

“Rumble seat?”
Stopping swiftly over Chiquito’s rear basket, the girl cleared a space amid the welter of bottles and dropped in her school texts with a sigh of relief.

“There!” said she, looking pertly at the strong, young Chinaman. “The excess baggage will be a mere drop in the bucket.”

Swinging the pingga to his broad shoulders with an easy grace, Chiquito resumed his peculiar, springy, boteya trot, while his companion tripped gaily beside him. With dusk gathering about them the two waded cautiously through the swirling traffic of the Rizal-Azcarraga crossing. They made port safely beneath the huge umbrella of Asiong, the policeman.

“New friend, Yori?” he asked.

“We have been neighbors for two years.” Yori’s almond eyes smiled up at him. “But we have spoken to each other only now.”

Asiong flashed his traffic lights. He blew a curt blast on his whistle and held up his hand. Then all Manila made way for Yori and Chiquito.

Reaching the opposite pavement, they paused under a neon sign. The sign blinked: “Malviz Tailoring-Malviz Tailoring.”

Mr. Malviz himself was inside his show window, lovingly draping upon a mustached dummy the latest creation of his art. Chiquito’s eyes widened with delight. It was a superb Norfolk suit, of the color of ashes-of-roses.

“Mr. Malviz!” Yori was pressing her nose against the class and tapping upon it. “Have you any bottles for Chiquito?”

“Yori!” Mr. Malviz turned and peered down upon them over his glasses. “Now, what would I, a tailor, be doing with bottles?”

They skipped away. Mr. Malviz shook his head slowly, kindly. Then, stooping down, he moved the price placard ever so little into the orange light. The color softened somewhat the stiffness of its “P 27.50.” Mr. Malviz, you see, was a psychologist.

Yori and Chiquito came to a halt at a quiet corner beneath a stunted tamarind. This tamarind had entangled among its dusty leaves two stars and a crescent moon. Such things are possible in the City where even the
heavens must struggle for attention against buildings and activity. Beside the tree was a corner store, exactly like Manila’s ten thousand others, with a sleepy eyed Chinaman perched on the sagging ice-box. He was Chiquito’s business partner. This was Chiquito’s store.

“Here we are,” said Yori, picking up her books again. “Good-bye, Chiquito! Thank you for carrying my books.”

Leaving him a coy smile, she skipped across the street to the opposite corner where Arimoto’s Refreshment Parlor was ablaze with light. Arimoto’s square face looked up from the paper napkin he was folding and brightened suddenly. Yori came home from school every evening. Every evening her coming was an event for Arimoto.

“Welcome home again, little sister!”

“Oh, honored brother!” she exclaimed, bright-eyed and breathless.

“Do we have any bottles for sale?”

Meanwhile, Chiquito had leaped across the counter of his little store, had jerked the cash drawer and was feverishly counting the earnings.

“Five, ten, fourteen, fourteen-fifty, fourteen sixty-six,” he muttered and became lost in a happy dream of Yori—in a Norfolk suit.

II

One Sunday afternoon, weeks later, Arimoto sat at his eternal folding of paper napkins. He looked up. There, shimmering in his doorway, was a Norfolk suit of the color of ashes-and-roses. Except for the familiar smile, he would never have known Chiquito.

“I would like—” began Chiquito nervously, “I would like to take Yori—Miss Arimoto—to see a talking picture, and then to take a walk in the Luneta. Is this objectionable to Mr. Arimoto, please?”

There was a little cry. Arimoto turned. He saw Yori clutching at the curtains of the kitchen door.

“Oh, honored brother!” she exclaimed; and then clapped both hands to her mouth. She feared that she would scream with excitement.
Arimoto’s face was very grave. He turned back wordlessly to his folding. There was silence in the little parlor for the space of one napkin, two napkins, three, four. Then Arimoto spoke, very quietly.

“Have you finished your new dress, Yori?”
“Oh yes, please, dear brother?”
“Go, then, and put it on.”

Yori was gone in an instant. Already they could hear her bustling within, humming softly a wild little song of joy. Arimoto looked up with a brief smile.

“You are not Japanese, Chiquito,” he said. “But you are an honorable man. Take care of my little sister.”

So Yori and Chiquito went to the movies, and heard a band concert, and saw the sunset across the water, and bought peanuts, and a red balloon, and were very happy. Chiquito dutifully deposited her at the Parlor at seven, and bowed his way out the door. Arimoto was still folding paper napkins.

“Oh, honored brother, it was wonderful!” she signed, sinking beside him with a weary little flutter. “All the people, all the music! And the balloon! He said ‘Let it go.’ I let it go. It went up, over the clouds into the heavens.”

Arimoto was silent. He did not look up.

“What is the matter?” she asked.

Arimoto pushed away his napkins and handed Yori a newspaper. It was an English newspaper, with a single screaming headline. Arimoto’s face was grim.

“The big letters I was able to understand,” he said dully. “Read.”

Yori read, “China Receives Japanese Ultimatum.”

The chair scraped jarringly. Arimoto rose and strode over the wall. There hung a large colored map of China and Japan. Out of his pocket he pulled a box of colored pins.

“Now,” he said, “read to me in Japanese. What do the small letters say?”
III

VERY EARLY NEXT MORNING CHIQUITO WAS SITTING ON HIS ICEBOX, deep in thought. Today was the Big Day, the Day of the Question. Perhaps it would be Day of the Answer. The gods would surely... The gods! He must pray to them. But he could not pray to his pagan gods. They were pale and bloodless. They had never been in love. He had left them behind in China, long ago. He had forgotten their names.

He would pray to Yori's gods! Yori's gods were kind. Was she not staying home from school today, because it was the feast of a goddess? She had told him her name: Assumption. Yes, he would pray to Assumption, now. There was no one to see. Sitting up very straight on the ice-box, and folding his arms across his breast, Chiquito prayed.

"Assumption, Lady of Heaven, Great Friend of Yori, help my courtship. Make it, please, a big success. Amen."

Arimoto's parlor was open early that morning. Chiquito was seated at his usual table. He had become a steady customer.

"What will you have, Chiquito?" asked Yori.

Chiquito dared not look up. He did not see Yori's eyes. They were red with weeping.

"I will—I will have you, Yori," he stammered lamely.

"Yori!" It was Arimoto standing beside his map and its pin armies. He stood stiffly, unyielding. "Go inside. His country is at war with ours. All diplomatic relations must be broken. I beg the gentleman from China to leave, at once."

IV

THE WAR DRAGGED ON FOR DAYS, WEEKS. ON ARIMOTO'S COLORED MAP the space about Shanghai became ploughed up and ragged by see-sawing pins. Punctually at six every evening Arimoto would be standing beside it. Yori, just back from school, would translate for him the war news out of the afternoon paper. Grimly, silently, Arimoto would shift the pins. His
customers would look on. One evening a bit of a back page news caught Yori’s eye.

“Look, honored brother!” she exclaimed. “The geishas in Tokyo have staged a sit-down strike against the oppression of their employers.”

“Sit-down strike?”

“Yes. They sit down in the temple and refuse to work. They refuse to eat. They only pray.”

“They should be praying for Japanese armies. But turn to the front page, Yori, to the war news. What does it say?”

Across the street two “shoe-shine” boys were baiting Chiquito.

“You shirker!” said first boy. “Look at Arimoto. He is a patriot, why he almost dreams the war. Look at his flag!” The boy’s smudgy finger pointed across the street. There, above Arimoto’s cigar counter, hung Japan’s banner, scarlet even in the dusk.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“I do not want to fight with Arimoto,” said Chiquito. “I do not hate the Japanese…”

“Oh, you won’t fight? Well, we’ll make you!”

Chiquito could not stop them. They acted too swiftly. They hurled two stones across the street, splintering Arimoto’s show case into a thousand pieces. Then they took to their heels. White-faced, Chiquito leaped across his counter and ran over. Yori had rushed out and stood dazedly contemplating the wreckage.

“Listen, Yori,” he began. “I did not do it. Really and truly, please. Let me explain…”

Yori merely looked at him, and said “Oh!” in a small, cold voice, and fled back into the Parlor. He saw her holding back with all her thin strength a pale and murderous Arimoto, and crying: “Please, don’t Fuminari—please don’t! For my sake…”
V

THE NEXT DAY, YORI DID NOT COME BACK FROM SCHOOL. FROM SIX TO eight Arimoto stood motionless at the Parlor door, waiting. At eight, he closed up shop. Chiquito stopped him before the corner store.

“Where is Yori?” he demanded.

Arimoto’s beady, expressionless eyes held Chiquito’s for one long minute; then they fell. “I do not know,” he said, quite simply.

Silently, shoulder to shoulder, the two men marched forth into the night and into the City. No, Mr. Malviz, the tailor, had not seen her, nor had Asiong, the policeman. Portress at the school would call Mother Superior. Would they please sit down?

“She went home at the usual time,” said Mother Superior.

“Why? Is anything the matter?”

“No. Nothing, thank you.”

They walked the streets, searching. They hunted in and out of little lanes and down long stretches, through lines of lamps on the Escolta. The sidewalks were crowded at first, then struggling, then deserted. It was twelve o’clock. It was one o’clock. They could not find Yori.

Coming home, Chiquito said: “I did not throw those stones. Yori thought so. But I did not.”

“I know.” There was an odd catch in Arimoto’s voice. “I saw the boys throw them. She did not see. So I pretended to her. I wanted her to be angry with you. Forgive me, please…” His voice broke: “That is how wars are made.”

VI

VERY EARLY THAT MORNING, THEY RESUMED THE SEARCH. IT WAS fruitless. The following morning they grimly continued their search. Again there was no trace of Yori. They searched for three days. They did not feel weariness, only a dull ache in the heart. Crossing Santa Cruz bridge in the early evening, they stopped to stare down at the Pasig. What
if…? Shapeless and horrible thoughts gnawed at Chiquito’s brain. He could not shake them off.

“No, Chiquito.” Arimoto’s answer to his unspoken fear was weighted with solid certitude. “That is not the way of the Japanese.”

They walked on. Suddenly, Chiquito remembered something. “Perhaps it is because we have not prayed.”

Arimoto stopped abruptly. “Prayed? To whom?”

“There are many gods. My gods…” He shrugged his shoulders. “They are dead ancestors. They cannot help. Perhaps your gods…”

“My gods are gods of war. What care have they for a lost little girl when there is war over China?”

“Then, perhaps, Yori’s God…..” Chiquito’s arm shot out towards a hunched dome, and gaunt cross-lifted against the evening sky. “There.”

There was dusk and silence in the church as they entered. The only light was a flickering tongue of red before the altar. The only sounds were the echoes waking at the touch of hushed footfall on stone. The church was deserted. No. There was one watcher—there, in the front pew—kneeling very straight and still. They came nearer, nearer yet. It was Yori.

They fell on their knees, Chiquito, the son of China, and Fuminario Arimoto, son of Japan. They knelt close to Yori, one on either side. Here there was peace. In came a ghostly little breeze, stirring the white tabernacle veil, ever so slightly.

“Oh, thank You, thank You!” whispered Yori, with a sob of happiness. “My kneel-down strike succeeded! You brought these two beloved, in friendship, to your feet at last.”

Outside, in the raucous plaza, a newsboy was shouting something, over and over again. “Extra!” he was shouting. “Extra! Japanese Airmen Bomb Shanghai.” Yori, Chiquito, and Arimoto were happy together in prayerful peace.

**HORACIO DE LA COSTA, SJ** *(HS 1931, AB 1935, Honoris Causa Ph.D, Humane Letters 1965)*, communicator, historian, and writer, entered the Ateneo de Manila University at the age of 11, and spent the next 8 years
honoring his communication skills. In his college years, he was part of two student publications: *Today* magazine as the managing editor and poetry editor and *The Guidon* as editor-in-chief. In 1942, he wrote *Light Calvary*, which detailed the history of the Jesuits. Fr. de la costa also wrote another historical book on the Jesuits—*The Jesuits in the Philippines, 1581-1768* (1961). He also wrote books on Philippine culture and history such as *The Trial of Rizal: W.E. Retana’s Transcription of the Official Documents* (1961), *The Background of Nationalism and Other Essays* (1965), and *Asia and the Philippines* (1967).

Fr. de la Costa’s written works were not limited to books; he also contributed to various scholarly publications such as *Science Review, Philippine Social Sciences and Humanities Review, Bulletin of the Philippine Historical Association, American Historical Review*, and the *Catholic Encyclopedia* where he wrote the entry on the Philippines.

After obtaining a doctorate in History from Harvard University, Fr. de la Costa returned to the Ateneo to teach. He became chair of the History department, and, in 1953, became the first Filipino dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. In 1964, Fr. de la costa became the first Filipino Superior General of the Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus. Six years later, he went to Rome to become General Assistant and Consultor to Jesuit General Fr. Pedro Arrupe. In 1975, he came back to the Philippines and again taught at the Ateneo until his death from cancer in 1977.

Fr. de la Costa’s “Kneel-Down Strike” may be found in the book, *Horacio de la Costa, sj: Selected Writings of His Youth, 1927-1945*.
He had never seen or touched anything quite like it. The green leather, finely textured but smooth to the fingertips, the red and gold trim, the foil-stamped title on the broad spine: *The Norton Shakespeare*. He opened the book at random; it opened to *Twelfth Night*, page 1774, Act I Scene 5. He looked down and across the spread, drinking in the sight of the letters and spaces between them. He smiled upon seeing the names “Viola” and “Orsino” and “Feste” as if having the good fortune of running into old friends in a new country. He turned the page and marveled at the off-white, almost yellow paper, milky to the touch, thin and delicate, worthy of a most respectful reader. No, he couldn’t remember having seen or touched a book like this, much less owning one. Now it was his.

As he kept turning the pages, going back to the table of contents, glancing at the genealogy of kings in the endpapers, dipping into the essays in the appendices, he couldn’t decide which play he liked the most. Sometimes he agreed with a good majority of critics that *Hamlet* was ...
unsurpassed. Other times he thought *King Lear* plumbed the depths of despair like no other, and he affirmed the twentieth century’s acclamation of that work. Still other times he thought he preferred one of the comedies—*As You Like It*, featuring the compellingly complex Rosalind, or *Much Ado About Nothing*, with the sparkling verbal sparring of Benedick and Beatrice. Maybe it was even *Henry V*, the history that towered over the rest with its grand ambivalences. Then his mind turned to *Macbeth*, and thought how difficult it was to take a hero and turn him into a villain without ever making him completely hateful.

His mind turned to such thoughts now, but they didn’t need much prodding or the benefit of an occasion. He was, after all, the Shakespeare expert in this high school for boys where he had been teaching for more than two decades. Only a handful of the faculty members had served longer than he, and they were institutions in their own right. In the English department, two others had served longer. Wilhelmina Silva, whose hair had turned from jet black to gun metal to a shimmering white in her nearly thirty years in this school. Carlos Dureza was also nearing the end of his third decade. Benito Sales, bd’s namesake, and going on twenty-five years, had died the past school year two months before hitting his silver anniversary as a teacher.

The death made Benito Deluria Maiquez (or bd to his colleagues) the third-longest-serving teacher in English. There was some to-do three years ago, when his second decade ended and his third one began, and he feigned bemusement at the program the administration had put together to honor him and two other colleagues (one in Math, another in Science) as well as all the congratulations. In truth, he felt they did not go far enough. The program was not well attended; invitations to the Friday night affair were given out late, and guests of the honorees were sparse. Some of the teachers begged off, as the date had been decided less than two weeks before the event. And anyway, why would the younger folk take a Friday night off from their vibrant lives to honor three old teachers?

It was on that night, after the party and the ill-prepared songs and dances and skits were thankfully over, that it came home to bd that he was
old. Marianne Velez of Math was older by three years, Enrique Realuyo of Science by five, but as he sat on the makeshift stage of the gym (erected for such special occasions) with the two older ones beside him, he felt for the first time that the difference in years between them didn’t matter to anyone. In the eyes of the other teachers and of the staff, he was just another of the old folk, relics from times gone by, useful more for what they represent than for who they are.

He had heard the whispers, behind the polite smiles and attentive faces of the staff when they took his exams for mimeographing or gave out his payslip at the cashier’s or served him his coffee at the canteen (everyone made sure that his regular seat in the darkest corner of the faculty room in the canteen, farthest away from the TV tuned in to a noontime show, was available at twelve-thirty when he took his lunch), the words in hushed tones exchanged when his eyes were averted.

His colleagues in the English department tolerated him, though he was held in greater affection before. After his first few years, he was routinely asked to give a short seminar on the teaching of Shakespeare and the classics during the summer months, and he thought these were the best months of the year. He would photocopy articles from commentators—AC Bradley or Frank Kermode—and hand these out. He would play tape recordings of audio performances of the plays, tapes he would make from records he still had at home. (He was particularly proud of his Richard III featuring no less than Laurence Olivier.) He would screen excerpts from movie adaptations—Olivier’s Hamlet and Henry V, Zeffirelli’s Romeo and Juliet, Orson Welles’s Othello and Macbeth. He didn’t mind at all that none of the participants in these seminars matched him in eagerness, or that fewer among the teachers attended them year after year.

But he no longer gave the seminars. The department no longer asked him to, and though he dropped broad hints to anyone who cared to listen that he was willing to continue, no invitations came. Over the past decade, more and more of the teachers were dropping the tragedies from their reading lists, exchanging Hamlet or Macbeth for lighter fare such as A Midsummer Night’s Dream. When a few dropped Shakespeare
altogether and replaced him with Greek plays—Oedipus or Antigone or Medea—he didn’t mind much. But when these were in turn supplanted by Arthur Miller or J D Salinger, he went up to the chairman. It was fine to supplement the works of the world’s greatest writer with modern fare, but to supplant them entirely? The syllabus requires that we teach only one Shakespeare play every year, and will we give up even that? Chita Esperanza reasoned that since the turnover of teachers was high—up to one-fourth of the English teachers every year were new—their ability to teach the Bard’s works was questionable at best, and so they seemed better off giving their students material they themselves could handle. She had given the teachers the green light to make the change, a “small deviation” from the syllabus, herself. BD was left to mutter as he left her office about watering down the curriculum.

Over the last five years he became aware that only a handful of teachers still taught Shakespeare, but those who did used the same plays over and over—Romeo and Juliet or Julius Caesar or Midsummer—and had no need of BD’s help. Once in a while he would drop by their cubicles, lean an arm or elbow on the divider’s edge, and ask how their Shakespeare classes were going, how the students were enjoying it, if it might help for him to give a lecture or two, provide an audio recording, recommend a film version, or make copies of insightful articles. They always declined with severe politeness.

The administration didn’t seem to mind either. Parents didn’t complain that their sons weren’t reading Shakespeare, and neither did the students. The only complaints BD heard of were about Math teachers who gave too much homework, a PE teacher who made inappropriate physical contact with an undressed student in the lockers, an art teacher selling cartolina and markers to students then pocketing the money. Recently a clamor arose from both teachers and students for more computers, and the principal had himself kicked off a fund drive, meeting well-off parents and possible corporate sponsors, to raise money for new computer labs as well as another audio-visual room. No one raised their voices to ask for more of the Bard.
And so bd would find himself spending more and more time, swathes of mornings and afternoons even, in his cubicle, along with his students’ papers and their stunningly bad grammar, his books, and his thoughts. He would pick up his paperbacks of Dickens or Austen or Hemingway, follow the stories unfolding in their novels with some interest (he found Austen particularly charming), yet he thought their books stirred in him a thirst they themselves could not quench. Eventually, after giving *A Farewell to Arms* or *Emma* or *Bleak House* a fair chance to make its case—he would give each one a week, time enough to finish the novel, though he certainly didn’t finish everything he read—he found himself returning the books to his shelves and picking up his well-worn paperbacks of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* or *Much Ado*. Only these could truly satisfy.

He had actually taught some of these works, such as *Pride and Prejudice* (Wilhelmina Silva’s favorite), as a change of pace. But he couldn’t resist making the honest observation, one day in class, that Lizzy Bennet and Darcy were pale shadows of Beatrice and Benedick, and he heard the class groan. Relating the incident to a colleague, the co-teacher only said, “You’re making teenage boys read *Pride and Prejudice*?” with an eyebrow raised before walking away.

Sometimes, and lately it happened more frequently, he would wonder if he should have come here after all, more than twenty years ago, in the full bloom of his youth, a young man barely thirty. It seemed a victory at the time, getting onto the faculty of this private school he could never have joined as a student. A product of the public school system, he went to high school in Manila and college in Diliman, and there he had the great fortune of having William Querijero Ramirez as his literature teacher in freshman year. He vividly remembered the books he would bring to class, many of them hardcover, his initials “WQR” in thick black ink on the edges of the paper. He imagined having his own library one day, shelf upon shelf with books that had the letters “bdm” on them. He sat in front, on the far left, enthralled by the old man’s readings of poetry, to his fascinating insights into this or that play, to his trenchant commentary on the world and its many ills. The highlight of the course was *Hamlet*. “O, that this
too, too sullied flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,” he whispered, rolling the delectable syllables on his tongue, the words from the soliloquy he performed, perhaps too timidly, in the last week of that semester, uttering the lines on the raised platform in an empty classroom as the teacher sat in the back, his hand to his chin, a finger on his lips, his face a mask of sternness.

Then BD’s eye would catch the cheap, dark varnish of the wooden panels of his cubicle, the many small scraps of paper pinned to the corkboard, the harsh fluorescent light bouncing off the glossy-white wall above the divider, and he would remember where he was and wonder why no one enjoyed the taste of these words as he did. He was here. He had made his choice. And more than two decades had gone by.

• • •

“Mr. Maiquez?” asked a woman’s voice. BD turned from the book on his desk. A young woman’s face peered rather forwardly at him from above the cubicle divider.

“Yes?”

“I was told that you’re the Shakespeare guy around here.”

BD chortled softly. “I guess so.”

“I’ll need your advice then. May I come in?”

BD was startled. He looked around the cramped square of workspace and wondered where in heaven’s name he would ask her to sit. Then he spotted his briefcase on the small table, a side table of light wood bought from a furniture store going out of business that he had put here long ago to prop his things on. He took the worn, black briefcase and put it on the floor. When he looked up she was already in the narrow entrance to the cubicle: strappy sandals, blue jeans, a bright yellow t-shirt, and an equally bright face with close-cropped hair. He gestured to the table apologetically. She stepped into the tight space and sat on the table with a refreshing lack of politeness.

“It’s Jocson. He’s giving me a hard time.”

“You’re Ms.—?”
“Nuguid. Bea Nuguid.”
“Hello, Bea.”

“Anyway, Jocson says I can only teach one Shakespeare play the whole year. Also, the syllabus for sophomores says only two major works for the year, in the third and fourth quarters. And *Romeo and Juliet* is the only one if you want to teach Shakespeare.” She seemed unconcerned that, though they were strangers, their faces were never more than two feet apart.

“Yes, it’s been like that for a while, but what some people do is—“

“It’s annoying! I want to teach two plays, and I don’t want to use *Romeo and Juliet*. I don’t think it’s right for second-year high school students.”

bd raised an eyebrow.

“Too much sex. It’s amazing how much sex, sexual language, sexual imagery, there is in that play.”

“There is,” he said quietly and quickly. Of course, one could simply downplay Mercutio’s verbal naughtiness, or even ignore it entirely. Even Jocson, the department chairman, had admitted to him that he did just that.

“Yet we offer it to, what, fourteen-, fifteen-year-olds? Are they ready for this?” Before bd could reply, she continued. “But if you leave the sex out, what do you have left? You need it as a sharp contrast to the love of Romeo and Juliet. The love poetry becomes sappy if you don’t contrast it with the crassness of the people around them.”

“Excellent point.” One probably lost on my colleagues.

“Well,” she said, and paused. “If I have to teach it… I’ll show the movie with Claire Danes and Leonardo diCaprio.”

“Why not the Zeffirelli?”

“Oh, I don’t like it. Boys in tights running around the dusty streets. Olivia Hussey’s heaving bosom in the balcony scene. It doesn’t work for me.”

“But in the newer version, the actors mangle the language. You don’t understand every other word they say. Especially the one who plays Benvolio…”
“But it gets the love story right. That’s the most important thing! When Romeo and Juliet spot each other across the aquarium with the bright-colored fish, oh wow.” She put her hands together, stretched her arms downward, then closed her eyes. “It’s beautiful. Then the party scene, then the balcony scene, transferred to a swimming pool. Brilliant. The two of them kissing in the water. So dreamy.” She had on a distant look, as if imagining the love of her life in her arms. “The movie gets the love story right, and without that, the story falls apart.”

“Bea?” a voice called from outside the door several cubicles away. “We’re starting.”

“Oh, I have to go,” she said, then leaned forward, her voice dropping. “The orientation for new teachers is about to start. Can we talk about this later? What’s a good comedy I can pair with Romeo? Merchant? Much Ado? Oh, I have the Kenneth Branagh movie. Fantaastic! I don’t care, I’ll get Jocson to let me teach two plays.”

“Well,” bd began, fumbling for an answer. “A comedy. Some folks here...some go with Midsummer. There’s that recent movie. Though I wonder, well, if...”

“Wait, it’s May. Why are you here during the summer?”

“Here? Oh, I’d rather stay here than in my apartment. It gets really hot, and many of my books are here. It’s quiet, no one disturbs me,...”

“Let’s talk later,” she said, putting her hand on his forearm, then stood up, said a school-girlish “Bye,” and stepped quickly out of the cubicle. He stood and watched her disappear through the doorway of the faculty workroom. He stayed standing there for a few moments. Her face lingered in his thoughts, and the incongruity of her words and the youthfulness of her countenance. He began to wonder how long it had been since he had heard anyone talk that way about the writer he loved most.

O for a muse of fire!

● ● ●

bd trudged into the dark house. It was an old, one-floor house in the Scout area of Quezon City. It used to be a fifteen-minute commute to the
school. Now it took half an hour on a good day. Every few minutes he would hear the rumble of the MRT on its elevated track in the distance.

He entered the living room, but it had been a long time since it was used that way. Now it was a storage area of sorts, for the stacks of newspapers and boxes of old clothes, bottles, broken appliances, and other things that the Arceos, the owners, would collect and sell to junk shops.

Old man Arceo stepped out of his bedroom door on the left of the main hallway. “Hello, Mister Shekspir!”

BD nodded wearily. Arceo muttered his apologies for the state of the mess, declaring his intention to clean up one of these days, apologies he had been making for how many years BD had lost count of. He made his way past the piles of junk, past the doorway to the kitchen, to his room in the back. He turned on the light. Stacks of books rose from the floor to his waist. He opened the window, heard the radio and the shrill chatter of the househelp in the next house, and shut it as tightly as he could. In a corner stood a metal cart with his TV, VCR, and stereo. All were old and hardly used anymore.

At the end, near the foot of his single bed was a study desk, half of whose surface was occupied by a phonograph, its cover thick with dust, the other half obscured by piles of tests and student themes. He was always losing the battle against paper, and no matter how many years he had been teaching he never managed to figure out how to check papers quickly and efficiently and get them back to his students right away.

He shrugged, but everyone has this problem. Besides, at least there are things I’m good at as a teacher. He pictured himself in the classroom, reciting a speech from a play, any play, taking care to pronounce the words right, speaking them deliberately, meaningfully, thinking the splendor of the words and the sonorousness of his voice would combine to stoke a fire in the hearts of his students.

Yes, I am good at some things, he thought, then put his bag on the chair by the table and began to undress. The closet by the inner wall was small, he had thought when he moved into this place more than ten years ago, but he found that he didn’t have need of many of his clothes after
all, and little by little they had found their way into the junk heaps in
the living room. Now there was just what he needed. He hardly bought
anything, and for new shirts or pants he simply walked over to the tailor
two blocks away. It was cheaper than going to a department store, and he
never understood the thrill of bargain-hunting in Baclaran or Divisoria.

He put his white polo barong on the bed, hung his gray slacks against
the closet, grabbed a pair of shorts, and walked over to the bathroom.

bd went back to the title page of the book bound in green leather,
glistening in its newness, and again read the inscription in a woman’s hand:
“To our Shakespeare guy! Happy birthday! Love, Bea.” He thought again
how he would have preferred her writing “my” instead of “our,” but all
things considered, the school year, though barely three months old (it was
only August), was going far better than most he could remember.

“Wow, the two of you talk about Shakespeare the way other people
talk about basketball,” George Jocson said, as he slowed to a stop over bd’s
cubicle divider.

“Excuse me?” bd said, lifting his face from examining the volume.
“You and Bea. I overheard you in the lounge. You’re funny together.”
George had a gleam in his eye, or so bd thought.
“I guess that’s how it would appear to you.”
“Oh, don’t be offended. It’s good to see you this lively again. I’m
glad to see you helping her in adjusting. The first year of teaching can be
difficult, as you know. But her first three months she’s looked fine. Great
even.”
“Good to hear.”
“Bea’s so refreshing. How often do you get a girl that age—what,
twenty-eight, nine?—so interested in teaching lit, eh?”
“I suppose it’s unusual.”
“Yes, it is. And with her background. She doesn’t need this job. The
father’s a sugar baron, did you know?”
bd shook his head with disinterest.
“She could be at home sitting pretty, no problem. Married, taking care of kids while the husband works. But no, she wants to be here. I kid her sometimes and say, ‘If you stay here, you’ll never find a boyfriend.’ She just laughs. She has a wonderful laugh.”

Yes, she does.

“She says she’ll start on her masters soon. At up probably. Asked me for suggestions for her thesis. You might have ideas.”

“If I have any, I’ll let her know.”

“You know, if you’re going to specialize in Shakespeare, prepare for a lonely life,” bd said, glancing up from his cup of coffee.

Bea laughed, sinking her fork again into a slice of cheesecake. “You sound like my cousin Marie. She got her PhD in London. Expert in medieval literature. She knows Old English. Now she can’t teach in any university because no one needs an expert in that field. So after teaching here for a while, she went abroad.” She glanced at the other side of this room in the canteen reserved for teachers. “Married a French guy.”

“Old English. That will be our fate, I think.”

“You, did anyone warn you to prepare for a lonely life?”

I wish they had.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend.”

“It’s all right. But be ready because people will have a hard time understanding why you do it, why you bother to read this stuff, why you think it matters.”

“Oh, I’m a lit major, bd. I’ve gotten that all my life. Friends, family. Everyone. ‘But what kind of job will you get, Bea?’ As if getting paid is all that matters. My father banished me here when he found out I had chosen literature as my course against his wishes. Best thing that ever happened to me.”

“It matters a lot if you haven’t had much to begin with.”

“I suppose you think I have no idea what that’s like?”
“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that you’re insensitive. But…look at you. You could go anywhere, work anywhere. Why teach? Why teach lit? Here?”

She paused to consider, then raised her glass of iced tea to her lips. “Because I choose to!”

“You’ve been here half a year and so far you’re doing well. But it gets tedious pretty fast. Oh, wait.” He took out a photo from his planner. “This is Greg Oledan. He was here just the other day. Were you able to meet him?”

“No.”

“Anyway, we had a small merienda for him. He used to teach math. Five years, I think.”

She looked at the photo. A dark, round-faced man in shorts and a sleeveless top stood knee-deep in the waters of a beach. He was grinning into the sun, a hand over his eyes.

“Where is he now?”

“Palawan. He went there on a lark. He left here a while back—six, seven years ago—then worked at a bank. Then an aunt offered him a teaching job in a high school there, she was principal, and he went.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes. Says he has no regrets.”

“Wow. So what’s it like there?”

“Worse than here, if you can imagine. Their English is really bad. I asked, how bad? He said, think of your worst students here. Over there they’re the best.”

“Oh no. I don’t think I could teach there.”

“Me too. But he looked…happy. And tanned. He said come over any time.”

“No way I could do that. I wouldn’t survive. I’m too much of a Manila girl now.”

“I know. Me too. If their English is worse, teaching lit must be a nightmare… I’m quite happy where I am, thank you.”
“You are? Are you, teaching lit? When nobody shares your love of your favorite writer? Not even your colleagues?”

He pondered the question. He remembered the agony of writing academic papers for his classes in graduate school, something he never quite figured out how to do, and the shame of pulling out of the masters program after only a year and a half. The years in his room reading dogeared copies of Shakespeare in the night after a day clerking at the post office or cranking out press releases for a softdrink company, determined to learn on his own. The time he applied as a teacher here, gave demo classes, then got the job.

“Yes, I am. And I’m starting on Lear next week. Nothing like a little tragedy right before Christmas, as an antidote to their excessive cheer.”

“And why here, in this high school for bored rich boys?”

He remembered his parents beaming at the news of his acceptance, teaching in a school where they had only dreamed of sending him to study. His mother phoning his relatives, his uncle the judge being the first.

“Because I like it here.”

She didn’t know what to make of his answer, if he was sincere.

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When he was new he would look into the faces of his students and see only potential. They were new, they were coming into the world of words for the first time, and he was just the right person to guide them through. As the years went on he found them more and more tiresome. There was the occasional bright or eager student, and once in a while someone would demonstrate a talent for stringing lucid sentences together—really, how hard is it for teenagers to write a coherent paragraph?—but by and large the young adolescent faces became more and more impenetrable. What did they think of the poems they read? The stories and novels? The essays they had to write, which he had to make them write? (Teaching composition was the most tedious part of the job.) And what did they really think of Shakespeare? Did they hear his words? Did they feel the pain and joy of his
characters? Were they awed by the poetry? Or did it all go by in a blur of pentametric iambics?

When his student evaluations became more and more negative, he resisted at first. He justified his methods to the chairman, his colleagues, the administrators who would drop by his cubicle and ask innocently how his classes were going. But he finally wore down, and thought it best to take the path of least resistance. He followed the prescribed syllabus faithfully, never going beyond the material necessary, teaching the same works over and over, and kept most of Shakespeare (beyond the one-a-year) to himself like a precious hoard.

So he would spend much of his free time in his cubicle, between the pages of a play. Lately he found himself gravitating toward As You Like It, imagining himself in the forest of Ardenne, pining after his lovely Rosalind. Sometimes she would appear as the slim, pale girl he had wooed in his college years, the two of them finding refuge in the other’s shyness, the one who disappeared with her family when they migrated to the US. Or the lanky one with penetrating eyes who scolded him for not caring when martial law raged, for preferring instead to study the barren poetry of a dead white man. The one who simply disappeared when the row of apartments she and her comrades lived in was raided. She may be dead for all he knew, but he preferred to think of her as living in the mountains somewhere, part of a ragtag crew of stubborn idealists who fought the good fight he wasn’t brave enough to join. In his mind’s eye he saw thick, lush jungles, her naive but ardent Orlando to her Rosalind, strong and beautiful and boy-crazy. They would be drinking beer and eating cheap burgers, as they used to in one of their haunts, in front of a fire and arguing again over what constituted a meaningful engagement with life.

And lately he found that Rosalind looked more and more like a girl in a bright yellow top with deep eyes, close-cropped hair, and a vivid laugh. He didn’t mind wandering about the woods for hours in her enchanting company.
Sometimes, as he sat in his cubicle with nothing urgent to do, the image of the old man would form in his mind. The man in the back, partly in the shadow of a late March afternoon of a school year coming to a close, his back straight, his hand taking the pen from his shirt pocket and scribbling on his index card. “Mr. Maiquez,” the gravelly voice said, “that was good. B-plus. A good speech. I commend your diction especially. But I miss… the pain.” The old man’s eyes closed, his right hand in a fist that he touched to his chest. His brows knitted. “What is he feeling at this point? The world has lost all value to him. ‘How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world.’ All because his mother has hastily remarried. You did not quite convey this sense of disillusionment and resentment.”

bd could still see Ramirez clearly at the back of that room, dispensing judgment, handing A’s to classmates who had done far worse in the quizzes and tests, who had shown at best a grudging interest in the class but who, when it came time for the speeches, seemed to summon a little more passion than he could. bd had replayed his speech in his head many times over since then, wondering how he should have said this word or that phrase. He considered different inflections of key words, saying a phrase slower or faster, glossing over an image or lingering over it. And he would recite the entire corrected speech to himself, thinking himself again in that room, the distant, demanding figure again in the back, and he would get it right this time in this second chance always available to him in his mind.

“There have been complaints, bd,” George Jocson said. Next to him sat Father Jose Mendoza, the principal, and Thelma de la Cerna, the assistant principal for academics, in Father Joe’s airconditioned office.

“What kind of complaints?”
“Letty Baisas,” Father Joe said, “you know, head of the parents association—told me recently that other parents have been telling her about certain teachers they’re not happy with.”

“Me?”

“Not just you, bd.”

“On their own these complaints wouldn’t carry much weight,” De la Cerna said, “but, well, the results of the year-end evaluations just came in and…”

“Perhaps we shouldn’t pay too much attention to what students say about their teachers.”

“From both your students and your supervisors. bd, the fact is, all the department chairmen of English from way back never gave you sparkling reviews. Chita. Benito Sales. Old man Tenorio. What’s more, the trend has been downward these past few years. You seem to be getting worse.”

“I guess I’m not that good anymore. I’m not on top of my game.”

“And even when you were, you weren’t… So, it’s been on our minds for a while now.”

“What has?”

“bd, have you thought about what you would do after you retire?”

“No really.”

“Does it seem like it’s a long way off?”

“I guess.”

“Well…maybe it would be good for you to start giving it some thought. Before you know it, it will be time. Best to be ready.”

“I’ll cross the bridge when I get there.”

“Remember that you’d get full benefits. Plus one month’s salary for every year of service—the standard retirement package. Not bad at all. If you complete your twenty-five years, I’m sure the school will throw in something extra.”

“Plus no more badly written student papers. Annoying bosses. No one to keep you from your books.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Please, bd. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”
“You’d do a Helen Montaño on me, wouldn’t you? What would my namesake have said about this?”

“Who?”

“Benito Sales. He wouldn’t have put up with this.”

“You don’t know that, bd.”

“I think I do. He was the only one who took me seriously in the end.”

You died too soon, Benito.

“We’re sorry, bd.”

“Besides, you’re not the only Shakespeare expert anymore.”

• • •

“What are you doing out here? You a smoker now?” Bea stepped through the door onto the open landing of red tile just outside the faculty workroom where people stepped out to take a smoke. bd was alone, sitting on the wooden bench. She walked to the edge of the landing opposite him and lit the stick in her fingers. “I still have three sets of final exams to check. Where are you off to this summer?”

“They asked me to retire,” he said.

“What? Who?”

“Father Joe himself. Thelma. George. We had a short meeting today. Not right away. In two years, when I complete my twenty-fifth.”

“Can they make you do that?”

“No. Well, actually, they can.” He looked up at her, squinting into the late afternoon sun descending among the low condominiums across the street. “Parents are complaining about me, not just students. They’ve gone straight to the principal. You know this school and how it kowtows to its ‘clients.’ My evaluations from both students and chairmen past and present aren’t good.”

“But you’ve been here so long, how…”

“They could always make a case for incompetence. If I refused to go quietly, it could come to that. It’s happened before, you know. There was a history teacher, Helen Montaño, who was eased out like that. She had been here something like sixteen, seventeen years. I hear she was awful.
Rarely had a lesson plan, and spent most classes just talking about her trips abroad and all the important people she met. I hear students laughed at her behind her back. Anyway, she was eased out for being incompetent. She got a lawyer and put up a fight, but nothing happened.”

“Oh God, bd. I’m sorry,” she said, sitting beside him.

“By the way, it’s Ben.”

“What?”

“When I came in there was already a Benito, Sales. The one who died last year? So they told me I would be called ‘bd.’ But my name is Ben.”

She looked confused.

After a while, he continued. “Besides, how many Shakespeare experts does the school need anyway? One is more than enough. And you probably cost one-third my salary, maybe less.”

She turned to him and stiffened. A look of pity and anger came to her face.

He looked past her. “Well, if you wanted my job, it’s yours.”

“What the hell are you saying?”

“Jocson was all praises for you. Your kids love you. Your use of ‘educational materials and supplementary activities enhances the learning experience.’ You are ‘enthusiastic.’ You are ‘nurturing’ and ‘inspire confidence.’ He said so. And you’re going to get an ma, which I don’t have and never will.”

“bd, I’m sorry,” she said as she stood and walked to the ledge. “I had no idea they were even thinking of asking you to leave. Oh no, it’s my fault.”

“Why?”

“I only asked George…to talk to you…about the way you teach.”

“What about the way I teach?”

“I also suggested that the summer workshops on teaching lit be revived.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“George didn’t tell you?”

“No, I guess he forgot.”
"Well, a few of the other teachers asked me if I could, you know, help out in designing some modules for certain works. So I told George I’d do it."

"And you would teach them?"

"Well, yes."

"Right. Me, I can teach only one author. But you, you’re the only one who’s good enough. And you’d play your CDs of So-and-so reading Austen or Dickens or Eliot, and you’d have your handouts with activities, with little grids to fill up and guide questions for the rich and illiterate."

"At least I can teach! You know, in the short time I’ve been here I’ve found out that I’m a good teacher. Yes, I am! I can do this. But you, how long have you been teaching? And after all this time… You can’t even do one author right! Do you think reciting lines from Shakespeare is the best way to make students like him? Do your little elocution contests work? Your memorization tests? Do you even think it impresses us? Maybe fifty years ago it worked, when schools still shoved your heads into Latin phrasebooks and made you recite Horace or, or Pindar."

"The words must be spoken well! Great words must be spoken well! How are they going to learn to love Shakespeare if you do not recite the words as if they mattered?"

"It doesn’t make sense to them, BD. His English is a foreign language to them. They don’t have ears for it, not these kids. And why don’t you care about anyone else but this one writer? There are many other good writers…"

"I only want to read the best."

"And I’ve seen your long tests. All you do is supply a passage and ask, who said this, what act, what scene. Oh God! That’s just the wrong way to do it!"

He raised his hand and said very softly but clearly, "And what is the right way, ma’am?" When she didn’t answer, he continued, in the same pained and mocking voice, "Please tell me, teacher. I want to know."

She took a step toward him and seemed about to utter an expletive, but it stuck in her throat, and all she could do was clench her teeth and
grimace. She threw what remained of her cigarette to her feet, ground it with her right foot into the cement tile, then walked briskly back into the workroom, wisps of smoke dissipating about her.

Ten minutes later she returned, wanting to apologize, but he was gone. He wasn’t in his cubicle, and neither was his worn briefcase.

• • •

“O for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention,” bd muttered to himself. How he wished to ascend to that heaven now.

The fire of the candle didn’t dance in the darkness; it just burned steadily. No air came in or out his room, the fan was off. The power was out tonight. Arceo told him, when he made his way through the mounds in the living room, that some repair work was being done that night in their street and the lights would be out from ten until six in the morning. When the lights went out on time, bd lit a lone candle in his room and didn’t feel the urge to do anything but sit up in bed and look at the steady flame in the heat of this March night. It was too dark to read, and he didn’t feel like reading.

When he got here Arceo had met him at the front door and told him, sorry to say this, you’ve been a good tenant for so long, but my nephew from Samar will be going to college in Manila soon and will need a place to stay. So would you be kind enough to move out before the start of the next school year please? I hope you understand. He said he understood, and the shirtless man smiled, relieved.

The candle stood on a plastic coaster perched atop a small stack of books on his desk. It stood there precariously, mere inches away from other books, sheets of paper on the desk, the stacks of books lining the walls of this cramped room, the photographs pinned to the wall. The shapes in them were too dim to see now, but he knew each one, these images of people long dead or far away. A few inches from the candle was his Norton Shakespeare, its cloth gray in the darkness, a tome full of many
words, magnificent words; how could they mean so much to him and so little to others?

Later, how much later in the evening he couldn’t tell, he thought he could see an old man’s stern face in the light, a face that would do nothing but remain in the shadows at the back of a classroom from a year now distant, a face that was demanding, so demanding it would not confer approval. He had hoped all these years for it, thinking that there was still hope that it would nod or a faint smile issue from its taut lips. Tonight he saw in the light of this long, slender candle that such approval would never be forthcoming.

In the light he thought he saw a half-hearted ceremony, plaque and speeches and food and cheap wine, honoring him and his twenty-five years of teaching, the faces around him happy that they would finally be rid of him and his obstinate ways.

He saw his uncle, big and garrulous and, in his mind, always half-drunk at family get-togethers, clapping him on the back with his broad dark hand, and saying with a voice emanating from the pit of his rotundity, “Remember, Ben, you don’t have time to read all the good books in the world.” The dramatic pause, the one he no doubt used in the courtroom and in his law school classroom to great effect. “You have time only for the best.” Then the self-righteous smile, broad and toothy and shiny with scotch, the hand with index finger pointing to no one in particular, in case he hadn’t made himself clear.

He saw his parents the night they threw a big dinner for their only son, to celebrate his having made it in the world. And then the night he came home to find the house in flames, a fire that started in a neighbor’s house and which took most of the block with it.

In the light he thought he saw Bea twenty years later, lines on a face that had lost much of its vividness, huddled in her cubicle, her books her sole protection against the emptying years. He thought how, two decades from now, she would still remember the way he lashed out at her, the only one he could reach out to, this afternoon. And what a foolish, fond old
man he was. He hoped that, at least then, she would know how sorry he was.

If those books catch fire, he thought. It wouldn’t take long for the room to go up in flames. The whole house, even. The stacks of newspapers in the living room began just outside his door, even leaned into the doorway when he opened it. It would be quick. The room, the curtains, the furniture, the boxes of clothes, the house. His papers, books, photos. Himself. A poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage then is heard no more. If those books catch fire. Especially the one in green leather resplendent with words that were never his.

He sat and looked at the flame for what seemed to him a long time. Then when the candle was nearly spent, he stood up and walked toward it.

She opened the letter and began to read:

Dear Bea,

Surprise, surprise! I hope this gets to you before the ceremony or whatever it is they’re going to do there for you to celebrate your twentieth year. (It will probably be a letdown, so don’t get too excited.)

I’m doing fine over here in Palawan. I’m sure you heard that I came here exactly twenty years ago, give or take a month or two. Yes, I decided to take Greg Oledan up on his offer to teach here. I was crazy to do it, I know. I didn’t even know his phone number. I just packed, went to the airport, and took a plane. Amazing, looking back, how easy it is to make these decisions.

It helped that I had some money. I had almost two million in the bank at that point (surprising what you end up with when you save a little every payday; the retirement pay didn’t hurt either). After living with Greg and his aunt for a while I got my own house. It’s not too big, but it’s just the right size and it’s near the school. Plus the beaches are twenty minutes away on foot. I’ve discovered that I love beaches. And walking.
What was hard was the teaching. I never was a great teacher, as you yourself pointed out to me once. When I started here I felt like a complete fool. Greg was right. The kids here are nowhere near their Manila counterparts. The best ones here wouldn’t even get into the top five schools there. And what a world apart in career opportunities! My kids dream of being able to go abroad to work in ships or hospitals or elementary schools. If they’re lucky, they get to do it. How would that sound to our Manila boys with their dreams of wealth and comfort?

It’s been hard, yes, but you know, I’m glad I came here. They look up to me here so much. I teach the teachers, not just the students. In the classroom the kids sit and listen as if I have something important to say. How I missed that. And they study so hard! So I don’t care much how bad they are when they come here. And it doesn’t bother me so much anymore that many of these boys and girls will end up fixing someone else’s bed in Florida or scrubbing floors in the bowels of a ship in the middle of the Pacific. They do this as if their lives depended on it. And I guess it does.

And mine does too, I suppose. Funny.

So, to answer a question you’re probably dying to ask, no, I don’t get to teach Shakespeare much. Hardly. Some of my colleagues insist on Julius Caesar just so we can have some color in our yearly elocution contests. I’ve seen some pretty good fourteen-year-old Marc Antonys here. But do I miss it? Not really. Once in a while I still read that beautiful book you gave me. And I had to send for all the books I left behind. There are no bookstores here! Just awful. No wonder their English is so bad. So I’ve become a good friend of the xerox ladies. But no, I don’t wonder anymore if I have time to read both Shakespeare and Austen (your love). I don’t have time for either. And I am happy to know that now.

Well, that’s all. I may have another update after another decade or two. (If you want more details, you’ll have to visit! The address is on the envelope. I have an extra room.)
Regards to everyone there who remembers me. And to George and the kids (three, right?).

And so I take my leave. Adieu.

Always,

Benito, your Shakespeare guy

Bea put the letter down. The handwriting was supple, elegant, the kind one rarely saw these days. Bea herself could hardly write a page by hand before tiring, and her letters were getting cribbed and small. When she was new here two decades ago she could write pages of lesson plan in longhand.

She took out the photo in the envelope. It was of a man in shorts and a sleeveless top, knee-deep in the waters of a beach, squinting into the sun, a smile on his familiar face. He was older now, but his slim figure, which she had always seen in office clothes, seemed smaller, leaner. His face had the shimmer of a young man’s, it was even boyish, despite the wrinkles and the tufts of gray hair.

She leaned back in her chair and looked at the shelf above her desk. A copy of *The Brown Bard: Appropriations of Shakespeare in Philippine Drama* by Beatrice Nuguid drew her eye, the book she had published after getting her masters degree. She had put her doctorate on hold, her responsibilities as a teacher increasing. She embraced her new roles, mentor to new faculty, resource for literary texts and how to teach them, class adviser, moderator of the drama club, and lately, department chairperson, and it seemed the doctorate she had put on hold might never be hers.

She thought about that one year they were such friends, and she felt a smile forming on her lips and a dampness in her eyes. Oh, BD. What if he had been there when she returned that afternoon? What if she had not snapped at him? What if she hadn’t been so young and foolish and headstrong, wanting things she didn’t understand?

There was a knock at the door. “Shall we go?” came the familiar voice. “Just a minute, love,” she said, hoping she didn’t sound out of sorts. She
put the letter and photo back in the envelope, left it in a drawer, packed her bag, and walked to the door. When she opened it, George stood there, briefcase in hand. She noticed that his arms were growing thin, his plain white button-down shirt seemed rumpled, his temples graying and sinking. For the first time in her life, he looked old. She wondered, do I look old to him, too?

She glimpsed the sign on the door: Beatrice Nuguid Jocson, Chairperson, English. She remembered the first time she saw that sign. When it was posted on the door two years ago she felt that she had gotten what she had wanted for so long, and exulted. How short that joy lasts.

Their eyes meet, he takes her hand, and silently they walk down the dim corridor to the exit.

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The father of the boy Vićtor worked on the waterfront and got involved in a strike, a long drawnout affair which had taken the following course: It began with charges that the employees were not being given a just compensation, that part of their earnings were being withheld from them, and that their right to form a union was being disregarded. It escalated with the sudden dismissal, for unstated reasons, of several workers, giving rise to fears that more layoffs would be carried out in the near future. This led to organized defiance, and the setting up of picket lines. Finally, one stifling summer evening, violence broke out on the piers of the city as the strikers were receiving sandwiches and soft drinks from sympathetic outsiders.

Vićtor had been, and still was, too young to understand it all. But when they were living in one of the shanties that stood in Intramuros, he would frequently overhear snatches of conversation between his parents regarding his father’s job. Sobra na, his father would say, we cannot take it
anymore. Naglalagay sila, they are depriving us of our wages, and they even have this canteen which charges us whether we eat there or not.

Then his mother’s voice, shrill and excited, would cut in, urging him to swallow it all, accept what little was given to him and stay away from the groups that wanted to fight back. She spoke bitterly of the newly emerging unions—and that priest with his cohorts and his student volunteers—who were trying to organize the workers. Vićtor’s father defended these groups, saying they were only protecting the dockhands’ interests. You don’t know what it’s like out there, he would say, there have been beatings, and all sorts of accidents. It’s a dreadful place really…

Once the boy interrupted them and wanted to know what the discussion was all about, only to be met with a rebuke from his mother. But he was insistent, the heat of the argument stirring a vague fear within him, and he asked what a cabo was. To distract him, his father playfully laid hold of him and hoisted him over his shoulders (although Vićtor was getting a bit heavy for this sort of thing). And thus they horsed about the house, or what passed for it, to the tune of the boy’s delighted shrieks and the cold stares of his mother.

Occasionally, whenever he would find the time, his father would take him out at night for a stroll along the Boulevard, to feel the breeze and to walk gingerly on the narrow embankment. The place at this hour wove its spell around him, a kind of eerie enchantment, and he would gaze fascinated at the murky waters gently, rhythmically swirling on the shore, and at the beckoning lights of Cavite, and thrill to the mournful blast of a departing ship.

—Tatang, where is the ship going?—
—I don’t know, Vićtor. Maybe to the provinces. Maybe to another country, a faraway land.—
—When will we be able to travel too?—
—I don’t know, when we have a little money, perhaps.—

The whistle of the ship, which seemed to be a big liner, sounded once more as it steamed out of the harbor and headed in the direction of the South China Sea. Arm in arm in the darkness punctuated only by a few
insufficient lights, father and son tried to make out the dim outline steadily moving away from them. Then the ship faded into the shadows, and its whistle sounded no more.

Later they strolled on the promenade and made their way slowly to the Luneta, where his father bought him some chicharon.

The park was dimly lit and ill-kept, and as they passed by the Rizal monument they noticed a number of rough-looking men lurking about in its vicinity. Two women, dressed gaudily and unaware of their presence, were approaching from another direction. As they neared, the men unloosed a volley of whistles, yells and taunts. Then stones were flung, triggering screams and curses from the two. Victor was startled at hearing their voices, which, though high-pitched, sounded distinctly masculine.

His father hurriedly led him away from the scene, and to his puzzled queries replied that it was nothing, just a quarrel, an incident. As an afterthought, he observed that the park had not always been like this, that once in the distant past it had been a clean and picturesque place.

—Maybe it will become beautiful again in the future...

A week after this the dock strike materialized. It was called against a shipping firm following the breakdown of negotiations. The picket dragged on, with the strikers and their families subsisting on funds raised by student, labor, and civic-spirited elements. And the tide seemingly began to favor the strikers, for soon the case attracted national attention.

Victor’s father would return home late at night from the marathon picket manned in shifts, exhausted but excited, and brimming over with enthusiasm for the cause. His mother made no comment, her protests having long subsided into a sullen silence.

Students and unionists drummed up public support for the workers, organizing drives for them, detailing their plight in pamphlets and press interviews. They reinforced the picket lines, held rallies to boost their morale and distributed food and money. And the shipping management’s haughtiness turned to concern and then to desperation...
ONE EVENING, FOUR MONTHS AFTER THE STRIKE BEGAN, THE SILENCE of the piers was broken by the rumble of six-by-six trucks. There were three of them, and they were heading straight for the picket lines. A shot rang out, reverberating through the night, then another and a third.

Panic spread through the ranks of the strikers, and a few started to run away. Calls by the activists to stand fast, however, steadied the majority, who stood rooted on the spot following the initial wave of fear and shock.—Easy lang, easy lang, they won’t dare crash through.—But the huge vehicles advanced inexorably, and as they neared, a kind of apocalyptic fit seized three picketers who, propelled by the months and years of exploitation, charged right into the onrushing trucks.

Amid screams and yells, the barricades were rammed. And the scores of strikers fell upon the six-by-sixes loaded with goons in a fury, uncaring now as to what happened to them. They swarmed over the trucks, forced open the doors and fought back with stones, placards and bare fists, as more guns sounded.

Then the harbor police moved in, and as suddenly as it began, the spasm of violence ended. The moans of the injured mingled with the strident orders of the authorities to replace the noise of combat. In addition to the three who had been ran over, two other men had been shot to death. One of them was Victor’s father, and his picture appeared on the front page of one newspaper. It showed him spread-eagled on the ground, eyes staring vacantly, with a stain on his breast.

Later that evening, the news was relayed to Victor’s mother, and she fell into hysterics. Her cries betrayed not only anguish but fury and frustration as well, and learning of his father’s death and seeing and hearing his mother thus, Victor, eight-year-old Victor, cowered in the shadows.

Neighbors took care of him that night, but in the morning he managed to slip out, and he made his way to the Boulevard, once there walking about aimlessly. He heard the call of newsboys going about their job, and unknown fears began to tug at him. At a newsstand in the Ermita district his glance fell on the photo of his father, and he stared at
it long and hard. It was the first time he had paid such close attention to a newspaper.

Víctor’s father was laid to rest three days later at the crowded cemetery to the north. His fellow workers had passed the hat around, and although the amount collected was meager, contributions from the union organizers and their supporters had made possible the fairly decent burial. His mother sobbed all throughout the ceremony, and broke down noisily when the time came for a final look at her husband. The boy stood at her side, subdued. As the coffin was being lowered, he felt like calling out to his father, tatang, tatang, but the impulse died down, swept aside by the copious tears of his mother. It was a bright, clear day. On the avenida extension, the early morning traffic was forming and the sound of car horns intruded into the place where the mourners were gathered.

Not long after his father’s death, Víctor, a third-grader dropped out of school, and plans were made to employ him as a newsboy with the help of an uncle who was a newspaper agent. His mother, who had gotten into the habit of disappearing in the afternoons and returning home early in the evening, pointed out that he was healthy and active, though lacking somewhat in aggressiveness. Surely this could be easily acquired once he was thrown out into the field?

One day she brought with her a man, a stranger with a foul breath who swayed from side to side, and introduced him to Víctor as your new tatang. The boy did not respond to him, thinking some joke he could not comprehend was being played on him. And in the days that followed he avoided as much as possible all contact with the interloper. This man, unkempt in appearance, seemed to be everything his father wasn’t. For one thing he was always cursing (his father had done so only when angry, and kept this at a minimum whenever Víctor was around.) And in his friendlier moments he would beckon to the boy and say—want this, sioktong?—in such a falsetto tone that Víctor coldly looked away. At night he heard strange sounds behind the partition, accompanied by his mother’s giggling and the man’s coarse laughter, and he felt like taking a peek, but some instinct held him back. He was disturbed to no end.
One morning a week after the man moved in, Vićtor woke up to find him gone, along with his mother. In their stead stood his agent uncle, Tio Pedring, who said his mother had gone on a long vacation, and amid assurances that she would come back soon, informed the boy that he was to start to work immediately as a courier for the newspaper he was connected with. It’s easy, Tio Pedring said, and forthwith briefed him on his duties.

He was to report at the plant every night at 9 o’clock, wait for the first edition, which came out at 11 p.m., and observe the routine. He was to sleep right outside the circulation offices, and then awaken before 4 a.m., for that was the time the city edition was made available. A number of copies, perhaps 15 or 20, would then be turned over to him, and it was up to him to distribute these in the Blumentritt area. Tio Pedring, his mother’s older brother and a thin man with a nervous tic, gave him the names and addresses of 10 regular customers, and said that it was up to him to develop his own contacts so as to dispose of the rest of the newspapers allotted. When he was off-duty, Vićtor could stay in his uncle’s Blumentritt place, and for every newspaper he sold he would get three centavos. No mention was made of resuming the boy’s interrupted schooling.

**THAT EVENING AT THE APPOINTED HOUR HE WENT OVER TO THE**

newspaper’s building located in the downtown section, and was greeted by the sight of scores of ragged, barefooted newsboys swarming before the dispatcher’s section. A few were stretched out on the pavement, asleep on kartons that served as their bed, while others were having their supper, bibingka and softdrinks, from the turo-turo that catered to them. The majority just milled around, grouped together in tight bunches playing their crude game of checkers, or simply loafing, awaiting the call to duty. The noise of their conversation, loud and harsh and punctuated by words like putangina, filled the newspaper’s building.

In reply to his hesitant queries, the guard directed him to the distributing center, a stifling, enclosed place adjoining the printing presses.
Vićtor entered, knowing that the notice which said unauthorized persons keep out.

—Our work here is rush, rush, rush. You’ve got to be lišto.—

Vićtor nodded, then, dismissed, made his way back outside, where the chill of the evening had replaced the heat of the plant. A mood of foreboding descended upon him, like a pall. He was hungry, but had no money, and so contented himself with watching the other newsboys. He wanted to mingle with them, but they didn’t seem to be very friendly. A dilapidated ice cream pushcart stood at one end of the corner, and to this the urchins went for their ice cream sandwiches, consisting of one or two scoops tucked into hot dog and hamburger-sized bread. Beside it was a Magnolia cart, patronized by outsiders.

One boy stood out from among the throng. The others called him Nacio, and like all of them he wore a dirty T-shirt and faded short pants, and had galis sores on his legs, but cheerfulness emanated from him and he seemed to enjoy a measure of popularity among his companions. Upon noticing Vićtor watching from the side he detached himself from a group and offered him a cigarette.

Surprised, Vićtor demurred, and said he did not know how to smoke. Nacio shrugged his shoulders, as if to say hindi bale, then asked if Vićtor was new on the job. Upon receiving a reply in the affirmative, he nodded in satisfaction and told the other to learn from him, for he would teach him the tricks of the trade, such as how to keep a sharp eye out for customers, how to swiftly board a bus or jeep and alight from it while still in motion, and so on…

Nacio invited him to eat, but again Vićtor declined, saying he had no money.

—Hindi problema yan!—the irrepressible Nacio said,—Sige, I’ll pay for you.—He turned to the turo-turo owner: Hoy, Aling Pacing! Pianono at Coke nga ho! Will you give me a discount?—Aling Pacing only looked down coldly at the boy, and grunted—no discount for you. No discount for any of you—
Nacio winked at Víctor as he paid, took the rolls and drinks, and handed over to the other his share. Víctor wolfed down the pianono, although it didn’t taste too new, and drank with deep satisfaction while his companion chattered on, regaling him with his experiences as a carrier and his ability to skillfully dodge in and out of traffic. He disclosed that once he had been sideswiped by a car, but escaped only with a few scratches, and boasted:—I’m the fastest newsboy in Manila.—Víctor marveled at his luck in finding such a fine friend.

As the time for the release of the first edition neared, an air of expectation materialized outside the plant. The newspaper’s trucks and vans stood in readiness. The newsboys grew in number and began to form a dense mass. Their conversation became louder, more excited, and their horseplay rougher. Shortly after 11 p.m. a team of dispatchers emerged with the initial copies, the ink of the presses still warm on them, and was greeted by yells of anticipation. A stampede followed, and Víctor noted that for every bundle turned over to a newsboy, one distributor jotted down on a piece of paper the number allotted to him.

The clamor grew as the boys dashed out of the building and surged into the darkened streets. They were like school children being let out for recess. The noise continued, then subsided after a few minutes, with the last urchin scampering away. The nighttime silence returned once more to the area, broken only by occasional shouts of the men loading the main bulk of the provincial edition into the trucks, the toot of passing motorist’s horn and the sound of laughter from drunkards in the sari-sari store in front.

Víctor settled himself on the pavement, and despite the hard ground he felt tired and sleepy. He used his right arm as a pillow, and thought briefly about his father, his mother and the man she had taken up with, Tio Pedring and the day’s events, before sleep claimed him.

He awakened several hours later, jolted by the noise of the second wave of newsboys gathering for the city edition. Gingerly he stretched his cramped arms and legs, peered about him and shivered, for it had grown much colder. He kept an eye out for Nacio, although he felt sure he would
not come back anymore tonight. He could recognize, though, some of the faces in the crowd.

The same procedure took place at 4 a.m., it was like a reel being retaken. The routine was now familiar to Vićtor, but with a difference. This time he was a participant in the activities, and he found himself caught up in the excitement. All weariness gone from him, he sped away in the company of his colleagues, holding on tightly to his ration of 15 copies. Exhilaration coursed through him, and he ran and ran, stopping only when he reached the avenida. The others had scattered in different directions, and the street stretched away endlessly, virtually devoid of traffic. Its stores had long closed down for the night, and only a few neon signs glowed.

He began to walk slowly, sober now, his responsibilities heavy on him. His destination was Blumentritt. As he crossed Azcarraga, a taxi slowed down, and its passenger called out to him. Tremblingly he handed over a paper, and received 15 centavos in turn. His very first sale! His spirits soared anew... perhaps it wasn’t so difficult after all to sell a newspaper. This impression was bolstered when in a matter of minutes he made two more sales, to customers at a small, all-night restaurant.

It was still dark when he arrived at the district, and the first thing he heard was the whistle of the train which passed through the place every evening. He reacted in the same way he had to the foghorn blasts of the ships along the Boulevard.

He set about reconnoitering the area, to get the feel of it, and took out the list Tio Pedring had given him. He recalled his uncle’s words:

—You’re lucky. Not all newcomers have mga suki when they begin, and they have to return so many copies at first. Tambak sila.—The customers included a dressmaker, a barber, a small pharmacist, and a beautician. And to their places Vićtor eventually made his way, slipping the newspapers under doors, into mailboxes, and the apertures of padlocked steel gates.

Soon it grew light, and more jeepneys began to ply their routes, as buses appeared, bound for Santa Cruz and Grace Park. The signs of
activity in the neighborhood market increased while the small parish church near it remained closed, silent and deserted. Young scavengers, worn out from poking all night among trash cans, slept inside their pushcarts. Piles of garbage stood on several streets and alleyways.

Vićtor made no other sales that day, and he returned to the plant with three unsold newspapers. He turned them over apologetically. The one in charge now shrugged, then noted that he had not done badly for a first night’s work. He added that he expected Vićtor to improve in the future and equal the other newsboys, who always complained that their allotment was not enough. The dispatcher said:—Our newspaper is sikat. By noon we are all sold out in the newsstands.—

On his second night on the job, Vićtor was set upon by a group of street boys his age, who sprang up from out of the shadows and began to beat him up. He managed to flee from the scene in terror, leaving behind all his newspapers. For this he was roundly cursed by his uncle, who promised to take it out on his earnings for the next few days.

He took to haunting his beat even during the daytime and became friends with the little people, the vendors, the sellers of peanuts, kalamansi, coconuts and pigs, the grocery employees, the market denizens, the modišt as and shop owners, and even some of the patrolmen. Through his constant presence in the area, he was able to find additional regular customers, and no more did he have to return unsold copies. At night he went about his tasks with renewed confidence, and when through he would rest in front of the local bank. Gradually he lost his fear of thugs.

Though his work improved, his relations with the other newsboys didn’t. Nacio remained his only friend, and whenever he was around the others let Vićtor alone. He couldn’t make them out at all, with their rough games and harsh tongues, their smoking and their constant baiting. At one time he was jolted awake from the dreamless sleep by the concerted yells of the newsboys, who were hurling missiles, with the drivers reacting by merely stepping on the gas, and the passengers cowering in alarm. The guards whose job it was to break up these things did not seem to be around. No one could give an explanation for the sudden outburst.
VICTOR WAS EVENTUALLY ALLOWED TO SELL BOTH EDITIONS OF THE paper and his daily quota was increased to 20. Soon he was making about three pesos every day, sometimes more. His beat late at night was transferred to the Boulevard distrikt, where he peddled the provincial edition to night clubbers and cocktail loungers. In the early hours of the morning he would distribute the city edition to his Blumentritt customers. Tio Pedring expressed satisfaction with his development, and granted the boy more decent accommodations and better food at his residence.

Victor settled down into the routine, which would be livened up sometime by big events, like an earthquake. During such occasions the labor force would swell, augmented by now inactive boys who had graduated to other fields of endeavor, like pickpocketing and the watch-your-car business. In January the Press Club held its annual party in honor of newsboys, and Victor and Nacio along with many others, attended.

There were balloons, soft drinks and cookies. Nacio kept stuffing these into his pockets, to the great amusement of Victor, who was tempted to do the same, but there didn't seem to be enough around.

That was the last time the two spent together. Within a week Nacio met his death—violently; he had been run over by a car while recklessly charging into the street following the release of the first edition. The following afternoon, this sign stood at the corner leading to the newspaper building: SLOW DOWN NEWSBOYS COMING OUT.

Victor grieved for his friend, and from that time on he became even more taciturn and withdrawn.

HE AVOIDED THE BOULEVARD BY NIGHT, WITH ITS MOTIONLESS SHIPS, its necking couples, jagged embankment and swaying trees, and stuck to the well-populated areas. The bar distrikt in the southern part of the city began to attract him, and fortified by his sheaf of newspapers, which was like a badge of distinction for him, he would stare expressionlessly at the painted girls posing before the doorways under the garish neon signs, at the customers briefly eyeing them before going in, and at the well-dressed bouncers.
On this particular evening the bars were filled with foreign sailors, for a military exercise was to be held within a few days. Red-faced and grinning, the fair-complexioned seamen made the rounds, boisterous, arm-in-arm sometimes, and swaying from side to side (they reminded Victor of the man who had replaced his father). Helmeted men, with arm-bands, stood in front of some of the cocktail lounges.

Vic tor approached one of the dives and, getting a nod from the bouncer, who saw he was a newsboy, made his way in. It was almost pitch-dark inside, and it took a few minutes for his eyes to grow accustomed to the cavern-like atmosphere. Hostesses and sailors were grouped around the small tables, drinking, talking and laughing shrilly while a combo belted out pulsating music and a singer strained to make herself heard above the din. Some couples were pawing each other.

He approached a group noisily drinking, and tugged at the sleeves of one sailor.

—You buy newspaper from me, sir. Sige na, Joe.—

The other peered at him in surprise, then guffawed loudly, and waved him away. He said thickly—Beat it, Flip boy!—

Vic tor stood rooted on the spot. He didn’t understand the words, but the gesture was unmistakable. Some hostesses started giggling nervously. He was about to turn away in anger and humiliation when another seaman, blonde and clean-shaven, gently laid a hand over him—Wait a minute, sonny.—Then he dipped into his pocket and handed over something to Vic tor.—Here, take it, it’s yours. Have a grand time with it.—

Vic tor thanked him automatically, and went out swiftly. He looked at the paper bills in his hand and saw that they totaled two pesos, practically a night’s work for him... and the pall that had descended over him for weeks was suddenly lifted, like a veil. He felt liberated, renewed. He wanted to sing out, to shout and dance about. And he began to run, joy spurring him on.

Later that night he recounted the incident to his surprised colleagues, who had never seen him this garrulous before. He elaborated on the
story, enriching it with imaginary details, and transformed it into a tale of danger, excitement and exotic drama. As a clincher, he proudly showed off his money, realizing his mistake in the next instant. But it was too late. The others began to advance toward him, encircling him. Their words were flung at him like stones:

—Why aren't you like us?—
—Why don't you smoke?—
—Why don't you curse?—
—Say putangina.

Víctor drew back, frightened. With a chill he remembered the time the Blumentritt boys had ganged up on him.—I don't say words like that.—
—Say it!—
—All right, all right, putangina.—But the epithet carried no conviction, and he repeated it, stronger this time. The boys laughed in derision, and gave out a mirthless kind of cheer. After uttering the words, Víctor could no longer control himself. He began screaming all kinds of curses, and he hurled himself bodily upon them, kicking, hitting, screaming, in the grip of a fury he had not known existed within him.

With a great shout, the others fell upon him. Newsboys sleeping on the ground woke up in alarm, the night circulation people looked around in consternation, and the turo-turo owner screamed. The melee continued until a shouting security guard rushed in and roughly broke it up. He led Víctor away, and was about to interrogate him when the boy, who had sustained some cuts and bruises, broke free of his grasp and fled into the night.

He roamed the streets, the byways and darkened alleys of the teeming district. He passed by children his age scrounging around trash cans, and dingy motels where couples went in and out. One small restaurant, a focal point of excitement during the daytime when the racing results were posted, now stood silent and almost empty, about to close down. His face and body ached from the blows he had received, and a trickle of blood streamed down his nostrils. He wiped this on his T-shirt. He seemed to be in good shape otherwise, and he felt relief that the fight had been stopped.
in time. His thoughts flew back and forth. He promised himself that he
would never go back to the plant, but his resolve soon began to weaken.
He was at a loss as to what to do.

A rough voice to his right drew his attention, and as he turned into
a narrow sidestreet leading to the avenida, he saw a policeman bending
over a man sprawled on a heap, and apparently asleep. The officer kept on
shaking the fellow, who failed to respond. Then, cursing, he hit him with
his night stick, as Vićtor watched…

HE REPORTED FOR WORK THE FOLLOWING EVENING, PREPARED FOR
anything. But nothing untoward happened. Lašt night’s incident seemed
to have been forgotten, and the others made no reference to it. Then one
of the boys, whom Vićtor recognized as a ring-leader, went over to him
and, apparently as a kind of peace offering, held out a cigarette. Vićtor
hesitated, then said he didn’t smoke.

The others began to form around him anew, but this time their
attitude was one of curiosity rather than of menace.

—Sige na, take it. It is very nice to smoke, and it is easy. All you have
to do is take a deep breath, then exhale slowly.—

And Vićtor, his last defenses down, leaned forward and wearily
accepted the cigarette, while around them swirled the life of the city: this
city, flushed with triumphant charity campaigns, where workers were
made to sign statements certifying they received the minimum wage,
where millionaire politicians received Holy Communion every Sunday,
where mothers taught their sons and daughters the art of begging,
where orphans and children from broken homes slept on pavements and
under darkened bridges, and where best friends fell out and betrayed one
another.

AMADIS MARIA GUERRERO (GS 1952, HS 1956) has written stories
for various publications like Leader, Women’s Home Companion,
and Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine. A theater aficionado, Guerrero
wrote Tanghalang Pilipino: Celebrating 25 Years of Philippine Theater
in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the theater group Tanghalang Pilipino. He has also published short stories and travel features, including “The Manila I Knew,” “Traveler’s Choice: From North to South,” and “Tropical Splendor.”

In 1971, Guerrero’s “Children of the City” won third prize at the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature. It was published in 1974 by the University of Michigan, under a short story collection of the same name. In 1975, Guerrero wrote *The Struggle of Philippine Arts* in coordination with Purita Kalaw-Ledesma. They collaborated again in 1979 for *Edades: National Artist*. He is a regular contributor to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. 
On the last day of school, Ms. Munsayac distributed the invitations to Jaymee’s eighth birthday party. Inside the little pink envelope was a thick, cream-colored card with the words, “You’re invited!” in pink glitter. The words danced atop a picture of a brightly colored carousel with five prancing horses, all dainty bejewelled creatures with small feathery wings on each foot. “A prize for the best dressed princess on the carousel!”

Jaymee no longer spoke to Heidi, not after the incident involving the pencil box, but Heidi couldn’t help but smile at the lovely picture. It was magical. It was perfect. It made Heidi feel that everything was alright, or would be.

“I won’t be there,” Ms. Munsayac said. “I’ll be back home in Tarlac to visit my parents. But Jaymee’s mom told me she expects to see all of you there. All of you. No exceptions.”

Tita Karen was Jaymee’s mother. Everyone knew who she was, because she was always at school. Heidi often saw her chatting with Ms.
Munsayac during dismissal time, and once, even with Dr. Ferrer, the school principal. She was very slim, always in a simple shift dress, always in pastel colors. She wore pearl stud earrings and soft ballet flats. She spoke in a gentle voice and rolled her r’s, and when she laughed, she threw back her head and her long, shoulder length hair fell like a waterfall down her back. Heidi thought Tita Karen was the prettiest woman she had ever seen.

“Can’t you come to school like Tita Karen?” she once asked her mother.

“Parents aren’t allowed inside.” Her mother was hunched over the office laptop, typing numbers into a table.

But Heidi knew the truth. “Tita Karen was there yesterday. We saw her as we were going out for P.E. She joined us and told us jokes all the way to the covered courts. Ms. Munsayac was laughing at the jokes too.”

“There are better things to do than trade jokes with your teacher.”

Her mother had not even looked at her throughout their conversation.

Heidi’s mother worked at a doctor’s office in Manila, two trains, a jeepney, and one tricycle ride away from where they lived. Every day, Heidi waited for her to pick her up two hours after they had been dismissed. Heidi did not mind. There was time enough to play with the other girls who were fetched late, and when they were all gone, she would wander around the pleasant school grounds, the ground staff sweeping away the day’s fallen leaves in the late afternoon light.

This twilit ease was broken by the vroom-vroom-vroom of a tricycle bearing her mother. “Didi! Didi!” she would call out, even though Heidi, alerted by the trike’s rough sound, would be standing on the curb, ready to board. The road home was hot and muggy, dusty during dry spells, and muddy during rain. There was nothing to say on the long ride home; the rumble-grumble of the tricycle and honking of cars filled in the space where words ought to have been.

The smoke and the smog made Heidi’s head ache. Heidi took to watching her mother, who often fell asleep on the ride home. She was plump, with a small, flat nose and a double chin. Her stringy hair was often slick with sweat. Her blouses were buttoned all the way up, but were
too tight—her mother was thinner many years ago, when she had had them made—and so Heidi would try cover the gaps between the buttons with anything she had on hand: a sweater, a folder, a handkerchief.

Once they had passed the narrow bridge over the creek, Heidi would wake her, for home was near. They would get off at Aling Celing’s, whom they paid a small fee for daily dinner rations, which came in a small steel container. “How is the scholar?” Aling Celing would say, nodding at Heidi. “Doing well, thanks to your help,” Heidi’s mother invariably said. There were evenings she did not have to hand anything to Aling Celing.

At home, there was always rice, and the piece of fish, the bowl of sayote or togue from Aling Celing—always more than enough for the two of them—were their own kind of comfort, different from the quiet ease Heidi felt in her school, but comfort nonetheless.

Jaymee’s birthday invitation challenged this sense of contentment. As the date of the party drew near, Heidi could not help but pester her mother about attending.

“No exceptions, Ms. Munsayac said.”

“This isn’t a school party is it?” Heidi’s mother was transcribing a recording on her laptop.

“No, but—”

“I don’t see why you should go—”

“Why we should go—”

“What do you mean, ‘we’?” Heidi’s mother stopped the tape recorder, took off her earphones, and looked at Heidi sternly.

Heidi looked away. “All the other mothers will be there. They always are.”

“But this isn’t a school activity. It’s after the last day of school.”

“But Ms. Munsayac said we should be there. There will be games. And awards.”

“Awards? What kind of awards?”

“She didn’t say.”
Her mother put on the earphones and turned on the recorder. She began typing once more. She had stopped asking questions. But she didn’t say no.

• • •

Things had been easier when Tita Lany was still around. Tita Lany was Heidi’s aunt, Dad’s sister. Before she moved to Daly City to teach, she was the principal of the kindergarten Heidi attended. After class, Heidi went straight to Tita Lany’s office, with her little sandwich and box of milk. Tita Lany always took her lunch with Heidi, and then tucked her in for an afternoon nap on the couch in the principal’s office. No one seemed to mind. It was a small school. Everyone knew Heidi’s father had died when she was very young. They all doted on her.

At the end of the day, Tita Lany took Heidi home, cooked dinner, and stayed up until Mom came home. While they waited for Mom, Tita Lany taught Heidi how to make words from the letters she had learned in class; to add and subtract the numbers she was taught in school.

“Didi’s a quick study,” Tita Lany observed one evening, “I think she can make it to the girls’ school near the plaza.”

“We can’t afford it, Lany. And we can’t keep asking your help. Especially when you move to America.”

But some of Tita Lany’s girls had received scholarships. Heidi could, too. “What do you think, Didi?”

Heidi envied the big girls from the school beside the plaza. They looked so smart in their blue jumpers and white blouses. “Yes!” she shouted, jumping on the bed. “Yes, yes, yes!”

It was a hot day when Heidi visited the school for the first time. The heat shimmered on the damp moss that covered the school walls. It was a relief to enter the administration building: a cool, well-lit structure that, from the inside, seemed to have been carved from a block of marble. But her mother was uneasy. Heidi could tell, because she kept smoothing back her hair.

“I should have bought you new shoes,” she muttered.
Heidi looked down, and noticed, for the first time, how wrinkled they looked, and how dusty. There were some forms to fill. And after, a teacher asked Heidi to follow her down the hall.

She asked Heidi some questions about herself, her family, the things she liked and disliked—all too easy, Heidi thought. Then she led Heidi to a small desk with blocks and puzzles, and asked her to play with them. Time passed by quickly. The teacher smiled at her as they left the room. “We’re headed for the playground.” Heidi’s heart leapt with joy.

On the far side was a slide that looked like a castle. Two girls in the blue and white uniform were climbing the slide. The teacher said Heidi could go and play if she liked.

Heidi approached them. They were taller, but not by much, and this made her feel less uncertain. They sat, side by side, on top of the slide, like princesses looking down at Heidi.

“Hello,” Heidi called out, but they said nothing. Heidi circled the slide and then decided to join them. But when she had climbed to the top of the slide, the two princesses only looked at her, and then at each other, their tiny backsides wedged tightly into the top of the slide.

“Can I join you?”

“No,” they said in union.

Slowly Heidi climbed down the slide, made her way to the empty swing across. And just when she had settled into it, the princesses slid down, one after the other.

Heidi walked back to the teacher, who had been observing her all this time. They returned to the lobby where her mother was waiting.

A few weeks later, they called Tita Lany, who was, by then, already in Daly City.

“Like you said. With scholarship.”

“That’s great!” Tita Lany’s voice cackled through the static.

“But they said she needs to make friends.”

“Don’t we all?”

“I don’t know how I can manage, Lany.”

“You’ll have to, for her sake.”
When they hung up, she turned to Heidi and asked, “You really want to do this?”

Heidi nodded, already imagining herself in the smart blue jumper and crisp white blouse, playing on the castle-shaped slide in the fairy-tale playground, answering test after easy test, as her teachers smiled kindly at her.

• • •

The day of the party, Heidi’s mother took a leave from work to bring Heidi to the mall. At the toy store, Heidi chose an ink stamp set for Jaymee—something that Heidi would have loved to buy for herself—but Mom said it was too small a gift, and bought a Barbie doll instead.

Their next stop was the children’s section of the department store.

“What do girls wear to parties these days?” Mom asked. “Princess theme.”

The attendant showed them a rack of Disney princess gowns. Mom checked the tag on one of the dresses.

“We’ll be late,” said Heidi.

“Be patient, Didi. We’ll find the right dress.”

“I don’t want to try any.” What games would they be playing? What would the prizes be?

But her mother insisted. She asked about party dresses at half-price, and made Heidi try one dress after the other. None of them seemed to make her happy.

“We’ll be late.”

“Be patient.”

Heidi thought of cupcakes and cotton candy and realized she was hungry. But instead she said, “I’m tired.”

Mom stopped riffling through the rack of dresses on sale, and looked at her angrily. Heidi noticed the fine lines at the edges of Mom’s eyes, and the dark circles underneath. She had forgotten to put on some powder and lipstick. She looked tired, and old.
“It’s just a class party. When we have those in school, we all dress like this.”

“Really?”

Heidi was wearing a pair of jeans that Tita Lany had sent her, together with the pencil box that had caused her so much trouble lately.

“I’m more comfortable in jeans anyway.”

Her mother looked relieved.

“Let’s get you a new shirt. And maybe some baby cologne. You’ll be sweaty after the ride.”

The train had broken down again, and the guard at the station’s entrance turned them away. As they boarded a jeep, Heidi wondered why things couldn’t always be as easy as school.

She had taken to the new school like a duck takes to water. She loved the quiet classrooms, the orderly school grounds, the well-swept lawns and rows of kalachuchi trees that lined the well-landscaped pathways. The stories they read in class were unlike any she had read before, and the math exercises they did calmed her restless mind. She was often praised by her teachers. And in this school, the teachers were generous with their praise.

Generosity, Heidi learned, was very important to the school. A few weeks after school started, the principal sent out a letter requesting each student to bring two cans of corned beef and a box of juice in tetrapaks for those who had lost their homes during the last typhoon. During the second quarter, Ms. Munsayac distributed a letter signed by Tita Karen, soliciting cash donations for the annual PTA fund drive. The third quarter came with a booklet of 20 tickets each priced at P100, which the students needed to sell for the school’s social action fund. Her mother bought the corned beef and juice and sent money to Tita Karen. But when Heidi brought home the tickets, she told Heidi she would have to sell the tickets herself.

“Go ask Aling Celing if she’d like to buy a few.”

Heidi simply returned the booklet to Ms. Munsayac. She could not bear to ask anyone this favor.
Why did she find this so difficult? This was not a problem for the others, she observed. Certainly it wasn’t Gabby’s problem. Gabby brought a box of corned beef and sold twice the number of tickets required. And Gabby often treated the girls to rounds of iced tea during recess. She was a great favorite of the girls, and the teachers always praised her for being so friendly.

“That’s a nice lunch bag,” Gabby would say, fingering the strap of Heidi’s new bag; or, “I had a pencil like that once,” she’d recall, picking up Heidi’s only mechanical pencil. She’d hang around a bit, as though waiting for Heidi to say something—perhaps ask if she could join them—but Heidi never did. So Gabby and her friends—Jaymee was Gabby’s best friend—would leave Heidi in the classroom, sometimes taking with them a pencil or eraser that they particularly admired. More often than not, the borrowed things would make their way back to Heidi by the end of the day, sometimes with a note saying, “Thank you for letting me borrow.”

But sometimes they didn’t. On those days, Heidi’s stomach would be all tied up in knots. Because no matter how tired she was from work, her mother never failed to check Heidi’s things. It upset her when Heidi came home a pencil or crayon short.

“Where is it?”
“With Gabby.”
“She took it?”
“She borrowed it.”
“Did you ask her to return it?”
“No.”
“Ask her to return it.” Sternly. Then, softly: “You can do it. You’re so much braver than I am.”

The jeepney dropped them off at Gate 1. Heidi’s mother handed over her company id to the guard on duty.

The children’s party?” he said, eyeing the gift-wrapped present tucked under her arm.
She nodded. “How far from the gate?”
“Five houses. Best to get a tricycle—one of those that carries the village sticker.” He showed them a sample. “We don’t let the others in.”
“That’s nothing,” she said. And Heidi agreed.
But soon they realized they were wrong. They walked and walked and still they were unable to see the second of five houses. Heidi felt the sweat trickle down her new shirt. Her legs felt hot inside her jeans.
Suddenly, the familiar roar of a tricycle from behind them. The guard, the tricycle driver said, had asked him to come after them. They rode in silence as the tricycle made its way down the wide village street.
Finally, they stopped by a towering green gate, half-open. A group of men sat on a bench right beside it, watching the cars parked on the vacant lot across. Heidi clambered down the tricycle and waited for her mother to follow. But all she did was hand Heidi the gift.
“Didi, if I come with you, we wouldn’t have a tricycle to bring us back to the gate.”
Heidi did not understand.
“It’s easier to get us a tricycle if I wait outside the village.”
“Please come in,” one of the men said to them. “The guests are all inside.”
“Can you please make sure she is taken care of?”
The man took Heidi by the hand.
“Don’t worry,” Mom called out. “I’ll be back at 6:30.”
Heidi followed the tricycle as it vroomed away, her eyes filling with tears.
“Your classmates are already inside,” the man said kindly. “Don’t cry. Look!”
And that’s when the stilts walkers appeared. Some of them juggled little colored balls, others made merry noises with whistles of every shape and size. “Welcome to Jaymee’s eighth birthday party!” they cried.
A circus girl lifted Heidi overhead. Heidi found herself among feathers and colorful pillows, inside a sedan lifted by four stilts walkers. From her moving perch she enjoyed a bird’s eye view of the party. At the far end of
the garden, a group of boys, dressed like princes, were playing with a big black dog that jumped in and out of a hula-hoop, and performed other tricks. On the other side of the garden, little girls in floor length gowns were taking turns riding real ponies. A carousel at the center of the garden played sweet music as it went round and round and round.

The stilts walkers let Heidi down by the carousel. “This is as far as we go,” said the circus girl, “Enjoy the party.”

“Didi? Is that you?”

From behind the carousel, a woman in a silver-colored wig, a glittery mask, and a ball gown the color of the moon. Heidi was so bedazzled by the sight of her, she failed to recognize who it was.

“I’m so glad you made it. Ms. Munsayac thought you might not come,” Tita Karen said, as she took Heidi’s gift.

Heidi was tongue-tied, transfixed by everything around her. The little girls running past her wore make up; the little boys wore pomade on their hair.

Tita Karen led her inside a tent, big, white, and airconditioned.

“Ladies,” she said to the women inside, “this is Didi.”

“Oh,” one of the ladies said.

They all looked thin and willowy. They all wore candy-colored shift dresses. They were all fully made-up. Heidi could not tell one apart from the other.

“The girls are done with merienda,” Tita Karen explained, “They’re enjoying the games in the garden. You can join them when you’re done.”

She led Heidi to the buffet table at the far end of the tent. On it, were two small mountains of chicken lollipops, two pineapples skewered with sticks of pork barbecue, and a bed of red and yellow stuff inside a long silver tub. Heidi had not seen anything like it before. It smelled delicious.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Lasagna.”

Heidi liked the way the word sounded, repeated it, liked the way it rolled around her mouth.

She realized then that the room had turned quiet.
“It’s Jaymee’s favorite,” Tita Karen said, breaking the silence. “We have it so often, I’m actually sick of it.” She asked the waiter to cut a hefty slice for Heidi.

“It’s just like spaghetti. But better,” one of the mothers said from across the room.

She was right. It was rich and warm, soft and comforting, sour and sweet, buttery and cheesy. Heidi knew this was something Aling Celling wouldn’t ever be able to make. She took one bite after the other, forgetting everything but the dish before her. She did not even notice that one of the mothers had approached.

“Didi, right?” said the lady in the cherry red shift. “I’m Gabby’s mom.”

Heidi felt the weight of all eyes on her.

“Is your mom here?” the woman said. “I’d like to speak to her.”

Heidi shot up from her seat, pulling the table cloth with her. As she ran out the tent, she heard her plate crash to the floor.

“Oh,” she heard one of the painted women say, very softly.

• • •

Heidi had hoped Mom wouldn’t notice that the new pencil case was missing. But Mom noticed everything, forgot nothing.

“This is the same girl who took your mechanical pencil?”

“Yes.”

“And the yellow eraser?”

“Yes.”

But this time, Heidi wanted to say, this time was different. The pencil box wasn’t taken from her, she had given it away. But she couldn’t find the words to explain what had happened, why she had felt that giving Gabby the pencil case was the right thing to do—what she had wanted to do. Her mother had asked so many questions, none of which seemed to fit the answers Heidi wanted to give.

During recess, Gabby came by her table with two cups of iced tea.

“My birthday. Got everyone some iced tea,” she said, setting down a cold
cup on Heidi’s desk. “Just making sure you got one too,” she said, gulping down her drink.

Something in the way Gabby had given her the drink reminded her of Tita Karen, who had, not too long before that, dropped in one day with a tray of chocolate cupcakes with pink frosting and tiny pearl sprinkles.

“Thank you,” Heidi said, after sipping some of her tea.

“Is that a new pencil case? I haven’t seen that before.” Gabby looked at the new pencil box on her desk. It came in the last box Tita Lany had sent Heidi from Daly City.

“It’s new.”

“Can I borrow it?”

“You can have it,” Heidi said, in her most grown-up voice. It seemed like the correct thing to say, the most gracious, the most generous. “It’s your birthday after all. Besides, I have another one at home.”

Gabby whooped with joy. Together, they emptied the pencil case. Heidi gathered the homeless pencils and erasers and placed them inside a pocket of her bag.

“Thank you,” Gabby said, as she ran out the door with her empty cup in one hand, and Heidi’s pencil case in the other. Heidi smiled as the other girls gathered around Gabby, admiring the pencil case they had failed to notice when it was sitting on her desk.

• • •

“You can’t let them treat you this way, Didi,” Mom said, her voice suddenly soft, her arms drawing Heidi into a hug.

“I can handle it,” Heidi whispered, though she still did not understand how she had been hurt, or why.

“You get that pencil box back.”

“Yes.” Heidi felt a tear roll down her cheek. She brushed it off quickly.

“Good girl,” Mom said, rubbing her back with long strokes. “You’re so much braver than I am.”
Heidi did not feel very brave when she spied her pencil box on Gabby’s desk. It was only a pencil box, a small matter she wanted to forget about. But she had promised to get it back.

At recess, Gabby and Jaymee, stopped by Heidi’s desk. “Would you like to come with us, Didi? We’re going to the canteen.”

Heidi shook her head, began clearing her desk.

When they had gone, Heidi went up to Gabby’s desk, emptied the pencil box, and left the note she had prepared the night before, which said: “Thanks for returning my pencil case.”

When Gabby read the note, she sat in her seat and said nothing. Heidi heaved a sigh of relief and placed the pencil box she had recovered on her desk. But when Jaymee saw the pencil box on Heidi’s desk, she said, “Why do you have Gabby’s pencil box?”

Heidi said nothing. Ms. Munsayac had already entered the room. She took out her notebook and began copying the lesson on the board, but she couldn’t concentrate properly. She felt that the other girls were looking at her. Jaymee approached Ms. Munsayac, and pointed at Heidi. Heidi swiftly hid the pencil box inside her bag. She felt sick.

When the bell rang, Ms. Munsayac asked Heidi to stay behind.

“Jaymee said you have somebody else’s pencil box in your bag. Is that true?”

Heidi shook her head and tried to be brave. “It’s mine,” she wanted to say, but she could only cry.

Ms. Munsayac took away the pencil case. Heidi had done something serious, she said. Of course, she would be calling Heidi’s mother.

But when her mother came to fetch her, Ms. Munsayac was not mentioned at all. All evening, Heidi waited to be asked about the pencil case. But she wasn’t.

“Go to bed,” was all her mother said to Heidi.
The next day, Ms. Munsayac returned the pencil box. “I’m sorry I didn’t notice what Gabby was doing to you. I’ll be speaking to Gabby and her parents, like I promised your mom. It won’t happen again.”

• • •

She found her classmates at the pavilion, all dressed in Disney Princess outfits. Cinderellas, Snow Whites, Ariels, Auroras, and Belles—they were all seated in a semi-circle, squealing in laughter. Gabby was dressed as Cinderella; Heidi could not take her eyes off her glass slippers. Jaymee, the celebrant, wore a tiny tiara. She was dressed as Belle, but even Heidi could see that the material from which her gold gown was made was much more special than the other girls’ dresses. The princesses were in the middle of a quiz bee.

“I want to join,” she whispered to the lady assisting the party host.

“Oh sweetheart, wait for the next game. This one’s almost over.”

And so Heidi waited as her friends battled it out. In the end, Jaymee won, and all the contestants blew air kisses at each other. Everyone clapped, and shouted, “Happy birthday, Jaymee!”

Jaymee smiled, as she ran back to the tent with the rest of the girls. Heidi considered following them, but then she was called to join the next game.

She realized immediately that the girls she would be competing against were so much younger than she was. They were no more than babies. Their nannies trailed after them anxiously.

The game, it turned out, was Musical Chairs. Heidi didn’t need to listen to the host explain that they would be going round and round looking for a space to sit on. That it was just like going on a carousel, but the one without a seat would not be able to ride.

They played the sweet tinkling music that the carousel played, and Heidi walked round and round, imagining herself an adult among children. The music stopped, and Heidi knew what to do. The other kids didn’t. This was all new to them. Their nannies screamed: “Find a chair!”
Heidi realized, she could win this. Every step, she took deliberately, always positioning herself in front of a seat. When the music stopped, all she needed to do was sit. There was no chance she could lose.

One by one, the chairs were removed, and the ring around them grew smaller and smaller, until there remained only Heidi, and the littlest princess, a toddler in a gold and pink gown.

Heidi studied the competition, wondering how she had lasted as far as she did. The little girl did not seem very smart or interested in winning.

“Come on, Sab, you can do it! Eyes on the prize!”

Heidi saw the child’s mother, a young woman in a pale pink shift clapping her hands, encouraging the little one on.

“Sab! Sab! Sab!” the crowd began to chant.

Heidi looked at the child—so adorable in her pink and gold gown, her blush-colored lipstick, her tiny crown—and felt anger rise from her belly, and constrict her throat.

When the music played, little Sab planted herself in front of the chair and began to dance the Macarena. The crowd began to laugh. Heidi tried to push her gently so that they could finish the game. Sab looked up at Heidi and chuckled. And for the briefest of moments, Heidi smiled at the little one. Sab took a step forward. Heidi stepped forward too.

And then the music stopped. Heidi sat down on the remaining chair. Sab lost her balance and fell. The crowd gasped. Little Sab’s mother ran to the stage. But when she got there, Saab announced, “Booboo not hurt.”

The crowd cheered. Sab and her mommy went down the stage.

The host thanked Heidi for being such a good sport, and handed her a toy balloon.

Heidi wandered around the garden, watching the sights. She rode the carousel twice, and visited the black dog. But she didn’t join the girls on the prancing ponies, no.

At six o’clock, the stilt walkers reappeared, carrying a three-tier cake with a rotating carousel topper on the palanquin. They set it down on the stage where the games had been played. Heidi hung back from the little princes and princesses singing the birthday song. The sun had begun to
set, and Heidi noticed how, though the stage seemed too brightly lit, the garden was too rapidly embraced by shadow.

The birthday song ended, pictures were taken. Still, Heidi hung back, and no one seemed to notice. Not the mothers and nannies clicking their point-and-shoots and cellphone cameras; not the waiters clearing away the stray plates and goblets. The host asked the children to fall in line, to bow or curtsy in front of Jaymee, and receive a token in exchange. Heidi considered approaching the stage but thought the better of it, seeing, for the first time, that she was the only child who was not in a costume.

Was it the end?

Oh, no, the host said, one last thing! There were just too many goodies, we almost forgot this one! He called the stilt walkers back, one last time.

This time, they carried with them a beautiful papier mache horse in pink, turquoise and gold glitter. A golden horn protruded from the centre of its forehead, and two gilt wings, from its back.

Heidi thought it was the most magical thing she had ever seen.

Jaymee was called onstage, blindfolded, and given a bat.

Heidi watched them turn Jaymee round and round; how Jaymee aimed at the air once, twice, and broke nothing; and finally, when they fixed her aim, how she broke the paper horse, first at the neck, and then at the chest. A shower of sweets, glitter, coins.

The crowd surged forward.

A little prince walked off wearing the horse’s head. The horn had broken off. Not too long after, the crowd disappeared.

All that was left of the paper horse was a broken wing.

“Pick that up and throw it in the trash.”

It took a moment before Heidi realized that the woman with the broom was talking to her.

Obediently, she picked up the wing, and a few other ribbons left on the stage. The host’s assistant hissed at the woman who had ordered her about, whispered a few harsh words to her. The woman shrugged and turned away from Heidi.
Where was her mother? Her nanny? Did she need a phone to call or text them?

“They are on their way, thanks,” Heidi said to the assistant, clutching her little balloon and the broken wing tightly to her chest.

She did not dare to walk to the gate, where Tita Karen and Jaymee were still seeing the last stragglers off, and so followed the staff to the kitchen and from there, by following the caterer, found her way to the service gate.

The guard at the service gate gave her no trouble. Out on the curb, Heidi heard the familiar sound of a tricycle approaching. She followed the sound down the long road snaking into the darkness. Now that she knew who she was and where, the trip back would take much longer.

“Didi! Didi!”

The sound of her mother’s voice broke her heart.

She was tired, so very, very tired.

Bravely, she put on her happiest smile.

CHRISTINE V. LAO (AB Philosophy 1995) received the Ateneo de Manila University’s Dean’s Awards for Poetry and the Essay in 1995, and served as editor of the Filipino section of Heights, Ateneo’s literary magazine in her undergraduate years. She went on to study Law, and then creative writing at the University of the Philippines. She has worked as a staff writer for The Sunday Times, penned a column for The Manila Times, and has written and edited books on law and policy reform for the Asian Development Bank. Her stories have appeared in the anthologies Heat: A Southeast Asian Urban Anthology; Maximum Volume: Best New Philippine Fiction 2014; Lauriat: A Filipino-Chinese Speculative Fiction Anthology; and Philippine Speculative Fiction. Her stories have also been published in Expanded Horizons; BANWA; Philippine Genre Stories; Philippine Graphic; and Philippines Free Press. Ms. Lao was a fellow for fiction at the 50th Silliman University National Writers’ Workshop.

Tito Boy, a long time ago, traded a box of rubber bands for a baby monkey. When his friend’s mother came to get the monkey back, Tito Boy, with the monkey cupped in his hands, rolled himself in a banig and stood it up in the corner of the children’s room, beside the old aparador. Nobody found him. Later on he showed up for dinner, and his father made him return the monkey to his friend.

Well, Daisy stood in the same children’s room now, but no rolled-up banig stood in any corner of it. The one banig left in the house could only be folded into smaller and smaller squares until two handles stuck out and made it look like a bag. Yayang the cook used it for her afternoon naps; it was too hot to lie on her bed, she said, now that it was summer. Anyway, Daisy had no use for it. She simply needed a hiding place as clever as Tito Boy’s, and unlike Tito Boy, she owned her new set of markers, so that she couldn’t be made to return them to anybody.
Still, she had to hide them from her two younger sisters, Lily and Marie. They touched everything they could get their hands on in the children’s room, even Daisy’s things—her dolls, books, art paper, crayons, and her brush and clips. Now that Tito Boy had sent her the colored markers from Japan, all glossy and thick and on display in their transparent plastic case, she couldn’t bear the thought of anyone using them except herself.

So Daisy looked under her bed, one of her trusty hiding places. But there, last week, Lily had discovered her collection of coloring books, and had proceeded to muddy every uncolored picture with crayons called black, brown, and burnt sienna. Daisy turned to the huge aparador where all the children’s clothes went. The highest shelf was hers, and she had from time to time buried her stuff under her t-shirts. Unfortunately, last month, Marie had stood on a chair and rifled through all shelves and drawers until she found Lily’s doctor set and the bag of chocnut which Daisy and her best friend Kathy had stashed.

Their mother had made Daisy share the chocnut with her two younger sisters, but Daisy didn’t want to share her colored markers just yet.

“Pssst,” a scratchy voice called.

Daisy took a step back and stared at the open aparador in front of her. She tugged at her ears and looked closely at the tumbled piles of shirts on the shelves, the half-open underwear and sock drawers, the metal rod overloaded with dresses and skirts and pants and school uniforms.

“Yes, I’m here,” the voice rasped, and Daisy saw a dustball float out from behind the aparador, as if a breath had blown it out.
Daisy peered into the dark and dusty space between the back of the aparador and the wall. She could barely see anything, could only tell the dust lay thick with the way her nose twitched. And then, as her eyes adjusted in the gloom, she began to make out a grayish shadow, different from the darkness, which moved slightly towards her.

Daisy yelped. Now she looked straight into a pair of black dots that blinked right back at her, except that the other black dot seemed almost stuck to the wall. “Well, here I am, now you’ve found me,” it said, speaking through the corner of its mouth. The other corner seemed stuck to the wall as well.

“What are you doing there?” Daisy demanded, surprised enough to forget her fear.

“Oh, just hanging out,” it replied, “especially since both my shoulders have been pinned to this wall for around fifty years.”

“Fifty years?”

The creature seemed to cock its head to think. “Yes, just about fifty. It was about the time the aparador came to this house.”

A wave of sympathy washed through Daisy. “And you got trapped in there? Didn’t anyone see you?”

The creature gave a short laugh, which sounded more like a scratch. “No, not really, nobody saw me. And I’m not trapped, just a little uncomfortable. I’m an anito. I lived in the tree that the aparador was made from.”

Daisy opened her mouth to ask her next question, but just then she heard her sisters clattering up the stairs outside the children’s room.

“Oh no!” Daisy cried.

“What’s the matter?” the anito asked.

“I need to hide my markers, I can’t let my sisters find them.”

What looked at first like a tattered gray blanket rolled itself out under Daisy’s face. She realized it was a very flat hand. “Quick,” the anito said, “give them to me.”

Without hesitation, Daisy placed her set of markers on the hand. Daisy’s fingers brushed against it. It felt dry and rustly like old and
The hand withdrew with the markers, just as Daisy’s sisters burst into the room.

“What are you doing there, Ate?” Lily asked. “Look what Tito Boy sent me, a robo-dog.”

“And he sent me a Pokemon watch,” Marie added. “What did he send you?”

Daisy moved away from the cabinet. “Well… guess!”

As they enumerated any number of things—doll, volleyball, cd, cellphone—Daisy sat on her bed and used a foot to slide out the first thing that it found underneath. Luckily, it was a batch of sparkly stickers, which Lily and Marie had not yet seen because Daisy had just received them the day before from her best friend Kathy.

By dinnertime, Lily and Marie had stuck every sticker of the Powerpuff Girls and Mojo Jojo on their desks and bedroom walls, but Daisy didn’t mind. At least for the time being, her markers were safe.

Daisy tried to stay away from the aparador until evening, when her sisters had fallen asleep. She lay for a while, looking at the huge bulk of it. She had known that the aparador was old; it had stood there, solid, tall, and brown, since before her mother, Tito Boy, and five other brothers and sisters shared the children’s room.

She stood up and tiptoed to the corner where she had met the anito just that afternoon.

“Hey,” she called softly, “Are you there?”

There was no sound or reply. Daisy’s heart grew heavy. Had she just imagined the anito? What if there had been no creature behind the aparador? What if she had thrown her markers in there herself, where her own arms could not reach?

Daisy felt for the gap between the back of the aparador and the wall. With her fingers, she tried to feel for her markers down the length of the cabinet. She stuck her hand farther.

“I can’t reach it,” Daisy whispered. “It’s nowhere.”

“What is?”

“You’re there!”
“Of course. I told you I couldn’t really go anywhere.”
“Are my markers with you?”
“Yes, here they are.” Something squarish and plastic poked her hand.
“Why are they so special?”
“I like to draw,” Daisy replied. “And, my favorite Tito gave them to me.”
“You mean Boy, of course.”
“You know him?”
“I remember a little boy who came running in here once having to hide a baby monkey.”
“You know that story?”
“I helped him keep the banig up in that corner while he hid inside it with the monkey. Too bad he had to give the monkey back.” The anito sighed. “Boy was a clever one, but he ran outdoors all the time, and would forget me for days on end. I think he eventually grew tired of all my stories and forgot me altogether.”
“Stories? Like what?” Daisy leaned forward.
“Mostly of the forest where my tree grew, the narra trees beside mine, the river that ran past the cave at the foot of a hill.” The anito sighed again. “I sure would like to see that place once more.”
“Hmmmm,” Daisy said.

The next morning, Daisy’s mother went into the room and scolded Daisy for having gone to bed in a dirty nightgown and with dirty feet and hands. Daisy realized that the grime had come from sitting in the corner beside the huge aparador. She changed the bedsheets and the pillowcases without complaint, as her mother stood nearby.

“You may as well make the beds of your younger sisters, Daisy,” her mother said. “Then we can go drive to the mall, get some groceries, and watch a movie.”
“Never mind, Mama, I don’t want to go.”

The moment her mother and sisters left, Daisy ran to the corner and called out to the anito. “Give me my markers,” Daisy said. “Look, I brought some paper.”
She lay a piece of paper flat on the floor, where the anito could see most of it, even if only through the corner of its eyes. Then she opened the plastic container and gasped.

“Where’s the red pen?”

“I took it,” the anito admitted. “It reminded me of the red flowers that grew on the bank of the river. They looked yummy.”

“You didn’t eat it?”

“I can’t eat flowers, silly.”

“I meant the pen.”

The red marker flew out of the narrow gap. The anito turned away.

Daisy didn’t mean to hurt its feelings, but she was more excited about getting to use her markers at last. She worked for a full hour, humming to herself, and then thought that perhaps she had begun to be like Tito Boy. She had forgotten the anito, just as he had when he would go out and play in the streets. So she tried to do something thoughtful. “Here you are, come take a look. You can’t go back to the place you lived a long time ago, but I tried to bring the place to you.”

Daisy showed the anito what she had drawn—a group of trees on the right side of the page, the river snaking down the middle, then the hill and cave to the left.

“It’s not like my place, but it’s just as nice. Thank you,” said the anito.

She inserted her drawing through the gap between the back of the aparador and the wall. “You can have this so you can always look at it when you miss your home.”

That summer, Daisy drew lots of trees and gardens with her markers, while her sisters were out. When they ran in, Daisy would stuff her markers and drawings behind the aparador, where the anito could watch over them. Then, like Tito Boy, she would run out and play with Kathy, under the narra tree in her best friend’s backyard.

One day, as Daisy, Lily, and Marie dressed in their play clothes, Lily placed her hands on the rod where all their clothes hung and started to swing. She laughed and squealed so much that Marie felt compelled to join her. Although they were very small children, they were too much for the
old aparador to bear. It creaked and leaned forward. The wood on both sides of the rod splintered. Daisy called for them to stop, but they didn’t hear. Then the rod came off and flew out, taking her sisters along with it, and burying them under a huge pile of dresses and skirts and pants and school uniforms.

Hearing the screams Lily and Marie made, their mother rushed in. “Daisy, what happened?”

Daisy couldn’t reply. She stood agape before the open aparador, watching as the shelves began to tilt without the wood panel on one side, and as their folded shirts and Lily’s robo-dog tumbled to the floor.

“Daisy, help me!”

Turning around, Daisy saw her mother trying to dig out her sisters from under all their clothes. Lily and Marie’s heads appeared a moment later, looking around at the mess they had made. They began to cry.

“Oh no, you two,” their mother said. “You are going to help me and your Ate clean up and fold all your clothes. Then we’ll have to look for a new cabinet.”

“A new cabinet?” Daisy repeated.

“Yes. This one can’t be fixed anymore. We can sell it to one of those carpenters who make new furniture out of old wood.” She stopped and looked at Daisy closely. “You want your own cabinet, Daisy? I know you’ve always wanted a room of your own.”

Daisy nodded. But even the thought of owning something she didn’t have to share with her two sisters failed to lift her spirits.

That night, when everyone in the house went to sleep, Daisy crept past piles of clothing on the floor to her favorite corner. The anito spoke first. “I heard.”

“Do you have to leave too?” Daisy asked.

“Don’t worry. Once you have your own cabinet, you can keep your markers inside and lock it.”

Daisy shook her head. “Never mind the markers.”
The anito fell silent. Then, in an even scratchier voice, it said, “But I do have to leave. Where the aparador goes, I go. Otherwise, I won’t be able to breathe.”

“But what happens if—,” Daisy swallowed. “What happens if the carpenter cuts the wood into pieces to make all sorts of new furniture?”

The anito made creaky noises, but it didn’t reply.

“I can’t let that happen,” Daisy decided. She crept back to her bed and lay staring at the ceiling, wondering what clever thing Tito Boy would have done.

The next day, when Lily and Marie went off with their mother to look at cabinets, Daisy took the foldable banig from Yayang’s room before the cook could claim it for her afternoon nap. She spread it out in the children’s room and slid it flat between the wall and the back of the aparador. Now that the aparador leaned slightly forward, there was more space behind.

“What are you doing?” rasped the anito.

“Just hop on, and I’ll fold you into the banig.”

“You can’t part me from the aparador. It’s all the wood from my tree.”

“You can move into the narra tree in my best friend’s backyard.”

“There’ll be an anito there too. There’s only room for one in any tree.”

Daisy clenched her hands. She swiped at the tears that sprang to her eyes. “Please,” she said. “The carpenter is coming to get the aparador this afternoon.”

She heard the banig scrape the wall and felt a tug at the end she was holding. “Okay, fold me up,” said the anito. “I’ll hold my breath.”

With the banig folded up, it looked slightly bulkier than before, and weighed a little more. Something fell out—her set of markers. Daisy didn’t bother to pick them up. She ran at once, all the way, to Kathy’s backyard. She put the banig down by the narra tree and knocked on its trunk. “I know you’re there,” she whispered to the anito in the narra tree, squinting her eyes, trying to see. “Please. You know me. You have seen me play here everyday. Please let my friend in… just to visit. Until I find someplace else—”
The banig moved with a rustling sound. She caught a glimpse of something shadowy, disappearing into the roots of the tree. “It’s okay now Daisy,” the anito whispered, her anito, the one who had lived behind the old aparador all these years. “The narra tree’s anito has welcomed me and told me what to do. I will go with a seed from this tree, to be planted elsewhere. I do not know if we will meet again, but I thank you for saving my life.”

Daisy leaned her head on the trunk of the tree. “Goodbye,” she said. “I hope you find someplace with a river, a hill, and a cave.”

Daisy spent the rest of the day with her best friend. She told Kathy about the anitos while they had a picnic on the banig under the narra tree. And although the anitos did not speak to them, they promised out loud to be kind to all trees, and to plant many, the rest of their lives.

When she got home, Yayang said the carpenter had already taken the aparador away. Daisy clattered up the stairs to her room, and found her two sisters busy with her markers, drawing on her drawings, messing them up. But she didn’t care. She joined her mother, who stared at the wall where the aparador once stood.

Her mother took Daisy’s hand, and said, “Your Tito Boy used to say there was a monster behind the aparador. Nobody believed him. But I don’t suppose you could have done that.”

She didn’t need to point. Daisy could see for herself. Drawn on the wall, with a special set of markers, were the greenest of trees rising tall and stately above a blue river running through them, and off to one side was a brown hill covered in red flowers, with a dark cave at the foot of it.

**Cyan Abad-Jugo** (AB Literature (English) 1991) is the daughter of prominent poet Gemino Abad, and one of only two Atenean English Literature majors to graduate in 1991. Five years later, the father-daughter duo published their first book, aptly titled *Father and Daughter: The Figures of Our Speech*. Abad-Jugo, who finished her PhD in English Studies: Creative Writing and Anglo-American Literature at the University of the Philippines, has written several books, including *Sweet Summer and Other*
Stories (2004), Leaf and Shadow: Stories about Some Friend Creature (2008), and Salingkit: A 1986 Diary (2012). In 2003, her children’s story “Behind the Old Aparador” won second place at the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature (Short Story for Children). Abad-Jugo has also lent her writing skills for comic books, creating Siglo: Passion in 2005 and Mango JAM (2005-2009). She is an Assistant Professor at the Ateneo de Manila University’s Department of English.


NEXT PAGE
The museo or museum of biological specimens at the old Ateneo in Intramuros, from Ateneo Municipal de Manila: Álbum. Exposición de Filipinas en Madrid (1887). Public domain.
Afterwards, whenever Dr. Jose Caridad tried to recall exactly how the events of the last days of that May began for him and his family, what formed in his mind was a recollection of heat, bright and oppressive, and strangely, utterly silent.

The heat at the beginning had been, as Dr. Caridad would remember it, a humid glare pressing down upon the town from a white sky like a lens magnifying the shrouded glow of the sun; but the absolute stillness was merely conjured by his imagination, influenced perhaps by the vast desolation at the end.

In the hot dazzle of that Sunday afternoon in Tarlac, he had driven home across town, from the Rotary Club luncheon at the Central Luzon Emerald Hotel for the newly elected governor. He had not voted for the man, who had won by only a narrow margin, in his view nothing but a fraudulent upstart, a deceiver of his class, appealing to the electorate with his glib socialist pretensions; and having to listen for the better part of an
hour to the politician’s cordial clichés, about democracy and social justice and genuine land reform, whatever that meant, had only made him wish he had gone instead with Maripaz and the girls. After the ten o’clock Mass, they had promptly set off to visit with his in-laws in San Sebastián. That he should be driving all by himself in Bobby’s Lancer, whose aircon refused to work, while they had the Mercedes and the driver, added to his ill humor.

Perspiring in the jusi barong plastered to his broad, fore-shortened body, his surgeon’s fingers slippery on the wheel, Dr. Caridad steered the yellow car down the length of Aquino Avenue with its shops and restaurants, the moviehouse and his uncle’s decrepit building where he had once maintained a clinic, the mini-buses and jeepneys, loading passengers, mostly people from the barrios—the dumb, prolific masses idolized by that goddamn demagogue—crowding half of the thoroughfare across from the church. Then past the plaza where some thatch-roofed food stalls remained more than a month after the fiesta, and beyond it to the glimmering leafshade of Romulo Street where his cousins still lived in the old indestructible houses near the stone bridge. The river, as he had noticed more than once during these dry months, had shrunk to a shabby stream between broad sand banks on which was now spread, like a vivid quilt, the wash drying in the sweltering light. In a rainy season long ago, when he was in the grades at Don Bosco, and before learned how to swim, he had almost drowned, there, below, where women were not pounding clothes beside the thin stream. For no apparent reason another boy, a rough farmer’s son, had pushed him tumbling into the swollen river…

At last on the highway that looped around the poblacion and afforded a shorter route home, in Fortune Village, Dr. Caridad flicked on the radio for music, only to be greeted with a crump of static. It was the same brittle crackling everywhere on the dial, as if some malign electricity in the glittering air had repelled all other sounds. Glumly he wondered why Bobby hadn’t bothered to have the set fixed or gotten one of those removable cassette players when he was so keen on planning wherever he was punk rock or whatever the young people danced to or mooned over
these days. For Bobby’s birthday in July, he might get him the newest thing from Sony, a disc player, was it now, if that boy would promise not to turn it on so loud as to burst your eardrums, which was what he liked to do with his stereo when he was home from college, any hour it seemed of the day or night. Nobody, but nobody, Dr. Caridad mused sadly, cared anymore for the kind of music with the sweet and yearning lyrics that he and Maripaz knew by heart during their courting days, about these foolish things reminding me of you and strangers in paradise and such; and he was reflecting on how times had changed, how different kids were from when he was growing up, things were no longer the same, life in general, yes, here in Tarlac, certainly in Manila, the rest of the country, for that matter, when from a block away he saw the men in front of his gate.

There were three of them, and the tallest one, in a narrow-brimmed buri hat, appeared to be arguing with the security guard. They had their backs to the cemented street and did not see Dr. Caridad coming up until he had slowed before the two-story house to swing the car towards the gate. The guard, in a dark blue uniform, gestured to the men to back off, stepped through a side entrance under the bougainvillea to push open the black steel panels topped by coils of barbed wire.

As Dr. Caridad eased the car into the driveway, the tall doffed his hat, revealing shaggy hair and a haggard face, nodding and smiling. Strangers: what could they possibly want at this time of day, didn’t they know he no longer saw patients on weekends… Then, one of the men leaned towards the car and raised a hand, as if to halt it, and Dr. Caridad thought the man vaguely familiar, he had seen him before, but where? The guard waved the men to move back and closed the gate on them with a grating metallic thump.

Dr. Caridad parked beside the Toyota van with the cracked window like a glass spider-web where a stone or something had hit just last week, the evening Jocelyn and Susan came back late from that wedding party in Gerona. He should have better than to let them go driving out there at night, in that troubled part of the province where, he had since heard, shallow graves had been found along the road to Victoria and the soldiers
no longer ventured out after sundown. He sauntered out of the garage, rolling the sleeves of his drenched barong further up and squinting in the suffocating light. An ice-cold glass of lemonade, that was what he wanted; then a shower and a siesta; but Santa Maria, those inconsiderate characters at the gate, so early in the afternoon… The guard hurried to overtake him in the shadow of the porte-cochere.

“Doctor… They wish to see you, Doctor.

He spoke to the guard also in Pampango, unable to stifle the curt irritation in his voice, “What do they want?”

The guard said, blinking anxiously, “They say they are from San Sebastián, Doctor.”

“So?”

“They say they have come because of a…question” the guard pronounced it as if with sad dištaste—“about Hacienda Margarita…”

Dr. Caridad made a mental note to ask the security agency to send someone more forceful and dependable, not this anemic probably tuberculous runt who looked anything but a sentinel, despite the .45-caliber pistol holstered at his waist. “In that case, they have come to the wrong place. If it’s some business on the hacienda…” And had this fellow’s brother, as agreed on, come at all today to help around the house? No sign that the lawn had been watered, most of it a powdery yellow, and littered with leaves before the miniature Lourdes grotto, under the overhanging branches of the caimito next door.

“They have been waiting for almost an hour now, Doctor. They said it is very important.”

Dr. Caridad paused before the front door to dab at his face vigorously with a handkerchief. “Tell them to go see Attorney Tancinco. Tomorrow. He is now in charge.” It was then that he heard the day’s first thunder, a brief rumble like distant rocks falling, and he seemed to feel its vibration in the heated air. But what would this be about? Maybe, he should find out, at least: after all, anything that concerned the hacienda… He felt the pressure too of their presence, their silent waiting out in the street.
“They said they would not leave until they had spoken to you.”

The guard now sounded more forlorn, as if shamed by his own nervous complaint, blinking at Dr. Caridad. “They said they would not take too much of your time, Doctor. They said—”

“Very well then, let them in.” Dr Caridad exhaled audibly, wiping his face. “Take them to the veranda.”

The German shepherd in its cage in a corner of the front lawn began to bark as Dr. Caridad crossed the living room and ascended the stairs towards the huge silver-framed Sacred Heart and the blasts of the Springsteen concert from his son’s bedroom.

The afternoon had so darkened by the time Dr. Caridad, iced lemonade in hand, came out onto the veranda that he turned on the overhead light, along with the ceiling fan. The men rose as one, greeting him in polite accents. They were dressed almost identically, in T-shirts and denims. The tall one wore black shoes, his companions were in rubber sandals. There was about them a kind of humble apprehension and a sourish odor of sweat, which Dr. Caridad had learned to associate with the more industrious peasantry during his stint some years ago as assistant manager on his father-in-law’s plantation.

They had barely taken their seats, the three men close together on the wrought-iron rather like the subdued patients Dr. Caridad still allowed himself to see on occasion at the provincial hospital, when the least unfamiliar of the three stood up and said, formally, as if in class, “Doctor, I am Isidro the brother of your encargado in Sapang Malati, Doctor.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Your mother had cancer…”

“She died last December… Doctor, this is my compadre, Luis Sumulong”—Malabanan motioned to the gaunt, smiling man—“and this is Placido his cousin, also from San Sebastián.”

“Sit down, sit down.” Dr. Caridad thought of his denied siesta and the last few chapters of the Stephen King novel he had expected to finish this Sunday. And he needed to rest up for the next day as he would have to be
off early, for the stockholders’ meeting in Camiling…. Thunder exploded in alternately faint and resounding bursts in the hills beyond the river, to the east, and he hoped Maripaz and the girls would come back early. As he well knew, the highway where it curved after the army camp in San Miguel could turn slick and tricky even after just a drizzle. “What is it you have come to see me for?” he said, affecting a jovial gruffness. They would have to walk some distance back to where they could catch, on the highway, a bus or jeepney bound for San Sebastián. No softdrinks let alone coffee for them—that would only encourage them to stay longer. “Let’s hear it, don’t waste time. It looks like rain…”

“It is about a problem of Pareng Luis here,” said Malabanan. He clasped and unclasped his hands with their knobby fingers and broken nails.

“And what would that be?” That new maid couldn’t learn the simplest thing, like not putting so much sugar. This Malabanan was too fair in complexion to be a farmer himself, he was probably half-Chinese, yes, the mother was, one of his charity patients. “Speak up, we don’t have much time.”

“Pareng Luis has a small piece of land, very small, Doctor—“
“Riceland? Sugar cane?”
“Sugar, Doctor. All these years he has been selling what little he produces to the Central…”
“Yes? Go on.”
“There was a survey made last month, by the men of Attorney Tancinco,” said Malabanan, his voice fading on uttering the name so that Dr. Caridad, as was his habit when he dealt with children, the aged and the sick, bent inquiringly forward and almost knocked the glass off the arm of his chair. “The land of Pareng Luis,” Malabanan resumed, “according to them, Doctor…”

He could already guess what they wanted, the intercession of the favored son-in-law. It would not be the first time; it would not be the last. Dr. Caridad no longer relished having anything to do with these things, not since the old man had turned perceptibly aloof, after that confused
discussion they once had, about the tractors, at the dinner with his bishops yet… Still, he should listen and pass on the information to Anding and his brother-in-law could take it from there. “Yes, go on about the land of this compadre of yours.”

The man called Luis Sumulong gestured suddenly at Malabanan, a small impatient twitch of the hand, and looked at Dr. Caridad straight in the eye and said in a clear, steady voice, smiling, “They claim this plot of land that we have been farming since before the war is part of the hacienda. They have begun to put up a fence that will enclose our land. They said the space would be needed for the new stables they are going to build, for the horses, the race horses of your brother-in-law.”

Dr. Caridad held Sumulong’s gaze—bloodshot eyes, and wasn’t that a tinge of jaundice?—until the man looked away, still smiling. Such insolence hardly befitted one who had come to beg a favor. He resolved to conclude this little dismal meeting of theirs sooner than he had intended. He said, “You should talk to Attorney Tancindo. Manoling is a reasonable man, I am sure Manoling—”

Sumulong laughed, and Dr. Caridad, his glance then on the shredded rag of dark cloud gliding closer beyond the water tank of the Rodriguezes, started at the sound like a dry cough and flushed in anger. But Sumulong sat hunched with his bony arms resting on his knees, shaking his head of shaggy hair, eyes on the floor. The pose suggested, not resentment or defiance, but a melancholy puzzlement, perhaps even anguish. Dr. Caridad said, “Have you spoken with Attorney Tancindo?”

“I was able to talk only with one of his assistants. Attorney Tancindo is often away, in Manila.” Sumulong reached into a hip pocket and produced a square of folded paper. “With your permission, I should like very much to show this map to you, and to Attorney Tancindo. It shows the old boundaries of Barrio Santo Tomas.” Dirt smudges edged the folds of the ruled sheet, which he held up with thumb and forefinger and extended towards Dr. Caridad. “The fence of Hacienda Margarita goes southward here, across this creek—”
Dr. Caridad half rose and shrank back in his chair as he pushed a palm against the proffered sheet, as if it were stained by some malignant infection. “No need for that.” Must this obstinate pest go on smiling that way? It was time to wind up this farce, in this stupid weather yet. He should never have allowed them in; how had they managed to come this far into the village, to begin with. Those good-for-nothing guards at the entrance… He said, “Let us see what can be done. These matters, you need time—”

“Doctor,” Malabanan said, “we would be most grateful, Doctor, if you could mention this…question…to Attorney Tancinco, and to your brother-in-law…”

“I cannot interfere—”

“Perhaps,” Sumulong said, “if they will do another survey, the mistake can be corrected—“

“That may be asking too much,” said Dr. Caridad, then winced from a flick of lightning. It was like the cue he had been waiting for, and he stood up and spread his hands in dismissal even as the thunderclap tore open the sky, it seemed, directly above the house.

Sumulong retrieved his hat from the couch. “If your brother-in-law is told of the mistake, he might ask Attorney Tancinco to consider…”

“We will see about that,” Dr. Caridad said.

“Pareng Luis requests only another survey,” Malabanan said. “Perhaps by other persons, or another group, Doctor…”

“That I cannot decide.”

“We hope that you will help, Doctor,” Malabanan said.

“Yes, yes, we will see,” Dr. Caridad said.

Only the third man, the silent Placido, whose right arm, Dr. Caridad saw then, bore a long diagonal scar as from the slash of a bolo, shook his hand before they strode down off the veranda. The man’s palm felt as hard and grainy as a splinter of rock. He watched them cross the lawn, not following the flagstone path but stepping on the dead grass, the tall one in the lead, and the dog was barking again, in the hot darkened light of the afternoon. The sky above the Concepcion house across the street...
turned black, except for the underside of a cloud bank which glowed red and orange from the hidden sun.

A mistake, they said, how could they be so certain? There were officials, agencies they could complain to, if it had to come to that, Dr. Caridad said to himself, more agitated than he was willing to admit. He knew these people, you surrendered a few square meters, before you knew it they had grabbed and squatted on a hundred and more, and there were so many of them, goddamit. He had gained nothing from talking with them but this headache. The sound of the approaching rain like many voices rising from the earth reached him from the direction of the river, behind the bamboo groves to the east, as he shuffled inside to get himself some Tylenol and tell Bobby to tone down that maddening, mortifying racket of the Stranglers or U-2 or whatever on that overworked stereo, for God’s sake.

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For almost an hour it rained fiercely, a warm heavy rain coming straight down. There was a lull of a few minutes, during which Dr. Caridad, roused from a shallow nap by the suspension of the drumming on the roof, could hear the streaming and bubbling in the roof gutters and drains distinct from the hum of the airconditioner. Then, preceded by a reverberating volley of thunder, the rain swept again, with a different aspect, with wind this time slamming of water, branches and leaves against the walls and windows. In the lamp glow from the bedside table, Dr. Caridad noticed one of his slippers lying in a widening pool between the rugs on the parquet floor.

He came out into the hallway, to call a maid to mop up the floor. The door to his younger daughter’s room was open, Jocelyn brushing her hair before her dresser and turning the pages of some magazine. Seeing her father, she skipped towards him at once, brisk and bright-eyed, still holding the brush and the magazine, and kissed him on the cheek.

“Daddy, we had a wonderful time, Tito Anding said not to fail to come next Saturday, for your golf game, Tito Anding’s so good and
patient, I mean, giving us the nicest, handsomest horses in the lot. Daddy, are you all right, you look—so tired—how did the luncheon go, Daddy?"

“Had a little headache when I got home. The heat. This rain’s a relief, isn’t it? Where’s Mommy? What time did you get back?”

“I hope it stops soon,” said Jocelyn, sagging against the doorframe, “there’s this party tonight I simply cannot miss. That guy from Ateneo, Tonyboy Pineda, tall and guapo, like Richard Gomez, remember him, Daddy? He’s picking me up, I mean, with the gang, all of us, it’s the anniversary of the Jasmine Club.”

“You haven’t asked my permission,” Dr. Caridad said with mock sternness.

“I haven’t, have I, Daddy? May I? Of course you’ll say yes. Yes?”

“If this rain lets up, yes.

“You are fantastic, Daddy.”

Bobby’s room was unlit and quiet, for once. The boy reclined in the wicker settee under the stairs, jiggling the phone, thin and morose, while the more chubby of the Concepcion from the street stood by, chewing his nails as usual. “Aah, blasted shit, the line’s dead,” Bobby wailed as his father passed them on the way to the kitchen.

Maripaz Caridad was scolding the new maid from Cebu.

The tonta, she said, had fried the lapu-lapu in vegetable instead of corn oil, in complete disregard of her instructions given clearly and repeatedly before they left this morning. Dios mio, the kind of help you have to put up with these days. How alike they were, she and Jocelyn, rather breathless and impulsive, and with the same ironic intonation, regardless of the problem, language or audience. Dr. Caridad mentioned the leak upstairs, but she did not seem to hear and he asked about their other daughter.

“Susan stayed behind,” said Maripaz Caridad.

“I was hoping they’d all be home this week, before classes. After Baguio, and Hongkong, I was thinking, before she went back to the university—”

“She’ll keep Papa company for a few days. She’s always been his favorite, you know that. By the way, Anding said to tell you not to miss
your next target practice, before your shooting arm gets too rusty, he said.”

“Something’s come up,” Dr. Caridad said, tentatively. “I may have to go see him one of these days.”

“You sound like it’s some unwelcome chore.” Maripaz Caridad gave him one of her quick irate glances, such as he had once considered both distressing and adorable beyond words, an aspect of her wealth, beauty, and temper, during their long courtship. It seemed so out of character now, the resentful pride glinting across the tired, slack face.

Dr. Caridad said, “Some people came to see me today. Just this afternoon, before it started to rain. They were from San Sebastían. “

His wife told the maids to set the table. She said, “Something about the hacienda?” He used likewise to remark on it, the quick, visible transition in her manner, from an exacting calculation, for instance, to girlish expectancy.

“They had some problem which they’d want me to take up with Anding. “

“Have they talked to Tancinco?”

Dr. Caridad made a sound in his throat, half-grunt, half-moan, indicating either yes, no or maybe, to which sometimes he had recourse in such exchanges with his wife.

“Must you take it up with Anding?”

“A small matter, really, something about a survey, and the hacienda boundary…”

“That’s Tancinco’s job. Just leave it to him, he should handle it. Was it last year, there was this group that was threatening to put up a union, imagine, at the Central, after all that we’d done for them…” Sighing, Maripaz Caridad directed one of the maids to call Jocelyn and Bobby to the table, they had had a long day and she wished to retire early.

There was such a flapping of wind and rain now at the windows that Maripaz Caridad had to call across the dining room to where the Concepcion boy stood about uncertainly, “Nonoy, sit down there, time to eat. It’s all right, Nonoy, your folks know you are here, sit down.”
“Won’t this rain ever stop?” Jocelyn said. “How awful, how long do you think this is gonna last?”

“Forever and ever, and you’re not going to any party,” said Bobby.

“Is this a typhoon?” asked Maripaz Caridad. “It’s been falling for hours. If this keeps up…”

“There’ve been no storm signals,” Dr. Caridad said. “Nothing in the papers at all. Bobby, you have that radio in the Lancer fixed, by the way…”

“Ay, we forgot,” said Jocelyn. “Maybe on the tv.”

“Better not,” Dr Caridad said. “Not with all this lightning. Somebody remind me to get batteries one of these days, at least for the transistor—“

“The phone’s conked out, Daddy,” Bobby said. “Ah, holy shit, I forgot. Fr. Tanedo called when you were out. Urgent, and to please return his call.”

“Another fund drive, you can be sure of that,” said Maripaz Caridad. “Peping, it’s about time he got somebody else as devout. Like your Opus Dei friend, the fat obstetrician, what’s his name now?”

Dr. Caridad concentrated on the delicious warmth from his brandy. Having given up smoking, he all the more savored this occasional indulgence, a small glass of Pedro Domecq before dinner, and a special pleasure indeed on rainy nights like this.

“If I could only call Minet or Ching and find out,” Jocelyn said. “If Tonyboy doesn’t come by nine, Daddy, could Mang Vicente drive for me tonight, ha, Daddy?”

“He’s gone home,” said Maripaz Caridad. “You mean you’re seriously thinking of going to that affair…”

“Lousy shit, it must be a swimming party,” Bobby said.

“Bobby, how many times have I told you to stop saying that word,” said Maripaz Caridad. “It’s so bajos.”

Dr. Caridad said, “Bobby can take you. But nobody goes out, unless this rain stops.”
“It’s the first real rain, and about time too, it’s been so hot and humid,” said Maripaz Caridad. “But it’s getting worse. Jocelyn, pass the pochero to Nonoy.” Then the lights went out.

“Somebody, bring the candles!” Maripaz Caridad commanded, her chair scraping back. “Anastacia! Pining! You know where they’re kept in the kitchen.”

“There are no more, Mum,” one of the maids answered tremulously. “Blasted shit, let’s use a flashlight,” said Bobby.

“I saw a bundle in that cupboard only last month,” said Maripaz Caridad.

“I better go,” Nonoy Concepcion whined.

“How awful this rain, it had to happen tonight,” Jocelyn said. “The Club planned something really, really special, for the end of summer…”

Dr. Caridad stared into the blackness. It was as if he had fallen into an open, undefined space within the night. He groped for his wine glass on the table cloth and could not find it. He closed his eyes and sat holding himself still, he must not move lest he fall again, deeper into this unknown space; and the total darkness he beheld in his mind seemed to be one the same as the night now filled with the relentless rain and the spray and thud of the wind against the windowpanes.

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At around half past ten, with the lights still out and the rain sounding louder in the night, Dr. Caridad at last admitted to himself that the storm was most unusual, and with a prickle of anxiety he rose from his bed to peer through a window, searching the darkness outside, the black depths that now smelled of wet earth, cold mud, the pulp of water-softened wood, leaves, and grass. From the other side of the house, towards the garage, he thought he heard the barking of the dog, freed to roam the grounds at night. There was nothing to see from the window, no lights or shadows anywhere in Fortune Village, only the faintest strip of gray above the bamboo groves that separated this part of town from the river. He stood there in his pajamas, disturbed by the force and duration of
the rain, until he saw, in a white flicker of lightning, the half-submerged wheelbarrow by the swimming pool and the tin cans and planks of wood floating around it in the water below.

He cursed the rise of the water outside, the failed electricity, the unending rain. His wife was beside him, and she too tried to see into the streaming dark. “What? What is there?” He said, “What’s that guard doing?” and he snatched up the flashlight from where he had placed it, by the luminous clock on the night table.

Jocelyn was outside her door “Daddy, what’s going on, oh, Daddy, won’t this rain ever stop?” Dr. Caridad played the flashlight before him, down the hall to the staircase. He realized he could not rouse the help from there even if he shouted, and with increasing alarm, he proceeded down the stairs and the flashlight beam slanted and gleamed across the floor of water in the living room.

But where were the maids? And that guard, where was he? Why hadn’t they called him, how could they be so stupid… He stepped wincing into the water, cold about his slippered feet, and ankle-deep, this was unbelievable, why, it had only been a couple of minutes. Where were they? He could wring their necks, damn all of them. His rapid heartbeat seemed to fuse with the drumming of

“Pining! Anástacia!” Dr. Caridad bellowed in the entry to the kitchen, standing in the swirling, softly tugging water. “Inday! Pining!” And with a catch in his voice, “Guard! Guard!” From out of the darkness before him cold droplets sprayed his face and chest. He directed the flashlight at the maids’ room, then, with a tremor of fear, further on to the far end of the kitchen where the back door next to the gas range stood open on the outer darkness. “Anástacia? Pining? Inday?” Before he could reach the door, the German shepherd bounded inside. He patted the dog, feeling it shivering beneath the wet fur.

“Pining!” he called out once more, indignant and afraid and withdrew from the kitchen, forgetting to bolt the door shut against the black void and the flood. How could they…this couldn’t be… He made his way
back to the stairs, stepping unsteadily in the water now inches deeper and seeming to suck at his feet. He discarded his slippers in the dining room.

Maripaz Caridad was saying something incomprehensible from the darkness at the top of the stairs.

“They aren’t here,” Dr. Caridad said.

“What?”

“The maids. They aren’t in their room.” The dog scratched past him up the stairs. “They are gone.”

“That cannot be. Impossible—they must be somewhere—”

“The water’s come inside. Look,” Dr. Caridad panted, pointing the flashlight down over the banister at the water in the living room. It was as if the floor itself, the blue and white tiles, had been torn out to expose the churned earth underneath, now like a porridge of mud reflecting a tiny swaying light.

“Oh my God!” cried Maripaz Caridad. “What shall we do? Peping, call for help! We must move the piano, the chairs, the Ming vase, my things in the study. The Santo Niño. Jocelyn, get Bobby, do something, oh God—”

“Daddy,” Jocelyn gasped somewhere in the hall, “what’s going on down there...?”

“Bobby, Bobby, help Daddy!” Maripaz Caridad gripped her husband’s arm and would not let go. “Bobby!”

The boy joined their huddle on the top landing, his own flashlight creating more clashing shadows. “I’ve got lots of stuff down there, shit,” he snapped as he lunged past Dr. Caridad, who almost lost his balance, wavering on his bare feet.

“Bobby!” Dr. Caridad shouted down the stairwell. What was it he wanted to say? He strained to remember, wrestling his arm loose from his wife’s grasp, and once more descended the stairs. There were wet footprints on the steps, his mind noted as in a numb, partial trance that dissolved as soon as his feet reached the waterline. Bobby was splashing around under the stairs, demanding, “Where’s that video cassette? I left
that thing right here by the phone!” and then Dr. Caridad remembered what it was he had to tell his son.

Maripaz Caridad was whimpering behind him, “God, oh God, why, Peping…” Jocelyn said, shrill and plaintive on the stairs, “Daddy? What are we going to do, Daddy?”

“The switch, Bobby,” Dr. Caridad began, “the main switch in there beside—” The rest of his words were lost in the massive roar about the house. It was like a huge runaway train bearing down on them, he was to recall months later; like a giant infernal machine attacking the house, its fury vibrating on the stairs, on the banister, in the foot of water in which he was then standing, followed by the crash of the French windows between the living room and the terrace breaking inward as the roaring, boiling waves of the flood smashed into the house and he was scampering up the stairs.

Bobby was pushing behind, gasping, and Maripaz Caridad continued to scream above them amid the glancing shafts and shadows made by their flashlights. Dr. Caridad gathered his family to him and led them away from the stairs. He must protect them, in the dark and flooding house; comfort them, that was what he must do, that was all he could do, and he said, “We’re safe. the water won’t rise higher,” before he gagged from the fear. He sank down with them on the sofa in the corridor and, spent and shivering, heard the rumbling, hissing high tide of the flood.

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The rain dwindled at dawn. Gradually, Dr. Caridad became aware of the altered sounds, of the diminished rain and wind, and the flood not pressing violently now against the concrete house but flowing around and away, slower and spread out like a vast river, like a sea. In the monotone of that ponderous flow, there began a rhythmic muttering in front him. His wife and daughter were praying the rosary, some of their Hail Mary’s interrupted by sobs and sniffles. Then he too whispered his own pleas and invocations, “Save us, O Jesus… Lord, have mercy… Mother of God…”
He crouched deeper under the blanket, in the leather armchair, dozed, woke up and glanced at the clock beside him. It was a quarter past four o’clock. They had withdrawn to the master bedroom, at the end of the hall, where it seemed they were farthest, as on the high stern of a ship, from the frontal cleaving of the waters moving past the house. The drizzling rain fell, the body of the flood passed by, less powerful and slower now in the still unrelieved darkness.

Soon, he was sure, in the morning, the waters would recede. He tried to imagine the mud, the filth, the wreckage the flood would leave on the floor below; the passbooks and time-deposit certificates and other papers, the things they had brought back from Paris and New York in the study, what a mess. The cars, the cream Mercedes underwater, the engine an absolute ruin. Was the flood as high around the casa in San Sebastián? Susan… Anding would come in the helicopter at first light… The river rising, the waters coming down from the mountains and growing, widening so swiftly in the night. But hadn’t they just built that big dike—a dam?—in Santo Cristó, he had attended to some of the men smashed by the overturned crane… The fragmented images turned abstract, drifted away from him. He would confront his losses in the morning, not now, not yet; and he reminded himself to keep still, as when the lights went out, to keep from falling deeper into a black space. But he began to fall against his will, and woke up to the dog’s furious barking outside in the corridor.

Dr. Caridad staggered to the door, disconcerted by the cold dimness, the hour, the passage of the strange waters rustling like felled trees being dragged away in a fevered dream such as had visited him once in childhood. The guard dog kept up its barking and growling at the head of the stairs. Was there someone… something… Bobby came out with his flashlight, and he and Dr. Caridad moved forward together, Bobby saying, soothingly, “Prince, what’s bothering you, easy now, Prince…”

The flashlight showed the dog bristling and braced as if about to hurl itself down from the top landing. “Prince, come back here, c’mon, Prince,” said Bobby, and the drowsy thought filtered into Dr. Caridad’s mind that the dog must have come upon one of those cats that wandered
homeless in the neighborhood. He glanced down over the banister, and smelled the wet acrid rot of the flood.

Dr. Caridad flinched from the odor, and in that instant two images imprinted themselves almost simultaneously in his brain: in the half-light from tall windows by the stairwell, the flood level lapped midway up the stairs, at the twelfth or thirteenth step, and directly in front of the step awash in the water, a shadowy shape floated, long and extended like a log. Then the object swiveled so that one of it touched the stairs at sharp angle, and Dr. Caridad saw it more clearly then: a banca with men in it. One of them wearing a hat, was rising and pointing, it seemed, a stick at him. It was absurd—incredible! Outrageous!—a banca in his living room.

The first volley cut down Bobby and the dog even as the animal sprang down and then tumbled on the stairs into the water. Dr. Caridad hesitated for a second, then ran. Another burst of automatic rifle fire ripped at the ceiling, showering down chunks of wood and plaster as ran. He slammed the bedroom door shut. He was trembling so hard the knob rattled in his sweating hand. He tore his hand from the knob and Maripaz Caridad and Jocelyn were screaming.

“Quiet!” And then, whispering hoarsely, “Be quiet. Don’t make a sound.” He tugged at a chair, tilted it against the door. The rocker too, and that stool—he pushed, kicked building a barrier, a soundless cry trapped in his chair, the bed—“Jocelyn, stop that, come push!” Maripaz Caridad cowered beside her dresser and from her mouth issues a shrill, stuttering chant.

They’ve killed Bobby, the thought thrust from a distance. Dr. Caridad then proceeded to do what he knew he must even as in his heart, in the inmost center of his being, he recoiled from the lonely and despairing compulsion. These men might still spare them if he placed himself totally at their mercy. But once he removed the gun from the velvet case wedged inside the drawer, the moment he did that, there would be no reprieve, no delaying the confrontation of his own death. The pearl-handled, .38-caliber revolver had, as always, a reassuring compact weight, just right, a gift from Anding. Dr. Caridad collected the picture frames from the
round table in the darker half of the room—he knew each one by heart, by feel: photographs of their wedding, of baptism, first communions and graduations—and placed them one on top of the other carefully on the rug, beside the pail for the leak in the ceiling. Then, almost with a kind of exultation, he positioned himself on one knee, facing the door, with the gun in both hands, propped on the marble top of the table. His heart pounded, he felt a longing to weep, and he waited in the cold and the dark.

The door exploded in gashes of red flame. Dr. Caridad fired at the smoking, disintegrating door, fired again at the figure suddenly framed in the dissolving dark. The man doubled up and smashed headlong into the overturned rocker, his M-16 rifle clattering and sliding on the floor. The second man, with a .45 automatic, shot Jocelyn in the breast and stomach before Dr. Caridad could turn the gun steady on the table around to the right and drop him sprawling across the bed with a slug in the back of the head. As the man rolled with a gurgling moan on the bed, a third assailant swung a bolo with vertical force down at Maripaz Caridad huddled against the dresser, slicing her face open from forehead to chin then shouting frenziedly whirled towards Dr. Caridad, who fired his last two shots. The slashing blade cut into the flesh of Dr. Caridad’s forearm and chipped the edge of the table, then uttering something like a mournful query, collapsed and lay still. The sounds of the rain and the flood came back to the room, and fading away the thump of running feet out in the corridor.

The rain was still falling on the flooded plain that stretched to the far horizon, a light misty rain in the pale dusk of the morning when the amphibian tank from Camp Makabulos north of Tarlac came to Fortune Village about two hours later and the soldiers in their green raincoats, paddling their rubber raft, found Dr. Caridad sitting in his blood-splattered pajamas at the top of the stairs, under the shattered frame of the Sacred Heart, looking formal and reflective with his hands clasped on his knees and his head cocked slightly to one side, staring down at the brown flood on the level of the tenth or eleventh step, at the tangled weeds and garbage and chairs and a dead dog and some chickens floating in the nearly
motionless water, and saying in a gentle, wondering voice, “They had no right…coming into my house that way…my house…absolutely no right… no…. right…”

GREGORIO BRILLANTES (BA Literature 1952) has a life-long love affair with the written word, that thrived in the Ateneo de Manila University. As a college freshman, he was already using the power of literature to impress colegialas from Maryknoll, Assumption, and St. Theresa’s College. His first real short story “My Brother Ramon” was published in the official student publication The Guidon.

A multi-awarded writer, his works include The Distance to Adromeda and Other Stories (1960), The Apollo Centennial: Nostalgias, Predicaments and Celebrations (1980), On a Clear Day in November Shortly Before the Millennium: Stories for a Quarter Century (2000), Looking for Jose Rizal in Madrid (2004), The Cardinal’s Sins, the General’s Cross, the Martyr’s Testimony and Other Affirmations (2005), and Faith, Love Time and Dr. Lazaro (2010). In 1995, Brillantes was inducted in the Palanca Hall of Fame. The Carlos Palanca Foundation also honored him with a Dangal ng Lahi award in 2010.

This story is from On a Clear Day in November, Shortly Before the Millennium (Anvil Publishing, 2000).
My brother Kiko once had a very peculiar chicken. It was peculiar because no one could tell whether it was a rooster or a hen. My brother claimed it was a rooster. I claimed it was a hen. We almost got whipped because we argued too much.

The whole question began early one morning. Kiko and I were driving the chickens from the cornfield. The corn had just been planted, and the chickens were scratching the seeds out for food. Suddenly we heard the rapid flapping of wings. We turned in the direction of the sound and saw two chickens fighting in the far end of the field. We could not see the birds clearly as they were lunging at each other in a whirlwind of feathers and dust.

“Look at that rooster fight!” my brother said, pointing exactly at one of the chickens. “Why, if I had a rooster like that, I could get rich in the cockpits.”

“Let’s go and catch it,” I suggested.
“No, you stay here. I will go and catch it,” Kiko said.

My brother slowly approached the battling chickens. They were so busy fighting that they did not notice him. When he got near them, he dived and caught one of them by the leg. It struggled and squawked. Kiko finally held it by both wings and it became still. I ran over where he was and took a good look at the chicken.

“Why, it is a hen,” I said.

“What is the matter with you?” my brother asked. “Is the heat making you sick?”

“No. Look at its face. It has no comb or wattles.”

“No comb and wattles! Who cares about its comb or wattles? Didn’t you see it in fight?”

“Sure, I saw it in fight. But I still say it is a hen.”

“Ahem! Did you ever see a hen with spurs on its legs like these? Or a hen with a tail like this?”

“I don’t care about its spurs or tail. I tell you it is a hen. Why, look at it.”

The argument went on in the fields the whole morning. At noon we went to eat lunch. We argued about it on the way home. When we arrived at our house Kiko tied the chicken to a peg. The chicken flapped its wings and then crowed.

“There! Did you hear that?” my brother exclaimed triumphantly. “I suppose you are going to tell me now that hens crow and that carabaos fly.”

“I don’t care if it crows or not,” I said. “That chicken is a hen.”

We went into the house, and the discussion continued during lunch.

“It is not a hen,” Kiko said. “It is a rooster.”

“It is a hen,” I said.

“It is not.”

“It is.”

“Now, now,” Mother interrupted, “how many times must Father tell you, boys, not to argue during lunch? What is the argument about this time?”
We told Mother, and she went out look at the chicken.

“That chicken,” she said, “is a binabae. It is a rooster that looks like a hen.”

That should have ended the argument. But Father also went out to see the chicken, and he said, “No, Mother, you are wrong. That chicken is a binalake, a hen which looks like a rooster.”

“Have you been drinking again?” Mother asked.

“No,” Father answered.

“Then what makes you say that that is a hen? Have you ever seen a hen with feathers like that?”

“Listen. I have handled fighting cocks since I was a boy, and you cannot tell me that that thing is a rooster.”

Before Kiko and I realized what had happened, Father and Mother were arguing about the chicken by themselves. Soon Mother was crying. She always cried when she argued with Father.

“You know very well that that is a rooster,” she said. “You are just being mean and stubborn.”

“I am sorry,” Father said. “But I know a hen when I see one.”

“I know who can settle this question,” my brother said.

“Who?” I asked.

“The teniente del Barrio, chief of the village.”

The chief was the oldest man in the village. That did not mean that he was the wisest, but anything always carried more weight if it is said by a man with gray hair. So my brother untied the chicken and we took it to the chief.

“Is this a male or a female chicken?” Kiko asked.

“That is a question that should concern only another chicken,” the chief replied.

“My brother and I happen to have a special interest in this particular chicken. Please give us an answer. Just say yes or no. Is this a rooster?”

“It does not look like any rooster I have ever seen,” the chief said.

“Is it a hen, then?” I asked.
“It does not look like any hen I have ever seen. No, that could not be a chicken. I have never seen a chicken like that. It must be a bird of some other kind.”

“Oh, what’s the use!” Kiko said, and we walked away.

“Well, what shall we do now?” I said.

“I know that,” my brother said. “Let’s go to town and see Mr. Cruz. He would know.”

Mr. Eduardo Cruz lived in a nearby town of Katubusan. He had studied poultry raising in the University of the Philippines. He owned and operated the largest poultry business in town. We took the chicken to his office.

“Mr. Cruz,” Kiko said, “is this a hen or a rooster?”

Mr. Cruz looked at the bird curiously and then said: “Hmmmm. I don’t know. I couldn’t tell in one look. I have never run across a chicken like this before.”

“Well, is there any way you can tell?”

“Why, sure. Look at the feathers on its back. If the feathers are round, then it’s a hen. If they are pointed, it’s a rooster.”

The three of us examined the feathers closely. It had both.

“Hmmmm. Very peculiar,” said Mr. Cruz.

“Is there any other way you can tell?”

“I could kill it and examined its insides.”

“No. I do not want it killed,” my brother said.

I took the rooster in my arms and we walked back to the barrio. Kiko was silent most of the way. Then he said:

“I know how I can prove to you that this is a rooster.”

“How?” I asked.

“Would you agree that this is a rooster if I make it fight in the cockpit and it wins?”

“If this hen of yours can beat a gamecock, I will believe anything,” I said.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll take it to the cockpit this Sunday.”
So that Sunday we took the chicken to the cockpit. Kiko looked around for a suitable opponent. He finally picked a red rooster.

“Don’t match your hen against that red rooster.” I told him. “That red rooster is not a native chicken. It is from Texas.”

“I don’t care where it came from,” my brother said. “My rooster will kill it.”

“Don’t be a fool,” I said. “That red rooster is a killer. It has killed more chickens than the fox. There is no rooster in this town that can stand against it. Pick a lesser rooster.”

My brother would not listen. The match was made and the birds were readied for the killing. Sharp steel gaffs were tied to their left legs. Everyone wanted to bet on the red gamecock.

The fight was brief. Both birds were released in the centre of the arena. They circled around once and then faced each other. I expected our chicken to die of fright. Instead, a strange thing happened. A lovesick expression came into the red rooster’s eyes. Then it did a love dance. That was all our chicken needed. It rushed at the red rooster with its neck feathers flaring. In one lunge, it buried its spurs into its opponent’s chest. The fight was over.

“Tiope! Tiope! Fixed fight!” the crowd shouted.

Then a riot broke out. People tore bamboo benches apart and used them as clubs. My brother and I had to leave through the back way. I had the chicken under my arm. We ran toward the coconut groves and kept running till we lost the mob. As soon as we were safe, my brother said:

“Do you believe it is a rooster now?”

“Yes,” I answered.

I was glad the whole argument was over.

Just then the chicken began to quiver. It stood up in my arms and cackled with laughter. Something warm and round dropped into my hand. It was an egg.

ALEJANDRO ROCES, (GS 1937, HS 1940, Honoris Causa Ph.D. Humane Letters 1996) born in Manila, was a short story writer, essayist, and National
Artist for Literature (2003). He was a staunch defender of the country, starting as a guerilla captain during the Japanese occupation. As Secretary of Education in the 1960s, Roces was instrumental in changing the date of the country’s Independence Day from July 4 to June 12. He also convinced then President Diosdado Macapagal to use Filipino language in Philippine passports, stamps, and currency. Roces helped popularized local festivals and in 1980 wrote Fiesta, which celebrated the festivals in the country. His enduring love for Filipino fiestas earned him the moniker Hermano Mayor of the Philippines.

His other works include Of Cocks and Kites (1959) and Something to Crow About (2005). His “We Filipinos are Mild Drinkers” was cited in Martha Foley’s Anthology of Best American Stories in 1951.

His family was in newspaper publishing, and Roces was also a columnist for many years, writing on Philippine culture and history—first in the Daily Mirror, the Manila Times and finally in The Philippine Star. “Roses and Thorns,” his column in The Philippine Star, was one of the longest running columns in the country.

A few years before his death in 2011, Roces wrote Something to Crow About, a zarzuela based on his cockfighting stories. It was staged in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco in 2007.

This story may also be found online at the Philippine Presidential Museum and Library <malacanang.gov.ph/75520-my-brothers-peculiar-chicken-by-alejandro-r-roces/>.
A year ago, he came to Manila from a small coastal barrio to study commercial art. He had a scholarship for two semesters and some money given to him by his parish priest who believed in his talent.

He boarded in one of the rooming houses near the University. He lived in a cubicle furnished with an iron bed, a table and a box where he put his clothes. The strain of old rain streaked the ceiling. The table was scarred. A naked bulb hung over the bed and he kept the light burning all the time because the room was dark. Often he could tell the difference between night and day only from the street noises outside. The windows were permanently shuttered.

The previous occupant, in an attempt to decorate the place, had pasted a colored picture from a magazine on the wall. But the wood had warped and distorted the picture which now showed a young girl with a wrinkled face. The room was small and humid but worst of all, he felt confined inside it. Sometimes while waiting for sleep to come, he would think of
the ocean and open fields illuminated by the sun. He loved the sun because it enabled him to see for miles around. But it was difficult to sleep in the room and at night the hours were long and tedious.

The mornings were not much better. He found the University to be ugly and crowded. Thousands of students milled in the concrete corridors, ramps and plazas of the campus, and often he would get lost. He would have to stop and think where he had been and where he must go. He knew no one in the school and the University staff was curt and impersonal. His English was very poor because he could best express himself mainly with drawings, sketches, and images. He was not good with words.

• • •

During the first few months he made an effort to write home as often as he could. He wrote the parish priest about things he wanted to do. He would study hard because he wanted to see the world clearly and in a new light, without tricks, see only the truth, hard and bright and real. A student must work and learn and see and not be afraid of what he discovers. He did not know if he made himself understood because the priest answered his letters only once and it was a very short note that told him to be a good boy and say his prayers often. He wrote his mother about the city and the University and he made up stories to make them seem very exciting. His mother, who did not know how to write, did not answer him at all.

He had two friends among his classmates but even the nature of their friendship was tentative and transient. One was a girl who sat next to him in one of his art classes. She was a tall, bony girl with long straight hair and very clean white teeth and her eyes were dark brown and looked perpetually amused at some secret thing inside herself. She was very quiet and rarely talked but he liked her. In the middle of the semester the girl dropped out of class and he never saw her again. Later he heard that she had become pregnant and returned to her hometown in disgrace. He missed her for a while and unconsciously he would find himself searching for her face among the campus crowd but he never found her.
His other friend was a young man who wanted to be a dress designer and was attending art classes to learn how to sketch. He was very kind and soft-spoken and he too had a very few friends because he was regarded as a homosexual. When he realized this, he began to avoid the dress designer who, however, did not seem to care, remaining aloof and self-sufficient.

He kept to himself, and because he could not bear to stay in his room for any length of time, he spent most of his free hours sitting alone on a tree-shaded bench on a traffic island in the middle of the street, just across the campus. There was a patch of grass near his bench and a few wild flowers. He would pretend there were no cars and people around him and he would study the grass and flowers and an occasional butterfly that flitted by in the sunlight.

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At night he would go on long walks, first just around the campus and then within the University neighborhood, and then farther and farther away until he was too exhausted to walk any longer. Then he would rest for a while and walk back to his room and try to sleep.

He walked through the city streets because the lights attracted him, particularly the neon signs which seemed to have the power of life and movement. Light leaped and danced into new forms that slithered through tubes and exploded into fantastic shapes. It was like a continuing show of fireworks without soot or noise, with the patterns repeating themselves, making the display more spectacular because the images duplicated themselves again and again.

In his barrio, everything stopped at sundown. There were a few gas lamps which glowed for a while, dim and sad, but everyone went to bed early or sat by the window with nothing to see, trying to pass the time of darkness, longing for the sun.

At night in the city, he thought he had found a new kind of sun, multiplied by a hundred shapes and colors, a sky full of light. But he could not get close to it. It was too high, distant, shining on tall buildings far
above him. The night sun in the city was unattainable, beyond reach. He could only gaze at it in wonder.

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When he received his University identification card, he felt important. There was his name typed out in clear, capital letters. He read it over and over again. He looked at his picture which was overexposed, taken in a drugstore booth, but his face and his name appeared on the card for all to see, laminated in transparent plastic. He carried the card, like a talisman, through all his waking hours. But soon after, in the Registrar’s office, he saw thousands of similar cards showing other names and faces stacked about for feet high against a wall, and he lost his sense of importance. After a while, he left his card in his room.

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One of the required subjects of the first semester was Introduction to Biology which included three units of laboratory work. The lab was a long, high-ceilinged room with low tables in the middle and big glass cabinets on one side where the equipment was stored. Everything was in perfect order.

Miss Divina, the technical aide who supervised laboratory work, was a tall, neat, very precise woman of indeterminate age. She looked as if she had never been young or would never be old. She had clear dark eyes with which she surveyed her students with objective detachment. She always spoke in the third person. She would say: “One does not exactly what one is told.” Or: “It is advisable to remember one’s role as a student in the University.”

She judged everyone with strict impartiality, dispensing no favors, stressing the importance of following rules. Rules were strict but they had to be observed. Punishment for breaking them was inexorable.

One of the major rules stressed by Miss Divina concerned the proper use and care of laboratory equipment which meant the microscopes. If someone broke a beaker or dropped a test tube she was not unduly
disturbed. But if a student so much as touched the lens of microscope or played with the knobs controlling the find adjustment, she became absolutely furious. No one may use a microscope without her personal supervision. After the experiments, the instruments were returned to the side cabinets which were promptly locked. All other equipment in the lab may be used freely.

Miss Divina explained the way a microscope worked, how it refracted light, achieved magnification. It occurred to him that if light could be concentrated, fixed on a single object, then perhaps it might uncover a new reality. The theory fascinated him and he thought about it for a long time.

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From the moment he peered through the eyepiece of the microscope he knew he had to possess the instrument. He had to have it because it had become part of him. It seemed to be a natural extension of himself. The sun, the neons, all the lights in the city had been refracted to produce an illumination so intense that it pierced through things and revealed their inner core.

The neons were interesting distractions that created sensations in the eye. But in the microscope all light gathered and fused and assumed substance. He caught himself clutching at the microscope because through it, he had seized light and now held it in his hands.

He needed to have the microscope. But of course it was an expensive property of the University and no one was allowed to borrow it or even take it out of the laboratory. He had to steal it.

In the laboratory he used the microscope as often as he could but it was not enough. He wanted to see more than an amoeba. He wanted to look at the whole unseen world.

• • •

Miss Divina noticed his intense interest in laboratory work, his industry and concentration when studying specimens. But she did not suspect that inside him a much stronger desire was growing. In his room after school,
he spent hours thinking of how to steal a microscope. He did not worry about consequence. He was certain that the theft would be discovered and he would be punished. But he must not get caught in the act. He needed some time, a few hours, a day, perhaps two, to possess the microscope, acquire a new vision.

One evening after a long and exhausting walk through the city streets, he passed a place called the Beer Garden where his classmates went regularly. He had never been there before but he was thirsty and he wanted to rest his feet.

It was a nice place, clean and cool with small green tables where a lot of young people sat talking and drinking beer. A four-piece combo played and on a small circular floor near the tables, several couples danced, and he could see the faces of the dancers floating past and disappearing into the dimness.

He sat quietly by himself, sipping his beer and watching the dancers. One girl stood out from the rest. Tall and full-bodied, she was wearing a sampaguita garland on her close fitting blouse which was damp with sweat at the back. She was laughing and throwing her head back, and her long black hair flowed as she danced. Passing the tables she left behind the mingled scent of flowers and flesh. He watched the girl until she left with her partner. Then he moved to the table where they had sat, absorbed in the mystery of a woman observed from a distance, breathing the lingering scent of her. But she was gone, leaving only a sampaguita bud which had fallen from her garland and a wisp of her long black hair. He put the bud and the wisp of hair in his pocket and left the place.

• • •

Very late the next afternoon, when all the other students had gone, he forced the laboratory door open. He broke the neck in one of the glass cabinets and placed a microscope in a paper bag. Then cradling the bag in his arms, he ran from the campus to his room. No one stopped him.

The theft had been simple. Looking at the instrument on his table he felt a sudden calm, an acceptance of the inevitable. It was over, he
had done it. He had merely done what he had to do. For the first time in months he fell into a deep uninterrupted sleep.

• • •

In the morning he was ready. He would look at beauty under the microscope. He went back to the patch of green on the traffic island and caught a butterfly. He plucked a wing off and very carefully placed it on the slide. He adjusted the lens and the butterfly wing came slowly into focus. But what he saw was not a thing of beauty. It was a pulpy mass of dead tissue. The glint was gone, and the brightness and the specks of iridescence. He looked more closely and saw only the rawness of the dark, powdery dust. But what he saw was real. His eyes did not deceive him now. It was the sun and the green grass and the piece of sky against which the butterfly wing had shimmered with fragile gold. He brushed the butterfly wing from the slide and threw it away.

He tried the flower. The sampaguita bud had opened up and under the lens its softness vanished. The surface of a petal showed jagged ridges stained with decay. He saw holes clogged with black nodules, mottled patches on the skin of the flower. This was the same blossom that had dangled from the woman’s breast.

He placed the wisp of her hair under the microscope and he saw giant strands of matted fiber. He remembered the deep blackness of the woman’s hair, the sweep and flow of it as she danced, but all he saw now was the coarse grain of ropelike threads. Streaks of mold clung to the edges. The mystery was there was no longer. What the microscope revealed was the hard truth, of course, and he looked at it unflinchingly.

He did not feel the humidity of the room nor the sweat which drenched his body as he examined the microscope itself. He worked the adjustment knobs, polished the mirror. Simply to touch the instrument gave him a sense of strength. He had found something, achieved what every student had been reaching for. He had seen. He knew. But he did not have much time. Soon Miss Divina would trace the theft to him. He did not have time to eat or sleep.
He trapped a spider in the ceiling and began to examine it under the lens. His mouth was dry. His fingers shook as he turned the knob to sharpen the image. The lens focused on the spider’s head which displayed black and blue patterns which were not at all frightening, but strangely beautiful. The geometric lines formed a shell, like delicate cap woven with great care and precision. The hues of black and blue merged, creating specks of indigo. He peered into the microscope for a long time, as if he were looking at an abstract painting, a masterwork. The dead spider was a beautiful thing.

He saw a dead fly and placed it under the microscope. He looked at the wings of the fly, translucent as if made from the purest crystal. The tips curved in a luminous arc that was lightly shaded by a fine mist. Dark blue veins ran in smooth converging lines like the steel framework of stained glass window. Through the gossamer softness of the fly’s wings he could see harmony in the design.

He swept away some dust from his window sill and poured it on the slide. The mound of dust looked like a crater. The grains had turned into boulders the color of granite, stretching as far as he could see. It was as if he were on another planet looking down at some terrestrial mountain range and seeing for the first time the strength and fullness of the earth. Plateaus, valleys, elemental soil that endured through centuries existed in a mound of dust. Though he kept watching the same slide he felt there was still so much to see. He had forgotten that he had not eaten or slept for almost two days.

That night he had a dream.

In the dream he is looking down a huge microscope that reached upward to the sky. He clings to the rim of the eyepiece but a sudden gust sweeps him off. He fall through the body tube of the microscope into a dark, swirling ocean. Alone and helpless he is sucked in by a powerful
undertow. The water is icy. He is drowning, sinking deeper and deeper
down to the ocean floor. And then in one miraculous instant the water
turns into light. Waves become light beans and he floats in a crystalline
prism, riding brilliant ripples of oozing light, soft and warm all around
him. He sees everything with magnificent clarity. His eyes focus on
objects—fish with scales of diamonds, ivory rocks with velvet moss. He
catches every detail. But he can also see it all in clear perspective. Light
fuses all around him, yet one intense, irresistible ray pieces together
everything.

In the morning he woke up to find that he had ejaculated in his sleep.
Fully awake, he washed the dried semen from his underwear.

He had long expected to hear the knocking on his door and when he
opened it he found without surprise Miss Divina standing in front of him.
She entered the room, stood by the table where the microscope was, as
though to identify its rightful owner. As she knew fully well, what had
happened was not an unusual occurrence. She knew of students who had
suffered a nervous breakdown, a neurotic collapse that required immediate
expulsion. The academic load was too much for the poor provincial
students who were not prepared for University life.

“When one has a broken rule, a serious rule, one must be punished.
Do you understand?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“The University must take immediate disciplinary action. One can not
apply leniency in this case.”

“I know,” he said. He had seen it with his own eyes, a butterfly wing,
blossom, a wisp of woman’s hair. He had indeed broken a serious rule.
He realized the gravity of his offense. He knew that a dead spider was
beautiful and the wing of a common fly mirrored the concept of flight and
a mound of dust contained the earth itself.

“Do you understand why you must be punished?”

He looked straight at her for a long while without saying anything.
Then he closed his tired, glazed eyes, and in the darkness nodded his head.
He knew. He understood. He must be punished.
Benjamin Bautista (GS 1950, HS 1954, BS Journalism 1958) was born in Manila. He completed his preparatory and undergraduate studies in the Ateneo de Manila University where he graduated with Honors and the Mulry Award for literary excellence. He earned a Foreign Exchange scholarship to the University of Washington where he obtained a Master of Arts degree. His short stories have appeared in national publications and received critical recognition. Several have won prizes in prestigious literary competitions (such as Free Press, Focus, and Palanca Awards) and are included in anthologies of Philippine writing. Prior to his retirement, he pursued a career in business and management. He and his wife live in New Manila, Quezon City. They have two daughters and a grandson. This story may be found in his book Stories from Another Time (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008).
CUADRO DE HONOR COMPLETO.
In my son’s world, sands shift to become windowpanes of water that dissipate into storm clouds roiling. He explained to me once that it was all merely texture mapping: by assigning subtle color variations on miniscule polygons and gathering them into 2-d digital sheets that bent and flexed into virtual 3-d, you can theoretically come up with a thousand replicated textures in sixteen million colors: now vapor, now silica, now silk.

He sleeps heavy in his bed, quirkless, twitchless. His head looks almost too big and heavy for his body. That’s almost all he needs, anyway: that big head of his, lolling from side to side, thinking its heavy thoughts and performing quantum calculations. The eyes that dart about under thin eyelids are his only activity tonight, his brain’s twin pilot lights. I almost flinch when he turns towards me, eyes closed but sensing, pupils flitting about, following dream images.

Gabby’s just finished Sixth Grade, and this is his twelfth summer. You would have thought seriously about how thin and scrawny he is,
how anemic and undernourished-looking, almost unfinished, like some skyscraper’s skeleton, his body glimmering faintly from the computer’s light.

For this story, I’ve decided to abandon my typewriter. I’ve snuck into Gabby’s room, where I man his machine secretly as he sleeps, this great hulking computer matching my coffee glaze with its constant state of alertness.

Turning it on, though, is as simple as punching the bright blue button on the tower unit, making the act seem anachronistic, an idiotic act quite separate from the whirrings and clickings that it sparks. Then the screen comes alive, bursting into the welcoming graphic. A bas-relief of his name: Gabby, amid a constantly shifting environment: deserts, oceans, blue-mountains-on-blue-skies. He’s showing off his magic, what I or anybody else I know can’t do on a computer. But he’s just flexing his fingers.

Then I’m in a Magritte painting, and the blue mountains magnify to become fields of blue flowers, which dissolve into little cranes, blue like the flowers, poised to disappear into the edges of the screen.

When I was young as Gabby, a cel-animated Penelope Pitstop flew across the screen in her yellow Sopwith Camel, and I flattened my face against the picture tube, trying to nose my way past its edge. The edge was negative TV territory, the undefined state of a light bulb in a just-closing refrigerator door. It was the edge of the cosmos. I was precocious too, you know, in my own way. And I knew only someone like Dick Dastardly could overstep that line, could, in the end, capture Penelope.

And now, what do I have? When Gabby’s programmed birds, armed with high-resolution feathers and algorithmic AI, rocket across his created landscapes with escape velocity, the screen follows to keep them in video gravity. Feather-bound, svelte, and anatomically correct to the smallest detail, the cranes flock, migrate and separate with all their faculties alive, leaping through rainbows, swimming across the mirror of sky on bay, attacking horizons with 3-D ferocity. And at key points in their flight, a virtual camera takes over and gives us their point-of-view, following their
line of vision to scan chasm walls, cave ceilings, ocean depths, all their complex surfaces made of crystal-pure polygons that curve into rocks, earth, trees, into a world. Gabby’s world.

But today is a quiet, cloudy day in Gabby’s world. When the last shadow of the cranes leaves, the leaves on the trees are quite still, and nothing disturbs the expanse of grass except little grey stones littered about.

But the stones magically lift into the air, buoyed by a slight breeze. They morph into what looks like strange, twenty-first century origami, then unfurl into alien glyphs, strange symbols that each represent programs, applications and code files. The screen refreshes itself, and the icons twitch.

Gabby shifts in his sleep. The icons flutter slightly, their colors fading into faint blue and white patches, until I realize they’ve become little nimbus clouds blown slowly across the screen by random digital breezes. I double-click on one such cloud, and the word processor comes up. The game of writing begins.

I’m an old hack, but I still feel overwhelmed by the possibilities. I could write a word, a sentence, the whole novel I have always promised to write, and rewrite everything with the flick of a wrist. Or erase everything with the slightest whip of my mouse’s tail.

I find it hard to accept that millions of lines of code have been written just to create my word processor, in itself part of an interlocking suite of programs intended to make short work out of even the most complex financial and business process. My meandering, almost random writings all seem to be petty data in the face of this landmark of technological evolution.

To make matters worse, I’ve run out of ideas tonight. Their absence, as always, makes more commotion than their presence, so that my mind is now a poor imitation of negative video space, staticky and hopelessly random.

But my mind is alive, shifting with ideas, constantly changing. Writing is searching, someone once told me. You search for something and you
don’t know what it is until you’ve found it. At the end of every sentence, every quantum of thought, the cursor blinks, the computer mocks my inaction by devoting its chip activity to some other menial task: checking for system viruses, ferreting out lost clusters, and fluffing up feathery edges of clouds.

Gabby begins snoring gently, nudging me further into my solitude.

On the upper-right corner of my screen a little cloud appears, slowly growing darker and trembling with rain. Instinctively I double-click, and a video window comes up. It’s an RF connection, hooked up through the cable modem. Now a little TV set dangles in the corner of my screen. There’s a shiny virtual interface, and I flip through channels and catch some breaking news on CNN. A female newscaster of mixed racial origin speaks soundlessly, with a facial expression that seems purposely meant to be alarming. There is an image of a map of Australia beside her head.

As she mouths words, the inset magnifies to fill up the screen. There’s a rippling body of water, with a single speedboat in the middle to give it some size reference. A red strip appears across the bottom of the feed, with “tumult in great barrier reef” in shiny capitals. Should I wake up the wife and kid? As a helicopter comes into view, hovering over the growing waves, I let the cursor hover over the mute disable icon.

I really don’t know what is happening since the volume is still switched off. All I see is shaky video of the Australian coastline, interspersed with shots of the news chopper’s own moving shadow over the sea’s surface.

In a fit of boredom, I flip through Gabby’s subdirectories by randomly clicking on passing clouds. They are marked by incomprehensible filenames, with long and cryptic extensions. Opening them up reveals programs that take up gigabytes of disk space, filled with line after line of code that only Gabby can understand. Reserved words, which thunder in my head like the stupefying elements of schoolgirls’ secret codes, punctuate each line amid numbers and greek-letter variables.

No, this language cannot be compared to the snot-nosed secret languages of my childhood, of concatenated syllables, inserted consonants,
and reversed pronunciations. We spoke them as we huddled in corners, our backs turned to our enemies and our teachers.

No. Gabby himself has taken these words from the fabric of computer logic, solid and irrefutable. Grown men in labs would listen to him and understand. And Gabby himself has spoken them, reinvented their purpose to create his own world.

**ME? DESPITE EVERYTHING I DON’T UNDERSTAND, I’M A MAN OF THE TIMES.** Principled despite my flaws, young despite my age.

Yes, I keep a mistress and sport a paunch. But there’s something about having a belly that even I can’t explain. I look at myself having late breakfast with Loren, in a restaurant, the gentle swell of my belly bibbed by the edge of the table linen, as though it were another mouth, another mistress to clothe and feed.

In motels my paunch challenges Loren’s slip of a body. It demands respect, it hangs, luxuriates and obnoxiously intrudes upon our meshing, as though it were another sexual organ to rub and to please. During lulls in my life it swells to considerable proportions, possibly matching my biorhythms, or perhaps my sperm count, or more probably invisible endocrine levels. Then, despite my monotonous diet, it goes soft without warning, out of season, retreats into my body space, and hibernates like a sleeping serpent.

When I sleep it is one of the treasures that I clutch close, proof of my bittersweet blessings, unwished for, but ultimately accepted and expected, like the wife beside me, our only child Gabby in the other room, and Loren who studies and waits in her college apartment, precocious, too, in the way she bears my love for her.

There is a soft whirr; the disk lamp lights; I have done something that has made the computer react. Tripped by some digital tripwire, a dialogue box unfolds in the center of the screenful of code and hypertext, demanding a password. The video window, currently showing a news correspondent in front of a huge radar structure, reacts to the new instruction stream by freezing picture, before jumping back into realtime,
the correspondent’s mouth resuming synch with her voice. My mind reawakens. It bristles as the computer’s scolding red eye lights up again, signifying internal activity. “Enter word in one minute.” A clockface appears at one corner, a stopwatch set to one minute. It starts ticking backwards, imperceptibly changing hue every second, the command counting down with it.

I have but less than a minute to read Gabby’s mind. What is the word? In my own sharp but less-than-perfect logic I wonder what words might mean to one like him. In any given string of programming, there are precious few statements that resemble real words: int for integer, char for character, stdout for standard output. Even then, these might not take the form of words in his mind. They might more likely take the nature of mere affixes, punctuation marks, discreet strings of numbers, or perhaps even dumb directional arrows. Words no longer exist in Gabby’s world. And yet: “Enter word in thirty four seconds.”

**DO I REMEMBER SEEING HIM SCRIBBLE SOMETHING DESPERATELY,**

furtively, in his programmer’s notebook? Did I notice a secret name in the configuration of the grains of sand, some hidden arrangement in the flocks of blue-feathered cranes, or phantom shapes in the wisps and curlicues of cloud vapor, noticeable only if one took a step back and peered at the screen from the corner of one eye? That was how one of my friends taught me to look at genitalia in Japanese pixelized porn. I look at Gabby’s mouth as he sleeps: half open, his little teeth showing through. Do I remember him whispering a name while he slept, through all these nights of my intrusions?

The clock ticks away. I do not know the consequence of a wrong answer. Perhaps a system shutdown. Perhaps an electronic note—when he next opens the secret file—that an attempt has been made. The exact date and time will be given. In fact, I might have already triggered that program-within-a-program, just by accessing this query.
With barely five seconds to go, I press the reset button and the screen blacks out. The red eye gives me a livid glare before it retreats into darkness and sends me back to my own world.

In a moment of inspiration I christen the word ‘X’. As in undefined, infinitely variable, the intercept of an equation that eludes me.

**IN THE MORNING I ABANDON MY UNFINISHED STORY. SLIP INTO OUR**

bedroom where my wife sleeps, whisper a brief and hurried explanation about a weekend crisis in the office, pick up my briefcase and drive to Loren’s place.

Loren laughs at the sight of me, carrying my briefcase containing random work papers and a change of clothes on a sleepy Saturday morning. She knows the ruse is useless. I tell her I have decided that we set out for Tagaytay, where the country is wide and open. I feel cooped up, I feel confined, I confess to her, writing night in, night out, in Gabby’s room. The world is moving at an inexorable pace, I say, remembering the muted TV image and the vast, unexplored ocean in the corner of the computer screen. The world could be ending, us writers are still too busy writing about the world.

This is our first trip out of town in our four-and-a-half years together. Soon, many empty miles after we hit the coastal road, we are stunned by the clear and far distances. Loren has been hushed, her young cluttered mind has expanded. Seeing countryside makes her giddy, unsure. I imagine that the things in her mind have spread apart too thinly, loosening frail chains of chronology and association, washed out by the midmorning brightness.

After all, here footsteps are projected into strides and stretches, stretches into long drives, each distance an afternoon shadow of the last. Our words are therefore spaced out, like milestones, and the silences between remarks and counterremarks measured by rows of trees and tracts of grass.

Our bottles, spoons, and tupperware rattle in protest. We drive into the picnic grove, led by some unseen force to seek out the normal, the citylike. Cars and vans are spread out haphazardly on the scraggly, sunbeaten grass, the people emerging from them all picnickers from the city.
Loren pulls me toward the fence at the edge of the field, where all the people are headed. We walk past flocks of families, young couples, carrying cameras and cell phones and picnic baskets. I feel like I’m part of some suicide ritual.

At the edge we see what I’ve always seen in all my visits to this place, this very same tired grove. The white wooden fence, many times repainted, is waist-high, and is broken at many places. It is decoration, not a safety-measure, at best a psychological barrier. Beyond the fence the grass plunges wildly, roots and vines scrambling willy-nilly for hold. The ravine is covered with thick brush and pine trees, softdrink cans and foil wrappers. And beyond that, the lake-within-an-island-within-a-lake that has lately been threatening to blow. For the past few years, warnings have sounded and escalated, people have been evacuated from the island, and innumerable eruption dates set and reset. Someone beside me points to a small plume of smoke, rising from a barely visible vent on the island.

“There it is, that’s where it’ll start.” Loren is listening to him furtively, cocking her ear.

“No,” I whisper. “It’s going to happen in Australia.”

The perfect view tires me. From here, the now-reactivated volcano looks dead, lifted from a postcard. It all seems rehearsed, like the ritual of going to the edge of the field.

I wait patiently and let her have her fill. Then she takes my hand and we go back to the car.

It’s almost noon. The sun’s heat is sharp, biting. It’s changed. When I was Gabby’s age, the sun was warm, the heat was gentle even when it beat straight down in summer. Now you can almost feel the uv pierce your skin. Sunlight doesn’t feel too good anymore.

For our picnic she has prepared a basket that smells of steamed rice and adobo, staple of all picnics, and a Coleman full of iced tea. We choose to eat in the car, with the front seats reclined and our suddenly feet tucked under us. In my mind I see myself, in my T-shirt and cut-offs, sitting Indian-style in the driver’s seat, opening her offerings one by one, setting each one down gingerly, as though she were appeasing a sun god who
might end the world any moment. In the background, there is the white glare and the rumble of the sleeping volcano.

After we eat, Loren and I pack up, erecting our seats and smoothening our clothes for the long drive home. More picnickers arrive. We have trouble starting our car. It won’t even make a churning sound. I look at the dash and there’s nothing there that tells me something is wrong. The tank is half-full. The temperature is normal and no warning lights have lit up. My belly grazes the bottom of the steering wheel.

I end up having to open the hood, checking the battery contacts to see if they’re loose. I take a wrench and bang at them, something a taxi driver once taught me to do. He told me it loosens the salt encrustations. I see Loren through the windshield, her face screwed up by heat and apprehension. My first blows startle her, but after a while her eyes gloss over. It’s the only sound we both hear now: the dull, inconsequential banging of my wrench, trying to hit the invisible mark that will mend the battery, mend Loren, mend us all. The other picnickers seem so far away, on another island, another volcano.

After a while I try starting the car again. Nothing. Loren starts panicking, tells me she has to be home by five so her boyfriend won’t find out. She asks me if she has to push.

After a half-hour of shuttling back and forth between the engine and the wheel, the ignition finally works. As I get in I mumble something about an alternator problem, but it is Loren who has shut herself off now. She wants to say what the fuck is wrong with this car. But she won’t say it out loud. Her way of saying it is being all quiet and screwed up.

We’re testing our love, testing our faith. We’re doing it so we can be sweet again, so I can drive back with Loren dangerously draped across my lap, like vacationing preppies do in American movies, only they drive convertibles and are young enough to not have wives and not need secret lovers.

In the middle of the long and quiet ride back to Manila I tell Loren about X. I ask her questions she isn’t meant to answer. “What secrets could it unlock? What must Gabby hide from me, his own father?”
Without a hug, a kiss or a wave, Loren alights from the car and sticks a ready key into the lock.

**BACK IN GABBY’S ROOM I TRY TO FORGET THE MYSTERY BY IMMERSING**

myself in more live news footage. The cameras have been there, it seems, for days. And the scientists, as we are expected to believe, have been there since the beginning. All along the great underwater wall of coral, the fish have only increased in number and in kind. Now, besides the small, dainty angelfish and parrotfish that are native to the reef, huge tuna and mackerel have arrived, leaping and spinning through the froth and the air. The choppers, too, have multiplied. There are now three, sometimes four of them, hovering over the great commotion in the water.

The only marine vessels allowed near the site are the scientists’ yellow rubber boats. They are loaded with all sorts of expensive equipment, and shuttle back and forth between the site and a large research vessel moored close to the shore. The people on the boats look frantic, even from this distance.

Satellites have been reoriented, retracked, so that the scientists receive a steady stream of aerial shots and updated atmospheric information.

A reporter patches in, and does an interview with a scientist in his late fifties. He sports a grey beard, round wireframe glasses and a ponytail. He starts blaming everything from the hole in the ozone layer to toxic dumping in Australasia. It’s a tired old subject. Then the cam zooms in, so that his head fills the TV window.

“Or,” he mumbles, his wireframes catching a glint of light from the cameraman, “there could be another reason.”

The reason that dissolves into the screen is a picture I’ve seen maybe two dozen times before, in books, in Internet Websites and TV shows. It’s a frozen image of a flying saucer in a blue sky. On the bottom of the screen, there’s a strip of fine print: “Stock footage courtesy of 20th Century Fox.”

**AS GABBY SLEEPS I WRITE AND REVISE, ADD OR SUBTRACT DETAILS AS I see fit. When the ideas tire me out with their repetitiveness and all my**
poorly hidden meanings, I start scouring his directory listings for any clue: a curious passage, a lost text string, a dubious-looking fragment of code.

After work I feel restless. Uninvited and unexpected, I make an unplanned visit to Loren’s house.

She hops into the car, full of energy, hair wet and smelling of sex. Her boyfriend is some college boy she met at one of her fashion pictorials. He’s as unreal as they come: strong and well-built, a perfect match for her body.

I try to feed on their energy as I mount her and pound her toward the cusp of her ecstasy minutes later, at our favorite motel. Her hips move with a rhythm that is her own, too quickly and too easily. For a moment I feel as though I’m looking at her and her boyfriend doing it on TV, and I’m having to match their timing while jacking off on my own, as many ageing men do. I am also forced to pull back, in the middle of the dissipating curve of my energy, and watch as she breathes and mumbles and opens her soul for a very brief moment, and I know she is thinking of him as she looks at me and mouths my name silently, as though it hid another name in the depths of that breath.

Then her eyes light up. “X is a woman,” Loren says, laughing that laugh. “Writing is stealing.” Or maybe they said ‘writers steal’? Writers are jackals, lone wolves. We smell the merest hint of rotting flesh dropping from the bone and we strike, feeding nightly upon the half-digested, wormy carcasses. In the midst of all this we imagine that we have hunted our prey down.

ok, so let’s solve for X, such that X is a woman’s name. A girl’s name. The next question is, what’s in this single secret file, anyway? In other words, isolate Y. Isolate Why. This file probably contains secret proceedings between friends, or secret lists of childhood concerns. Or a day-to-day journal, or pretentious stories about everyday life, the stuff of which my files, which are open for anyone to read or alter or perhaps delete, are made of. I struggle to remember the secret lists and writings I myself must have made as a boy, but I can remember nothing.

Gabby’s other hidden programs are pretty simple, even if they’re in programming code. Opening assembly-language files is like opening a
series of doors in a castle. You go deeper and deeper, opening program after program, and soon all files written in open themselves up for you, routines and subroutines deflowered in your path.

The first thing I do is try to locate the query program, so I can open it up. As I have come to expect, there are more ruses: baffling linkages of commands and programs that will easily throw any amateur code reader off the track. Names and numbers spill across the screen, fruits of his brilliant, excessive, and careless talent. The names are gibberish; it seems no references have been made to anything, and there is no apparent naming system to them. There are literally hundreds of executable programs, and trying them all out might take days, weeks. There are programs within these programs, that, when activated, will surely open other programs within.

I study the names one by one. I take note of arrangement. I take note of chronology. I take note of phonetics, and mumble the alien words to myself, waiting to catch something that might sound like a name, her name.

**Monday, 0600 Hrs. The Sea by the Great Barrier Reef is in absolute chaos.** Close to a hundred humpback whales have arrived from the North, in a great herd from that stretches for miles.

To the helicopter cameras it seems that they are milling around, without any semblance of order. But then, a scientist adds, what is order? This brings up a host of special reports—even on other channels—on chaos theory and the mathematics of fractals. The reports are punctuated with breathtaking visuals of Mandelbrot Equations, all uncannily resembling Gabby’s graphics of grass and other greenery.

The humpback whales display their great backs and flanks to the helicopters and the TV audience. The scratches and scars, the voice-over adds, are from errant Japanese harpoons and from propellers of ships wandering into migration trails.

The rubber boats have limited themselves to the South side of the reef now. Scientists are still discussing what to do about the whales. Satellite images are spread across the TV screen. They are sharp enough to look like
any photo, although the colors look a bit artificial. The news special serves up several aspects: Earth’s topography, infrared map, and atmospheric conditions, which are soon joined by simulations of lunar paths, planetary positions, and supernova activity.

Again, the anchorman reminds us that the possibility of alien involvement cannot be ruled out, as we are reminded by feature after feature showing artists’ renditions of short gray humanoids that many believe hold the secret to man’s and, therefore, even the universe’s existence.

As another dark shadow of collected marine shapes disrupts the underwater blanket of ultrasound, Gabby stirs and begins to wake. I snap the file windows shut, hurriedly switch the system off.

“Wake up, son. You’ll be late for school.”

“It’s a Sunday,” he mumbles, his head turning suddenly to look at me with freshly opened and instantly vigilant eyes, his eyelids flashing like nictitating membranes.

X. YOU MUST BE BEAUTIFUL. GABBY’S PUPILS FLIT RANDOMLY UNDER his eyelids, like the fish in the Australian sea. All along, he has been dreaming about you, your shadowy figure in a billowy, translucent school dress, smooth calves gleaming, fleetingly glimpsed between the hem of a yellow skirt and knitted white socks. Your swan neck, white and somewhat flushed, glowing above your collar. Your hair, hazy, thin, almost curly, windblown—all but insignificant for the face it frames, perfectly shaped and with beautiful and smart and knowing eyes. You are the stuff of all our schoolday imaginings.

Gabby’s spoken with you, once or twice, at some campus affair—a school fair or a flea market or a charity drive. Maybe he’s spoken to you many times. There might have been secret meetings, entire afternoons together, talking, laughing, and sharing whatever childhood delicacy his meager allowance could afford. Ice cream. Popcorn. Fishballs. A Ring Pop.

He’s held your hand in his, to confess, to implore, or to beg your trust. And you, in return, have weaved your tiny, slender fingers through his bad haircut and tenderly touched his blotched face. Your skin is white but
already slightly tanned by the heat of the new, hurtful sun, and you smell of the unmistakeable smells of earth and girlhood.

There might have been things said. Real things, like the things you really meant and spent your whole life pretending, or believing not to have meant. So that one day, the entire episode might seem savage, dreamlike, like lost days of youth, or for me, the ever unfound, ever unattainable old age at which all my mysteries would have been answered.

And yes, best and worst of all, he’s shared his talent with you, pulled you into his world as though he were rescuing Penelope Pitstop, and made you the holder of the darkest, most wonderful secret in his arsenal of codes and colors.

In exchange, what cruel, senseless thing did you tell him, that he now must guard from the world with a one minute code, retrievable only by a password?

This spurs me to open his personal files without hesitation. His programming notes, his letters to friends and relatives, the nude pictures he downloads from the net. I look for clues, hints, careless utterances. There are none.

The story so far: romance, philosophy, adventure. A techno-thriller, a mathematical treatise. But it’s a mystery story, really. Half of the time, my readers might be wondering, Who the fuck is X? Why is X so important? Or even, could aliens be behind that feeding frenzy? —Which, as many of us know, is based on real actual fact.

And looking at you, Gabby, peacefully withholding the most terrible secret of your heart in your deep and untroubled sleep, I wonder, why must you give your heart away so young in your life? You had your maths, your assembly language, your high-end video card. You were happy, you were complete!

And so the dark shadows emerge, in a white explosion of water and blood and bloody flesh, to reveal delta fins and great silver backs. Chopper cam comes in for a close up and gives us multiple rows of teeth, gnashing and tearing tuna into pieces.
Sharks are always consumed by hunger, Dr. Ponytail explains. Should we believe it? There are rows and rows of books behind him. Sharks, he adds, can smell bloody flesh miles away.

There are no more rubber boats, only shadows of helicopters hovering lower and lower. The news correspondent’s voice is ragged, tired, like that reporter in Kuwait under siege. The chopper lifts, the camera view opens up: although the weather is clear, the water is choppy with fish movement. Everywhere, the surface is cut by clumps of delta fins, stationary, or circling, or cutting arrowlike shapes towards their targets.

We switch to computer imagery. This is quieter, more controlled. We are calmed by the enhanced colors, the digitized matter. Sonar feed is superimposed over the perfect seascape. Clusters of dots tell the story of the largest feeding frenzy ever recorded in history. The fish have almost numbered a million. The sharks, up to two thousand, circling, attacking, repositioning. I learn more about the Great White than I ever have in my entire life. The sharks are a vision of the future: their torpedo-shaped body is perfectly streamlined, their tissue impervious to cancer, and their physiology a stranger to satiation.

The next time I drop by Loren’s uninvited, it’s her boyfriend who opens the door. A head taller than me, he is wearing a muscle shirt and boxer shorts, and brushing his white teeth with hard, solid up-and-down strokes.

“Who the fuck’s this guy?” he says.

I remember this episode as though it were a funny thing that happened to someone else, what with me standing there with a briefcase full of phony things, with a hunger in my loins and a lost look in my eyes.

Loren says nothing as she sits on the couch in her robe. She’s thinking. I can almost hear her mind whirring towards her next move, as though we were having another argument. At that moment, looking past the angry man, at Loren, sitting in the couch, looking at my face, my paunch, my aching shoulders—my nondescriptive clothes bulging at the seams—wondering whether to recognize me as an old professor or a long lost
uncle or a lost neighbor, I remember the way we make love, lying in
her bed locked in our stalemate, moshing and meshing and grunting. I
remember the silent countdown, in the face of which I would grunt and
pump like a madman, trying to beat the time.

The man throws a fantastic curve at me, his fist forming its advancing
point, to connect with jaw at unmatchable, youthful speed. It’s what
Gabby’s video games refer to as an “unblockable move”. As his knuckles
strike bone, I imagine X to be the asymptote of a graph of a calculus
equation, that crucial point, eternally elusive, which all my graceful,
infinite curves, like the gentle swell of my belly, will never reach.

“THE MYTH IS NOT SAFE,” SOMEONE TOLD ME ONCE—AND WHILE THE
capital M is mine, I do maintain that we live in a world of diminishing
mystery. Even writers have to steal material now, not unlike magicians
stealing sleight-of-hand tricks. You see, unlike colors or numbers or particles
in the known universe, there are only twenty-six letters for me to sift among,
fit and fix. As I grow older I often find myself coming up empty-handed.

My own electronic search, too, has ended similarly. I have discovered
only a tantalizing proximity to you, X. And then, nothing more. You are
a myth. An imaginary friend of my egghead son, made more real than any
phantom playmate from my boyhood might have been. There is no X.

By the time this is published, of course—if it ever will—even if it
will be seven years from now or a year from now, everything will have
changed. There will be more catastrophes around us. Perhaps the volcano
will finally erupt, perhaps the sharks will eat all the whales, perhaps the
sun will be covered with a strange cosmic dust, or perhaps our souls will
awaken and be one. Or perhaps not.

In the future Gabby will no longer be the prodigy he is now. I imagine
him as a scientist bypassed by the Nobel, a news reporter on the field who
never made Pulitzer, a bitmapped clip of a volcano hanging in the air
beside his head, in the background a newsroom filled with people trying to
look busy.
As Gabby sleeps, I close his electronic doors one by one, the TV satellite feed, the terminal windows, the wasted efforts of his genius. And as I close the door on you, X, failed phenomenon, aborted catastrophe, I imagine myself as a shark, nursing an ancient, eternal hunger in an eternally dying sea.

ANGELO R. LACUESTA (GS 1984, HS 1988) went to the University of the Philippines for college to study Biology, but later exchanged a life with a scalpel for a life with a pen. Theater and literature influenced him, having been part of Dulaang Sibol in the Ateneo High School. In 2001, his first collection of short stories Life Before X and Other Stories (University of the Philippines Press, 2000) won the Madrigal-Gonzales Best First Book Award. He has also won the National Book Award, the Philippines Graphic Award, the N.V.M. Gonzales Award, and four Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature. His writing fellowships and residencies include the Silliman National Writers Workshop (1992), The Writer’s Retreat in Scotland (2003), and the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa (2007).

Lacuesta has been the literary editor of the Philippines Free Press and is currently editor-at-large at Esquire magazine. He has served as an executive director of the film commission of the Film Development Council of the Philippines, and is Managing Director for Logika Concepts, a communications agency he founded in 1997.
Julian has had so many pets die on him (hamsters, fish, a spider, a bird) that I worried he, only eight, might think life so inordinately flimsy, full of sad surprises: someone you care for turning stiff. I sat him down once, talked about life’s bumps and grinds, about cycles and seasons along the endless line of time. I carried on like I was Ecclesiastes until he picked up a ball, bounced it off the wall and followed it out the door.

In October, with his birthday money he got himself a rabbit. Fine with me. White fur, twitchy nose. He is not discouraged, only resolutely more watchful. He put the new pet in an old bird cage where Eaglet, his maya, had lived and died.

He’d always named his pets with a kind of no-nonsense logic: the first of hamsters has been Hammy and Hammer, and then there were Hammy Jr. and Hammer Jr. The fish, just guppies in a glass bowl really, were Swimmy and Dive and Orbit and Slimy and Sharko; the spider’s name was Spy. (It’s not that he doesn’t have a vocabulary. He says ‘stupendous,’
‘acquisition,’ ‘reverberate’—Touch this, Mama, feel it reverberate. He’s a genius!) I suggested Snowball for this rabbit, as it tucks its head in and curls up into ball when it sleeps, but he said “That’s sissy.” And so he named it Buddy. Buddy Rabbit, like sinusitis.

We take Buddy with us, now two months old, to Punta Fuego. Takes me and Julian forever to get Francis to come along, a roundabout series of arguing and bargaining and cajoling, come-on-Daddy, please-Daddy, until finally Julian and I win, and we all go, for private Christmasing with Francis and her kids. It’s the best time to go out of town, too: all those rabid holiday shoppers making traffic crazy, why deal with that. And Gracie is balikbayan—and not just back from the States, but back to her old self.

The last time Francis and I saw her was three years ago in McLean where she lived, when she was newly divorced, losyang and pudgy and weepy. Not like her at all. She took us to Arlington cemetery in D.C., where she cried as if JFK was her ex-husband. Wiped her cry-snot with her pashmina like it was tissue.

What’s with your friend? Francis asked me, as if he needed to establish whose friend she was.

“My friend just got divorced, heartless.”

• • •

I took Gracie out to Red Box Karaoke the night of her arrival, just last week, the two of us. Her old shine is back; she looked sharp: jeans, tank tops, a short jacket. Blahniks. A fox? “Why are we singing alone in this tiny room?” she said, “Where’s the audience?”

We had big fun like we did when we were skinny and clueless and boy-crazy, back in the days of Mahogany Water, that song-and-dance trio we put together in our all-girl college to meet boys. I was Patti Austin; she, Pauline Wilson. The good-time, big-hair mid-eighties. Our third member, Weena, played guitar and did anyone from Roberta Flack to Whitney Houston, as well as, for laughs, Imelda Papin. We got the name Mahogany Water from Weena’s father who made us drink a concoction of steeped
mahogany seeds he got from his caddy at Aguinaldo. Awfully bitter. The
taste, we used to say, of boiled golf shoes. It was supposed to make us
invincible. Weena’s daddy, five-star general, what a quack! He stomped
his feet—tiny, little stomps, like a boy throwin a tantrum at a toy store—as
Weena was being lowered to the ground. Dead at twenty-one from a
steering wheel lodged in her chest. Vincible.

Gracie and I tour our borrowed Punta Fuego house, a humongous
Rubik’s cube made of glass with some corner quadrants lopped off. It’s
shamelessly large for a weekend retreat: eight huge bedrooms spread over
three floors. The bits of detail—stone, wood, glass, leather—smell of
over-the-top money. Every twelve-inch plank of wood makes me think of
landslides in Quezon but I don’t tell Gracie that. Her sister owns the place,
so I tell her, “it’s so L Décor.” I must admit it’s very pretty though. The
design is so open, as if the ocean and sky are part of the house, and darn it,
I like it. I like it so much I attempt to compute how many million episodes
of telekomedyas and gig shows I have to write for ABS, how many thousand
tax cases Francis has to lawyer for [him] to buy us a trophy like this.

• • •

“Heeey. Does this make you feel like Master of the universe or what?”
I say to Francis, whom we find at the second-level terrace, standing in
hammering ten o’clock sun. He’s wearing his new shorts that Julian and
I got only the day before (Look, Mama, Speedo Voyager swimsuit shorts!).
Francis hasn’t gone swimming in years, and though he’d still fit in his old
blue-and-white-striped Lycra trunks—and he’d wear them, too!—that
would be too funny for Francis. I mean, let’s be in vogue here, right? He
has widened around the waist, just a bit—the practice of corporate law
doesn’t make for much aerobic exercise and he’s near forty already. He’s
looking out at the spectacular 360-degree view through Julian’s spyglasses
and I know what he’s thinking. He’s thinking God and binoculars.
Magnificent and magnifying. He’s into humanities and gadgets and
Discovery Channel. A giant boy in shorts loose like a skirt.
Across the water on the north side where the ridge curves, there is a larger house, large like Alcatraz even in the distance, and Francis points to it.

“Whoa, that’s one’s a biggie,” Gracie says. “Isn’t it weird, all these estates, and outside, those kids?”

In front of the barrios along the stretch of highway leading to Punta Fuego we saw children, some half the size of Julian—they’re babies—waving Merry Christmas placards, asking for money. A bit in-your-face guilt they fling to the rich on their way in. Gracie’s half-American kids thought they were simply for the goodwill, for the cheer! Like little brown ambassadors. You too, you too, Merry Christmas!

“That house has a telescope you can count moon craters with. Wohow, someone’s watching me watching him,” said Francis, stepping back. We see a flash of light from that direction. A glint of sun deflected from a mirror, maybe, or something flashy like a Rolex.

“Wave,” Gracie tells me.

“I don’t see him,” I say.

“Wave anyway,” she says, smiling brightly, her hands already up in the air.

Gracie has always been the most ebullient one, forever effusive and showy, not to mention the prettiest. She got the most attention, and, even as I’d rather drop dead than admit it, she was the chick; she was Mahogany Water’s main attraction. Back in the day, I had issues with that—called her names to myself sometimes. I remember Ricky. Boy-of-my-dreams Ricky, for whom I did all my tricks onstage at the La Salle College Fair, practically sang to his ear, and he blew wolf whistles for Gracie. You’re the funny one, Beth, he said to me. Pucha! Weena had a few mishaps like this happen to her would-be loves, too. And this—this wide-armed lunatic openness to people is what puts Gracie ahead.

“Come on, wave!”

“Stop it already,” I tell her.
Gracie’s kids, Bianca and Kevin and Carlos, they look almost as American as their father, as Gracie is tisay, to begin with, 25% percent Russian—don’t ask me how—with an unspellable middle name. “Ma, they’re foreigners!” Julian said when he met her kids. Now they are all splayed on the living room floor, looking in on the rabbit cage. I could make out their teeth in their reflections on the hardwood floor.

“Nobody take out Buddy from the cage,” Julian tells them.

“Why, you the boss of the rabbit?” Carlos asks him. Carlos is four and must be dying to hold the pet.

“It’s his rabbit, Carlos,” said Bianca, running a forefinger on a cage grill. She is older than Julian by a year. “Why can’t we take him out? Don’t you ever take him out?” She has green eyes.

Julian turns, belly up, resting his weight on his elbows. He looks around, catches my eye for a moment and I give him a wink, but his eyes are too fast, he misses it. He’s looking for potential rabbit hazards, so I look around as well, imagining his thoughts. Buddy can ram his tiny head on the huge glass windows all around, he can overrun the terrace and land in the swimming pool below; or he might get blind from all this ocean-side light.

“I don’t know,” he says, standing up.

“I think it’s okay for him to run around here,” says Bianca.

“I don’t know,” he says again. “Pets die easy.”

“No, they don’t. My cousin has a golden retriever and it’s two…wenty-four years old,” says Kevin. Hearing this, Gracie raises her eyebrows at me and grins. Kids embellish! They exaggerate!

“A retriever’s not a pet,” says my boy.

“It’s an animal,” says Carlos smartly.

Julian nods his head. He thinks for a bit and then he says, “A pet is something between insect and animal.”

My turn to grin. “Come here, Jaloosh,” I say.

“Why?” he mouths.
“Come here, gimme hug.” I say, and he walks over and wraps his skinny arms around my neck. “I love you, Jalooshkins,” I whisper to his ear.

“I love you too, Mamooshkins,” he says. 
“But I love you more!” I say.
“Na-ah, I love you more.”
“That’s not possible,” I say, and he runs back to his rabbit, saying, “it’s possible, it’s possible,” as he goes.
“That’s cute,” Gracie says.
“It’s a script,” I say. We say the same lines to each other every day like prayer.

• • •

Gracie is having it really good here: two yayas for her kids, a cook, a chauffeured suv, pantry to put Santi’s Deli to shame, and this graciousness of her sister’s cascades down to me and mine. Having brought nothing but my Magic Sing and a bagful of kangkong for Buddy, I’m feeling like I’m queen of Sheba here, fresh from a swim, eating shrimp salad with a silver fork in the brightest dining room on the planet. The yayas have set up a kiddie table where the children are having spaghetti and fried chicken, and where Bianca, precocious like her mother, carries on like she was some chairman of the board. Or like Gloria Arroyo on a good day.

“We’re going to call us the Secret Society Club, and I’m the president and so you listen to me, okay?” She said. The curls of her hair bounce like coil springs.

“Who’s the boss of the rabbit now?” Carlos wants to know. A yaya wipes the edges of his mouth with a linen napkin.

“This is not about the rabbit, Carlos!” says Kevin.

“Oh, says Bianca, “Julian, you’re the boss of Buddy the rabbit. But you have to let all of us hold him three times a day. Kevin, you will be the vice-president, so you have to follow me because I’m president. Okay?”

“Sounds like democracy,” says Francis. I reach over and pinch his arm to silence him, accidentally toppling a knife to the floor. The kids turn
their attention to this little commotion in our table, and I signal Gracie
to pretend to be oblivious, but she can’t help from giggling. When she
giggles, her eyes squint as if to let the light into her face so that she flows,
it looks like, from inside her skin. And she shows a lot of cleavage between
the V of her turquoise top that I suddenly feel nervous, and pucha, I need
to watch my husband’s eyes.

“We have to have a secret spot. Every secret club should have one,”
says Julian, glancing at our table. “There are spies everywhere.”

“Yes, the billiard room downstairs will be our secret spot. And, we
will always stick together, of course that’s our motto of the club.” Bianca
is whispering now, though we can still hear clearly.

“Even sleeping time?”

“Sleeping time, swimming time, eating time, we’ll stick together,”
says Kevin.

“Yes, no matter what happens, we will stick together,” says Julian,
mouth bursting with enthusiasm and spaghetti. He’s a joiner. He likes
clubs.

“We can’t speak when our mouth is full of pasta, Jool,” I say.

He looks at me from the corner of his eye, then turns to his friends,
says conspiratorially, “Unless problems, such as adults, happen.”

Gracie laughs hardest. I’m laughing, too, but then I see Francis’ eyes
flit from her boobs to his shrimp and back again, and I feel the room
darken a bit. “We’re going to behave ourselves, aren’t we?” I say, looking
straight at Francis with my eyes popped.

• • •

There is no access to the beach. Between the houses and the water is a
scraggy ridge to negotiate which you have to be either a mountain climber
with a rappel rope or a skydiver with—well, wings. No wonder there’s a
swimming pool. This set-up, it’s funny—it’s all for show, a pretend beach
house. The ocean? Untouchable! How jokey is that? Ooh, the rich and
their funny vanities.
“I’m sure there’s a way down there somewhere,” Francis says. He is on a hammock, reading with his shades on, his six-foot frame bent like a pretzel. Gracie is face down on a mat beside the pool just a few feet away—an ogle away—the two swells of her butt peeking out of her bikini like twin blimps heralding the start of a major problem.

“Why’re you here?” I ask Francis, pushing the rope above him with enough force so that half of him tilts in, then out. He lowers a leg to the floor, putting his swing to a stop. He takes off his shades and cocks his head to the side, showing the angle where he most resembles Julian, like he is Julian thirty years from now. He opens his mouth to speak but words don’t come out, so he just gapes. I’ve seen this gape many times. It’s usually followed by something like, “What’s your problem, Beth?”

• • •

I don’t know where my panics come from. Wifehood, motherhood, they make me crazy. I stand at the gates of the grade school, picking up Julian, and a horde of them mini-Jesuits come charging out and they all look the same, so I can’t tell which one is mine, and that fills me up with dread. What if he doesn’t see me, and he panics and he runs all the way to Katipunan and gets run over by a maniac truck driver? “I won’t get lost, Ma, I’m eight,” Julian has said to me four times already.

• • •

I stay where I am, beside the hammock, blocking my husband’s view of Gracie. He is reading Clinton, and he says, “I’m on the Lewinsky now.” I’d just showered and my hair is dripping on my dress, which is a beach tunic in blinding orange: it’s way too short. Someone’s pasalubong from Boracay. I didn’t think I’d ever wear it—it’s too Joyce Jimenez. But it’s something Gracie would wear. It’s a Gracie kind of look.

“Is that new? It’s nice,” Francis says.

“It’s a gift. Isn’t it too short? Too orange? Really, you like it?”

He reaches under the hem of it, slides his fingers beneath the lacy elastic of my panties. “Let’s go upstairs,” he says.
“Now?” It’s only half past three.
“Now.”

Sometimes after sex I think of my mother. I can tell she had sex all the time—she gave birth ten times, once every two years. Ten girls until she was fat and confused. Couldn’t say our names off the top of her head. But to imagine how she behaved in bed? I can’t! It must have been, what facile? Perfunctory? As methodical as baking a cake?—Tonight, we’re going to try to bake a BOY. Was she even awake? I can’t think of my mother doing the things I do with Francis. No way.

I was the sixth girl, come at a time when the disappointment had given way to disgust. Babae na naman? Relatives, friends, the whole stretch of Pinaglabanan is saying the same thing. Another girl? The whole city of San Juan!

We were all mistakes. We should have been boys. My sisters and me were all screwed, trying all our lives to be the best disappointment Daddy ever had. Daddy with the stingy, stingy heart.

We had a spinster aunt live with us, what with all those girl-babies and wedding cakes Mommy had to make. Auntie Paz told me—should told me many times—that my father refused to look at me after I was born, left my mother at the hospital and got drunk and smashed somebody’s face, so that if I didn’t eat my sitaw my Daddy “will give you to the bumbay who will grind you into paper money.” And Daddy will not miss me. I swear to God that’s the first thought that came to my head.

A month before my wedding, I stopped speaking to Daddy altogether after my mother—what was she thinking?—did me some girl-talk and said, “Anak, men are faithless.” She said I had better accept that as a fact as early as I could to save me a lot of misery.

“Was Daddy?”
“That’s beside the point.”
“Does he have a bastard boy?”
“That’s not the point, anak.”
What Francis does after sex is sleep. I leave him alone in his apnea and walk around the house again, dispelling the residues of passion, shaking off the happy guilt of broad-daylight sex in someone else’s bed. I see the yayas outside the billiard room like a bunch of groupies, banished by the Secret Society. They’re nibbling on butong pakwan, slipping the black spit-soaked peels into the pockets of their uniforms, afraid to make a mess. They won’t sit on the Italian-leather sofas.

Gracie, fresh from a shower, is talking to her sister on the phone, lying on a divan in the living room with both her legs up on the wall. “What are you now, a Lladro?” I say. I look up to the second veranda to see if by any chance she could be seen from our bedroom upstairs.

“Pee-la-tees,” she says, cupping the receiver.

The stairwell comes alive as four kids run up the stairs at once, a curious formation: Carlos and Kevin in front, Bianca and Julian at the back together, holding either end of the rabbit cage. What, she blinks her green eyes at him and he’s in love with her already? Three yayas trail behind, my lieutenant, yaya Lengleng, included, their rubber slippers flip-flopping on the wooden steps. I follow the kids to the kitchen, and I hear the tail end of a sentence being spoken by Bianca, apparently a suggestion (as can only come from a girl) to mash the vegetables before giving it for feed.

“Hey, baby!” I say.

Julian spins around, a clear ripple of disgust washing over his face. He mumbles that shush, he’s not a baby.

“Oh, sorry, I forgot that you’re an attorney,” I say, sing-song. They are raiding the fridge, Bianca giving orders to the others like a mother in a supermarket. “Don’t get that. Get this. Take that one.”

Without gel on his hair, his bang keep falling into his face and he jerks his chin up constantly to flip them away—the handsomest boy in the
world. He keeps glancing at Bianca like a boyfriend, holding a bouquet of *kangkong*.

I will not have any other child. He’s enough. He’s plenty. Takes all my time, all my heart. “Come here, guwapo, gimme hug.” I say.

“Tsk,” he says.

He approaches me, and I stoop down to welcome his embrace, my lips puckered. But he goes for my ear and whispers, “Ma, can you stop, please?”

When I go into shock my face feels numb and lines of songs go off in my head. I feel the earth move. Shake, rattle, roll. Say you love me. Shanananananana.

• • •

Gracie and I keep in constant touch—I write her long emails full of exclamation points. We’ve been face-to-face only five times in fourteen years, and each time—but for the last—is a regression into an earlier age. (The last visit kept us in the dire divorce-wrecked heaviness of her present.) With the kids caught up in their merriments and Francis watching the whole *Godfather* series on a wall-mounted plasma television, Gracie and I sing and reminisce and drink wine until well into the night. We have these little memory snippets like coins for a jukebox time machine that returns us to a time we are Mahogany Water again and we hate Madonna and everything disco. We are jazz. We are wearing penny loafers and smelling of Anais Anais and Weena is alive. The happy, the *superkaduper* fun parts. The days of giddy hope and pointless imaginings. We will all be, someday, in New York where Weena will hang her panties on Kenny G’s saxophone and I will marry Woody Allen and Weena will be Grizabella in *Cats*.

• • •

We have a burial ceremony for Buddy at noon in the vacant lot beside the house. We watch as Francis lowers what looks like a fur shoes into a shallow hole. Carlos is sobbing beside Kevin, who is wearing a scowl on
his face, the top of his lips beading with sweat. Even Bianca is looking grave. She is murmuring something to herself, perhaps a prayer, the act of contrition.

I cringe with sympathy for him and I watch Julian’s quiet sadness. I haven’t said a word to him since he rebuffed me yesterday, and now he looks at me and our eyes lock for a while, a secret exchange of grief between him and me, a look that says all that needs said: I’m sorry, it’s all right, I love you.

He looks away first, looks down and starts pushing dirt onto the hole with his foot.

• • •

Buddy’s burial leaves me in a benign mood all afternoon. I have no wish to swim or crack jokes or make love. I sit alone on my borrowed bed and look at the sky through the glass walls and think of Weena—not the sunshine rah-rah Weena but the Weena in a box and all the grief it stands for. I remember the debilitating envy I had of her father’s love. Grieve. I can do this all day. Through the night, I could. I’m good at feeling sorry—I moped and cried and stayed in bed for weeks after Weena’s death—I can do this forever. But Francis comes in and takes me by the hand to the terrace. “Look,” he says.

Julian and Kevin and Bianca and Carlos are playing in the pool, chasing, splashing, diving in, and flapping about, screeching like dolphins, laughing like birds. Having fun. “They’re forgotten.”

At the rim of the pool, Gracie, queen of fools, dances to Jingle Bells. I look away. From the house across the water I think I see a glint of light flash for one brief moment and I wave. I fling my arms like crazy.

SOCORRO VILLANUEVA (AB Psychology 1982) led a corporate life as president and CEO of a manufacturing firm before diving into the world of literature. Despite a prosperous career, Villanueva yearned for one that would unlock her creativity. In 2001, she picked up her first N.V.M Gonzalez Award for “Lavender” and her first Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards
for Literature the following year.
Two N.V.M. Gonzalez Awards and 3 Palancas later, Villanueva’s creative journey took a different spin with her coming out as a visual artist. In 2010, she held her first exhibit at Galerie Francesca in SM Megamall. Since then, Villanueva’s visual works have been showcased in Manila, Davao, and Hong Kong. Ever the transformative artist, in 2014, Villanueva returned to her love for the written word and penned a screenplay.

“Mahogany Water” won First Prize for the Short Story in English at the 2006 Palanca Awards, and was first published in Hoard of Thunder: Philippine Short Stories in English, 2001-2008 (Vol. 2) (University of the Philippines Press, 2012).
A


Kaya akala ko, noong isang beses na nakasakay kami sa jeep, alam na ni Noah ang gagawin nang may sumampang lalaki at tutukan ng paltik ’yong katabi naming babae. Nagulat na lang ako noong matapos naming mailagay ’yong mga cellphone at relo namin sa isang itim na backpack, pagtingin ko kay Noah, nakatitig siya sa mukha n’ong holdaper.

Unang beses ko rin namang maholdap, pero matagal ko nang alam, matagal ko nang natutuhan sa mga balita at kuwento ng mga kaibigan ko: huwag na huwag titingin sa mukha ng masasamang-loob. Kapag nakita nilang nakatingin ka at posibleng maalala mo ang mukha nila, hindi ka na


Si Tom ang nakaisip na mag-alaga sila ng ahas. Katatapos lang nila noong mapanood sa TV Patrol na may ro-talampakang sawa na nakita sa isa sa matatandang imburnal ng Quezon City.

“Walang kahayop-hayop dito!” bulalas ng binatilyo. Pinagsasaluhang nila noon ang iniuwing Andok’s ni Tony. “’Yung buhay, ’yung maaalagaan ba,” hindi na nahintay ni Tom na sumagot pa si Tony: Anong walang hayop? e halos magdilim na nga ang buong salas hanggang sa kuwarto nila ng kung ano-anong display gaya ng mata ng musang at iba’t ibang hugis at kulay ng paruparo.

na hindi nakahuma sa kanyang pangri-raid sa katanghaliang-tapat, saka
siya tatalon sa lupa at pagdadadamputin ang mga insekto. Saka lang
niya mapapansin na nangapigtas din ang mga bulaklak ng mangga.
Mapapagalitan na naman siyang tiyak ng Mama niya.
“Nakakain ang salagubang, di ba?”

Napakunot ang noo ni Tony. “Pa’no mo nalaman?” Laking-Cubao
si Tom, sa pagkakaalam niya. Pero may mga puno rin nga pala sa Cubao,
paalala niya agad sa sarili. At kasabay noon, ipinaalala rin niya sa sarili na
hindi na siya papayag na hindi siya isama ni Tom sa bahay ng mga ito sa
Project 4.
“Paano kasi kita ipapakilala,” maktol noon ng binatilyo. “Bubugbugin
ako ni kuya ’pag nalaman n’ya.”

“Ipapaalam ko ba naman? Kahit sa malayo lang ako,” katwiran naman
ni Tony. “Bašta makita ko lang kung saan ka nakatira.” Pero hindi na
sumagot noon si Tom. Kaya napilitan na rin si Tony na isama ang binatilyo
sa apartment niya. Para maramdaman ng binatilyo na seryoso siya rito.
“Ano, nakakain ’yon, di ba?”
“Adobo.”
“Tapa?”
“O pito, isasawsaw sa suka.”
“Nakatikim ka na?”
“Mga Intsik lang ’yun.”
“Anong ’yun?”
“Tanga na kanina nun.”
“Tanga adobo?”
“Sabi ng matatanda. Bumibili ang mga Intsik ng salagubang, tapos
kinahain nila.”
“Nakita mo?”
“Hindi, ano. Takot ako sa Intsik sa ’min nung bata ako.”
“Anong nakain mo na?”
“Anong nakain?”
“Iyung mga kakaiba… palaka?”
“Kambing?”
“Ikaw, ’di pa?”
“Alin?”
“Palaka—at kambing.”
“Nakaano na rin, kambing, caldereta.”
“Sa mga inuman.”
“Oo nga,” napangiti si Tom. “Sa inuman. Parang aso.”
“Aso, ayoko. Parang pusa na tingin ko dun e. Domestic, di ba. Ikaw?”

“ANO, ITATAPON KO BA ‘TO?” BIRO NI TOM SA BUTO NG ANDOK’S NA
sinisipsip niya.
“Gago ka talaga.”
Napangiti si Tony noon, at gusto niyang sabihin na hindi sementeryo iyon. Pero ngayon, matapos hilingin ni Tom na mag-alaga sila ng ahas, ang nasabi lang niya’y hindi ba sinabing souvenir ang mga ito.
“Bakit ba ahas?”
Biglang nagliwanag ang mukha ng binatilyo. “Bibili na tayo?”
“Wala pa akong sinasabi, tinatanong ko lang kung bakit ahas.”
Hinawakan ng binatilyo ang kanang kamay ni Tony. “Sige na, sige na, please. Hindi ako uuwi this weekend. Hindi ako lalabas bukas.”
“Ikaw talaga.”
“Ano, ha, sige na.”
“Okay, okay. Pero sa weekend na tayo bibili. Marami pa akong kailangang gawin.”


Napatigil si Tony sa pagliligpit ng mesa. Inabangan ang mangyayari sa tv. At eksakto nga sa mga sinabi ni Tom ang nangyari: Bumanda ang bato, tinamaan ang gilid ng tres pagbalik ng bato, bahagyang itinulak ng tres ang singko sa side pocket.
“Sabi na!” Napapalakpak ng isa si Tom.
Napangiti naman si Tony bago pumunta sa lababo para hugasan ang pinagkainan nila. “Puwede ka na palang manghula.”
“Hindi hula ‘yon. Experience ang tawag d’on.”

PERO LAGING NAROON SI TOM. NAROON, DAHIL... NANATILI NGA KAYA ITO


Pero paano ipapaliwanag ni Tony ang tiyak siyang mga sulyap ng pagkilala, ng dating pagkakilala, mula sa mga lalaki—iba't ibang edad at hitsura. May mataba, bahagyang kulot ang buhok, naka-shades, sando, shorts na maong at rubbershoes, nasa early 40’s. May payat na maputi, naka-long sleeves na puti at necktie na pula, slacks na brown, at katipo ng mga nanghaharang sa gitna ng mall upang itanong kung may credit card
ka na, o insurance o kung anupamang baka-sakaling wala ka at maaari niyang ialok sa iyo—gaya ng insurance plan, o kahit na anong plan. May halos kulay-dilaw na ang buhok at pakiramdam ni Tony ay mas bata pa kay Tom, naka-jacket na bodyfit, bodyfit din na maong, kulay itim, at may hikaw sa kaliwang tenga at sa ibabang labi. May mga babae rin, minsan, may babae—sa Megamall, kapag nagyaya si Tom na mag-bowling sila roon, o habang naghihintay sila ng mart pabalik ni Tom at nakapila sila sa platform malapit sa mga markang dilaw na nagsasabi kung saan tatapat ang bubukas na pinto ng tren. Pero hindi sila tinitingnan pabalik ni Tom. Walang mabasa si Tony sa anumang sulyap o kilos ng binatilyo na nakilala nito ang sulyap/tingin/titig ng paminsan-minsang nakakasalubong nila.


Dahil paano kung hindi makapagtimpí ang mga sulyap/tingin/titig ng mga tiyak siyang nakakakilala kay Tom—bagaman maaaring sa ibang pangalan? Paano nga kung hindi makapagtimpí ang mga matang iyon dahil hindi nagsasabato si Tom at patuloy lang sa paglalakad—parang
nagdaraang hangin na walang pakialam sa mga taong gumagamit sa kaniya at ginagamit niya.

Paano nga kung minsà’y biglang may sumutsot sa pangalan kilala rin niya: “Tom!” Alin ba ang mas makamandag—iyon, o na tawagin ang binatilyo sa ibang pangalan: Leñter, Jake, Aaron, pj, Raymond, jr, o Dexter—mga pangalan narining na rin niyang ginamit ng iba. Sa ibang pangalan ay maaari silang lahat na magpanggap na nagkamali ang tumawag, kahit pa alam ni Tony sa loob niya na ang mismong pagkakamali na iyon sa pangalan ang talagang magpapatunay sa mga bagay na hindi naman talaga nila pinag-uusapan ni Tom. Ayaw niyang mapilitan ang binatilyo na itanggi iyon sa kanya—at kahit pa laging nakalutang iyon sa isipan niya, pinapatok ni ni iyon, o pinakakawalan, pinalilipad sa kawakan gaya ng siguro’y nangyari sa lobo ng dalawang batang kadadalo lang ng birthday party at nakasakay sa traysikel na binunggo ng Rx na sinasakyan noon ni Tony. Sa bahay na niya naramdaman na may mahabang hiwa siya sa kanang binti at kumakayat ang dugo niya sa suot na khaki pants.

KINALINGGUHAN, HABANG PAPUNTA SINA TONY AT TOM SA BIORESEARCH
sa Alimall, parang tinuklaw ng ahas ang buong mall nang may tumawag mula sa likuran nila: “Alex!” At hindi gaya ng dati, napalingon si Tom at agad ding nagbawi ng tingin bago nagtama ang mga mata nila ni Tony.

Tumigil, tumigil ang lahat.

Totoo ba ito? sa isip-isip ni Tony. Pero hindi niya maigalaw kahit ang pagkakapako ng paningin niya sa mga mata ni Tom. At sa mga matang iyon—napakalawanan ng repleksiyon—sa dilim ng bilog ng kanyang mga mata, napakalawanang mga bahagi ng mall sa likuranan ni Tony. Ang magkatabing escalator na parehong nakatigil sa pagbaba at sa pagtaas, at malalaman lang kung alin ang pababa at alin ang pataas dahil sa posisyon ng mga taong nakasakay dito: nakatalikod ang mga nasa kanang escalator sa mga mata ni Tom, nakaharap ang mga nasa kaliwa. At ang mga nakasabit na papel ng mga anunsiyo: dambuhalang 50% discount. Na kapag tinititan mo nang mabuti ay may maliit na “up to” bago ang “50%” at mas maliit
pang “on selected items” sa ibaba ng “discount.” Nagkasya ang lahat ng iyong mata ni Tom? Biglang nagduda si Tony sa mga nakikita niyang nakikita ng binatilyo sa mga mata nito.


“Disiotso. Ano na?” Kailangan niyang iparamdam na niinip siya at wala siya rito para makipagkuwentuhan lang.

“250?”
Hindi sumagot ang binatilyo. Malinaw naman ang pagkakasabi niya kanina.

“Lahat na ’yon?”
niya, nakatingin pa rin sa mga akyat-panaog sa escalator. Pero mas hindi na naghahanap. Mukhang may pupuntahan ang buwena-manong ito.

“Kahit kiss lang, smack, sa labi lang?”

Tumatawad pa. Sa performance binabawi ang hindi mababarat sa pera. “Kahit gawin kong 300?”


“Pero kasama na dun ang service?”

Mautak talaga. Parang pirmahan ng kontrata, kailangang detailado lahat.


“Sige, 350.”

UMIKOT LANG SINA TONY AT TOM SA SECOND FLOOR BAGO SILA BUMABA ulit sa first floor para sa BioRes. Kailangan bang sa mall pa sila bumili ng ahas—at sa Ali Mall pa, naisip ni Tom, at ni Tony, kahit siya ang nagmungkahing doon sila pumunta. Matagal na rin kasi sila, ilang buwan na, at hindi naman siya inisip na may makakilala nga kay Tom, o na may kikilala pa rito. (O Alex? Alex? Sumusundot-sundot pa rin sa isip ni Tony.)


“Sir?” Nawala ang mukhang daga. Simbisig ng pagkaripas ng mga dagang-bahay sa apartment ni Tony sa tuwing binubuksan niya ang ilaw sa salas kapag dumarating siya roon nang gabi.


Delayed reaction, naisip ni Tom, at parang narinig niya sa utak niya ang hindi lumabas na bose ng lalaki: Aaa… Sir, wala po kaming ahas dito… Kay Tony pa rin nakatingin kahit si Tom ang huling nagsalita.

“Saan kaya kami makakatotoo?”


“Sir, kelangan kasi order pag ganyan. O hanap kayo ng direct selling.”
Lumilinga na ang mata nito sa ibang pumapasok na kostumer. “Hanap n’yo ser-mam?”
Kahit kaharap pa sila. “Iguana ser, gusto n’yong tingnan?”

Tumingin si Tony kay Tom. Nakakunot ang noo ng binaitulyo.
Bumaling si Tony sa lalaki. “Sige, di bale na lang.” At ni hindi na sumagot ang lalaki.
Nilapitan na nito agad ang papasok na babaeng dinig ni Tony ay naghahanap ng gold fish.
’Napaka-classic naman, sa isip-isip ng binata.

**HINDI KUMIKIBO SI TOM PAGLABAS NILA NG BIORESEARCH. DIRECT**
Hanggang sa lumipas ang mga araw, linggo, buwan, taon, na hindi niya ito naiiisip—at bakit ba kailangan niyang isipin ang Bumbay na nagpapasayaw sa alaga nitong ahas?


“SA’N NGAYON? SA’N TAYO MAGHAHANAP?”

Kumain muna sila sa Jollibee. Wala namang kakilala si Tony na nagbebenta ng ahas, o kahit nag-aalaga man lang para sana’y mapagtanungan nila. Well, ang totoo, wala siyang alam na kakilalang may ahas dahil hindi pa naman niya nasusubukan magtanong. At hindi siya sigurado ngayon kung gusto niyang ungkatin sa mga kakilala niya ang tungkol sa pag-aalaga ng ahas.

“May kakilala ka ba?” Nakakunot pa rin ang noo ni Tom.


“Check kaya tayo sa net?”
Nakahinda nang maluwag si Tony. Hindi nila kailangang maglakad nang maglakad sa kung saan kahtin hindi sila sigurado kung meron ba talaga ng hinahanap nila.


Http://www.ebay.ph: Burmese python, 2 ft., 5K. Uy, half the size, half the price. At bakit kung saan-saang sulok ng mundo nanggaling? Wala bang ahas-Pinoy na puwedeng alagaan?

Sawa: nanlilingkis, hindi kailangan ng kamandag para mapatay ka—dinadaan sa laki—kaya ba ito ang nasa balikat ni Zuma? Size does matter—napakamacho, napakamakalalaki, sa isip-isip ni Tony, ang sawa sa balikat ni Zuma na lumalamon sa puso ng mga birheng binibiktima niya—mga pusong umibig na kaya, may minahal na kaya, naranasan na kayang masaktan?


Sa screen ng computer ni Tom, nagpapambuno sina Zuma at Valentina—o guštong daanin ni Zuma sa balibagan ang laban. Pero iba ang diskarte ni Valentina: dinadaan muna sa ilang ilag dito, talon doon, at kung minsan, biglang titigil. At tila uluong naman si Zuma na mabubulag sa kalabang hindi gumagalaw. Walang makita si Zuma: Ulupong na kay
linaw ng mata sa pinakamalayong tikling na nagkakandirit sa palayan, pero bulag sa nakamulagat na tandang, walang kagalaw-galaw, sa kaniyang harapan. Ang sandali na iyon ng pagkabulag ni Zuma ang sinamantala ng kamandag ni Valentina na nagtambaling papunta sa likuran ng lalaki bago tinuklaw ng mga ahas niya sa ulo ang sawa sa balikat ni Zuma.


“Bakit hindi ’yung mas maliit?”

“ANG LAKI N’YAN, DI KO KAYA ’YAN,” PABIRONG SABI NI TONY KAY TOM


“Sabunutan mo ’ko,” ungol n’ya sa binatilyo, habang nakasubsoob ang mukha niya sa bandang bayag nito.
“Bibe, tingnan mo ang p’wet kung makalakad, naiwan,” at saka sila palihim na maghahagikhikan ni Niño, ang katabi ni Tony sa upuan noong Grade 4 siya, at wala silang ginagawa maghapon kundi isa-isahin kung anong hayop ang kamukha ng mga teacher at kaklase nila. Lahat siyempre, puwedeng maging hayop, maliban lang sa kanilang dalawa mismo, kahit pa sa isip ni Tony, mukhang giraffe naman si Niño dahil sa mahabang leeg nito—at hindi naman puwedeng gansa, masyadong elegante ang gansa para rito, at talagang mas bagay ang giraffe, lalo pa sa busargang ilong ni Niño na lalo pang bumubuka kapag nagtataawanan sila sa mga kahayupang pinaggagagawa nila sa mga tao sa paligid nila.

“Si Ron-ron, si Ron-ron?” bulong ni Niño kay Tony.
“Unggoy, s’yempre,” sasabihin naman ni Tony.
“Bakit, bakit, manggogoyo?”
“Hindi, hindi.”
“E bakit unggoy? Mabaho? Oo, mabaho nga si Ron-ron…”
“Hindi, hindi. Unggoy kasi,” at kaunting buwelo muna ni Tony.
“Ilang siglo na lang, papasa na siyang tao.” At saka sila maghahagalpakan na naman ng tawa na pigil na pigil ang bases dahil baka mapansin sila ng bibe nilang teacher sa English na walang ginawa kundi magsulat nang magsulat sa blackboard, kabit-kabit, ng exercises na nasa workbook din naman nila, pero pinaghihirapan nitong isulat pa sa blackboard para paghirapan din nilang kopyahin sa notebook nila.
“Evolution!” Hirit pa ni Niño habang sumusulyap kay Ron-ron na nasa ikalawang row sa unahan nila, na para bang announcement din kay Tony na naintindihan niya ang joke nito. Si Tony na sa isip naman ni Niño noon ay ahas, dahil lampayatot, pero hindi puwedeng basta butiki lang, dahil si Tony, madulas, mautak, mabilis mag-isip. Kaya nga hindi niya sasabihin kay Tony kung anong hayop ang naaisip niya kapag tinitingnan ang katabi sa upuan. Takot lang niya na makapag-isip ito ng kung anumang hayop na ipanloloko naman sa kanya, kahit pa wala siyang maisip na hayop na kahawig niya. Paano’y ang iniisip niyang kamukha niya, kung magkakaroon man siya ng mga kahawig na hayop, ay ang mga Ewoks na napapanood niya sa TV—at hayop ba ang mga iyon, may hayop ba
talagang ganoon? Iniisip ni Niño noon na kapamilya iyon ng mga bear—
ibig sabihin, ng teddy bear at ng bear sa commercial ng Bear Brand sa tv.
Pero matay man niyang isipin, malayo talaga ang mukha niya sa Ewoks, at
nakakaramdam siya ng panghihinayang noon dahil doon.

“E si Alex?”

Napatingin si Tom. Halata ni Tony ang pagkabigla sa mukha nito.
“Sinong Alex?” Natawaran ni Tony ng 8,500 ang Columbian red tail boa,
pero mahigit sampung libo pa rin ang nagaástos niya dahil bumili siya ng
aquarium na pagkukulungan dito.

Isang linggo pa lang ang ahas pero parang nawawalan na ng gana si
Tom dito. Hindi naman niya mabulyayan ang binatilyo tungkol dito—
ano nga ba kasi ang puwede niyang gawin sa ahas na ’yun maliban sa
paminsan-minsang hawakan at kapag napagod, ibalik sa aquarium. Ano pa
nga ba—e naghanap lang naman talaga sila ng alagain.

“Alex, ’yung itinawag sa ’yo—naaalala mo, nung sa Ali, nung
naghahanap tayo ng Valentin mo.” Valentin ang naging pangalan ng ahas
na nasa loob ng aquarium. Nakatutok na ulit sa kanyang 3210 si Tom, at
parang nang-iinis, sinadyang maglaro ng Snake, kahit pa ilang beses na
niyang na-perfect score iyon—iyung punong-puno ang buong screen ng
katawan ng ahas.

“Sabi mo,” bahagyang sumulyap si Tom kay Tony na nagpipipindot
ng iba’t ibang channel sa tv. “Sabi mo, ibibili mo ako ng 5300. Laging
nagha-hang ’to e. Tapos nagagalit ka ’pag di ako nakapag-textback.”

“Sabi ko, sa weekend,” at pinatay na ni Tony nang tuluyan ang tv.

Hindi na nagsalita pa si Tom. Ang totoo, naiinip na siya sa apartment
ni Tony. Wala na siyang magawa roon. Bored na bored na siya sa araw-
araw na panonood ng pirated dvd—at hindi rin naman niya gusto ang
karamihan sa mga binibili ni Tony. Parang nakakulong din siya sa bahay.
Hindi naman siya bañta makagala dahil kailangan din niyang manghingi ng
perang panggaéstos kay Tony—at nito ngang mga nakaraang araw, hindi na
siya kampanteng humingi ng pera kay Tony. Laging parang andami-dami
na nitong nakikita sa kanya, kahit pa wala naman siyang ginagawa. Wala na
nga siyang ginagawa, wala pa siyang magawa. Kahit naman ang mga tropa


“Sa weekend,” sabi ni Tom, bago ito tumayo mula sa sofa pumunta sa kuwarto.


Naghahanap siya ng sulat. Kahit anong pamamaalam—kahit anong katibayan na nakasama nga niya rito si Tom, na nagsama sila nang—ilan? tatloapat-limang buwan?


Tumakbo pabalik ng kuwarto ang Papa niya. Pagbalik nito sa salas, buhat-buhat na nito ang Mama niya, bumubula ang bibig, at kita ni Tony ang mga ugat sa manipis at maputing pisngi ng Mama niya—parang lamat, parang salaming mababasag ang mukha ng Mama niya.

Nang makabalik ang Mama niya, hindi na iyon pinag-usapan. Ni hindi siya pinadalaw sa ospital. Bastä halos dalawang linggong inalagaan si Tony ng tita niya na bunsong kapatid ng Mama niya. Hindi rin siya nagtanong noon. Alam niyang may nangyayari. Hangga’t hindi bumabalik ang Mama niya sa loob ng dalawang linggong iyon, ayaw niyang itanong kung patay
na ba ito. Kaya’t nakonsensiya siya nang masiglang-masiglang Mama niya ang bumalik. Wala na ang salaming mababasag sa mukha nito.


Si **EDGAR CALABIA SAMAR**

Pira-pirasong pagbubawas, muling pagpapatals, subalit hindi eksaktong ganoon. Sapagkat hindi naman talaga tumatalas muli, binabawasan lamang at naghahanap ng kapalit. Nailabas ko ang mga blade, dahil marami-rami sa isang pakete, hindi lang isa. Nahuli ako ng kasambay namin noon na hindi ko na maalala ang pangalan ngayon. Ate Cherry o Ate Melanie? Ate She? Hindi pala posibleng si Ate She, dahil may edad na siya noong kasama namin siya sa bahay, at wala sa alaala ko ang isang matanda. May pagkabata rin, sigurado ako, dahil tandang-tanda ko pa na hindi kami nagkaintindihan. Isang bata at isang mas bata na hindi maintindihan ang


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pinakabalahura sa kanilang lahat. Pagkatapos maresolba ang problemang
iyon, habang ilang beses niyang inuulit sabihin sa akin sa biyahe na kung
takot ka ng magasasahan ‘e bumili ka ng bahay na may sariling garahe, na hindi
ko alam kung suwerte ba o malas na kaya niyang sabihin at kaya kong
paniwalaan, ay nasabi niya na Kaya ayaw na ng nanay mo tumira diyan ‘e.
Walang nagbago sa tono niya. Parehong tono lang sa tuwing magpapaabot
siya ng ulam mula sa kabilang dulo ng mesa tuwing naghahapunan ang
pamilya. Parehong tono lang kapag sinasabi niyang tawagin ko na si
Patty na nagkukulong na naman sa kuwarto sa itaas. Ni isang beses hindi
dumapo sa isip ko na may kahit isa na ayaw na doon sa amin. Ang nanay
ko pa na laging may pinapagawa at pinakakarpintero sa bahay: bagong
tarangkahan, bagong palapag, bagong divider, bagong bubong.

Dahil palagi na lang may nadadagdag, kahit madalas ay hindi naman
talaga akma ang mga bagong pag-aarkitektura na naidadagdag, kakaibang
atensyon tuloy ang napupukaw ng bahay namin kaiba sa lahat ng iba pang
bahay sa Katamisan. Mahirap ipaliwanag sa mga bibisita ang hitsura ng
bahay. May kung anu-anong mga salamin sa harap, maaaring tawaging
mala-glasshouse kahit halata namang hindi nagagamit (katanggan-tanggan
ang-house na bahagi), at may tarangkahan na may hindi karaniwang kulya-
beige na may halong orange pero malapit pa rin sa krayola na flesh. Sira
pa ang doorbell at may layo rin ang mismong bahay mula sa tarangkahan
ng garahe. Tuwing umuuwi tuloy galing paaralan o trabaho ang isa sa
aming magkakapatid, maliban sa pinakabata na nag-aral pa sa hayskul at
hinahatid pa ng service na may gumaganang busina, laging katakot-takot
na pagkatok sa tarangkahan ang kailangan para lamang marinig ng mga
tao sa loob at mapagbuksan. Iniisip kaya ng mga kapitbahay kung bakit
wala kaming doorbell samantalang may bahagi ng bahay namina ng gawa
naman sa salaming may tinta? Iniisip kaya nila kung bakit pa doorbell ang
pinagtipiran ng mag-anak na ito? Iniisip kaya nila bakit napakaingay ng
mga nakatira dito?

Hindi ko maitatanong ang mga iyon kahit kanino. Huli akong
nakaroon ng kaibigan mula sa mga kapitbahay, umiinom pa ako ng
gatas mula sa boteng may tsupon. Jayjay ang pangalan ng kapitbahay,


Hindi na makadalas ng ganitong espisipikong takot ang mga mas bata kong kapatid sapagkat hindi na ginawang pamparusa ng tatay ko ang sinturon. Umalis na rin si Nana. Kakatwa nga ay halos hindi na


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kung saan paparating ang mga kotse (upang makita man lamang kung may paparating) ay hindi rin ligtas dahil sa mga traysikel na may sariling mga batas pagdating sa counterflow. Idagdag pa sa dami ng mga sasakyang nakikiraan ay ang dala nilang mga ulap ng usok at walang-patumanggang pagbubusina. Kung kailangan maglakad ay kakayahan naman, subalit mainam na lang ding iwasan.


ng kuya tuwing nilalabas ang kamay-kamayan? Wala na akong ninang? Paanong hindi na babalik?


idinedeklara sa telebisyon na ginagawa nila ang anumang ginagawa nila dahil mahal nila ang magulang nila.


**Paolo Tiausas** (BFA Creative Writing 2013) received the Loyola Schools Award for the Arts and the Joseph Mulry Award for Literary Excellence in 2013. He was selected as a fellow for poetry in the 11th Ateneo National Writers Workshop in 2012, and the 14th Iyas National Writers’ Workshop in 2014. In 2015, he was shortlisted for the Purita Kalaw Ledesma Prize for Art Criticism in the Ateneo Art Awards.


“Cutter” won third place in the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature (Filipino Division, Maikling Kwento) in 2016 and was first published in the 4th issue of *Plural* (February 2016) <www.pluralprosejournal.com>.
Mahinahong hinahagod ng liwanag ng buwan ang mga hibla ng itim niyang buhok. Paminsan-minsang itinutulak ng hangin pahiga ang damuhan sa paligid, kaanod ng malamig na awit ng mga kuliglig. Ilang oras pa, dadapuan ng hamog ang kanyang mga pilikmata.

Gumagapang ang kanyang samyo, naglalakbay paikot-ikot sa lawak ng bakanteng lote. Ilang dipa mula sa talas ng talahib, bumabaling-balit sa paglipad ang paniki, tila sirang orasan na paulit-ulit sa pagbilang ng bawat segundo.

Patay ang mga ilaw sa lahat ng bahay sa paligid ng bakanteng lote. Mahinang umuungol na lamang ang mga asong nagsisipagtahol kanina sa mga ingay na narinig.

Parang sakit na dumapo ang kahimikahan sa lahat ng mga nakatira sa subdivisyon. Maging mga sanggol biglang naubusan ng uha, hindi ininda ang basang lampin o pagkauhaw.
Matagal na nakadilat ang mga magulang ng subdivisyon, nag-aabang sa pagsapat ng umaga, sa paglabas ng araw ng magtataboy sa mga anino. Nang sa wakas ay magliwanag ang paligid, isa-isang nagbukas ang mga pinto.
Agad na nanghinasok sa mga bata ang sangsang ng dahas, nilingkis ang mga upuan, mesa, kama, lahat ng bagay at sulok na mapagluluklukan, pati kublihan ng laruan ng mga bata. Walang nagawa ang mga magulang kundi humakbang na lang palabas at hanapin ang pinamugaran ng sangsang.

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“Huwag kang gagalaw.”
“Bakit?”
“Ngayon lang bumalik ang tutubi.”
“Nasaan?”
“Teka, huwag kang lilingon.”
“’Asan nga?”
“Sa paanan mo.”
“Guéto kong makita.”
“Sandali. Lilipad. Hintayin nating magbaba ng pakpak.”
“Naiinip na ako.”
“Hintay.”
“May langgam, umaakyat sa tsinelas ko.”
“Huwag kang malikot. Mahuhuli ko na.”
“Aray!”
“Ay! Sabi nang…!”
“Kinagat ako, eh!”
“Wala na.”
“Ayun! Pula pala!”
“Pula nga. Dilaw ang pakpak. Sayang.”
“’Di bale na. Babalik naman siguro ’yon.”
“Anong oras na ba, Janet?”
“Ba’t hindi mo suot ang relos mo?”
“Ayoko ng relos, eh. Pinapawisan ako.”
“Magagalit ang Mama mo.”
“Anong oras na?”
“Alas-tres.”
“Bike tayo.”
“Ay, sabi ni Ate Jing masama raw.”
“Ha?”
“Ano. Kasi, baka may mangyari sa akin.”
“Marunong ka namang magbike, ah! Mas nauna ka pa ngang natuto.”
“Oo.”
“Mas marami pa nga akong bagsak dati sa ’yo. ’Tamo, andami ko nang peklat.”
“Ay, ako rin may peklat, eto o.”
“Teka, ba’t nga masamang magbike?”
“Ano, hindi ko puwedeng sabihin sa iyo.”
“Bakit?”
“Kasi lalaki ka.”
“Ano?”
“Baštá. Hindi talaga puwede.”
“Teka, alam ko yata ’yan, ah.”
“Hmm?” Kinabahan si Janet. Humigpit ang hawak niya sa plastik ng ratiles.
“Pareho kayo ng Ate Karen ko, ano?” Nakangising tanong ni Ron.
“Ha?” Pumatik sa binti ni Janet ang katas ng ratiles na napisa.
“Kasi pinabibili niya ako sa botika nung ano...ano ngang tawag doon?”

“Ewan.” Pinahid ni Janet ang katas.

“Iyong gusto pa ni Ate Karen laging nakabalot ng supot o diyaryo. Kasi nahihiya siyang makita ng mga kapitbahay, lalo nina Mark.”

“Hindi ko alam ‘yon.”


Namula nang husto si Janet. Gusto niya magtatakbo at huwag nang magpakita sa kalaro. Malapit na siyang mayaki.

“Ay, naku, sori. Hindi naman ako nang-aasar. Ano lang,...kasi hindi ba ang ibig sabihin no’n…”

Magsasalita na sana muli si Janet nang makaramdam siya ng lamig. Tumingala siya sa langit at nasilaw sa hapong araw.


Sabay silang napasulyap sa sulok ng kanilang mata, sa panig ng talahiban na nagkaroon ng puyo. Magkahawak-kamay silang lumapit, mabigat ang paghinga.

“Ang tutubi!”

“Ssshh.”

“Ay, dugo!”

Nanikluhod si Ron at dahan-dahan sinalat ang mahabang patak ng dugo na nagtatanimikala sa ilang hibla ng talahib na nakahiga. Pagdampi ng kanyang daliri ay lumawak ang patak at bumaba sa bahagi ng lupa na walang damo, naging sinlaki ng kanyang palad. Napaatras siya sa gulat. Walang mantsang nanikit sa kanyang kamay.

“Ipahid mo sa damo!”
“Ha?”
“Kumakapit ang dugo sa kamay mo!”
Pagkakita ni Janet sa kamay ay pulang-pula na ito. Nabitawan niya ang plastik ng ratiles at nagsisigaw. Inakbayan siya ni Ron at nagtatakbo sila palayo sa bakanteng lote.

• • •

Nagising si Janet na may humahagod sa kanyang ulo. Hindi agad siya dumilat at hinayaan pang dumaloy ang malambot na palad sa mga hibla ng kanyang buhok.
Parang may hamog sa paligid pagdilat ni Janet. “Saan ka pupunta?”
“Ma, paano si Vincent? Dadalaw siya mamaya for dinner, tapos wala kayo.”
Pinilit makita ni Janet ang Ate Jing niya sa pinto ngunit naharang ang kanyang ina.
“Nakaluto na ako. Initin mo na lang.”
“Eh, kami lang dalawa ni Janet dito pagalis ni Vincent?”
“Uuwi naman kami ni Papa basta mayos lang ang kotse. Ayaw lang niyang wala ako kapag nakina Mommy. You know your father.”
Narinig ni Janet ang mabigat na hakbang ng kapatid pabalik sa sariling kuwarto.
Pinahid ni Mrs. Encarnacion ang muta ni Janet.
“Paano, we’ll talk later. Tell me what happened, ha? Ron was so worried kanina. Hindi ko maintindihan ang kuwento niya. Pinauwi ko na lang. Both of you were so cold. Sabi ko na kasi don’t roam around at mid-afternoon. Baka nga totoong may spirits around this place.”
Naulinigan ni Janet ang paghupa ng bulungan at mahinang hagikgikan ng kapatid at bisita nito.

“Pssšt!”


“Pssšt! Pssšt! Janet!”

Napahiyaw siya pagkakita kay Ron. Mukhang ligaw na diwata ang kanyang kalaro, napapalibutan ng mga bulaklak at dahon ng gumamela.

“Ssshh!”

Napahagikgik si Janet. “Anong ginagawa mo dyan?”

“Huwag kang maingay. Andyan pa ang bisita ng ate mo.”

“Wala na yata. Tahimik na.”

“Pumasok sila ng kuwarto…”

“Baka nanood ng Betamax.”

“Halika na.”

“Ano?”

“Halika, may sasabihin ako.”

Dali-daling bumagon si Janet. Pagtayo niya sa tabi ng salamin ay napatakbo siya pakubli sa gilid ng kabinet.

“Ay!”

“O, bakit?”

“Talikod ka muna.”

Napangiting sumunod si Ron. “Sige na.”

Nagsuot ng shorts si Janet at nagsuklay. “Anong sasabihin mo?”

“Gaano katagal na kayo rito?”

“Mga one year.”

“Kami dalawa.”

“O, ngayon?”

“May kilala ka bang mas matagal pa sa atin dito?”

Huminto si Janet sa pagsuklay. Nag-isip maigi.

“Sina Mr. Fuentes wala pang tatlong taon,” pahabol ni Ron.
“O, bakit nga? Ba’t mo tinatanong?”
“Pinuntahan ko si Mr. Fuentes kanina. Sila ang may pinakamalapit na bahay sa bakanteng lote.”
“May iba pang bahay na mas malapit, ah.”
“Oo. Pero walang tao.”
“Hindi pa nabibili, eh.”
“Walang gustong bumili.”
“Ano? Magaganda naman…”
“Kasi mayroong…Aray!”

Biglang nawala si Ron sa tapat ng bintana. Napatakbo si Janet palapit.
“May bahay pala ng anay dito! Akala kahoy ang paa ko!”
Iniabot ni Janet ang braso niya habang natatawa. “Akyat ka na nga!”
“Hindi, lumabas ka na lang.”
“Ano?” Tumingin si Janet sa braso niya. Wala ang relós.
“Dali, labas ka na. ’Hintayin kita sa garahe.”
Pawis na pawis si Janet pagdating sa garahe.
“Ba’t antagal mo?”
“Hinanap ko pa ang relós ko. Nawawala.”
“Baka inalis ng Mama mo. Itinabi lang siguro. Baka natakot siyang malagyan din ng dugo.”
“Baka nga itinago lang niya.”
“Pero alam mo, hindi yata niya nakikita ang dugo sa kamay mo kanina.”
“Ha?”
“Oo, kasi takang-taka siya kung ano ang sinasabi ko.”
“Sandali, ano na nga ang kuwento mo?”
“Punta tayo sa lote.”
“Ay, ayoko nga. Andilim-dilim na. Tsaka darating na sina Mama.”
“Dyaraan!” Sinindihan ni Ron ang flashlight sa loob ng t-shirt.

“Noon daw maraming nakatira sa subdivisyon ito kahit bagong
debelop pa lang. Ito na lang ang loteng hindi pa nabibili.”
“Anong nangyari?”
“May babaeng ni-rape at pinatay banda doon, sa pinaglalaruan natin
kanina. Dalagita pa lang.”

Napahakbang paatras si Janet. Parang nanariswa muli ang dugong
kumapit sa kanya kanina. Dumikit sa kanyang mga mata ang buhok niyang
nilalaro ng hangin.
“Anong ginawa ng mga tao?”
“Wala.”
“Wala? Hindi ba siya sumigaw? Hindi ba nila narinig?”
“Wala silang ginawa.”
“Wala silang ginawa?”

Nag-init ang katawan ni Janet. May kakaibang ragasa ng dugo sa
kanyang mga ugat. Nagsimula siyang umungol, lumuhag.

Gulat na napatingin sa kanya si Ron. Pagtama ng flashlight sa kamay ni
Janet ay napasigaw siya. Pumapatak ang malapot na dugo, pinadidilim ang
kongkreto.

Hinalukay ng hangin ang talahiban sa pusod ng bakanteng lote.
Dahan-dahang bumangon ang bagong buwan mula sa talas ng mga
pumapalag na hibla.

**JIM PASCUAL AGUSTIN** (HS 1986, AB Literature (English) 1990) moved
to Cape Town, South Africa in 1994 to be with the girl who stole his heart a
year before. His first book of poetry was *Beneath an Angry Star* (Anvil, 1992),
followed by *Salimbayan* (Publikasyong Sipat, 1994), a collection shared with
fellow Ateneans Argee Guevarra and Neal Imperial.

After he left the Philippines, five poetry collections were published by
UST Publishing House: *Baha-bahagdang Karupukan* (2011), *Alien to Any Skin*
(2011), *Kalmot ng Pusa sa Tagiliran* (2013), *Sound Before Water* (2013), and *A

His latest poetry collection, *Wings of Smoke* (The Onslaught Press,
Oxford, 2017), is available on Amazon and other online retailers.
The story featured in this issue is from his first (perhaps also his last) collection of short stories in Filipino, Sanga sa Basang Lupa (UST Publishing House, 2016).

His blog: www.matangmanok.wordpress.com


“Sana, kasama natin ang nanay,” malungkot na sabi ni Bien.

“Marami siyang gagawin. Ayaw mo bang tayong dalawa na lang ang maligo? Tuturuan kitang lumangoy.”

“Sige, ‘Tay!”


“Tubig lang ‘yan,” sagot ng kanyang tatay, malamig ang tinig, tila hanging-dagat na bumubuga sa kanila.

At nagpatuloy ito sa paglakad.

Nang umabot sa baba ng kanyang tatay at lubog na ang tuhod ni Bien, nararamdaman niyang humihispit ang hawak ng kanyang tatay sa kanyang mga paa.

Guštong sumigaw ni Bien, pero nagsalita ang kanyang tatay: “Tama ang Tito Julian mo—putik nga ang nasa ilalim ng dagat!”

At nagpatuloy sa paglakad.


Nagsimulang umiyak si Bien nang umabot na sa ilong ng kanyang tatay ang tubig.

Ngunit patuloy pa rin ito sa paglakad.

Sumigaw nang sumigaw si Bien nang umabot na sa buhok ng kanyang tatay ang tubig. Ang huling nakita ni Bien ay ang tahimik na langit, langit na mas bughaw pa kaya kanyang mga holen.

At ang tatay niya ay naging isang malaking bato, uka-uka at maitim, nakalibing sa puntod ng dagat. Pero si Bien ay lumangoy nang lumangoy, kasabay ng dikya’t isdang bituin, malayo sa lungkot, malayo sa takot.
DANTON REMOTO
(AB Interdisciplinary Studies 1983, MA Literature (English) 1989) is a writer, reporter, editor, columnist, and teacher. His written works have won various awards, including the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature; the CCP Literary Award for Poetry; and the Stirling District Arts Council award for poetry and the short story. Some of his works include Skin, Voices, Faces (1991), Black Silk Pajamas/ Poems in English and Filipino (1996), Bright, Catholic, and Gay (2007), and Happy Na, Gay Pa (2015). Remoto, an LGBT advocate, co-edited Ladlad: An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing with J. Neil Garcia in 2007. He is chairman emeritus of Ang Ladlad, an LGBT political party in the Philippines, taught at the Department of English of the Ateneo de Manila University, and was Dean of the The Manila Times College. He is currently teaching at the University of Nottingham in Malaysia. This story first appeared in the textbook Hulagpos: Panitikan para sa Pag-aaral na Multi-disciplinario, Eksperimental na Edision, Ikalawang Bahagi (Ateneo de Manila University, 2003).
Hidalgo, Fernando Amorsolo, Fabian de la Rosa, Jorge Pineda at iba pang mahuhusay na pintor.


Kung kaya, nahulaan na sana ni Gigi sa mga pahayag pa lamang ni Fernan na hindi Impresyonismo ang hilig nito bago pa man sila ipakilala ng Propesor sa isa’t isa. Bago pa man mabuo ang impresyon niya kay Fernan, naunahan na si Gigi ng init ng ulo sa pag-isip ng maisasagot sa pintor. Magkasalungat kasi ang paninindigan nila ni Fernan sa pagbili ni Winston Garcia ng gsis sa pinta ni Luna. Naniniwala si Gigi na tama ang ginawa ng gsis. Hindi niya masikmura ang ginasa-bahagi ng iba’t ibang dayuhang
mayaman, bansa man o indibidwal, ang henyo ng sining ng mga Pilipino; samantala, sa loob ng bansa, wala man lamang o dahop ang nakikitang maganda ng mga Pilipino. Hindi tuloy nakapagtataking nananatiling baluktot ang pangangatwiran ng karamihan Pilipino na pawang patungo sa tiyan ang prioridad. Para kay Gigi, binabawi lamang ng sis ang pinta ni Luna sa pagpuputa rito ng ibang bansa, ibinabalik sa Pilipinas kung saan dapat manirahan ang pinta.


Nagkamali nga si Gigi sa impresyon niya kay Fernan. Ngunit paano niya sasabiing nagkamali rin ang pintor sa impresyon nito sa kanya? Nagdamit ba siya dapat nang higit na katulad ni Fernan? Hindi nakapagsuklay ng buhok at parang hindi nakapagligo! Dapat ba nagdamit siyang parang naghihikahos na alagad ng sining? Kaya nga binilibyan na niya ito ngayon ng trabaho! Dapat ba hindi siya gaanong nagbibis fashionista? Ngunit naka-maong at t-shirt na nga lamang siya. Akala siguro ni Fernan kung sino lamang siyang babaeng walang mapaglagyan ng kanyang pera. Magkaedad sila ni Fernan na nasa kanila pang pag-aaral
sa unibersidad. Naging madali ba sana kung naiusap na lamang siya at hindi na nag-alok ng bayad? Ngunit, ayaw naman ni Gigi na makiusap lamang. Naniniwala siyang dapat bayaran ang lahat ng trabaho kahit pa pakiusap. Dapat ba niyang sabihin dito ang tunay nyang pakay kung kaya naghahanap siya ng makakakopya ng _Marquesa ng Sta. Cruz_ ni Goya?


Naisip ni Gigi na akala siguro ni Fernan wala siyang pinagkaiba sa Marquesa. Inakala siguro nitong kabilang siya sa mga pamilyang aristokrata na walang magawa kundi ang magpapinta ng sarili nilang mga litrato. Sa isang banda, tama si Fernan. Kabilang nga siya sa mayayamang pamilyang nakatira sa loob ng Forbes Park na itinuturing nilang sarili nilang republika. Hindi suliranin para kay Gigi ang pagkamit ng isang...


sasagot sa lahat ng gaños, dagdag ni Gigi. Hindi agad nakapagsalita si Fernan.


kasaysayan ng Marquesa ng Sta. Cruz, nauwi bilang taga-endorso ng pabango at fashion accessories ang Marquesa Joaquina Téllez-Girón sa mga kamay ni Imelda.


May kaibahan ang dalawang Marquesa. May hibla ng buhok na nakalugay sa dibdib ng Marquesa sa hawak na pinta ng Prado. Walang ganoong hibla ng buhok sa kopya ng LACMA. Ngunit, may nakalugay man na buhok o wala, wala noong pakialam si Imelda matupad lamang niya ang kanyang pangarap na magmamakati ng isang Goya. Walang atubili namang ibinenta sa kanya ng LACMA sa gitna nga ng kontrobersiya. At ngayong naghihikahanos sa ang LACMA, gusto na nilang nabawi ang Marquesa ng Sta. Cruz. Ngunit dahil naman sa paghahabol sa kanyang pagpakita, bigla na lamang ang kasama ng publiko ang pinta. Walang nakakaalam kung na kay Imelda pa ang pinta at hindi pa nasasamsam, o nasa gobyerno na ng wala lamang ang kalye-alam sa halaga ng hawak nilang pinta.

Ang sukat ng pinta ni Goya ang nakatawag ng pansin ni Gigi upang maalalang umuwi isang gabi ang mga magulang niyang may dala-


Halos nakikita na niya kung papaano marahil palihim na tinawagan sa telepono ang mga magulang niya ni Imelda o ng abogado nito. May malit lang na pabor na hihining sa kanila kapalit ng kayamanang ibinigay sa pamilya nila sa panahon ng batas militar. Marahil binalaan na sila ni Imelda o ng abogado nito na huwag magdadala ng driver. Wala dapat ibang makakita at maging ibang witness. Magpupuslit lamang sila ng pintang magkakahalaga ng hindi babasa sa 12M dolyar. Ipapakitago na muna sa kanila nang hindi masamsam ng gobyerno sa patuloy pa ring paghahabol sa kayamanan ng mga Marcos. Hindi lubos maisip ni Gigi kung anong kaya ang pakiramdam ng mga magulang niya na nagmamaneho sa kakalsadahan ng Manila na may dalang milyong dolyar sa kotse nila. Marahil sinabihan sila ni Imelda o ng abogado nito na wala namang nakakaalam sa Manila. Higit na maganda ngang ipuslit nila na walang kasamang pulis o guwardiya nang walang magduda.

nila. Hindi siya papayag na pahuli sa parehong bitag na sila rin ang may gawa.


Waring ginagaya ng Marquesa ang posisyon ng Maja sa kambal na La Maja Desnuda (Ang Hubad na Maja) at La Maja Veñtida (Ang Nakadamit na Maja). Hindi naman ganoon kaganda ang Marquesa upang itulad ang kanyang sarili sa Maja na higit na naunang ipinta ni Goya. Sa tingin ni Fernan, higit na malakas ang loob ng Maja kay sa Marquesa. Nakuhang tumaliwas ng Maja sa kinagawian noon ng klasikal na litrato; kapag babae ang ipinipinta, parating ipinipinta bilang diyosa. Nakuhang magpapinta ng Maja bilang tao at hindi diyosa, at higit pa rito, nakauga ng Maja na maipapinta kay Goya ang buong katotohanan ng kanyang kahubdan.


Umabot nang tatlong buwan ang pangongopya ni Fernan sa pinta ni Goya. Sa loob ng tatlong buwan, nawala sa balita at muling naabutan sa limot ang paghahanap sa pinta. Nagpahayag na ng pagtakbo sa pagkapresidente si Bong-Bong Marcos upang ipagpatuloy ang pamana ng kanyang ama. Nagpahayag na ng pagtakbo bilang senador si Imee Marcos upang ipagpatuloy ang paninibihan dito ng kanyang kuya. Nagpahayag na muli ng pagtakbo bilang kongresista si Imelda upang ipagpatuloy ang paninibihan dito ng kanyang anak. Samantala, nanatili sa loob ng aklatan ang orihinal na pinta ni Goya habang unti-unting nabubuo ang kopya nito mula sa mga libro ng mga nagbubabong sa pinta ni Goya na pinag-aralan ni Gigi at Fernan. Sa loob ng tatlong buwan, nagkapalagayan ng loob ng aklatan ang kasambahay sa kanya at ang guwardiyang nagbabantay ng monitor ng CCTV. Napag-aralan ni Gigi kung papaano mapatungo ang footage ng pagpasok niya sa aklatan nang walang mahalal na nagagawain niyang pagpapalit ng orihinal na kopya ng Marquesa ng Sta. Cruz. Pagkatapos ng tatlong


“Naghimala ang iyong pagpipinta. Nakagawa ka ng orihinal na Goya.”

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**Alvin Yapan** (BS Legal Management 1997, MA Literature (Filipino) 2000) wears many hats: writer, director, producer, and teacher. As a writer, Yapan
has won numerous times at the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards, the NCCA Writer’s Prize, and National Book Awards. His foray into the film industry has also led to many accolades: his first solo feature length film *Ang Panggagahasa kay Fe* (The Rapture of Fe) won Best Picture (Digital Feature category) at the 2009 Cairo International Film Festival. His follow up movie, *Ang Sayaw ng Dalawang Kaliwang Paa* (The Dance of Two Left Feet) received the Bronze Award at the 2011 Festival de Cine de Bogota and Best Picture at the 2012 Gawad Urian. Despite his hectic schedule, Yapan manages to share his knowledge with aspiring writers and creative thinkers—teaching at the Ateneo de Manila University’s Department of Filipino. This story has been published for the very first time here in *Fabilioh!*.
Ateneo Municipal de Manila.

Trajes de los colegiales.
Fabioh! is fortunate to share this online exclusive, a cyberspace novel from esteemed author Tony Perez. The link above leads to the full text. Below is the Preface from the author.

**Preface**

*Cubao Ilalim* was conceived in 2002 as a series of three books, but I moved the project to a back burner when I enrolled for an M.A. in Religious Studies. Completing my unit requirements, presenting my public lecture, and then writing and defending my thesis took all of my spare time from work. I was employed as a Cultural Affairs Specialist at the time, and I thought that this would be one of my interesting, post-retirement activities. Behind my initial draft was the intention of transforming the novels into a TV series. After I finally retired in 2014, however, I lost all interest in the TV series. I discovered that, surprisingly, I remained as financially stable as I was when I was still employed, and that my retirement was far from the state of boredom that I thought it would be.
The work is a trilogy, and this is its first part. It is the complete antithesis of my earlier novel *Cubao Crossing*, which is an experimentation in 100% characterization. I think that it is safe for me to say that *Cubao Ilalim* is an experimentation in 100% plot. The minimal characterization was originally to allow for flexibility in casting, and the swift series of events originally designed to avoid dragging and overinterpolated episodes. *Unang Aklat*, as a matter of fact, is good for 30 episodes, or two full seasons.

Here, then, is the TV series that never was, written for you to enjoy reading as a novel. I hope that you will be able to visualize it more vividly than any production designer can, and I hope that you will also catch the different levels of meaning that I wove in.

—TONY PÉREZ, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2016, CUBAO, QUEZON CITY

TONY PÉREZ (GS 1964, HS 1968, AB Communication Arts 1972) is a novelist, playwright, poet, lyricist, painter, fiber artist, sculptor, photographer, and psychic journalist and trainer. He is one of 100 recipients of the 1998 CCP Centennial Artists Awards. His other awards include 13 Artists of the Philippines, the Gawad Pambansang Alagad ni Balagtas, four National Book Awards, a FAMAS Award for Best Story, five CCP Playwriting Contest prizes, three Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, the National Fellowship for Drama from the UP Creative Writing Center, the Ateneo de Manila’s Irwin Chair in Creative Writing. His artworks have been showcased in over 20 solo and group exhibits.

His plays include “Hoy, Boyet, Tinatawag Ka Na, Hatinggabi Na’y Gising Ka Pa Pala;” *Anak ng Araw;* “Gabún;” “Alex Antiporda;” “Sierra Lakes;” “Biyernes, 4:00NH;” “Sacraments of the Dead;” “The Wayside Café;” *Ang Panginoon sa Dried; Isang Pangyayari sa Planas Site;* and “Ang Prinsipe Ng Buwan.” He wrote librettos for the musicals *Florante at Laura* and *Sa Pugad ng Adarna* and the opera *La Naval*. His two major drama trilogies are *Tatlong Paglalakbay: Tatlong Mahabang Dula ni Tony Perez (Bombita, Biyaheng Timog, Sa North Diversion Road)* and *Indakan Ng Mga Puso*.
(Oktubre, Noong Tayo’y Nagmamahalan Pa; Nobyembre, Noong Akala Ko’y Mahal Kita; and Saan Ba Tayo Ihahatid ng Disyembre?).

His books include Albert N.: A Case Study and the Cubao Series: Cubao 1980 at Iba Pang mga Katha; Cubao Pagkagat ng Dilim; Cubao Midnight Express; Eros, Thanatos, Cubao; and Cubao-Kalaw Kalaw-Cubao. His Transpersonal Psychology Series includes The Calling: A Transpersonal Adventure; Beings: Encounters of the Spirit Questors with Non-human Entities; The Departed: Encounters of the Spirit Questors with Spirits of the Deceased; A Young Man Cries for Justice beyond His Grave Volume I; Stories of the Moon: Further Adventures of the Spirit Questors; Songs of Sunset: Incantations and Spells by the Spirit Questors; Mga Panibagong Kulum; Mga Panibagong Tawas; Mga Panibagong Orasyon; Mga Panibagong Orasyon sa Magica Cantada; Mga Panibagong Ritwal ng Wicca; Mga Panibagong Kulum sa Pag-ibig, and the new series Maligayang Pagdating sa Sitio Catacutan and Malagim ang Gabi sa Sitio Catacutan.

He conducts “Writing from The Heart,” a creativity workshop in writing, drawing, and drama, especially for underserved audiences such as public school teachers and students, community theater groups, the disabled, children in conflict with the law, abused women and children, victims of human trafficking, prisoners, gang leaders, drug rehab residents, and people in need of trauma therapy. Mr. Perez is an MA Candidate in Clinical Psychology from Ateneo de Manila University, and has an MA in Religious Studies, magna cum laude, from Maryhill School of Theology, and certificates in Publication Design and Production from the Department of Journalism at the University of Wisconsin and Fundamentals of Graphic Design from the University of California at San Francisco. He has taught at the Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University, Saint Scholastica’s College, Maryknoll College, and the Philippine High School for the Arts.

Mr. Perez has two sons, Nelson I. Miranda and Chito I. Miranda, four granddaughters, Angelique Pearl Miranda, Nielsen Tegelan, Aubrey Rose Miranda, and Chevy Keith Miranda, and one grandson, Chrysler Vince Miranda. His daughters-in-law are Agnes Tegelan and Ivy Vercasion. They live in Cubao, Quezon City, where Mr. Perez has resided since 1955.
THE COLLECTED STORIES OF JOSE GARCIA VILLA
Edited by Jonathan Chua

Here at last, insofar as possible for the meticulous and indefatigable scholar, an amazing collection of the entire corpus of Jose Garcia Villa’s short stories! And Jonathan Chua’s Introduction is exemplary for the historical context it provides of the short story in Villa’s time, and for its perceptive and therefore just interpretive-critical assessment of Villa as fictionist. Through all the stories in light of that assessment, we see how Villa as fictionist gained his critical acumen in the art of fiction whereby as its critic he cleared the ground for its maturity in the development of Philippine fiction; likewise, Villa’s agon with the medium of expression for substance and form led him to poetry as Doveglion: the stories are the sea, says Villa, the poems the horizon, for the sea designed the horizon.
Koleksyon ang aklat ng mga dulang musikal na may ganap na haba para sa mga bata. Pinahahalagahan ng mga dula ang mga usaping kultural at pangkasaysayan na nag-aambag sa malay ng mga batang Filipino.

Walang kamangha-mangha sa labo-labong at halos likas na tambalan at talaban ng mito at reyalidad, ng di-tunay at katotohanan, ng talulikas o sobrenatural, at pang-araw-araw o karaniwan, sa bansang Pilipino na mababalangkas sa mga naratibo ni Yapan ... Pinanunumbalik ng mga ito ang nawawalang at nakakalimutang Kasaysayan na magbibigay-katuturan sa mga laberinto at metamorposis ng sangkatauhan at sangkahayupang Filipino.—MULA SA PAMBUNGAD NI OSCAR V. CAMPOMANES
THE PHILIPPINES IS IN THE HEART
Carlos Bulosan

This collection of original, hitherto unpublished stories reveals an innovative, radical intellect. Bulosan’s homecoming explodes the stereotype of the author as a subaltern mimic and offers us a promise of celebrating the advent of proletarian jouissance and national liberation.

FLOY QUINTOS: COLLECTED PLAYS

The works of playwright Floy Quintos, in two volumes, with notes and photos from the acclaimed productions as well as annotations from the actors, directors, and designers who brought these texts to life.

BOYHOOD: A LONG LYRIC
Charlie S. Veric

Boyhood reconstructs a vanished time of awakening and discovery. It conveys the emotional force of a forgotten place. All that is lost becomes sensuous in a boy’s voice. Memory turns into a glittering work of poetry.
ROSARIO DE GUZMAN-LINGAT’S THE LOCKED DOOR AND OTHER STORIES  
Translated by Soledad S. Reyes

These stories explore the female experience in all its complexity various ways. They feature women as protagonists who, despite life’s numerous blows, refuse to give in, as they strive mightily to make sense of their lives fraught with difficulties. There are no happy endings in Lingat’s fiction. There is only a steadfast, clear-eyed view of what it means to live in an unjust system where women find themselves victims.

FRIEND ZONES: AN ANTHOLOGY OF STORIES FOR YOUNG ADULTS  
Edited by Cyan Abad-Jugo

Here’s an assortment of fourteen stories, studying all the permutations of friendship, detailing the development of new ties or the deepening of loyalties. In these stories—told in different modes of realist fiction, romance, horror, science fiction, fantasy, alternate history, and myth—I hope you find some that you’d love to read, and read again.—FROM THE INTRODUCTION
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## In Memoriam

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

—Matthew 11:28  
[www.ateneo.edu/alumni/memoriam](http://www.ateneo.edu/alumni/memoriam)

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<tr>
<td>January 15</td>
<td>Arthur “Thor” P. Lim (bsbm 1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 26</td>
<td>Gregorio “Greg” Ma. G. Santillan II (hs 1964)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 7</td>
<td>John Emmanuel T. Garrovillo (gs 1974, hs 1979)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 15</td>
<td>Cesar Roberto “Bobby” M. Roces (gs 1953, hs 1958)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 11</td>
<td>Vicente “Vic” J. Hilado Jr. (bseco 1969)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 14</td>
<td>Atty. Francisco “Francis” D. Hermano (gs 1949, hs 1953, aa 1955, llb 1959)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 20</td>
<td>Jose Maria “Tingting” V. Verzosa (abss 1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 23</td>
<td>Mariano “Yani” R. Singson Jr. (aa Law 1957, bs pm 1958, ma Educ 1983)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 27</td>
<td>Atty. Senen D. Cabrera (ab 1955, llb 1958)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1</td>
<td>Manuel “Boy” R. Labayen (gs 1960)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
May 3  Anacleto “Jun” G. del Rosario Jr. (bs bm 1980)
May 6  Oscar M. Caluag (ab 1950)
May 16  Patrick Donald “Pat” T. Teng (bs Bio 2014)
May 20  Prof. Enrico Emmanuel “Rico” C. Angtuaco (ab Eco 1972)
May 24  Atty. Jesus M. Laxamana (AA 1951, LLB 1955)
June 12  Manuel “Boy” U. Flores Jr. (gs 1953, hs 1958)
July 2  Vicente Ma. H. Gonzalez Jr. (gs 1957)
July 9  Jan Wendell “Wen” C. Batocabe (ab ss 2008)
July 10  Pacifico Raul S. Javier (gs 1985)
July 12  Alberto “Bert” R. Bengzon (gs 1954, hs 1958)
July 13  Paolo Angelo “Paolo” C. Frias (gs 1990)
        Veronica “Nikka” S. Cleofe-Alejar (ab ca 1996)
July 19  Benjamin “Benjie” T. Montemayor (hs 1959, ab Eco 1963)
July 24  Fausto D. Pineda Jr. (gs 1952, hs 1956)
July 25  Recaredo “Ding” E. Reyes (gs 1953, hs 1959, abeco 1963)
        Class Representative of Batch 1963
August 6  Lawrence Jose C. Gonzales (Col 1964)
        Ateneo Sports Hall of Fame awardee in 1997 for Basketball and Track & Field
August 7  Dr. Edmundo “Ed” F. Nolasco (ab 1949)
        a veteran of World War II, survivor of the Bataan Death March
August 9  Mr. Antonio “Tony” F. Santiago | Col’69 | 9 August
A piano class at the old Ateneo in Intramuros, from Ateneo Municipal de Manila: Álbum. Exposición de Filipinas en Madrid (1887). Public domain.
The Ateneo writer must be recognized and we are honored by the authors who have agreed to share with us their stories. These are but a fraction of what’s out there, by writers in English and Filipino. We hope that this collection will be enough to whet your appetite.

And a warning: these are not stories for the faint of heart. These are grown-up stories for people who understand the complexity of the world.