

THE ACADEME AND ITS WILD THINGS

by Augusto Antonio A. Aguila



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*His book *The Heart of Need and Other Stories* was published in 2013. His second book, *Carnival of Hate: Stories* was published in 2016 and won Best Book at the 2017 Dangkal ng UST Awards. Both were published by the UST Publishing House. His short stories and literary essays have been published in *Esquire* magazine, *Fast Food Fiction 2 (Anvil)*, *Mercy and Compassion: Pope Francis Blesses the Philippines (Anvil)*, *Philippiniana Sacra*, and *Leap Plus Magazine*.*

He was awarded Outstanding Alumnus for Humanities by the UST Graduate School. He has also served as a consultant of PS Bank, ABS-CBN, and the Office of the President (2021-2022).

My first two short story collections, *The Heart of Need and Other Stories* and *Carnival of Hate: Stories* feature stories set in the academe, such as “The Lost Season,” which examines the shallow preoccupations of university professors as seen through the eyes of a young and idealistic academic. Another is “The Shadows or Sorrow” which talks about the oppressive situation found in an educational institution. In “Smokescreen,” a trashy, sex-obsessed teacher who is also known for maligning his colleagues gets what he truly deserves when he is booed on graduation day.

I started teaching when I was only twenty years old. I had the audacity to apply for a teaching position in a school near my place even though I didn’t have a degree in education and hadn’t taken the licensure examination for teachers. I was just brave and daring. I was enrolled in the Master of Arts in English program at UST the year before I applied for this teaching position, so I already had a total of eighteen masteral units at that time. The school directress told me that I did well in my teaching demonstration, but she asked me how I could possibly handle high school students when I didn’t have any background in education. I replied, “Well, ma’am, I’ve always believed that whatever the mind can conceive, the body can achieve,” a quote I read from *Reader’s Digest*. I also firmly believe that you don’t need a degree in education to be able to teach well. Fortunately, I was hired right away after the interview. I taught in that school for six years. I left in 1996 and tried my luck at UST, and fortunately I got hired to teach English and Literature courses at the tertiary level, and there I’ve stayed.

I have been teaching for thirty-two years now, and I can say that the academe is a very interesting space peopled with various types. A colleague once told me that we meet the kindest and the nastiest people in the academe. I totally agree with her. In any educational institution there will always be well-meaning colleagues, good Samaritans, friends for life, fair-weather friends, supportive bosses, power-trippers, slave drivers, megalomaniacs, hypocrites,

predators, stalkers, backbiters, brilliant minds, mediocre minds, poor minds, lazy people, boring people, mean people, the discontented lot, the crazy lot, the strange lot, the rebel with or without a cause lot, the puritanical lot, the immoral lot, and the tired and unhappy lot whose stories – the real and the heavily edited or embellished ones – are the subject of gossip and idle talk among the faculty, administrators, non-academic employees, students, and the alumni.

These are stories I would like to write about in my next collection of short stories, which hopefully will give voice to the silenced and the oppressed, shed light on matters that often plague the academe, examine the dynamics that define the different types of relationships that exist, and satirize the various ironic situations that occur.

Below is the story “Delusion” which examines hubris in the academe. I plan to make this project a collection of ten short stories. The other stories are tentatively titled “Woke Convention,” a story set in the future which tackles the fate of wokes during very uncertain times. Another is “Much Ado About Nothing,” which examines the extreme desire to adopt a system that looks good on paper but in reality does not actually work. The story “Maracas” is about a ridiculous and kitschy teacher who becomes famous (or infamous) for playing maracas to entertain his audience whenever he delivers a lecture at national conferences. “The Mumbler” talks about a quiet non-academic employee who, for some reason, dislikes his new boss. “Resurrection” is speculative fiction about young people, a generation after the Chemical World War, who have to deal with a variety of genitalia, both common and rare, among their age group. “Proof” is about a guidance counselor who learns from a troubled student that she has witnessed a different kind of incest. “The Gatherer” depicts sexual harassment in a school organization, but it’s not the usual story of a teacher/organization adviser preying on a student; it’s the other way around. “Diva” is about a pig-headed and slave-

driving administrator who throws her weight around until she finally meets her match in one big showdown, and the last story is called “Tropes” which is a funny take on teachers embodying different fairy tale archetypes.

DELUSION

a short story

“Ladies and gentlemen, let us all welcome the star of the literature department of St. Peter University, Ms. Mely Bakkang.”

Mely could not get out of her mind what Dr. Fonseca, the Chair of the English Department, said when she introduced her as the star of the literature cluster when she called her to deliver her paper on what tissue and toilet paper meant to a woman’s loneliness and solitude.

“I have finally arrived,” she thought, feeling very proud of herself. She just hoped that Dr. Fonseca emphasized where she was earning her degree more instead of where she was teaching because she felt that she was bigger than St. Peter University.

The audience, which was composed of academics and scholars from universities all over the country, looked at Mely. They were clueless about who she was — the star of the literature department of St. Peter University? Many were either looking at or whispering to each other wondering who Mely was and why they had no idea who she was and if she were really the star of some discipline. The other members of the audience just looked at Mely for a few seconds and continued to do what they were doing — reading the conference program or the books they brought with them in case they got bored with what the presenters were going to talk about, chatting with their seatmates about how ridiculous it was to be referred to as “the star” especially if no one in the audience recognized you, and there were those who laughed silently about the silliness of the topic Mely would be presenting. One middle-aged woman uttered the words, “affirmative action.”

But Mely was on cloud nine. For Dr. Fonseca to introduce her that way surprised Mely, but deep inside she knew she deserved it. Dr. Fonseca,

whom Mely fondly called Ma'am Gigi, was, to a certain extent, her mentor. It also helped that she was at Dr. Fonseca's beck and call because Mely regularly did some errands for her such as photocopying pages of books, having reading materials bound at nearby book-binding shops, and buying her snacks from the cafeteria.

After the introduction, the audience applauded perfunctorily. Mely, who was seated in the last row, stood up and walked slowly towards the stage. She went up and made her way to the podium. She loved how the people were looking at her.

"This is my moment!" Mely thought.

When she looked at the audience, she saw a number of her colleagues who secretly made fun of her seated in the front row. Mely knew that they hated her because she was extremely brilliant. They all finished their Ph.Ds at St. Peter University, unlike her who decided to enroll in one of the country's top state universities for her Ph.D.

Dr. Fonseca told her on one occasion that she heard Mely's colleagues refer to her as "Bakekang," a character found in old comic books who was a cross between a simian and a Cro-Magnon man. Mely cried so hard that time when she learned that they were making fun of her. She couldn't tell her husband why she was crying very hard at that time. She was embarrassed to tell him that they called her Bakekang in school and that her husband's surname was very close to the name of the hideous-looking character. She was afraid that he might realize that she indeed looked like Bakekang and would decide to leave her for someone prettier. Was it her big eyes or her bushy eyebrows or her flaring nostrils that resembled two huge caves upfront or her pear-shaped head or her thick and pouty lips that led them to liken her to Bakekang, or was it just her husband's surname, Bakkang, that did it? Her husband always told her that she was beautiful, and she knew that he

had good taste in everything as he prided himself on being a connoisseur of women and wine. He loved to get drunk every now and then.

“They are just envious of me, because they know I’m better than all of them,” Mely once said to herself, and she believed it.

“A pleasant morning to everyone; I’m here to present my paper titled “Of Tissues and Toilet Paper: Interrogating a Woman’s Loneliness and Solitude.” It was during those times when Mely sobbed about being called Bakekang that she saw how important tissue paper and toilet paper were not only in her life but also to women in general. When she mentioned the idea of writing a paper about it to her brother, he said that men used tissues and toilet paper too. He asked Mely what the point of her paper was. “You will never understand because you’re a man!” Mely told her brother.

“Well, I use both tissue paper and toilet paper to wipe my ass! What’s so intellectual about that? You literature majors make simple things so complicated! Thank God, we engineers build houses and bridges. We don’t care about the cultural importance of toilet paper!”

But tissue paper and toilet paper became Mely’s only friends when she thought about being called Bakekang. It was during these crying sessions that she realized how dear tissue paper and toilet paper were to her.

“You might not be aware, but there is a reason why most of the time the tissue box is placed in the bedroom, usually on top of a woman’s dresser, and why toilet paper is usually placed in the bathroom or restroom. This is why these objects were culturally significant in the past, are in the present, and will continue to be significant in the future – unless, of course, a new kind of wiper gets invented that will replace the ultra-important tissue and toilet paper.” Mely began her presentation.

“What!” someone from the audience shouted.

Mely saw her hateful colleagues giggling in their seats. She had always known that new ideas were always frowned upon. She knew she was a trailblazer. Mely was confident that it would take some time for the same audience to realize how important her study was.

“This study is anchored on the fact that women turn to either tissues or toilet paper in times of sorrow and solitude...” Mely continued. Her slide showed a photo of girls using tissues and toilet paper in different ways.

“What about handkerchiefs?” someone from the audience jokingly said.

“I will go to that later...” Mely said to the audience.

“Really now?” the person who asked about handkerchiefs said.

Mely just ignored them. For her, they were nothing but hecklers. She had been christened the “star,” and she should behave like one.

“I will be using semiotics and feminism for my theoretical framework. Tissue paper like toilet paper is usually either white or pink, or at times yellow. These are pastel colors often attributed to femininity because they are light colors and soft to the eyes. Manufacturers carefully choose these colors because they think women are generally associated with fragility and weakness. This idea, of course, is opposed by feminists who believe that colors have no gender and that gender also has no color...”

“What the hell is she talking about,” a male faculty whispered to his seatmate.

“I actually have no idea. I thought this was a conference. This woman is a joke,” his seatmate said.

The people in the mini auditorium started to leave one by one. Mely didn’t want them to miss the important parts of her talk, particularly the section where she makes the pronouncement that wipers are actually women’s

weapons. It was the high point of her lecture. In her mind, Mely would never be like other paper presenters with nothing to contribute. She remembered the many times she reduced many paper presenters to tears because to her they were stupid. Mely didn't like it when a concerned colleague told her that what she was doing was grandstanding, to draw attention to herself. Mely was deeply offended by this, so she decided not to talk to this colleague anymore.

"Women long for a place of their own, a life of their own, and tissue paper and toilet paper serve not only as companions but as silent confidantes. Though they do not speak, they provide comfort, genuine comfort for women who, in their hours or days of loneliness and solitude, become bearers or witnesses of pain," Mely continued. She looked at the audience and saw that half of the audience had already left.

"The nerve of these people to walk out on my lecture!" Mely thought. She wanted to walk out but she didn't because she knew that real stars do not walk out.

"I end my paper by saying that no matter how insignificant tissue paper and toilet paper may be for many people – sad to say, even for many women – as a feminist and a semiotician, it is my goal to situate both tissue paper and toilet paper as articles that connect women to their pain and suffering, even though they are disposable. In that short period of time when a woman wipes her tears or her splattered mascara, or when she blows her nose using these often neglected objects, she is unable to free herself from the clutches of society's expectations, but also from the shackles that bind her to limitations attributed to her gender. That ends my lecture. Thank you very much." Mely smiled and went to sit on a chair designated for speakers.

"Thank you, Ms. Bakkang. Let's give her a warm round of applause," Dr. Fonseca said. No one in the audience applauded. Mely was sure that the audience who sat through her lecture was blown away.

“We have time for a few questions...maybe two or three before we break for lunch,” Dr. Fonseca told the audience.

A man seated in the third row, wearing a navy blue blazer over a white shirt, raised his hand.

“Yes, Dr. Avila. Please approach the microphone.”

“Thank you, Dr. Fonseca. Hello, Ms. Bakkang. I was just wondering what was running through your mind when you wrote this paper?”

Mely picked up the microphone from the table and began to answer Mr. Avila’s question. “Since I’m studying in the state university and have been handled by the best teachers, I was...”

“I don’t care about where you’re attempting to earn your degree or who your teachers are!” Dr. Avila snapped. “I’m interested in your state of mind when you wrote this paper!”

“Oh! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! What I mean is...is that..I was actually appalled by the uses of tissue and toilet paper and it is...” Mely stuttered.

“Appalled? Are you sure you’re using the right word, because it is very obvious in your presentation that you are putting tissue paper and toilet paper on some sort of pedestal?” Dr. Avila said sarcastically.

“What I mean is...you know...wait, I’m sorry... mean is...was...is that I was...what’s the word? Uhh...it’s right at the tip of my tongue...what I’m trying to say is that...”

“That you don’t know the meaning of ‘appalled!’ Dr. Avila was savagely reducing Mely to tears.

“Oh! Maybe what Ms. Bakkang is trying to say...” Dr. Fonseca interjected

“I’m not talking to you, Gigi! Okay, let’s put it this way, Mely. You have the guts to write a paper that’s not only grossly silly, but also pointless!

And you have the nerve to insult our intelligence with your trashy paper!”
Dr. Avila continued.

Mely could not believe what she was hearing. She was trying to control herself from crying. Stars don't cry, they shine. Why is this middle-aged man putting her on the spot and hell-bent on humiliating her? Who the hell did he think he was when he only earned his doctorate at St. Peter University? Who was he to challenge her?

“Uh...uh...” Mely didn't know what to say anymore.

“What's this 'uh, uh' you're saying? Next time you present a paper, make sure it's worth our while!” Dr. Avila didn't show any sign of stopping.

“Excuse me...I need to go...” Mely did not finish what she was going to say anymore. She was now openly crying.

The audience's eyes followed her as she rushed to the ladies' room.

Mely turned on the faucet and washed her face. She started to hear the sound of approaching voices and footsteps getting louder. Mely immediately went inside a cubicle and sat on the toilet bowl. She didn't want them to see her in such a sorry state.

“So that's the star!”

“And she actually believed it!”

“It's Dr. Fonseca's fault! She flattered her!”

“Of course she would. She was her errand girl!”

“You're so cruel! Hahaha!”

“Bakekang actually thinks she's better than everyone else!”

“Huh?”

“Oh yes, she does!”

“Avila was so...”

“He did the right thing. That woman is delusional!”

“Serves her right!”

“Sobra naman kayo!”

“I pity her!”

Mely heard all the things they were saying. She covered her mouth with her handkerchief. She didn't want any of them to know she was there hearing all the cruel words from her colleagues. Mely couldn't stop crying. She quietly unrolled the toilet paper from its holder, tore off a handful, and wiped her tears that seemed to be falling endlessly.

