

True Lies: An Essay on Writing Fiction

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I've always felt keenly the responsibility of fiction to spin a good yarn. I believe that the short story allows the writer some invisible movement in humankind's obsessive chronicling of its history and ways. The writer of nonfiction takes life, random and contrary, as her subject, and attempts to find order or purpose from it, while still rendering it as faithful to true events as possible. She is "at the mercy of a thousand anecdotes." (Updike 188) The short story writer, on the other hand, is not bound by the confines of individual perceptions and circumstances — one can assume so many personas, take from so many lives, and with permission or not, leap across so many histories. The writer of fiction, as Stephen King observes, operates from "a far-seeing place." (103) She is a sly traveler in time and space. And as the short story is defined by fictional time and space, in the story the fictional realm becomes as substantial as the reality from which it is distilled. Thus we are given a complete universe governed by its own laws, where randomness gives way to purpose.

As a writer (and student) of fiction, I have to come to terms with my own tendencies and fears, like coming closer to a mirror on the wall, or descending into the cellar of my mind. I should think that any writer's mind is horrifying — it's not the absolute darkness of the cellar that's so terrible but the shapes that solidify as the eye gathers light. Enough to make one turn and run back up the stairs. However über-American the metaphor

may be, the cover image alone of Stephen King's book "*On Writing*" makes a powerful statement: underneath a lighted window of a sweet, little house are the unlocked doors to the basement.

I think that the short story writer, compared to the writer of nonfiction, is closer to escape. But what is truly comforting is that the short story writer never has to examine herself in depth. Instead, she can let the subconscious take over and bleed through in fiction. The short story writer's patient is the fictional persona. A great convenience for writers like me, and also for schizophrenics.

Thus starts my introduction of myself as a writer. If it is painful to finally look into the mirror and see nothing but one's own reflection, this essay may perhaps trace the source of that strange discomfort.

Origins

I can't really recall a flashing moment, a great realization that I wanted to become a writer. I suspect that the outcome was inevitable, yet it came about through a quiet, ordinary process. Books led me to writing, as they have many other writers. I can't recall the first book I ever read; only that for a child, I was an unnaturally fast reader. I went to a school run by nuns, and sometime in my early childhood, in between the monotony of schoolwork, the sheer inanity of Catholic rituals and the burden of making friends, I found my way to the small school library.

What I do remember markedly that even as a small child, I had difficulty performing socially — I was withdrawn and sensitive, suspicious of adults and other children. Like the protagonist in my story "Hunger" I felt keenly my "simple, child's dignity," which many parents debase unawares by shoving their children into a social spotlight too early, having them sing and dance or display other talents; or programming into them a politeness or affection that in me, succeeded in cementing an imprisoning and often debilitating sense of social propriety.

As a child, I had to be polite without understanding why, had to kiss or take to my forehead the hands of unfamiliar adults who took measure of me, had to keep playing in a group of other children when all I wanted was to be alone. The result of this was a resentment of social codes that exploded to the surface in my adulthood, suppressed all through the years by a nagging obligation to be polite *all the time*. I believe that this social ab-

horrence of society would somehow later cause me to be more forthright in my stories than I was in real life. As a result, or maybe in spite of this, I became wary of adults and even warier of other children, large groups of which populated my world. To whom then could I turn?

“You just never know when you’ll want an escape hatch,” Stephen King says. “Books are a uniquely portable magic.” (104) Books allowed me to make acquaintances at my own pace, and to understand their character and motives better than those of the ones who directed my life in real time. It comes to me as ironic now that at about the time I knew nothing of the “real world” that affected my little life, determined my parents’ fortunes, and my family’s decisions, I also knew it intimately, as the kind of world that foiled true happiness as in *Anna Karenina* and forged strong character and courage as in *Treasure Island*.

Because of a year in a crummy kindergarten where reading meant memorizing whole books, I learned how to read in the Prep level, at six years old (the last in my class) and decided to practice to catch up with my classmates. The best reader in class was a girl named Joan, who also sang and danced well, and would continue to receive top honors all throughout our grade school years. I cared little for exhibition, but was determined to overcome my initial clumsiness at a skill I considered short of magical — because how could glancing at symbols on paper give Joan the power to tell awesome stories or explain bewildering photos on the textbooks? At the same time, this magic seemed accessible to anyone. Even my brother, who had difficulty in school, pored through the comics page snickering after reading each sentence aloud.

And so the fever took hold. A little cataloguing: I started reading age-appropriate books at the library — the Ladybug books of stories, Adarna House books, the huge Disney storybooks. I found that I read much faster than other children — it seemed the more I read, the faster I got at it. Within a few months I could read a standard children storybook from cover to cover in ten minutes. I started reading detective and mystery stories — Encyclopedia Brown, Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys, The Bobbsey Twins. At eight I was reading the unabridged classics: *Frankenstein*, *Little Women*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and my perennial favorite, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. I discovered a cache of Eyewitness science and history books in the nonfiction section of the library, and devoured volumes

about Vikings, dinosaurs, Ancient Egypt, European Gothic churches, miniature ponies. At ten my favorite book was Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, parts of which I could quote from memory. At twelve, I was consuming a steady diet of the Michael Crichton and John Grisham novels in the teachers' section of the library, which the school librarians, impressed with my reading rage, had given me complete access to.

I read three books a day — I would borrow one in the morning as soon as I got to school, read it under my desk during class, and throughout recess. By lunch I had finished with it and would return it to borrow two more books to take home, read overnight and return the next morning. The only award I received in elementary was the Best Borrower Award, which seemed senseless and irrelevant next to the academic awards much coveted by other students and parents.

Still, my mother went to school to pin a small medal on my uniform — my mother who, anxious over my addiction to books, periodically locked my library card in her cabinet. In retaliation, I would pinch five pesos from her purse to buy a new borrower's card. "You're so fond of reading, why don't you hit the textbooks?" she would always ask me. After a while she started to view books as a bad influence, like a strange friend who soaks up all your attention so much that you don't hear your name being called until someone finally shakes you by the shoulders.

I can understand why this made me unpopular with other children. I was the girl whose face was constantly in a book, who got hit on the head by volleyballs because of a strange deafness that afflicted her only when she was reading. Always, I seemed to be in a trance, a healthy companion for no one, surely.

That period of superhuman concentration is forever lost to me; it remains in my childhood, no matter how hard I try to resurrect it. Now, I read between increasing distractions. I no longer seem able to construct the impenetrable wall I surrounded myself with as a young reader.

In his stunning memoirs, Gabriel García Márquez reveals that while writing his first novel, he began reading "not only for pleasure, but out of an insatiable curiosity to discover how books by wise people were written." (404) He tells us how to read *as a writer*: "...read them forward first and then backward, and subject(ed) them to a kind of surgical disemboweling." He believes that once one becomes a writer, one stops being purely

a reader. I agree with him, as now I read mainly to sharpen my teeth. The kind of books that I read for enjoyment at that time in my life — my book porn, as I call it — were not, surprisingly, considered literary: the original Nancy Drew mystery stories, and scientific studies about the mind and the afterlife.

But as a child, considered strange by my peers, I wasn't lost to the point of not caring. I lamented the fact that I didn't have any friends. It did hurt me. I felt acutely the pain of not belonging to anything but my books. I remember an instance when my mother asked me why I didn't want to go to school at all, and I responded melodramatically. "They all treat me like dirt," were my exact words, no doubt something I had absorbed from my books. I was nine years old. In a household where only Tagalog and Ilonggo were spoken, this statement was startling. My mother must've been so dumbstruck by the unfamiliar idiom that she supposed it to be absolutely true: the very next day she called up my teacher and five of my classmates to inquire about what she supposed was a mighty trauma.

But if I had hit the books and studied the conventional way, I don't know what my future would have been. I am bad at numbers, slovenly in manner, and lazy as a cat, so that would have eliminated careers in the popular fields: medicine, law, engineering, nursing. Without the ability to write, and having gone the route of classmate Joan, who burned the midnight oil black, I would now probably be an utterly miserable call center agent.

Instead I am an utterly miserable writer, who has never had stellar grades but doesn't get bad ones either. As mentioned, I read under the teacher's sweeping radar, an exercise I soon perfected after having been caught once or twice and getting my book confiscated. I mention this, and the books I read and at what age I read them, merely because I feel these were important in shaping the kind of perception I have now. It has been said that reading gives children the ability to empathize, or put themselves in another's shoes, another's world.

But I've always also believed that reading sharpens an uncommon kind of understanding, one that goes beyond mere empathy. I would venture to say that it's a keen sensitivity to what is implied. This kind of "intuition" serves me well in dealing with touchy family members, in the journalistic work I have done, where I have had to read other people's gestures,

faces and voices; in the workplace or larger community — everywhere where I have had to practice discretion, diplomacy, or plain and simple insight. When I became a fictionist I could use it to analyze characters, real and imagined, deduce the motives of people around me, grasp immediately the mood surrounding an event or anticipate its consequences.

Perhaps, it's because of this that I managed to survive school without ever seriously studying. I failed math and the sciences regularly, and constantly made a fool of myself at supermarket counters when being handed my change, panicked that I might be cheated because I can't do sums fast enough.

In adolescence, I had very little clue about what a writer was. All I knew about the actual writer's life centered on the naïve notion that the college course to take to become a writer was called journalism, and so I followed that shining term as if it were the star of Bethlehem. I would find out later that it had nothing to do with the kind of writing I wanted to do except as a means to keep body and soul together for the creative writer.

Until high school I had no idea how I would become one of those writers I loved to read — to most people, even “journalist” sounded strange from the lips of a child being asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. I wrote throughout my childhood in my journal. I wrote so-called “poetry” I would give to friends as little tokens. My parents would tell people that one of their daughters “liked to write,” as in, had a hobby which was arranging words.

I look back at this with sadness, because I realize that we have virtually no notion of the culture of writing outside the canon. Schoolchildren are well aware of foreign literature, of the “classics,” or of Paulo Coelho, but of their own writers and these writers' works and processes, they know next to nothing. Their knowledge stops short of Nick Joaquin, and most don't even get that far along the timeline. Only when they get to college — provided they attend a university with a decent Philippine Literature course — do they get a belated introduction, but then most of the time it's knowledge given too late to inspire or be of any use.

I was one of them. I hadn't the foggiest notion that there were actually writers in the Philippines aside from Rizal and Balagtas. The only other Filipino writer I had read, more current than these two by half a century, was Magdalena Jalandoni, who I gravitated to because she was the

long-dead, mysterious owner of the strange house next to ours in Jaro. Her house, an elegant pre-war mansion, is now a museum, but in my childhood it was closed to the public. Furthermore, it had a reputation as a haunted house, full of elementals and dwarves that gave counsel to its dwellers but also punished them for their sins. The old woman had amassed a quirky collection of dolls, clocks and other odds and ends that were rumored to come alive at night. She died in the '70s but my father had vivid memories of her shouting curses from the balcony whenever he and his brothers filched fruits from the tree that grew above the cement wall dividing the houses. His stories revved my imagination, and as a child I used to peer through the gate into the house next door, waiting for the empty rocking chair on the balcony to move, as they said it sometimes did. The house and the figure of the old recluse stayed in my mind, and later, suffused the world of Lola Concha in the story, "A Ghost Story."

By this time, Jalandoni had become a town legend, but not for her writing. No one in my father's family can recall a work of their writer-neighbor. In high school, I dug up some of her stories from the municipal library and wondered if I would also end up shut off from the world, in an enchanted house.

Imagine my surprise and delight in college upon finding out that there was a long and current tradition of Philippine writing in all the languages, and that there was actually a community of writers I could be part of.

In college, a strange twist of fate led me to a campus writers group called the Thomasian Writers Guild, a bunch of campus writers who talked, lived and ate writing, high-art style. The qualifying exam I took to become part of the group contained some pretentious questions like "Which National Artist for Literature do you most read? Discuss his/her books at length," an amusing tidbit now, but to the eighteen year-old struggling with the desire to become a writer, it was nothing short of humbling, for I had not read the works of a single National Artist. I assembled an answer out of the recollection of a news article I had read in the student paper, about F. Sionil Jose, who had been conferred the award the year before. The article had mentioned some of his books, specifically the Rosales Saga, and I groped around in my memory for the descriptions the news writer had used.

My discombobulated summary of Jose’s work apparently missed the mark by a mile, but on the strength of an accidental allusion of mine (“dust drifts dreamlike into the day”) in one of the poetry exercises in the exam, I was accepted into the TWG. Thus began my “re-education” on what poetry really was and why short stories were more than neat little tales. With a great hunger I started learning about the heritage I wanted to acquire — the Philippine literary tradition as they call it, who the writers were and what they wrote. I knew then that I had abandoned writing as a hobby. Instead I wanted to pursue it for the rest of my life, to the ends of the earth and wherever it would lead me.

I did, but it was far from easy. Anne Lammott speaks for me when she describes part of her journey as a writer:

...There was a moment during my junior year in high school when I began to believe that I could do what other writers were doing. I came to believe that I might be able to put a pencil in my hand and make something magical happen.

Then I wrote some terrible, terrible stories. (xx)

The Art of Lying

Not all readers eventually become writers. In the same way, not all writers come from a good reading background.

I know some writers of my generation who were induced to write by their love for comic books or movies. Coming into writing via English classics can be considered old-fashioned in this Age of Facebook. But I think that’s how primarily I became a writer.

After devouring all the books in the grade school library and finding nothing more to read, sooner or later, I must have started wondering about the world on the other side of the stories that I had read, the figure behind the page: the writer.

As a reader, I thought of the writer and the writing process as a kind of inverse universe of the writing. These stories I loved had a source; they could have not sprung from nothing. The story held nothing back from

me, but how it came to be seemed a mysterious thing. I don't know if many young readers care to peer behind the story, but I think that once you have, there can be no going back.

I think that's how I became aware of the process of writing. When Kevin Brockmeier, an American fictionist, says that "I write out of gratitude for all the books I have loved," (*Powell's Books*). I think he is also talking about the urge to continue the creative act that is first discovered when a reader transitions to a writer.

One may begin to write out of the desire to imitate. But what will ultimately hold the writer to the craft is the need to continuously act upon a powerful creative impulse, which leads her to embark upon a cycle. One begins with nothing but this intense need or urge. Philip Roth, one of the most prolific of his generation of writers describes it as "a kind of provocation, a particular urgency." (212)

This beginning of things, which to me manifests physically as sleepless nights, a tension in the jaw or sometimes an unholy restlessness in what is otherwise a quiet life. This impulse to me seems almost primal. In my life as a married, urban twenty-something, with a house to buy, bank account to fill, pantry shelves to stock, parents to reassure, I've often mulled over the possibility of just giving up writing, and becoming a corporate or call center drone, but every time this seems almost achievable, I read a good book or an interview of a writer deep into a work-in-progress, and my insides quake — so basic is the impulse to keep on writing, once one has decided to commit to this painstaking, never-ending ritual, writing being "the country where one has decided to spend one's life." (Saramago, 2009).

At the end of the cycle may be a story or a novel, but the finished work is always in the future, never in the present, because to be a writer means always coming back, manuscript after manuscript, to the beginning.

However magical and irresistible this beginning is, the rest of writing is a voluntary act, a conscious and deliberate effort to complete the cycle. The toil sustains the magic, and allows the transformation of "the personal emergency" into "a public act." (Roth 212). If there's any comfort at all to be had in my darkest moments as a writer, it's the fact that everyone, even the writers I most admire, had to grapple with the blank page.

But why write fiction? As a campus writer, I had entertained notions of becoming a poet. I only gave up that fantasy when I realized how much I

despised the poets I was hanging out with. Most of them were young men and took to verse-making as a way of impressing girls. Not that they were the kind of men that on their own, without the help of poetry, were attractive to females at all. The poetry making I was exposed to was charged with testosterone, with the sole intent of making girls swoon. In addition, poetry readings bored me.

The first short story I ever wrote was my entry to my first writers' workshop. That story, "Birthday," explored a theme that was to manifest in my later stories: the difficult mother-daughter relationship, the chasm between generations of women and their values and the complicity and heartbreak that result from trying to bridge it. The same theme is explored in the story "Hunger," a piece commissioned by *Rogue Magazine*.

I thought long and hard about whether I to include "Birthday" in my M.A. thesis. It is the only story in the collection written in the third-person point-of-view, certainly the one with the most dialogue, two devices that I now struggle with so much that I wonder how I could ever have used them so easily in that story. I believe I wrote the story in half a day, heady with a lyrical style then newly absorbed from reading Lakambini Sito's collection *Mens Rea and Other Stories* in one sitting.

I decided to include it as a relic of how I used to write. Since then, my style has changed and my difficulty with writing fiction has increased. Now it takes me at least a week to a month to finish a short story. Dialogue, when I do use it, is close to primitive and I balk at writing in the third person. But still I find myself returning to the same theme, perhaps in an effort to understand it myself.

I also write fiction because I feel the incredibly intense impulse to lie. I take my material from life, and lying is a way of transfiguring and cheating memory. The unreliable becomes reliable, and more importantly, it becomes true.

I agree wholeheartedly with Borges when he says:

... In my stories ... there are true circumstances, but somehow I have felt that those circumstances should always be told with a certain amount of untruth. There is no satisfaction in telling a story as it actually happened. (116)

Borges goes on to say, “When I write something, I think of it not as being factually true (near fact is a web of circumstances and accidents), but as being true to something deeper.” (113-114)

Roth’s take on it is edgier, more cocky. He stresses that lying, in the case of creating literature, is performative.

Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life is my life... To pass oneself off as what one is not. *To pretend*... You distort it, caricature it, parody it, you torture and subvert it, you exploit it — all to give the biography that dimension that will excite your verbal life. (Roth, 211)

I feel that what is important are the truths behind the fabrication, and that fiction arrives at these truths through multiple layers that only serve to make them all the more clear.

Toni Morrison makes an interesting observation about the difference between facts and truth, and why the fictionist is better off maintaining her fidelity to the latter. “... facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot.” (93)

Lying, for me, is a kind of defiance, against memory and against time. In writing, it is an aspiration to freedom. In no other realm but the page can we escape the slavery of time. In fiction, the writer and the reader both time travel, skipping minutes, hours, and days, messing around with the meticulous order of past, present, and future. In the space of one paragraph, the character is brought from point A to point B, the past interrupts via flashbacks, the character grows white hair, loses a tooth, becomes a child again.

It is also defiance against the mundane. Margot Livesey points out the transformative power of fiction — and of all art in general — on the “unpromising material of the everyday.” (83) For example, “In the hands of Flaubert, the relationship between a poorly educated serving woman and her parrot becomes a subject of resonance and beauty.” She then goes on to say that like Machiavelli’s Prince, writers should become great liars. (83)

I use “lying” and “fiction” as interchangeable terms because to me fiction is lying in the service of truth, creating a way toward it instead of

obscuring it. In this way, truth is made more powerful than if it were merely pronounced.

Everyone in my family thinks I am a fantastic liar. In sixth grade, during one of those humdrum “retreats” where one was encouraged to “share” one’s most secret feelings to a group of judgmental twelve year-olds, I told the story of my life: my mother suffered from frequent depression and the delusion that I was not her child, switched with her real daughter in the hospital. I also volunteered the information that my father was a drunk who relentlessly beat me up, much like the father figure in my story, “Days of Rain.” The sob story was so detailed and intense that it did move my classmates to tears.

The teacher took the next PTA meeting as an opportunity to speak to my mother about my supposedly violent father. I remember playing jackstones in the canteen one minute and being yanked away from my playmates by my livid mother the next. At home, I got a severe dressing down for the hideous portrait I had painted publicly of my family. My mild-mannered father and my too-sane mother could not comprehend what had made a child — for whose happiness they gave their all, they emphasized — spin such incredible lies. I was sincerely sorry, but I knew that that memorable episode wasn’t born out of the need for attention, but out of the wonder of assuming a different life, becoming a different person, through a story. My grandfather, bless his soul, understood this, and his response to the incident was to advise me that it was okay to lie, but that if I happened to be caught, I should never, ever give any evidence that would confirm I was indeed lying. “Let them suspect, but never confirm it,” he said with a wink.

Later, my skill at lying would serve me well. Being a writer in the conservative, traditional family I was born to requires one to lead a double life. To my parents I was the ideal daughter, possessing all the Catholic virtues they expected me to have. They did not need to know that, since becoming a writer, I had become more intrepid and adventurous — like and with other writers, I drank, smoked pot, swore and cussed, railed against the establishment and entertained notions that God didn’t exist. I began to discover my sexuality, at odd hours and places. But officially, all drinking binges and romantic rendezvous, were, to my parents at least, “school projects.” When at 23, I snagged a six-month writing grant in Korea, I con-

vinced my parents that all the other fellows were female and married, because in fact, they were all male, and that would count heavily against my going.

At home however, I was still expected to cover my eyes when a movie scene switched to kissing, leave the room if it progressed to more. For my submission to my first-ever writers' workshop, I had to produce copies of my stories in triplicate, and I requested my mother to photocopy the stories at her office. Among the stories was the story "Birthday," with its mild sex scene, and it came to pass that my mother read the story, and all her excitement over my writing career promptly vanished. At home, she grilled me thoroughly, asking which parts of the story were true, did I think she was such a bad mother and was I no longer a virgin. It was a harrowing experience.

From that, I learned that my intended audience for my fiction was not my family, if I wanted to keep the peace. I believe writers should be allowed to keep their secrets. My parents and my family are proud of what I've accomplished as a writer, but I know better than to let them read my stories. As John Berger, writing of his mother, put so beautifully: "Most of my books she didn't read... Why suffer surprise from something which, left unopened, gives you pleasure? My being a writer was unqualified for her by what I wrote." (494)

I have tried to explain the strong urge of wanting to lie, but in essence it is an impulse because, like all impulses, it leads to a keen pleasure. Which, come to think of it, is the same as the sweet stab of satisfaction I feel when, having arrived at the last sentence of a beautiful story I am reading, the pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

Things that go bump in the night

I'm reminded that even before I learned to read, I was already spell-bound by stories, told orally. My father's family is from Iloilo. Of five siblings, he was the only one who chose to send his children to schools in Manila. The rest of the family formed a dense network that stretched from Iloilo City to Roxas City, and strung along its lines was family lore that was complex, sumptuous and boggling enough to turn into the Great Filipino Novel. These histories were steeped in the grand gothic Visayan tradition, where men and women's temperaments, fortunes, and passions had some-

thing of the supernatural in them, an underlying primeval darkness. In an essay I wrote for a fiction workshop class, I attempted to illustrate the sheer wealth of the material:

My mythical Iloilo keeps its ancient cathedrals, crumbling ancestral houses, forlorn war veterans, its miraculous image of the Virgin of the Candles, its enigmatic Teniente Guimo, the legendary *aswang* overlord. It is a place with families besieged by madness and incurable maladies, lust for money and refinements at a period when ships docked at a bustling harbor laden with sacks and sacks of silver coins the world offered for fine *piña* and *sinamay*, rocks of brown sugar from subservient, neighboring Negros. And where one family in every town — sometimes the richest and most powerful — kept the faith of their fathers, sustaining the black *aswang* blood that would give their children wings.

My own family's tales were not so different: tales of half-human mythical creatures, dwarves, and body snatchers, woven into countless births, harvests, and deaths. Even as a child I was intoxicated by the wealth of lore that was my only inheritance from this family. Given this, how could I not become a writer?

I suppose that many children of my generation first encountered the idea of an unseen world through bedtime tales of ghosts and monsters. For Visayan children, the creature that reigned supreme in the imagination was the *aswang*, the most powerful beast in Philippine mythology. Through my *yaya* and my aunts, I became familiar with this fearsome but tragic figure — oftentimes the reluctant heir of a curse that turned them into doomed flesh-eaters. It amused the storytellers when at the end of the story, the young listener professed sympathy for the *aswang*, instead of whimpering in fear. But even as a child I saw the *aswang* as the classic outsider who attempts to fill a void through violence and destruction.

The “human” elements perhaps make folklore so attractive as material for the writer. Behind the strangest of inventions, there is still the familiar which even a child can identify with. In the stories of the *aswang*,

the children who were spirited away by the *encantos*, the ghostly women mourning over lost love, were issues significant to my life then and now: regret, belonging, longing.

When I first started exploring folklore as material for my short stories, the effort was well received by my peers and mentors. But honestly I was flustered by the expectation that I would be a “magic realist” writer, and then later on after producing two or three stories in the same vein, a speculative fiction writer. I believe in having a theme, and that any writer must have the freedom to be true to it. Whether or not my fiction satisfies the definition of what speculative fiction is beyond my concern. I was not apologetic about presenting as my thesis a collection that contained specific, realist fiction, flash fiction. Whether it is readable or not is another question.

I count myself out of the arguments on fictional subgenres. I have been asked to defend my collection as not being children’s literature or young adults’ literature, despite the fact that most of the stories feature protagonists who are either young in the telling, or adults looking back at childhood. I don’t particularly declare that my stories are intended for young audiences. I was elbow-deep into constructing my defense when I realized that lumping them into specific genres is something I don’t concern myself with.

I joke to friends that the collection should be titled “Stories of Suffering Women,” since in every story, there seems to be a woman — usually a mother — aspiring to martyrdom. These secondary characters seem unbelievable in this day and time, when there is more to write about being a woman than being a dishrag of a housewife, or a wife that has long suffered her husband’s macho proclivities. Yet why have I constructed characters such as Clara’s MA-degree-holder, public-accountant mother who nonetheless endures her husband’s “itch” in “Fires of the Sun in a Crystalline Sky,” or the resentful, unhappy mother in “Hunger” (another victim of her husband’s unfaithfulness), or the tight-lipped mother in “Closed Doors,” who is powerless when her husband leaves her and her child for a past flame? I have no personal attachment to these characters — I’ve been voted “least likely to become *martir*,” many times and I enjoy a very egalitarian marriage. I don’t especially feel that being a woman limits my capabilities and the exercise of my rights the way they were limited in my mother’s generation.

My mother, however, is a woman who would identify with my suffering women because she belongs to the generation of these fictional sufferers. Perhaps in fiction, I am still trying to deal with my mother, creating warped mother figures for her, and for myself, struggling, pained daughters. Telling stories may be my way of talking to her.

Another influence that I return to again and again in my fiction is the Second World War. I suspect that my fascination with this period in history may be a residue from my past life as a guerilla or, more plausibly, stemming from the influence of the best storytellers I have ever known: my paternal grandmother's four brothers who were all veterans of the war.

These four old men religiously attended the wakes and funerals of their comrades. Their informal veterans' club convened every time death claimed one of their number — an occurrence that increased sharply in the 90s, when I was growing up, so that I saw more of my three grandfathers (technically grand-uncles) than I did the cousins who were my age. From the wide windows of my second-floor room in my grandparents' house in Jaro, I would see Lolo Mongo walking slowly down the street, a cigarette smoldering on his lip, and I would immediately put away my *Tintin* comics, fly down the stairs and yell to my grandmother that I was off to see the dead. Only two years before, at age 6, had I been introduced to death, not through the death of a beloved pet, as some children might experience, but through the passing at 78, from respiratory infection, of Captain Jose Maria Daglit, of the 62nd Combat Team.

My grandparents had taken me and my siblings along to the wake, since our *yaya* had quit the week before and our parents were in Manila working. I stood on tiptoe before the coffin, curious to see what the object of so much festivity and sadness was. I was suddenly lifted up, and in the arms of my Lolo Mongo, I gazed down at the bony form of the captain lying on a bed of silk.

Wise to the guiles of spirits and fairies, I asked my granduncle if the shrunken figure in the coffin was a banana stalk.

He let out a rumbling laugh. "No, my dear. That's an old man, quite like me. But now death has finally caught up with him." He added that most of them had cheated death, but with the captain, it had finally gotten even.

This made such an impression on me that, for a long time, the image I had of death was a small hound or pig, racing furiously after people and

grumbling with resentment at having been cheated. The image became the word, and the word the image. Encountering the phrase “a brush with death” in my books, I imagined the runner momentarily losing ground and feeling the stiff hairs on Death’s snout grazing his ankles. This was probably my first brush with metaphor, and certainly my first creation of metaphor. Long before I came to understand it as a literary device, I was acquainted with the power of metaphor to evoke and bring dimension to an abstract idea.

Lolo Mongo was the eldest of the brothers and certainly the gruffest of them. After the war, he had gone into the police force and later retired as Chief of Police in Leganes. He was spare with words, and spoke in a growl, put to maximum effect when he had to put someone in his place, or end a conversation with definite finality. The silences between his sentences would last as long as it took him to smoke a cigarette clear to the ends, for which he kept the record for the longest time. This served to make him a fearsome figure in the family, one whom many considered almost cold. But to me (then and now socially impaired), he was the perfect companion; with him I didn’t have to worry if my conversation was interesting, or if I should say anything at all. My affection for senior citizens perhaps lies in this fact that in their company, dead air isn’t so terrible; they’ve seen and heard it all tenfold and have no expectations to be entertained or impressed.

Lolo Mongo was legendary among his comrades for his ferocity. He is well-remembered for mowing down ten Japanese soldiers singlehandedly. The best story about him is a grisly one. One day, he and his scouting party came across a handful of Japs in the hills, separated from their unit after a skirmish. After shooting all of them, Lolo Mongo slashed open their clothes and cut off their balls. The party returned to camp with the organs dangling from their ears.

Next to Lolo Mongo was soulful Lolo Ramon, whose nickname was “Priest” because he had been deep in his studies in the seminary before he joined the Resistance, and came out of the war still prayerful and solemn. In the unit, he was in radio operations and intelligence, and had often gone on long journeys across Panay with radio parts and documents concealed in his clothes, gambling with the risk of capture or detection.

The youngest of the brothers was Lolo Tawi, the stand-up comic with the megawatt smile. He never took anything seriously, and was rumored to be in high spirits even during the war. “Life is too uncertain, *hija*, to be serious all the time,” he always said, making a face at his brothers. But among the brothers, Lolo Tawi had gone through the worst: he had been singled out by Makapili, and tortured for days, at the end of which he and other suspected guerillas were lined up to be shot. It was he who owed Death the most; as the rifles were aimed, he broke into an adrenaline-pumped run, straight up the eight-foot-high cement wall that ran around the barracks. Beyond was a cornfield, and he ran for his life, hearing the bullet zipping past his ears. He ran all the way to the hills, where he lay under the bushes and remained immobile for a full day until he felt safe enough to venture out and look for his unit. I imagined the hound of death shaking with indignation as Lolo Tawi bucked away, gleefully keeping his ankles out of biting range.

My registration in this club of old guerillas was fifty years late, but I was taken into the fold without reservations — a surprising recruit to their decreasing membership, and more importantly, a new pair of ears that could appreciate the old, worn stories of the war that everyone else by now had forgotten. I was an attentive listener, and before long could be counted on to helpfully fill in the gaps in the stories that gaped during their senior moments.

And it wasn’t long before I knew all the stories by heart. They involved Japs, guerillas and bandits, glory and despair, violence, kindness, and always, death’s relentless pursuit. Their protagonists counted on God or sheer, dumb luck. Even after the amount of fiction I have read thus far, they still remain the best stories I have ever heard.

Death has long overtaken my three grandfathers, but every time I write of the war, (“The Fires of the Sun in A Crystalline Sky,” “A Ghost Story”) or inject a bit of it in my stories as a defining period for one or all of my characters, (as in “Days of Rain” and “Hunger”) their voices ring in my ear. In a way, when my writing ventures to the topic we all shared and loved, they become my ideal readers; I try to depict the period or style the stories in ways they would have approved of, and would have enjoyed listening to. Certainly, the stories aspire to be as good and engaging as theirs were, worthy of ten minutes in their company.

Writing for a particular reader is “a natural human thing to do,” according to Kurt Vonnegut, “whether or not it could make a story better.” (10)

I am also interested in locating the point where relationships between parent and child break down, when familiar figures become irreversibly alien. I think I come closest to this point in the stories “Hunger” and “Comfort” both concerning mother figures who, despite the protagonists’ best intentions, become monstrous figures in their eyes. Children are programmed by evolution and society to perceive their parents as the best of people, inculpable and devoid of the frailties of humankind. But what happens at the point when we see our parents simply for who they are, measure for measure? I have not written the story I want to write on this, which I imagine to be about a young girl who finally submits to the realization that all along, the parents she so idolizes are in reality, unbearably stupid people.

Difficulties with language

To my eyes, my thesis was a strange, disjointed thing, a stitched-together circus freak that implores me to recognize it as my own and give it my name. This is perhaps because the stories in the collection were written in the span of seven years, with long intervals between each birthing. Some of them I can place in the timeline because they are so heavily influenced by the short story writer(s) I was reading at the time.

“Closed Doors” came on the heels of “Birthday” and it was written still with Bing Sitoy, and the short storywriters of the 90s — Clinton Palanca, Andrea Pasion and Romina Gonzales — whispering in my ear. I wrote “Lovelore” under the influence of Gabriel García Márquez’s brand of the fantastic. The twist in the story’s ending was inspired by the ending in César Ruiz Aquino’s “Kalisud a la Dante Varona” which he in turn has confessed to styling after Donald Barthelme’s “The Balloon,” Coincidentally, the same twist was employed by Rosario Cruz Lucero in “Doreen’s Story,” to which “Lovelore” has often been compared (although I had not yet read Lucero’s story while I was writing it.)

I wrote “The Fires of the Sun in A Crystalline Sky” fondly reminiscing about my love affair with García Márquez. The title is taken from a story by Gregorio Brillantes. I had intended to write an homage of sorts

to Brillantes, but the story ignored my wishes and took off in the direction of a tri-generational narrative. “Days of Rain” came to be years after I was wowed by Eric Gamalinda’s cult novel “Planet Waves,” and I had hoped to capture his tone in the novel, lyrical and tender despite the grittiness of the subject. “Virgins in the Window” is aspiring to be as funny as the Woody Allen stories I love best.

“Suddenly” and “Truth be Told” have the sparest language in the entire collection, because at that time I was into Raymond Carver, and wanted to demonstrate the lessons of restraint that I had learned from his stories of broken down relationships. Similarly, in “Comfort” and “A Memory of My Father” I wanted to be less melodramatic than in the earlier stories, and for this I looked to Sherwood Anderson, who has the ability to deliver a punch in the gut in the simplest of words.

In 2003, when I had made the irrevocable decision to become a fictionist, letting go of the yearnings of wanting to be poet or a playwright, I read back into the body of Philippine short fiction in English. On one of the regular excursions in Manila that I along with the young UST writers who considered themselves serious about writing, I found a ten-peso copy of the 1964 PEN Anthology of short stories, a perfect launch-pad for a Phil. Lit. ignoramus. The book gave me names to latch onto, whose books I could then track down and read. Naturally, this led to a brick road I could follow, traveling down the literary timeline to the present, to more contemporary writers like Eric Gamalinda, Bing Sitoy, Luis Katigbak and Sarge Lacuesta.

In our circle of young dreamers, we dropped names as if it were a sport. Have you read Butch Dalisay’s fiction? What do you think of Jessica Zafra’s? Don’t tell me you haven’t read Alfred Yuson’s new novel? Hungrily lapping up literary tidbits like Juaniyo Arcellana is the son of Franz Arcellana. Marra Lanot is married to Pete Lacaba and they have a writer son named Kris Lacaba. Have you read him?

So many names and their books, but I doubt that any of us read more than what was in the dusty shelves of the UST library or new titles our meager student allowances could afford. But I guess, literati idolatry is much how any young writer in the Philippines could begin, until one finds oneself soon bouncing off the edges of a very small community. Anyhow, it made choosing books in the “Filipiniana section” of the bookstores easier,

as we could distinguish the truly literary from say, a member of the religious or a terminally-ill child purporting to be a poet.

The inheritance of those days and my succeeding writerly experiences — the national writers' workshops I attended, at which many of our established writers sit as panelists — put perhaps, fortunately or unfortunately, a heavy premium on the quality of language.

The kind of English the older writers had used in fiction, from Paz Latorena, Joaquin, Brillantes, Ruiz Aquino to Lakambini Sitoy was marvelously lyrical, full of brillantine words and long sentences that accomplished the evocative job with a studied tenderness. I was enamored of this heavy lyrical style and consciously tried to mirror its lilt, more so when I saw that in the workshops, “beautiful” language was counted a primary strength of the fictionist and praised.

Now, writing fiction, I'm as finicky about my language as a poet. I have to confess that no matter how solid the idea for the story is in my head, no matter how much I have mapped it out in detail, I cannot complete the first sentence if the rhythm of the language trickling out on to the page is out of sync with the rhythm I imagine for it. I quote with embarrassment Maya Angelou, describing her agonies with getting the language to sound right.

Of course, there are those critics... who say, Well, Maya Angelou has a new book out and of course it's good but then she's a natural writer. Those are the ones I want to grab to the throat and wrestle to the floor because it takes me forever to get it to sing. I *work* at the language... When I would end up writing after four hours or five hours in my room, it might sound like, It was a rat that sat on a mat... but I would continue to play with it and pull at it and say, I love you. Come to me. (240)

I have no patience with Maya Angelou's writing, and I've never crooned jazzily to my own writing like she does, but I am comforted by the thought that even experienced writers take some time to perfect a particular language style for each and every work. I also agree with her when she says that, apart from the end, the best part of writing is when the language

lends itself to you. (257) In my case, unless this happens, I tend to write in fits and starts.

It's a relief when I can compose on paper the abstract rhythm I hear in my head, and I can lose myself in writing the story, which is what happened when I was writing the story "Lovelore." For this story, I tried to develop a similar melody to the language (or the English translation) of Anna Blandiana, in her short story, "The Floating Church," which was part of my readings for a fiction writing class.

Many of my stories were begun this way, because it's very rare that I sit at my desk and am immediately swept away by words coming in almost perfect order. As Angelou has pointed out, this occurs even to native English speakers, so it isn't because I am not American or British that my first attempts at beginning a story begin, by default, like this: "The dog is big and black and hairy."

It's helpful to describe language as music. When I can't write, I imagine it's like being in a soundless room — the silence is heavy and oppressive and hurts your ears. I go to my bookshelf and pick out a book to read. I read it until I get fidgety, and feel the words stirring. The music of the language I am reading comes on, and whatever it is, it carries me into a certain beat, giving me an impression of the rich possibilities of variations, the lure of many notes. Then I can walk out of the room buoyed up by this insistent beat or a rhythm of my own composition.

However, finding the language that sounds good to my ears is far from effortless. I am continually defeated by the fact that as I get older, instead of getting closer to finding my own voice, it becomes more difficult for me to find as it were, the perfect pitch. Perhaps it is because of the pressure precisely to rise above the tendency to echo other writers' language style.

In the darkest, loneliest moments of the writing, I warm myself with the memory of the rare, perfect writing day: a cup of coffee very early in the morning, several hours chasing thoughts on my computer, sometimes extending into the night with only the cat for company. Near dawn, trembling, I put down the last period and, too excited to sleep, make myself a huge and filling breakfast. Then I think of what to write next.

It takes courage to write, not only because as a career it is a thankless one, but also because it demands so much from oneself. All my life I have structured everything — the kinds of jobs I take, and when I take them — around the conviction that I will not stop writing and that I will die a writer.

Perhaps I do the great writers I love justice in saying that it takes unbelievable courage to get past the terror of the blank page. It takes courage to lie, imitate, distort, change the name of a person or a place for reasons known only to the writer, and then swear on one's name that all the characters are purely fictional.

It also takes courage to write about the things that matter more than the things that don't. A writer needs insight to discern the truth from life's random events but it takes courage to write it down.

On good days, I am courageous. If I can have one good day in a month, I reckon that's a good ratio.

Now perhaps I should count the lies in this essay, and perhaps not.

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