

G E R M A N E

*A Chapbook
Collection*

AVILA · CONDE · CRUZ · DEOSO · ESCAÑO · ORDA
· PASCUAL · PIOS · RAMOS · YU

THE 56TH SILLIMAN UNIVERSITY NATIONAL WRITERS WORKSHOP

ATTENTION

This is an **interactive** PDF.
You may hover over and 'click' certain icons
to navigate between pages.

*To the mentors, staff, and friends made
along the way...*

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ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

The National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete is the oldest of its kind in Asia. For its first 50 years, it was directed by the late National Artist for Literature Dr. Edith L. Tiempo, along with her husband and workshop co-founder, the late Dr. Edilberto K. Tiempo. Since 1962, it has trained generations of writers, many of whom helped shape, and continue to influence, the face of English-language Philippine Literature.



WORKSHOP 2017

THE 56TH SILLIMAN University National Writers Workshop began on May 7, 2017 and lasted a total of two weeks. Within that time, the staff and participants divided their stay among the Rose Lamb

Sobrepeña Writers Village in Valencia, the university campus, and on two occasions, in beach resorts in Negros Oriental. There, fellows and visitors honed their craft with guidance from some of the best writers

the Philippines has to offer. This chapbook from the fellows collects the works inspired by their stay, as well as all the things they have learned.

The photo above was taken on May 10, 2017 at Jabel's Resort in Dauin, Negros Oriental.

Pictured here, from top left to right: Gemino Abad, George Deoso, Catherine Orda, Jam Pascual, Tanya Cruz, Tiff Conde, Arlene Avila, Vincen Yu, Matthew Jacob Ramos, Cesar Miguel Escañó, Hezron Pios, Neil Garcia

Bottom left to right: Alfred Yuson, Sharon Dadang-Rafols, Jaime An Lim, Jose Wendell Capili, Virginia Stack



Jaime An Lim

finished his AB in English (cum laude) from Mindanao State University in Marawi City, his MA in Creative Writing from Silliman University, and his PhD in Comparative Literature from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.



Gémino H. Abad

University Professor Emeritus of literature and creative writing at the University of the Philippines, poet, fictionist, anthologist, and literary critic.



César Ruiz Aquino

was in the very first national writers workshop. However, the author now says he can no longer claim to be the country's most lyrical poet after seeing the recent love poems of Wilfredo Pascua Sanchez and Erwin E. Castillo.



Jose Wendell P. Capili

earned his degrees from UST, UP Diliman University of Tokyo, University of Cambridge and The Australian National University, where he completed his PhD from 1972 to 2007.



Ian Rosales Casocot

is a novelist and teaches film, literature, and creative writing in Silliman University. He was Founding Coordinator of the Edilberto and Edith Tiempo Creative Writing Center.



J. Neil C. Garcia

teaches creative writing and comparative literature in the UP Diliman, where he serves as director of the university press and a fellow for poetry in the Institute of Creative Writing.



Susan S. Lara

writes fiction and nonfiction. She has won the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, Focus Literary Awards, and the National Book Award from the Manila Critics Circle.



Grace R. Monte de Ramos

is a product of Silliman University's creative writing program. She has been a teacher of literature, a government bureaucrat, a cultural worker, stay-at-home mom, and freelance journalist, editor, and translator.



D.M. Reyes

is author of the poetry collection Promising Lights. He has an MA in Literature (English) from the Ateneo de Manila University and is on the faculty of Ateneo's English Department and its Fine Arts Program.



Alfred A. Yuson

A.k.a. "Krip," has authored 28 books thus far, including novels, poetry collections, short fiction, essays, children's stories, biographies and coffee-table books, apart from having edited various titles that include several anthologies.



POETRY

*“When the imagination sleeps,
words are emptied of their meaning.”*

Albert Camus

Planner

I stopped creating blueprints for my life with bullet points somewhere in October this year. My life, itemized for the future:

- Buy honey
- Write Philippine Literature Paper
- Meet R.
- Buy candles for the dead

The last point was the final item for the 31st, and it seemed wrong to follow it up with another agenda, it seemed I've traced death itself with my pen, with my clean, bare hands.

GEORGE DEOSO

an AB Literature graduate of the University of Santo Tomas.

His short stories "Road Reblocking" and "The Short Curious Life of Mr. Clock-man" won second place for the fiction category of the 30th Gawad Ustetika and the Best Entry for Prose category in the 2015 edition of Dapitan, respectively.

what we cannot give for a handshake with time?

where the end of sunlight begins
warmth engulfed like old flames

the wings of a butterfly landing on the zinnias
my mother planted in our yard

time was in the pollen it failed to find in the young shrubs
the butterfly must've sighed, before bearing itself away

holding her back, my mother bends low
to water the potted plants



JAM PASCUAL

is a Creative Writing graduate of Ateneo de Manila University.

His poetry has been published in *Public Pool* and *Rambutan Literary*. He has also written mostly for the publications *Rogue* and *Young Star*.

Nadagit

The saltwater air is pungent;
maybe that's your fault.

You walk along the bay
lugging your driftwood heart,
hoping some wandering demigod of wind
blows the heavy off your joints. You were
told the small gods still live here, as undetectable
as sorrow—only for so long, in this place, which lies
serene on the tectonic platework of myth,

or at least whatever myth you invented
when you touched the water. Disrespectful
of you to expect so much. You want to take this
all in, steal as much of this place into your lungs
as possible, but what does the ocean air portend?
What did your greed summon? There
in the distance, the city

lurching on long arachnid limbs
sloshing through the dark water,
its rock underbelly bursting
with ghosts and rusted pipework,
dripping with the real.



HEZRON PIOS

Taking up Liberal Arts and Commerce; Major in Communication and Marketing Management at the University of St. La Salle—Bacolod.

He is a magazine writer and contributor for The Spectrum, the university's official media corps, which has garnered numerous regional awards.

He is a magazine writer and contributor for The Spectrum, the university's official media corps, which has garnered numerous regional awards.

Pistol posed at will, a *pispis*
is reduced to a pinkness
of *unod-unuran*. Then, omen.

I wouldn't mind articulating holy
remains of *kabuhi*
parched by endless
bangs. *Anak ng putangina*, the Boy
says, lording over the trigger pronouncing
death through his spitting
shaft. I close my eyes in pretense:
none of this is real enough. Not the pistol,
not the *pispis*, not even greatness. Everything
made of plush and cheap plastic—
I swallowing omens.

Beware the Ides

for Astra

What resolves this grace of July
is urgency, is utterance of wings
teeming helium there's no use
in parsing stars knitted by past
lives, orbits or Zen after picking
up bones pared by volition rinse
your hands in a bowl of hues not
shade as a split tongue's thriving
on the eighth leaf of your days'
catalogue with only yours missing
or maybe if you pleat mistruth
like hibiscus your teeth might
sing rhapsodies white and even

Sight IV

In this room hereby declares objects
of space: armchair, El Filibusterismo,
dead language of gestures. Guess excuses
clutch whatever's left from insistence.

The god of windows is angry at us
I suppose. Between notes of dogma
comes vowels, consonants from palm
to palm reading. The key to dismantle
this framework is by apt misnaming.

After Tala Mundi



VINCEN YU

recently graduated from the University of the Philippines College of Medicine-Philippine General Hospital under the 7-year Intarmed program.

He is a contributing theater reviewer for the Philippine Daily Inquirer and member of the jury of the Philstage Gawad Buhay! Awards for the Performing Arts.

Nine

Nine meant bedtime,
but we were stuck to the screen,
as the second plane struck
steel and metal skeleton, and glass
and paper and misplaced lipstick
rained on cabs and clueless tourists.
The same clips in every channel:
paused, rewound, zoomed,
father chiming in, mother silent
beside me on the couch, her stitching
idle on the parquet. No flipping over
to cartoons, or racy music videos
my cousins shared in secret,
or animals photographed from safari trucks.

The next day bore the smell
of new memory, a shift in language and gait,
the image imprinted on every front page:

a pair of smoking towers, a burst of flame,
the shadow of a man suspended midair.
Father could be the man:
afternoon coffee, a beard, no religion,
a heart attack in nine years.
Or me: too young and feeble-minded
to understand coffee or religion,
but smart enough to know
I'd break his heart in nine years,
bedtime with a nameless lover,
broke, unphotographed.

The next evening I slept soundly,
while my parents took their places
on the couch, reporters blaring
from the idle screen. The next evening,
they told me to join them;
the next evening, there was only the sound
of my growing hunger for photographs
thrust between size-nine text.

Wolves

“Here is the Ossorio that fascinated me most... his vanity ego, his
‘Catolico Cerrado’ guilt over his sexual preference, his desire to
break free of his past and prevailing artistic convention... In his
memoir of the Victorias period, Ossorio makes mention of young
male assistants who helped him paint the [‘Angry Christ’] mural.”
—Floy Quintos on painter Alfonso Ossorio.

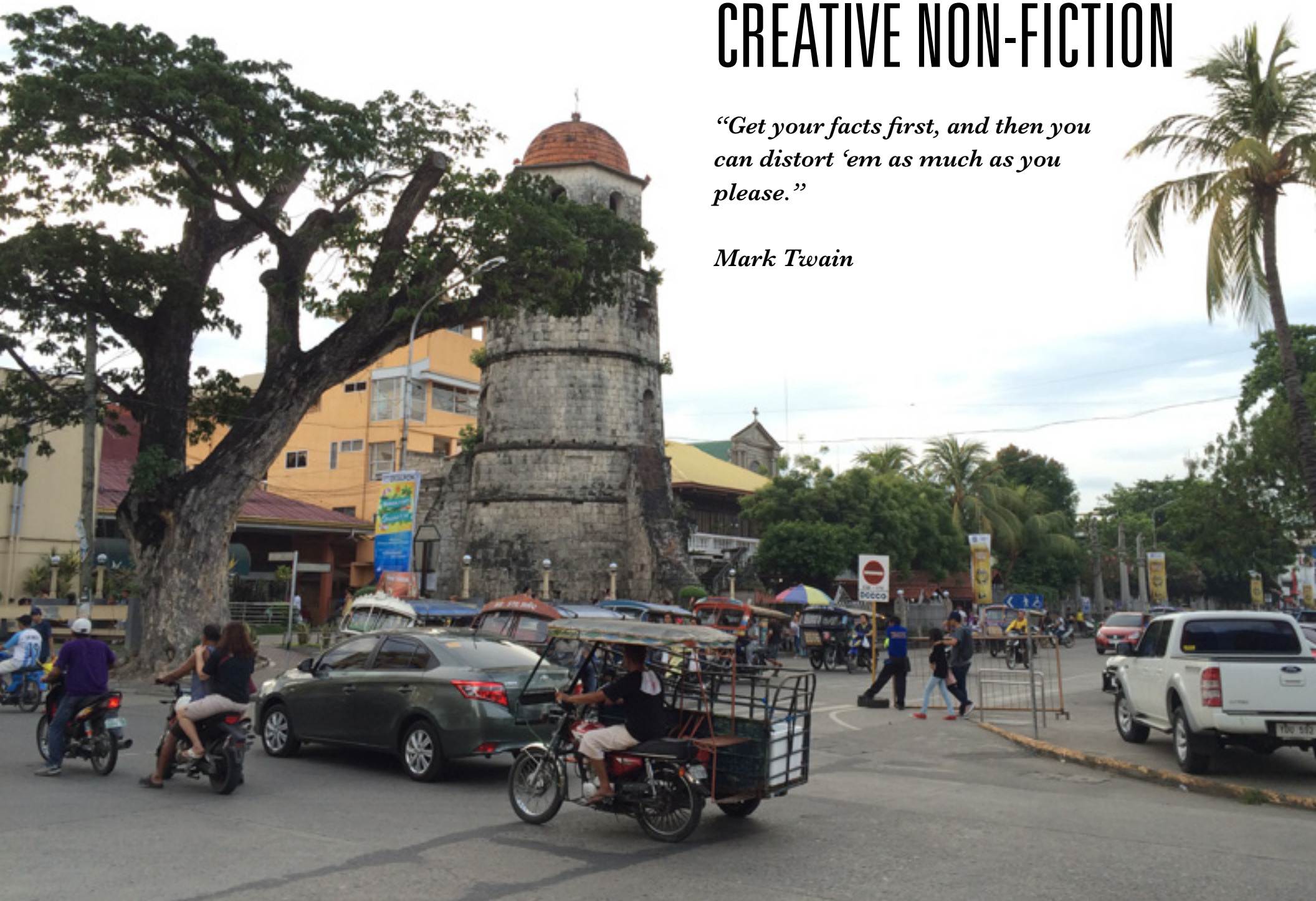
He believes there are wolves
in the woods of Victorias, howling
dissonant melodies late at night.
I tell him, there are no wolves
this side of the world, only lovers
flinching at the slightest creak of the door,
hands ready to pretend they are tired
from washing the dishes all day.

Gazing at the outline of his lips,
the slight dip down his delicate nose,
I tell him, go back to sleep, go back
to dreams. His hands are cold
against mine, skin rubbing against skin,
musk mixing in the dark. I tell him,
tomorrow you will finish those hands
tired from days of shaping mountains,
sky, pasture, the perfect arc of man's rib.
Tomorrow, a kiss so quiet, a twirl
of dancing tongues, a song
of words long forgotten.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

*“Get your facts first, and then you
can distort ‘em as much as you
please.”*

Mark Twain





TIFF CONDE

is a memoirist from Quezon City. Her essays have been honored by Ateneo de Manila University and the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

Landing in Siquijor, the fire trees not yet in bloom

I wanted to stay there long enough to wait for them, the sun melting into the ocean and our boat gliding farther away from the shore. Tomorrow I am going to walk a mile and think of how the power outage brought down all the fireflies on our first night in Valencia. Where, bent over my notes in the green light of morning I tried to resist hurry as best as I could. It was difficult to write in long sentences, so I gathered into my journal all the nattering birds and insects. Eyelashes on a leaf blade. Pieces of the yellow gumamelas scattered in front of my cottage. What the blue whale in the sky had looked like as we wrapped our poetry around the acacia tree. How we trudged through the wet grass of the fields, the night sky pocked with so many stars it was almost cruel.



CATHERINE ORDA

is a fourth year economics major in De La Salle University - Manila, where she writes monthly feature articles for *The Lasallian*. She lives in Quezon City.

Prologue

May in the city is warm and sticky. A mixture of sun-scent and salt perfumed the air. Sprinklings of sunlight glinted off the tops of the twenty or so cars that lined the street. The cars moved grudgingly slow for a few seconds, and then they bolted, suddenly unhindered, unhinged. I was in one of these cars, and this was my first pleasant encounter with bad traffic. In the car (small, black, intimate), there was conversation (fun and light and slightly polite). About my plane ride and schools and jobs and the city. About writing and teachers and where to get tacos and beer and coffee. By the time we reached the university, two things ran in my head--first of which was that I would like to retire in this city. At maybe 30. The second thing was a lot less significant, a lot more prosaic.

It had something to do with feelings, and was not one that you could call a Particularly Original Opinion. The second thing was this: I felt happy to be there—so much so that I didn't reflexively resort to asking myself the question, *what do you mean you're happy?* There wasn't a need for qualifications then; no need for clear definitions, for trying to figure out the subtle differences between joy and mere pleasure. Everything was fodder for laughter, for instant elation: I smiled dumbly at the sight of the red-roofed colossal structure we were approaching, at the crunch of the tires wheeling against the road as we parked; I found pure bliss at the cadenced, melodious

banter of my two companions--not at all minding the fact that I didn't understand a word of what they were saying to each other.

Led into a classroom, I took notice of eight familiar-looking strangers. They sat in little desk chairs, some of them hunched, some of them slightly leaning back. I remember an oversized polo shirt, a flowy floral skirt, a plain black shirt, and maybe a baseball cap? I remember strategically positioned suitcases, a delayed chorus of hellos. I remember sweet, unsuspecting smiles and grace and reticence and chattiness. All this I took in, yet it wasn't easy ignoring this weird, almost obsessive instinct to verbalize the sense of recognition and kinship I felt towards these strangers.

It was like meeting the characters in a short story I had read a few months back. As we were handed our food stipends, I consoled myself with the fact that despite the many borderline creepy implications of that thought, at least it was a short story, and not a novel, that I had in mind. The latter would have suggested a level of intimacy that was often associated with things like marriage and stalking. There was then some talk about a picnic and a poetry reading in the Rizal boulevard. On a Sunday, by an acacia tree. Also: book launches, lectures, and mentoring sessions next week. A two-week literary exploit in a city with pleasant bad traffic. Nothing could have spoiled my mood then.

At maybe about half past six, we were bound for the writers'

village in the hills of Valencia. Settled on the creased seats of the university's famous bus (bright red letters on a once-white surface), we bobbed along to the aggressive rattling of the vehicle--our warped voices competing with the noise of the engine as we tried to cover the basics. Age, school, favorite author, how we were feeling. My seatmate was 23 years old; she was from ADMU, her favorite author was Toni Morrison, and she was feeling excited and a bit nervous. I was feeling nervous, too. About my suitcases.

I was convinced that they've skidded off the vehicle, their insides sprawled across the road. The one word in my head at that moment was *irretrievable*--a word so often misused, it turns out. Some of my co-fellows slept; some of them looked out the windows, slightly recoiling every now and then to dodge the surprise graze of a tree branch. I am quite certain that my memory is failing me, and that my characteristic detachment from anything logistics-related and a propensity to resort to hyperboles are all that I am using to recall what happened next. What happened next was that the road got narrower and narrower and the myriad surrounding sneaky trees all but closed in on us.

But there were talented and formidable writers with writerly aspirations and world-changing ambitions in that bus, so of course the vehicle prevailed, seamlessly gliding across the narrow, narrow road, and eventually emerging from the sneaky, sneaky trees. I should also mention that this mostly-faux bus adventure didn't see any of us

letting out sounds that suggested feelings of fear or discomfort. We were a very well-behaved batch. *Batch But-an.*

Had these trees succeeded in engulfing us, I never would have known how it would feel to sit amongst and freely converse--on a daily basis--with kind, brilliant, and generous writers (hint: equal parts maddening apprehension and addictive exhilaration); I never would have known the joy that came with a shot of Ciao Bella's famous chupitos and a plate of churros, the exciting despair that came with being denied a table in five different restaurants on the night of Mother's Day, the sense of wonder and depth that permeated even the most mundane and awkward conversations, the cheap luxury that is the 8-peso tricycle ride, the delight that is rereading the story *The Woman of Sta. Barbara*, the use of the word *peppered* in the poem *Her New Church*, the alarming verisimilitude of the essay *The Hunt*.

We arrived in the writers village, performing the necessary banalities that soon proved to be a crucial bit of some plain and life-changing truths with which I was yet to be acquainted. The hauling of our suitcases and the unpacking of our stuff, reading the workshop guidelines and arranging our toiletries with the diligence of a spinster—these mundane rituals were germane to the discovery of certain important facts. These important facts include the following:

- i.) The struggling-artist-vs-philistine stereotype is nothing but a false dichotomy.

- ii.) You need to get over yourself. Otherwise, everything you write will be empty and solipsistic.
- iii.) There is nothing romantic about being a writer.
- iv.) An ostensible digression that has to be made: to this day, Dumaguete city makes me cry.

But these were lessons yet to be learned, memories and scenes yet to be played out. And so we prepared ourselves for the coming days.



FICTION

*“Fairy tales are more than true:
not because they tell us that dragons exist,
but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”*

Neil Gaiman



ARLENE AVILA

is an MFA Creative Writing student at the University of British Columbia in Canada.

She is in the editorial board of PRISM International and has translated children's stories for The African Storybook project at UBC.

The Deadline

chosen for publication in the journal "Ricepaper"

A week before my twenty-ninth birthday, my mother staged a one-woman intervention. The entire family was at home in our house in Coquitlam for the usual Friday dinner but mother and I were alone in the kitchen. I had helped her set the table and I was sitting in my spot at the table, texting Albert, waiting for the rest, when she sat beside me.

"You're running out of time, Sandra," she said, using a tone that she used for sharing secrets. There was an unspoken rule among Filipinos that you had to be married before you hit thirty-one. Since the longest month had thirty-one days, somebody had established it as the age-deadline for getting married. No one questioned it. Everyone just followed it. One of the painful jokes Filipinos said was, "*You're way past the calendar-deadline.*"

I looked at my mother's brown and wrinkled face and it surprised me to see that she had grown old. She had a small angular face and slit eyes that made her look more Chinese than Filipino. My mother had migrated to Canada on an entrepreneur visa in 2005. She opened and ran a Filipino store singlehandedly for a year until my father and two older siblings followed in 2006. I was a college freshman in Tourism and I stayed behind in Manila until graduation. I spent my summers in British Columbia but being away from everyone most of the year formed a gap between me

and my family that just kept getting wider. In my head, though, I often had conversations with mother and in those imaginary conversations, she was the mother that I had when we were in the Philippines.

“Do you want to know what I learned in class today? Feminism.

“Do you wanna hear what Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer said?”

“Do you wanna know what makes me tick?”

“You have two more years till the calendar-deadline.”

“I know, Mama.”

“Let me tell you something, Sandra Gomez.”

“I’m listening, Mama.”

“When I married your father, I was in love with someone else. The other guy was taking his time while I was running out of time. When your father proposed, I said yes.” I’m never shocked by anything. Or at least I don’t show it in my face. My Philosophy professor who had subscribed to the notion of the Four Temperaments had said this was characteristic of phlegmatic people.

“Did Papa know?” I reached up behind me, gathered my hair and twisted it in a loose bun.

“I don’t think so, no. But it turned out well, because I have you and Winnie and Carlito and I ended up loving your father.”

My mother liked to maintain normalcy. If she couldn’t have normal, she fought for the appearance of normal. Normal marriage, normal family, normal kids. Fall-in-love-marry-have-kids normal. For her to revise family history was contrary to everything she believed in. Perhaps she had sensed that I had sworn against

marriage. Mothers were powerfully psychic sometimes. I should have discussed feminism and existentialism with her when the lectures were fresh. The intellectual gymnastics had become a blur and all I was left with was a libertine lifestyle that had grown out of those liberal ideas.

Most of my aunts and uncles had unhappy marriages and only my parents had the perfect one. I knew no one was like my father and I knew I could never be like my saintly mother so in a twisted kind of way, my parents’ ideal marriage led me to reach the conclusion that I was never going to get hitched. In high school, I discovered boys were useful because they could make me feel good so I allowed myself to enjoy them. In college, I realized they were really useful, so I kept on having fun. I even discovered thinkers who gave me rationalizations for my choices and behavior. When I began working, I let the fun escalate.

“Yes, Mama. I will try. My best. No promises, though,” I heard myself lying. I wished she were young again so I could defy and disobey her. Denying her something when she was old was too mean. I wanted to make her old age nice and pleasant. She wasn’t sick or dying or anything. Thinking of her as a young bride marrying someone she didn’t love was brutal. Of course, women all over the world had done it all the time from the beginning of time. I didn’t care about them. I cared about *my* mother.

“There must be someone, Sandra. There are so many Catholic boys out there.”

Indeed, there was someone. There was Albert. I was about to end things with him but I was too lazy to start over and look for someone new.

We were both teachers in Gladstone Secondary. He taught Science and I taught Social Studies. I had been in Gladstone **for two years** when he came to take the place of someone who had retired. He had a round face that reminded me of my favorite pork steamed buns and biceps that bulged through his shirt. I liked him right away. At first I thought he was Punjabi but in the faculty meeting, he introduced himself by saying he was from Fiji. His classroom was B2510, just across mine, which was B2509.

“Do you know that you look like Jane the Virgin,” Albert said to me as we walked back to our rooms after the faculty meeting.

“Oh yeah. Strangers talk to me in Spanish *all* the time. In the Skytrain, bus stops, everywhere. *No soy Latina, Senor. Soy Filipina.*”

“Me, too. A lot of Indians and Fijians talk to me. It’s funny because we ignore each other back home but here we treat each other as long lost friends.”

“I know. And we go overseas so we can meet other people, experience other cultures and then we form our own Chinatowns, Korean towns, Filipino communities...”

“It’s our way of dealing with homesickness, I guess.”

“Until it becomes something else.”

“Maybe. Our parish priest is Filipino, by the way.”

“Who?”

“Fr. Amador Abundo.”

“We belong to the same church!”

“But I don’t see you there.”

“I’m a sporadic Catholic. I’m too lazy.”

“It’s a little too far from Coquitlam, isn’t it?” St. Mary’s Church was near Joyce-Collingwood Skytrain.

“My father wants to put up another store. And St. Mary’s happens to have the highest number of Filipinos. Sooo mercenary, right. Please don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t if you have dinner with me.”

“Deal.”

“But how perfect is the priest’s name for his job.”

“Lover abundant?”

“Or abounding in love? Excessive lover?”

“Where did *your* name come from?”

“My mother was obsessed with Prince Albert.”

“Queen Victoria’s...”

“The very same.”

I didn’t really like teaching. Papa wanted me to be in a school because it was one of the best ways to network. As a rule, we never missed any parents’ meeting in my nephews’ and nieces’ schools. It was an opportunity to meet people and give out flyers and business cards for the dental clinic, restaurant and grocery store. I was going to run the store one day so I did what Papa wanted. He believed in word of mouth advertising and I believed in the social media but I respected that he was not ready for it. Time enough for

me to innovate when it was my turn to run the show.

“Who needs a billion likes on Facebook? I don’t want those strangers coming to my store. Who knows what they’re up to?” I could have demolished that idea easily but he was my father.

Albert started joining us for Friday dinner and my parents seemed happy I had found a good Catholic boy. So now I had to break it off with Milo.

Milo and I had been hooking up for seven months. We met in Filipinos in Lower Mainland (FILM), one of the chat rooms on MIRC. It was my habit to spend a few minutes there before going to bed. I told myself it was a good cure for insomnia. Milo was supposed to be just a one-night thing but we found ourselves meeting again and I was too lazy to stop the fun. I was pleasantly surprised that on some level, I resisted this parting. Forming some sort of attachment to someone meant I was capable of feeling something.

“You’re getting married?” I had stayed the night in his Delta townhouse and he was seated across from me, over breakfast of almond croissants and coffee.

“I’m sorry, Milo.”

“We could still...you know. Until the wedding.” He was a pilot in the Philippine Airlines assigned to the Los Angeles-Vancouver-Manila route and whenever he came to see me, I imagined him bringing a slice of the Philippines or a whiff of Manila Bay or a chorus of Filipinos speaking in 170 languages and

I opened my arms to him eagerly. His family owned five outlets for package delivery service in Lower Mainland, catering mostly to Filipinos who love sending big boxes of goodies back home.

“Did you know that every year, Filipinos from all over the world send 7 million packages home?”

“But there’s 12 million out there? What are the rest doing?”

“The bad ones send cash.”

“I’m more interested in this package...”

“No, I couldn’t. It’s not nice.” I placed my napkin on the table and walked over to his side and kissed the top of his head. “Tempting, but no.” I have no idea how often I borrowed Julia Roberts’ line from *Notting Hill* for times like this but I liked to think it worked. If they caught the allusion, it was fine. If not, it was fine, too.

One week before my thirty-first birthday, I stood at the church-door wearing a long white dress, carrying a bouquet of sampaguitas. Albert was standing near the altar, waiting for me. I had underestimated my mother’s event planning skills and found myself blown away by Thunderstorm Mama. I had to stop being lazy if I wanted to live my life the way I wanted it. And soon. In the meantime, I consoled myself with the thought that forty-three percent of marriages in Canada end up in divorce. This was not going to be forever, thank goodness.



TANYA CRUZ

is a licensed pharmacist, currently taking up MA Creative Writing at the University of Santo Tomas.

Her works have won at the yearly Gawad USTETIKA, 3rd place in Poetry (2015) and 1st place in Essay (2016). She was also a fellow in the University of Santo Tomas National Writers Workshop.

Summer Storm

Life goes on swimmingly, right up until the moment it doesn't.

It's a Friday night. You're out with Misery, relishing in the relatively cool breeze that breaks through the muggy night air as you walk home. You feel uncomfortably sticky, the fabric of your shirt sticking irritatingly to your skin. Misery's oddly withdrawn tonight—quiet in a way you're not used to. You want to ask, but it's proving difficult to form the words. You've learned to keep your doubts and concerns to yourself. Desire's taught you well.

He brushes his fingers against the back of your hand carefully, so lightly that you thought you'd imagined it. You stop, turning to face him, a question ready. But he raises his hand, the very tips of his fingers pressing against the skin of your cheek, his thumb tenderly caressing the bottom corner of your eye just the once. This, you think faintly, is the first time he's ever touched you. The realization robs the question from your lips, punches the air out of your lungs, leaving you to stare wide-eyed at him, heart tipping into a frenzy.

The seconds pull tight as they stretch over the moment. You swallow around a dry mouth. He steps closer, the length of his body a mere hair's breadth away from yours, and your hands twitch with

the rush of desire to touch him back. There's a storm crackling in his eyes, and his proximity allows you to breathe in the scent of rain and lightning and your entire body hums with the desperate desire to arch and press against him—to see if he tastes like the ozone like you think he does. The possibility leaves you lightheaded and reckless. He tilts his head, nose brushing against the side of yours, the length of his eyelashes tickling the arch of your eyebrow and the bridge of your nose. You press the palms of your hands against his chest, nails digging into the fabric, the hairs at the back of your neck prickling with want. You think you can stay like this forever if you could. But the moment breaks, as it always does, and breaks you along with it.

Do you still think of her? he asks you simply, intent and unsympathetic and underneath all that agonized, but still acting for all the world like he hasn't gutted you open while you were unsuspecting, exposing your wrecked heart for all to see. Misery has always been selfish, always been upfront, wearing his affected indifference like armor, but you've never pegged him to be heartless.

His hand falls to his side, and he smiles as if this entire thing is humorous somehow. You can't peel your hands away, even if you know you should. But his eyes are boring into yours and he doesn't step away and neither will you.

What do you want, Love?

Your name on his lips jolts you, sending a shockwave through the numbness and mindless denial you've used as a crutch to survive the days without her.

It's starting to drizzle. Your hair is slowly growing damp and sticking to the sides of your face. You watch as his eyelashes clump together in a stunned sort of silence. You lick your lips, and a thrill shoots through you as his eyes latch onto the movement.

I want to forget, you admit, smiling like cracked glass.

He kisses you, bearing down those few increments of space, catching your doubts in his mouth.

Alright, he whispers into your ear. *Let's forget.*



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A Cat Named Lola

My grandmother lived in a house filled with cats. She adopted all of them through the years except for a black cat named Lola. She once said that she named her Lola so she could call somebody else “Lola” and she wouldn’t feel so old after all.

I couldn’t tell if my grandmother was joking or not. She told all of her stories, imagined or true, with a smile on her face.

My grandmother once told me that she started adopting stray cats after her husband, my grandfather, died. That was ten years ago. Since then, the number of cats had grown too many to count. I asked my grandmother how many cats she had but she said it was hard to keep count.

I once tried to count all of them but they wouldn’t stay still. Some would play with each other and run around the room. Others would play with me and stay just out of reach for me to place stickers on their collars to make the counting easier. I managed to place stickers on the collars of a few but they would quickly run away to the next room. I would give chase only to find the sticker on the floor and the cat whose collar I placed it on nowhere to be found.

The only cat who stayed in one place was Lola the black cat. Whenever I visited my grandmother, Lola sat on my lap and turned herself over until her bellybutton was staring at me. I would scratch her belly until she stopped purring. Thinking she had fallen asleep

since she was making no sound and her belly was gently rising and falling, I would slowly lift my fingers and move my hand away. No sooner than I thought I had safely gotten my hand back, Lola's furry body would rub against my arm and I would go back to rubbing her belly.

Lola was the only cat in my grandmother's house without a collar. I once asked my grandmother about this and she said that she didn't really own Lola. She was just giving Lola a place to stay and rest when Lola wasn't working.

"Who owns Lola?" I asked my grandmother. "What do you really mean by Lola working? She's a cat."

"Lola works magic, my dear," she said, smiling at me. "Nobody owns Lola. She keeps people company, especially those who need her."

"What do you mean by those who need her?" I asked my grandmother.

"Let's follow Lola when she goes out," she said to me.

Over the years I visited my grandmother, Lola would sometimes leave the house while I rubbed her belly. I would ask my grandmother where Lola went but she would always answer me with a smile: "Lola goes where she's needed."

Most of the time, Lola wouldn't be back when I left my grandmother's house so I always wondered where she had gone and what she was doing wherever it was she was needed.

I hoped that someday I would get the chance to find the answers.

Until that day arrived, I was happy to visit my grandmother and keep rubbing Lola's belly. Underneath my fingers stroking her skin, Lola's belly gently rose and fell. While I talked with my grandmother, Lola purred contentedly on my lap.

My parents always dropped me off at my grandmother's house on the way to the dry goods market. We sold holiday ornaments and decorative items. They used to bring me with them but I always had an asthma attack because the places we went to were filled with dust. My grandmother's house was always clean even if she did not have a helper. She once told me that cleaning, knitting and taking care of her cats kept her occupied.

My mom once asked her mother, my grandmother, if she needed to have so many cats around the house. My parents were worried that their fur would cause my asthma to act up.

My grandmother turned to me and asked me a question, "Are you having difficulty breathing, apo?"

"No, Lola, I mean Grandma, my breathing is fine."

After I found out about Lola the cat, I took to calling my grandmother by a different name. I used to mix their names a lot at first, calling Lola the cat "Grandma" and my Grandmother "Lola." My grandmother would just chuckle and said she didn't mind.

"That's your answer," my grandmother told her daughter. "If she was allergic to cats, my apo would have been brought to the hospital the first time she entered this house. Besides, Lola knows best."

My grandmother winked at me as if sharing a joke only the two of us knew. I didn't wink back because I was confused on who she was referring to, the cat or herself.

One day, something happened that answered all my questions about Lola. At the same time, my grandmother answered my questions about her relationship with Lola.

It was late in the afternoon. I was about to say goodbye to my grandmother and her cats when Lola sprang from my lap and left the house.

I did all I could to keep from running out of the house and following Lola. My grandmother told me to wait for her while she got dressed.

When we reached the street in front of my grandmother's house, I looked around and found no trace of Lola.

"Oh no," I said. "Lola's gone."

"Don't worry, dear," my grandmother said, patting my head. "I know where she's going."

My grandmother and I walked a few blocks until we came to a house with a lot of cars parked out front. She rang the doorbell. After a short while, a woman opened the gate and invited us inside.

"How is your mother?" my grandmother asked the woman once we were inside the house.

The woman answered, "She's very weak. The doctor said she could leave us at any time."

"May I go in and say goodbye to her?" my grandmother asked.

"Of course. You're one of her dearest friends in the neighborhood," said the woman.

When we entered the room, many people were waiting by the bedside. Grandmother's friend was lying on the bed with her eyes closed and her chest gently rising and falling. Lola was curled up between her arm and her chest.

As my grandmother and I approached, I noticed paw prints, cat-sized, on the window behind the bed. Like us, Lola had been invited in.

"I see somebody arrived before I did," my grandmother said, seeing Lola.

"Yes, we're thankful that she did. Her arrival told us it was time to say goodbye," said the woman.

Others were crying in the room. I held back my tears the entire time because I was a complete stranger who had no business witnessing their grief.

My grandmother went to her friend's side and whispered into her ear. When she was done saying goodbye, my grandmother kissed her friend on the cheek and stroked Lola's fur. Lola never moved the entire time we were in the room.

Once we were outside the house, I couldn't hold back my tears any longer. I hugged my grandmother as if we had no time left together.

When the time comes, I hope I'll have the same strength as Lola to be at my grandmother's side and stay with her until her breath leaves her and her chest stops rising and falling.

The Final Bullet

Her father called it a six-gun. A revolver. It no longer boasted any paint or markings from its original make. Instead, the weapon bore on its surface the colorful history of local gang warfare. Its dry texture echoed the shape of polished bone. And despite the cold nature of the metal, it felt very much alive.

Miriam watched her father bend the pistol forward, exposing the gun's cylinder to the open air. Nestled in its chambers, sparkling like jewels in an otherwise unremarkable metal container, were four gleaming copper bullets. Two chambers did not sport ammunition. One of which had been scratched and warped to complete deformation. No slug would be able to fit its opening. The only thing this chamber held now was a half-burnt stick of cigarette. Her father's handiwork, no doubt.

"One chamber empty. For safety, one always empty" said Miriam's father as he took the cigarette out of the gun. "You set the empty chamber next to the firing pin. This way, no accidental discharge. If you want to use it properly, twist the cylinder until a live round aligns with the barrel. Old guns, see? No safety."

Miriam, only nine years of age, was unsure what to do with this information. Only that it meant the world to her father that she and her brother listen. Teodoro, on the other hand, was completely enraptured. His wide eyes caught the glow of the candlelight and his breathing slowed.



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“Only four?” Teodoro asked. His voice betrayed a hint of disappointment.

Their father, a gimpy young man, scratched the stubble from his long face. His ratty hair shook with every move.

“Had five before,” he laughed. “Accident. No one hurt, of course. Just excited, you know? That’s when you both were born. Tried to make many noises. For celebration.”

“Like today?” Teodoro beamed.

Their father nodded. “Today better. Today, your turn.”

The outside noises of the street became louder and the sound of sheet metal slamming on concrete punctuated the din. Tondo had always been unkind to its servants and on this particular day, their mother was its plaything. The skin around her face was pockmarked with dirt from the town. But it was the grime and dust of the day that truly emphasized the lack of color on her face. Exhausted, she let the roasted chicken in her hands topple onto the makeshift table. The smile on her lips felt forced.

“Happy birthday,” she said to Miriam and Teodoro. The twins leapt from their father’s side and encircled their mother.

Their mother’s eyes finally fell on their father. And then to the gun in his hands. She scowled.

“Not in the house!” cried their mother.

Sensing the oncoming argument, Miriam dove for her mother’s patchwork skirt and pulled twice. Already, she could hear their father’s jovial yet defensive timbre rising behind her. And as their mother protested, Miriam spoke again. Her voice barely

registered.

“I’ll be back later,” she whispered.

The two parents continued to argue as Miriam slipped past them, towards the entrance. Teodoro said nothing, frowning instead at her sudden departure. The door slammed behind her and she emerged into an empty street, its surface caked in dried mud. The weeds that had managed to break through the concrete sidewalk held pieces of plastic and moldy paper. Bottles of beer, long since broken into unhealthy shards of glass, dotted the ground, earmarking whatever recent festivity managed to make its way through the town. This was Tondo, Miriam figured. Not the best place to be out at night.

She then pulled a newspaper clipping from her pocket and unfolded it. The newspaper itself was two days old and the article Miriam found was buried underneath pages of local news; of mob arrests surrounding the local gangs; of indecent exposures and drug-fueled crime. But if the article was correct, then the object she was waiting for would reveal itself right around dusk and no later. Scribbled onto the paper was a set of calculations she had made with the assistance of her science teacher—an arcane collection of mathematics that plotted movement quite precisely. Now was the time to prove if they were right.

Miriam strained her neck upwards, her eyes skipping past the webbing of electric wires that snaked their way to each ramshackle home in their street. The skies were bright pink as light, reflected from distant clouds, revealed tomorrow’s weather forecast. A storm

was coming. But for the most part, the heavens were clear.

The first star winked into view. No, a planet. Venus, no doubt. But moving across the horizon, barely skirting the limits of perception, was a bright object darting from one edge of the sky to the other. Not a star or a planet, Miriam knew. An object made by mortal hands. An artificial satellite. The first of its kind.

When Miriam told her father of this news earlier this morning, he was visibly unsettled. The communists again, her father grumbled. She couldn't understand why he appeared so disturbed by it. Maybe even afraid.

A crash. The sound of glass shattering. And before that, the muted bark of metal. Miriam then became noticeably aware of a sharp pain in her leg. She winced and her eyes filled with hot tears as she crumpled onto the concrete. People were screaming all around her; the panicked cries of her mother, the angry tone of her father. And little Teodoro, stunned beyond anything she could recognize, watching her struggle on the ground as blood pooled by her feet. In the ensuing chaos, no one thought to take the gun from her brother's grip.

The police would later explain that the bullet had arched in the air and was thankfully not aimed directly at her. By sheer luck, it had fallen where she stood, striking her left shin. This lessened the damage and ultimately saved Miriam's life.

And while this knowledge did little to lessen the sufferings of a young child, Miriam could not stop thinking about Sputnik and

all its implications. Some of her father's fears returned to her and finally made sense.

Out there, for the first time in history, was a bullet that simply refused to fall down.

* * *

Students from different dormitories all over the university's campus gathered around Ilang-Ilang Residence Hall's common area where a medium-sized television set had been put up. Most of them were crowding around the screen to catch glimpses of Gloria Diaz amongst the other international contenders and pixelated artifacts. Despite the women-only restriction in the dorm, Miriam was surprised to find Teodoro's face among the male seniors that had gathered there.

"Miss Philippines," Bob Barker asked. The famous celebrity host's voice remained silky despite an ocean of separation. "In the next day or so, a man will land on the moon. If a man from the moon landed in your home town, what would you do to entertain him?"

Many in the living room gasped, puzzling at the borderline absurdity of the question. Miss Universe and the Man on the Moon. In any other time, this would have been a ridiculous pairing between two cosmopolitan figures. But as she stared at the moonlit lawn outside, she felt a sense of historical inevitability surrounding these

circumstances.

If Teodoro shared this incredulity, Miriam could not find it in his face. Rather, the young man was sweating, his eyes shifting every which way. It was at that moment that Miriam knew she would not finish the pageant's question and answer portion. She stood up, offered her space to the nearest senior and began walking out of the hall.

Ilang-ilang's shape was unique among the other dormitories on campus. The four different wings of the building encircled a manicured lawn filled with Caimito trees. The scents of nectar and moss brought about years of nostalgia. Teodoro, with little effort, broke this illusion with his shadowy presence. His gangly form was an aberration within an otherwise calm lawnscape. Hunched over his shoulder was a large trash bag nearly bursting at the seams. The students who saw him crossing immediately afforded him a wide berth.

"You promised you'd have them finished by June," Teodoro scowled.

Miriam was more than annoyed. "I only said that I knew how to do it. Helping you was different."

"June!" he spat. "That was a month ago."

Teodoro was barely recognizable these days. The young impressionable child had grown glass eyes and dark layers of skin underneath them. He did carry himself more confidently, however; his childhood meekness replaced by a grin charismatic enough to gain him followers. But most glaring in his ensemble was a

triangular tattoo by his neck. Inside the triangle, a lopsided letter 'H' resided. Miriam knew the symbol well as did many students on campus. The Alibata equivalent of the letter "K." The symbol of the Katipunan; now reincorporated into the new student movement: Kabataang Makabayan.

Miriam's mind lingered on these thoughts as she and Teodoro slowly made their way up the dorms. They skirted around the prying eyes of residence assistants, hoping to remain unnoticed for as long as possible. She then motioned Teodoro into silence as they entered her room.

"You're not listening, Miri," Teodoro persisted. "Aren't you angry? Don't you want things to change for all of us?"

"I don't want to hurt people," snapped Miriam. But her eyes never left the trash bag dangling on her brother's shoulders. She could already smell the lingering scent of black powder and it called to her like fresh coffee.

"Non-violent protests," Teodoro corrected. "But we need ways to defend ourselves. Marcos' cronies have always been armed to the teeth anyways."

Miriam scoffed, her tone bitter. "Non-violent? The other students tell me things about you, Teo. Even people inside your circle are afraid of you. They say you're dangerous. Often acting alone. Always willing to start a fight."

Her brother laughed, the smile never quite reaching the eyes. "Don't deny the fact that you were the one who begged me—begged—to get you all of this." The plastic bag was then dropped

onto the dorm room floor. A small bundle of fireworks peeked right through the bag. “All for you and your own weird group. Your own useless ends.”

Miriam’s cheeks burned. She dug up a large conical rod from within the trash bag. She recognized it as the leftover pyrotechnics from last month’s Independence Day. Slowly, she tore off one end of the firework and poured its dark entrails on a sheet of aluminum. “Keep the contents dry, always,” Miriam instructed. “Never hot either. Or you’ll lose a finger. Wrap the foil around the powder and seal with adhesive. Electrical tape should be okay. If you use a fuse, you can get a few seconds before it ignites.”

Teodoro stared intently but scratched his face. “I need it to do more than lose a finger. Need it to hurt more people.”

The request came in two ways to Miriam: one side of her brain was appalled, ready to wrestle the cocktail of explosives away from her brother. The other saw it as a mathematical problem, knowing full well the energies involved in a blast of this scale. “Most military-grade grenades have higher explosive yields. You would have to buy kilograms of black powder just to rival the kind of plastique the army uses.”

Teodoro responded with his bare hands. “No money. Have to make do with what we can get. But it has to be stronger.”

Miriam scratched her chin. It was an interesting conundrum. “Most of the damage grenades make come from the shockwave,” she mused. “But if we can’t make the explosion bigger, we can try something else. We could load the explosive with dangerous

shrapnel, instead. It should multiply the damage. The perimeter fences around some of the buildings here are studded with broken glass. You can chip them off and apply them to the explosive. It won’t kill anyone, I think. But fast-moving glass should be terrible against bare skin.”

The smile on Teodoro’s face was full of teeth.

“But they will lose more than fingers, right?”

After a heartbeat, Miriam made a grab for the contents on the table. Teodoro was faster, however. And stronger. And when he pulled out the gun from his pocket, she knew he was far more prepared than she was for this encounter. The weapon itself was a piece of their personal history. The mere sight of it made her left leg twitch.

“You’re going to make more,” Teodoro demanded. “I will make sure you get your share. But you have to make more.”

Miriam stared past Teodoro’s shoulder, out the window, beyond the tree line, and at the pale face of the moon. She wished she were there now, where people were making history. Perhaps, a dark thought announced as it welcomed itself into her mind, this will too.

* * *

The Battle at Mendiola was, thankfully, just a bloodbath. Not a massacre. Miriam consoled herself with this fact every few minutes. Just four dead. Just a lot of blood. It was the lack of deaths

that seemed to assuage her conscience best. Still, being in the confines of a police penitentiary was enough to keep her on edge. When the door opened, she nearly jumped.

Standing in the doorway was her brother. His face was split open, held together by bandages and staples. He walked with a limp as there was now a large puncture wound on his right foot. A fresh trail of pus and ichor ended where he now sat. The smell nearly made her gag. Worst of all was that the police could not be bothered to lend the crippled man a pair of crutches. The only courtesy the authorities did provide was the sense to give them their privacy.

When Teodoro smiled at her, his face crumpled into an even worse pastiche of flesh. “We did it,” he said.

News of the student protest quickly devolving into violence was still making its rounds weeks after the event. The Marcos regime responded with impunity, cracking hard on the young revolutionaries. Other activists had reportedly gone missing—most likely dead. But the Kabataang Makabayan saw this all as a success. And little of it would have been so effective if they were not so adequately supplied with a cache of pillbox bombs and Molotov cocktails.

It was only a matter of time until the authorities knew who gave them the idea.

“We got them scared,” laughed Teodoro. “Made us look serious. Tried to make that fascist pig put it down in writing, too. So close.”

Miriam made a frantic grab for the collar of Teodoro’s tank

top. “You didn’t tell them about me, Teo, did you? This was your fault, do you understand? Only you!”

“We did it,” Teodoro muttered. Miriam didn’t know what bothered her more: his utter obliviousness to the current situation or the satisfied smile on his blood-smeared lips. The man would continue mumbling, “We did it” for hours.

“You stupid man!” Miriam cried. “Because of your actions, the government will do their best to control the supply of black powder now. It was already hard enough to get it without a license before. But now, my group needs more of it! More!” And she throttled Teodoro until drool settled on his chin.

“Crazy girl...” Teodoro whispered. “Can’t you see that the future of this country is bigger than your little games? Black powder and bullets. Knives and guns. Your imagination is spread far too thin, Miri. A gun is a weapon. Simple as that. And all guns kill.”

She had heard this spiel from her brother before. This was a world of conflict, he once recited. Where the seat of power belonged to those with the biggest sticks. And at the tip of every spear, at the point of every arrow, at the edge of every blade, and at the end of every barrel, only one thing waited for the poor souls who cared little for power. And that was death. That was true for the extinct Mammoth, for the fallen Spaniards, and for the former residents of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But he was wrong about one thing, Miriam thought. Guns were not dangerous. It was the bullets they hold. And not even all of them were meant to kill.

“Teo,” she began. The tone of her voice sliced through the reverie and brought Teodoro back to the present. “Do you still have dad’s gun?”

They stared at each other for what seemed like minutes. Teodoro appeared uncertain as he pondered the question. Although laughing was surely the most inappropriate response.

“I was able to hide it in my dorm right after I came back from Mendiola,” Teodoro said. “Made sure the pulis couldn’t find it there either. But you should find it easily.”

Miriam nodded. And after another brief pause, she asked, “Aren’t you wondering why I want it?”

Teodoro laughed. But this time, Miriam found that the smile finally reached his eyes. “First time I pulled the trigger on that thing, I shot myself on the foot. Estupido. And after the second shot missed a guard completely, I knew it wasn’t for me. So you know what? I don’t care what you want it for. Your science experiments or your bombs, I don’t care. But it should stay in the family.”

All the violence and blood, Miriam could hear internally, it should stay in the family.

Miriam stood up and nodded, taking this as her cue to leave. But before she could walk away, Teodoro grabbed her hand. She was faintly aware of the dried blood that was now being smeared on her skin. Whether her brother was doing this intentionally or by accident, she wasn’t sure.

“There’s still one bullet left in the gun, Miri,” said Teodoro. For a moment, Miriam thought he was threatening her. But then,

the crippled young man began to sob. “One bullet. Be careful.”

* * *

“I still don’t understand why I’m here.”

The air above Lake Caliraya carried Teo’s voice over the long stretch of water. And because there wasn’t a single cloud anywhere, visibility was clear for miles. There was also the faint sensation that the lake was much higher than sea level. A shortness of breath, maybe. Or an overabundance of sky. It was the perfect place to watch the New Year’s festivities. People were already gathering around a nearby sandbar, extending telescopes and tiny rockets into the sky.

Miriam pointed at a heavyset old man surrounded by other people who seemed just as bewildered to be here. “You see that guy? Mister Vergara was committed for arson. The young woman behind him has charges of manslaughter held against her. Shot up her boyfriend. The one with the neckerchief fought in the Vietnam war. Shell-shocked.”

Miriam watched as Teodoro dragged his wheelchair into the mud. The marsh surrounding them did not take kindly to the rubber wheels. At some point, Miriam knew, Teo was going to have to walk.

“So this is what your group does?” Teodoro asked. There was a little more bite in his words than Miriam would have liked. “Therapy? Rehabilitation? In college, you made it sound like you were on some grand mission.”

The wheelchair came to a stop at last and Miriam pulled out a cane for her brother to latch on to. Eight years of prison made her brother slow, lethargic, and averse to be around wide-open spaces. Convincing her brother to come was herculean enough. Thankfully, Teodoro did not complain when offered the cane this time around.

“The social work is secondary to the science,” Miriam explained. “But it’s what lets us get away with what we have already. And it’s good PR. Anything to get Ombudsman whatshisname and the other senators to agree is a good thing. Not to mention allowing us use of this private land.”

“And the military?” Teodoro asked. “I heard they’ve been trying to reach you too.”

Miriam marveled at her own propensity to shrug off another verbal jab. “They can beg all they want. They’re never taking this from me. Ever.”

Teodoro, however, did not appear convinced.

That was when a loud hiss erupted from the shoreline. The air cracked and then split in two. Startled, Teodoro dropped the cane and collapsed into the sand. A little part of Miriam secretly enjoyed the shock to her brother.

Overhead, trailed by a thread-thin pillar of smoke, a rocket flew. It lasted seconds. And then the sound dissipated. Wind coming in from the east spread the trail of smoke so that its ghostly features haunted the rest of the lake. Those who were not bothered by Teodoro’s shouting began to clap at the spectacle. The few that were alarmed by the crippled man collapsing warily made their way to

assist him.

“Ma’am Dealca?” called a moon-faced young girl. Miriam remembered her from one of her classes. “Is he okay?” the child persisted.

Miriam lowered herself against her brother, positioning the latter’s legs so he could sit upright on the sand. Teodoro seemed to be elsewhere. He shivered with no obvious reason as to why. Still, the man’s eyes were transfixed skyward.

“It’s all right,” Miriam said to the growing crowd. “Just keep to the schedule.”

The moon-faced girl nodded and ushered everyone else away.

“Wow,” said Teodoro. “They actually listen to you.”

Miriam laughed. “Within reason. I keep them busy and that keeps them in line. Plus, the work’s demanding. Really demanding. That’s how I get the rehabilitees to focus.”

After five minutes, the two siblings managed to get back on their feet. But Teodoro set his eyes to the sky again, steeling himself against the possibility of another eruption of noise.

“I still don’t see how putting explosives into the hands of dangerous people can be a good idea. I wouldn’t call missiles ‘therapeutic’ under any context.”

Miriam dragged her brother towards one of the encircled groups and told them to move away. This was her project now. And as the crowd receded, Teodoro gasped as he spotted the object they had gathered around: a black obelisk that stood one meter tall. Even

her hardened brother could not deny that there was something potent about the simplicity of a rocket. It reminded her of the unmarred features of a scalpel. And scribbled on the rocket's spine were the painted letters of their hobbyist society: The Fifth Bullet. Their logo was that of a row of bullets; only, the one in the center had jumped ahead of the others and taken off to parts unknown.

"It's clear," said Miriam, ending her last round of visual inspections. "Let's join the others before we become part of a new crater."

But Teodoro did not move. He still seemed fixated on the rocket, his fingers lightly brushing against the insignia painted on its skin.

"This name... Miri... Dad's handgun. What did you do with the last bullet?"

Miriam made sure nothing distracted them as they made quick work crossing the final stretch of the sandbar. At the edge of the lake was a designated viewing area the younger ones jokingly called 'Mission Control.' This version, however, was the shoestring, budget of its professional counterpart. And it was glorious. Here, sand mixed terribly with all the cabling and metal switches. Miriam noted that they should have set up some tarpaulins on the ground to protect the delicate electronics.

Then began the terminal count. Someone started counting backwards and that was all anyone could do before their voices mixed into one cohesive whole. Miriam thought of it as the most unifying exercise their group ever performed. It was mathematics in

song. It was her life's work coming to a crescendo.

"The bullet, Miri" Teodoro whispered again. Her brother's mumblings were distinct amidst the growing noise. "What did you do with the rest of it?"

A dozen alibis came to Miriam's mind.

She could have explained that the first bullet was fired long before they were born. It was made of stone and was only as strong as the person who tossed it. These bows, slingshots, and spears brought people their food and protected their families from would-be predators.

The second bullet would probably be a more familiar sight. It carried gunpowder so it no longer relied on muscle alone. These were not clumsy rounds. Instead, they granted the complete certainty of the kill.

The third bullet was filled with black powder and was even larger. It was never enough to end one life so these shells were designed to take away entire communities. It advertised the wholesale destruction of buildings, neighborhoods, and towns.

Never to be outdone, the fourth bullet assured utter annihilation. It was meant to be the bullet to end all wars. These warheads fired with little warning and needed no gun. At its heart, it bore the power of the atom and unleashed hellfire that burned long after the bullet itself was scrap.

"Where is the last bullet?" Teodoro demanded.

At zero, the rocket on the launchpad leaped. There was an eagerness to the device that Miriam and everyone there completely

respected. This blunt force was what people like Teodoro chased after. But in reality, there was power here that could do more than just maim.

The homemade missile continued to rise until the last of its fuel reserves were depleted. Then it crested its highest point and spiraled into a dive.

This, Miriam believed, was what Teodoro could not understand. Because if he could be convinced that bullets were more than just weapons, then he would have known that the last bullet was something else.

The fifth bullet could carry people. And take them to the moon.



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