

ILUSTRADO

MIGUEL SYJUCO



ILUSTRADO

ILUSTRADO

*

MIGUEL SYJUCO

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX NEW YORK

Farrar, Straus and Giroux
18 West 18th Street, New York 10011

Copyright © 2010 by Miguel Syjuco
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 2010

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Syjuco, Miguel, 1976–

Ilustrado / Miguel Syjuco.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-374-17478-1 (alk. paper)

1. Authors, Filipino—Fiction. 2. Murder—Investigation—Fiction. 3. Experimental fiction. 4. Domestic fiction. I. Title.

PR9550.9.S96I55 2010

823'.92—dc22

20090430

Designed by Jonathan D. Lippincott

www.fsgbooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

For my siblings: J, C, M, C, and J.

And of course, for Edith

In response to the warnings received while researching this book, the author hereby states that all perceived similarities between characters and people living or dead are either purely coincidental or a severely skewed nerve in your guilty conscience.

—from the extant title page of *The Bridges Ablaze*, by Crispin Salvad

ILUSTRADO

PROLOGUE

The Panther lurks no longer in foreign shadows—he's come home to rest. Crispin Salvador's fitting epitaph, by his request, is merely his name.

—from an unattributed obituary, *The Philippine Sun*,
February 12, 2002

When the author's life of literature and exile reached its unscheduled terminus that anonymous February morning, he was close to completing the controversial book we'd all been waiting for.

His body, floating in the Hudson, had been hooked by a Chinese fisherman. His arms, battered, open to a virginal dawn: Christlike, one blog back home reported, sarcastically. Ratty-banded briefs and Ermenegildo Zegna trousers were pulled around his ankles. Both shoes lost. A crown of blood embellished the high forehead smashed by crowbar or dock pile or chunk of frozen river.

That afternoon, as if in a dream, I stood in the brittle cold, outside the yellow police tape surrounding the entrance of my dead mentor's West Village apartment. The rumors were already milling: the NYPD had found the home in disarray; plainclothes detectives filled many evidence bags with strange items; neighbors reported having heard shouts into the night; the old lady next door said her cat had refused to come out from under the bed. The cat, she emphasized, was a black one.

Investigators quickly declared there was no evidence of foul play. You may recall seeing the case in the news, though the coverage was short-lived in the months following September 11, 2001. One month later, during lulls in the news cycle, was Salvador mentioned at any length in the Western media—a short feature in the arts section of *The New York Times*,* a piece in *Le Monde*† on anticolonial expatriates who lived in Paris, and a negligible reference at the end of a *Village Voice* article about famous New York suicides.‡ After that, nothing.

At home in the Philippines, however, Salvador's sudden silencing was immediately autopsied by both sides of the political divide. Both *The Philippine Gazette* and the *Sun* traded blows with Salvador's own *Manila Times*, debating the author's literary, and indeed social, significance to our weary country. The *Times*, of course, declared their dead columnist the waylaid hope of a cultural and literary renaissance. The *Gazette* argued that Salvador was not “an authentic Filipino writer,” because he wrote mostly in English and was not “browned by the same sun as the masses.” The *Sun* said Salvador was too middling to merit murder. Suicide, each of the three papers concluded, was a fitting resolution.

When news emerged of the missing manuscript, every side discarded any remaining equipoise. The legend of the unfinished book had persisted for over two decades, and its loss reverberated more than its author's death. Online, the blogosphere grew gleeful with conjecture as to its whereabouts. The literati, the career journalists foremost among them, abandoned all objectivity. Many doubted the manuscript's existence in the first place. The few who believed it was real dismissed it as both a social and personal poison. Almost everyone agreed that it was tied to Crispin's fate. And so, each trivial tidbit dredged up during the death investigation took on significance. Gossip cycloned among the writing community that Salvador's pipe was found by the police, its contents still smoking. A rumor

circulated that he long ago fathered and abandoned a child, and he'd been maddened by a lifetime guilt. One reputable blog, in an entry titled "Anus Horribilis," claimed extra-virgin olive oil was found leaking out of the corpse's rectum. Another blog surmised that Salvador was not dead at all: "Dead or alive," wrote Plaridel3000, "who would know the difference?" None among Salvador's colleagues and acquaintances—he had no real friends—questioned the suicide verdict. After two weeks of conjecture, everyone was happy to forget the whole thing.

I was unconvinced. No one knew what I knew. His great comeback was scuppered; the masterpiece that would return him to the pantheon was bafflingly misplaced and the dead weight of controversy buried in his casket. The only remaining certainty was the ritual clutter inherited by those left behind—files to be boxed, boxes to be filled, a life's worth of stuff not intended as rubbish to be thrown out for Monday morning pickup. I just about ransacked his apartment searching for the manuscript of *The Bridges Ablaze*. I knew it was real. I had witnessed him typing away at it at his desk. He had spoken of it, puckishly, on many occasions. "The reason for my long exile is so that I could be free to write *TBA*," Salvador had said, that first time, spitting out the bones of chicken feet we were eating in a subterranean Mott Street restaurant. "Don't you think there are things that need to be finally said? I want to lift the veil that conceals the evil. Expose them on the steps of the temple. Truly, all those responsible. The pork-barrel trad-pols. The air-conditioned Forbes Park aristocracy. The aspiration kleptocrats who forget their origins. The bishopricks and their canting church. Even you and me. Let all eat that cake." But what remained of the manuscript was only crumbs: the title page and a couple of loose leaves scrawled with bullet points, found sandwiched and forgotten in his disintegrating *Roget's Thesaurus*. Missing was twenty years of work—a glacial accretion of research and writing—untying and unraveling the generations-long ties of the Filipino elite to cronyism, illegal logging, gambling, kidnapping, corruption, along with their related component sins. "All of humanity's crimes," Salvador said, spitting a bone atop the pyramidal pile in his bowl, "are only degrees of theft."

I, of course, believe the conspicuous lack of clues is stranger than the disarray of the domestic scene from which he was mysteriously absented. Ockham's razor is chipped. Every bone in my body recoils at the notion Salvador killed himself. Walking through his apartment afterward, I saw his viridian Underwood typewriter loaded, cocked, and ready with a fresh blank page; the objects on his desk arranged in anticipation of writing. How could he have brought himself to the river without passing his conscience reflected in that Venetian mirror in the hall? He would have seen there was still so much to do.

To end his own life, Salvador was neither courageous nor cowardly enough. The only explanation is that the Panther of Philippine Letters was murdered in midpounce. But no bloody candelabrum had been found. Only ambiguous hints in what remains of his manuscript. Among the two pages of notes were these names: the industrialist Dingdong Changco, Jr.; the literary critic Marcel Avellaneda; the first Muslim leader of the opposition, Nuredin Bansamoro; the charismatic preacher Reverend Martin; and a certain Dulcinea.

*

That you may not remember Salvador's name attests to the degree of his abysmal nadir. Yet during his two-decades-long zenith, his work came to exemplify a national literature even as it unceasingly tried to shudder off the yoke of representation. He set Philippine letters alight and carried its luminescence to the rest of the world. Lewis Jones of *The Guardian* once wrote: "Mr. Salvador's prose, belied by the rococo lyricism and overenthusiastic lists of descriptions, presents a painfully honest picture of the

psychosocial brutality, actual physical violence and hubris so acute in his home country . . . His vituperative works will prove timeless.”*

In its efflorescence, Salvador’s life projected genius and intellectual brazenness, a penchant for iconoclasm, and an aspiration to unsparing honesty during obfuscated times. He was, even until his death, touted as “the next big thing”—a description he could never transcend. “From the early age of self-consciousness, I was told I’d been gifted gifts,” he wrote in his memoir *Autoplagerist*.† “I spent the rest of my life living up to expectations, imposed by others but more so by myself.”

Such pressure, and a strong belief in living a life worth writing about, led him through many roles and adventures. His autobiography read so much like a who’s who of artistic and political icons that readers wondered whether it was fiction. “I’ve lived nearly all my nine lives,” Salvador wrote. His work borrowed liberally from and embellished each of those lives: his upbringing as the son of a sugar plantation owner, the sentimental education in Europe, Mediterranean evenings spent womanizing with Porfirio Rubirosa or drinking zivania with Lawrence Durrell, the meteoric fame from his scoop as a cub reporter, training with communist guerrillas in the jungles of Luzon, the argument with the Marcoses during dinner at Malacañang Palace. The group of influential artists Salvador co-founded, the Cinco Bravos, dominated the Philippine arts scene for years. Yet it was the internecine intensification of the local literati that gossiped Salvador’s life into chimerical proportions. Among the stories: he gave Marcel Avellaneda that scar on his face during a duel with butterfly knives; he drunkenly, though surreptitiously, vomited in the seafood chowder bowl at a George Plimpton garden party in East Hampton; he danced a naked moonlit tango at Yaddo, with, depending on who is telling the story, Germaine Greer, Virgie Moreno, or a dressmaker’s dummy on casters; Salvador was even said to have insulted conductor Georg Solti after a performance at the Palais Garnier (it’s alleged he shook the maestro’s hand and chummily called him “a smidge off at the start of the second movement of Ravel’s No. Two.” Note: I’ve been unable to confirm that Solti ever conducted the Second Piano Concerto at the Palais Garnier).

Salvador’s early work—most agree—possessed a remarkable moral vigor. Upon his return from Europe in 1963, he began building his name with reportage focusing on the plight of the poor—producing subversive stories famously at odds with his father’s philosophy of political toadyism as a means to the greatest social good. In 1968, Salvador declared his international literary ambitions with the publication of his first novel, *Lupang Pula (Red Earth)*.* The story of the charismatic Manu Samson, a farmer who joins the communist Huk Rebellion of 1946 to 1954, the book earned some acclaim and was later translated for publication in Cuba and the Soviet Union. (Salvador’s true first novel, *The Enlightened*,* released in the United States three years earlier, won prizes before it was published but could not live up to the fairy-tale hype. About his grandfather’s role in the 1896 Philippine Revolution and the subsequent war against American invaders, it was a work Salvador hoped would be forgotten. He once told me his portrayal of his grandfather had created “shoes too big for me to fill.”)

Despite his having been unanimously awarded the Manila Press Club’s coveted Mango de Oro Trophy for his exposé of police brutality during the Culatingan Massacre, it was the young writer’s milestone essay in the January 17, 1969, edition of *The Philippines Free Press*, titled “It’s Hard to Love a Feminist,” which incited uproarious controversy. To his own surprise, the attention thrust him into the consciousness of Philippine pop culture. Radio talk shows nationwide carried his voice, in studied enunciations characteristically losing form and rising in pitch when excited; television screens bore the images of his lanky frame seated insouciantly with a leg tucked beneath him, black pomade

hair parted severely, finger wagging at the other members of the panel discussion—a grab bag of effeminate academic men and thick-waisted female activists. He energetically debated with feminists on the television and radio, delivering froths of invectives that at times required intervention by the host. Salvador justified his work as “not chauvinistic, but realistic for a poor country with great *bêtes noires* than those raised at that recent symposium, ‘Changing *Hisstory* into *Herstory*.’” In October 1969, in the same magazine, Salvador published an essay, “Why Would a Loving God Make Us Fart?” This earned him the ire of the Catholic Church and further enshrined his intellectual infamy.

Salvador left Manila in 1972, a day before Marcos declared martial law. He hoped to make a name for himself in New York City, but success there was more coy than he would have liked, or was useful to. He lived in Hell’s Kitchen, in a coldwater studio “so sordid even the buzzing neon sign outside my window no longer lighted up.” To make ends meet he took a job at the Petite and Sweet Bakeshop in Greenwich Village. At night he wrote short stories, some of them finding print in small magazines like *Strike, Brother!* and *The Humdrum Conundrum*. His next milestone came with publication in the March 12, 1973, issue of *The New Yorker*, of the short story “Matador,” a piece reportedly “not disliked” by the magazine’s editor, William Shawn, but pointedly chosen for its relevance to the ongoing war in Vietnam. An allegory about the toll of neocolonialism, “Matador” drew on Salvador’s experiences as a banderillero in Barcelona during his youth, presenting the United States as the matador and the Philippines as the brave but ultimately doomed bull named Pito y Gigante.* After this success, Salvador had hoped closed doors would open, but his agent and publisher queries returned slowly, each demurring, though expressing interest if he should happen to have a novel. He started work on a new manuscript. A book attempting to provide a vivisection of loneliness, it was to be based on the unwitnessed drowning of a close friend and the effect the death had on the Salvador family.

In May of 1973, Salvador fell into a tempestuous relationship with Anita Ilyich, a Belarusian ballerina, disco queen, and early advocate of the swinging lifestyle. One stormy autumn morning following a party at The Loft, the couple, each of them reportedly under the influence of one too many gimlets and Quaaludes, had a jealous and theatrical fight there on Broadway in front of David Mancuso’s apartment building. Salvador, convinced it was “just another one of those tiffs,” returned to their home after a palliative walk to find his possessions dumped on the sidewalk to soak. Among his stuff were the translucent pulpy pages of his nearly completed novel.

That afternoon, Salvador quit New York for Paris, a city he’d frequented during his university studies. He swore off both women and literature, settled in a leaky *chambre de bonne* in the Marais and worked as an assistant to a pastry chef’s assistant. Soon after, he broke his vow to teetotal the comforts of the softer sex, but it would be two full years before he returned to literature. Ultimately both poverty and his restless spirit brought him back to writing in the summer of 1975; he took freelance assignments for *The Manila Times* and *The International Herald Tribune* and began work on what would become his popular *Europa Quartet* (*Jour, Night, Vida, and Amore*).* Written one after the other between 1976 and 1978, the quartet follows the life of a young mestizo gadabout in 1950s Paris, London, Barcelona, and Florence. It was a hit with housewives in three countries.

Buttressed by new success, Salvador returned periodically to the Philippines to undertake research, appear on panel discussions, stump for election campaigns, and work with other artists. In 1978, he began “War & Piss,” his long-running weekly column in *The Manila Times*. His recently out-of-print travel guide, *My Philippine Islands (with 80 color plates)*,[†] despite its unabashed subjectivity, was described by *Publishers Weekly* as “the definitive book on the Philippines [*sic*] people . . . entertaining and brave, chock-full of vivid anecdotes infused with a local’s intimate knowledge . . . It situates the

tropical country in the context of the rest of the world, retrieving it from the isolation and exotification it is oftentimes suffered to endure.” Later, in 1982, Salvador published *Phili-Where?*,[‡] a satirical travel guidebook that charted his country’s fall from “gateway to Asia” and proud U.S. colony to a plutocracy ruled by an “incontinent despot.” The book was banned in the Philippines by the Marcos regime and thereupon enjoyed decent sales abroad.

The 1980s—the decade of global stock market greed, of beehived matrons meeting for weekly Jane Fonda workouts, of Corazon Aquino’s People Power Revolution—was a new dawn for the Philippines. It was in that climate of moral contrasts that Salvador finally found the respect for which he intensely yearned. He published widely and often. His career peaked in 1987 with the publication of *Dahil Sa’Yo (Because of You)*,[§] an epic account of the Marcos dictatorship that included a pointed indictment of the opportunistic cronies responsible for the couple’s rise and fall, epitomized by Dinagdong Changco, Jr.* Salvador re-created the tumultuous era through a mixture of press clippings, radio and TV transcripts, allegories, myths, letters, and vignettes from the various points of view of characters, factual and fictional, intended to represent Filipinos from all walks of life. The book spent two weeks at the bottom of the *New York Times* bestseller list; it was reprinted three times and translated into twelve languages. It earned acclaim abroad, and therefore also in the Philippines, and placed him on the long list for the 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature (he thereafter often said: “I’m the first and only Filipino to be in contention for a little award called the Nobel Prize for Literature”). The award went to Naguib Mahfouz.

Salvador, like other prolific writers of extraordinary breadth and reach, was well acquainted with such disappointments, as exemplified by the various publications that made the literati doubt his abilities. Critics consistently judged the less successful works to be long-winded, messianic, derivative. (Avellaneda called his oeuvre “a dirty cistern filled with feces that has not been well formed. Objectively speaking, it’s the sort of crap that sparks fears of outbreaks of amoebic dysentery.”) The most memorable of these unmemorable works were: the 43,950-word essay *To the People*,[‡] which Salvador meant as “a catalog and homage to the glorious diversity of our race, our rich customs, and our beautiful women”; *Filipiniana*,[§] an ambitious but idiosyncratic survey of Philippine literature in English, which included most of Salvador’s short works, but only one each from other writers; and an early book-length epic poem about Magellan’s cartographer and translator Antonio Pigafetta, entitled *Scholarly Plunder*.^{||} Attempts to justify the latter in 1982 by transforming it into *All Around the World*, a disco opera, resulted in bankrupting failure.

What irked Salvador most—more even than Avellaneda calling his life abroad “a metaphor for an anonymous death”—was the critics’ claim that *Because of You* was his literary swan song. And so began whispers about an epic book that had been in the works since the early 1980s: *The Bridge Ablaze*. But what Salvador published next surprised the country, establishing him as a much-read writer but giving credence to what local books columnists called his “flimsy literary prowess.” *Manila Noir*,^{*} the most popular of his crime novels, presented Antonio Astig, a swashbuckling mystery author investigating Jack the Ripper–style killings of pretty women from shantytowns (the real-life murders were a sensation in 1986 and ’87: the police investigation was regarded as a sham and the murderer rumored to be a prominent “confirmed bachelor” politician). *The Bloody Sea*,[†] a five-hundred-page rip-roaring nautical saga set in the Philippines of the 1500s, pitted the dastardly Chinese pirate Limahong against the dashing Spanish captain Juan de Salcedo, and proved to be amazingly successful at home and in Britain. (The book, along with rumors of a sequel and prequel, fueled, to Salvador’s delight, public disdain from Patrick O’Brian.) And aiming to reach younger Filipinos, Salvador wrote

the *Kaputol (Siblings)* trilogy,[‡] a magic-infused offshoot of the YA tradition of Franklin W. Dixon. Following the adventures and coming of age of Dulcé, the tomboyish leader of a group of young boys in martial law-era Quezon City, the trilogy became his most enduring work, remembered and loved by a new generation of readers.

That period of his life, full of prolificacy but lacking in gravitas, plunged Salvador into a deep depression that made him lash out indiscriminately, though his behavior during both defeat and success had long elicited eager mockery. His mania for collecting subjected him to accusations of being “a closet bourgeois.” He famously wrote letters in purple ink, in grandiose longhand. With the advent of e-mail, to which he took early with extreme enthusiasm, he began sending long tirades to newspapers—intent on skirting the judgment of the editors of his column at *The Manila Times*—placing in his crosshairs such targets as our cultural crab mentality, or the hope that expatriate Filipinos will help rather than abandon their country, or the bad service at the Aristocrat restaurant and how in such an old institution it represented the passing of a more genteel society. The periodicals refused to run his missives, so he collected and self-published them in the book *All the News the Papers Are Afraid to Print*.^{*} Salvador’s fastidiousness of manner also opened him to rumors of homosexuality, yet he was criticized for being a womanizer “with the lascivious energy usually found in defrocked clergymen.” And he could never live down his 1991 TV commercial which showed him being served lunch in a book-lined study, shaking a cruet over his food before turning to the camera to deliver the now immortal words: “Silver Swan Soy Sauce, the educated choice.”

On June 2, 1994, Salvador held a book launch at La Solidaridad Bookstore in Manila. The event had been wrapped in secrecy, and excited literary watchers expected *The Bridges Ablaze*. Salvador instead unveiled *Autoplagiarist*, yet another self-published book, a memoir that refracted through his life story a history of the Philippines from the start of the Second World War to the end of the millennium. The 2,572-page volume, perhaps the most ambitious and certainly the most personal of his books, won him angry responses. One local critic said: “The Oedipal impulse was so ambrosial [Salvador] fucked his father and killed his mother.” Another said: “Dear old Crispin might have done better had he put his money where his mouth is and cleaned up Smokey Mountain [garbage dump].” Abroad, Salvador’s literary agent could not sell *Autoplagiarist* to publishers, and even ultimately terminated their professional affiliation. Worst of all, the memoir’s frankness destroyed what had long been a tenuous relationship with his family and friends at home. Salvador was suddenly a true exile. “You’re lucky your parents are dead,” he once told me. “The people who love you,” he said, while moving his bishop to take my queen, “will only see their deficiencies in your work. That’s the strength of good writing and the weakness of the human ego. Love and honesty don’t mix. To be an honest writer, you have to be away from home, and totally alone in life.”

The cut ties saw Salvador settle permanently in New York, and inexorably into a period of deep silence. He dropped his newspaper column. He gave up writing. That he became well known as a teacher attests to his oh-so-very-Filipino resilience. As he said in “War & Piss” on many an occasion: “If life gives you lemons, have your maid make some lemonade.”

Much of his life was apocryphal, so it may well be that this next bit was, too. Shortly after clipping the last review panning *Autoplagiarist* and pasting it into an album, Salvador went out by the Hudson River and burned the scrapbook, along with his diaries, in a public trash receptacle. It was in the waning hours of a summer night. Two policemen happened upon him while he was relieving himself into the conflagration. “I’m just trying to put it out,” he told them. Salvador was taken downtown and charged with misdemeanors for drunkenness and public urination. The event was somehow reported in the Manila papers and elicited the habitual snickers from those who remembered him.

But it was in that fire, Salvador later told me, that he rediscovered what it is like to be intoxicated by your own anger, to find the solace of destruction. The following morning saw him returned to his desk with frightening intensity. He had retrieved, from a locked drawer, the three black cardboard boxes containing the unfinished manuscript of *The Bridges Ablaze*.

*

At the end of the first week of last February, Salvador left for home. The purpose of the visit, his first in years, was for him to accept the Dingdong Changco, Sr., Memorial National Literary Lifetime Recognition Prize, or, as it is widely known, the DCSMNLLR Prize. The afternoon he arrived in Manila, Salvador ate a late lunch at the Aristocrat restaurant before going to their comfort room to change clothes. In front of the mirror, he adjusted the collar of his formal barong and practiced his speech. Outside it was raining heavily, and he took a taxi to the Cultural Center of the Philippines. The audience was composed of the old guard, mostly members and officers of PALS, the Philippine Arts and Letters Society. They leaned back in their plastic monobloc chairs, smirking magnanimously, faces serene and satisfied, as if at a much-awaited funeral. (The DCSMNLLR Prize is historically given to writers at the end of their careers.) Salvador bounded up the steps onto the stage, shook hands, posed for a picture with PALS deputy vice president Furio Almondo, and stepped to the podium. He looked admiringly at his gold medal—an ornately filigreed circle made of sterling silver. He poured himself a glass of water and drank it. Finally, he spoke. “Literature,” he declared, “is an ethical leap. It is a moral decision. A perilous exercise in constant failure. Literature should have grievances, because there are so many grievances in the world. Let us speak frankly, because we’re all peers here. Your grievances with me are because you say I have failed. Though I only failed because I extended myself further than what any of you have ever attempted.” The boos and jeers came suddenly, then peaked savagely, as at a crucifixion. “I accept this award,” Salvador continued, shouting to be heard, “ahead of what I will achieve. Next year, I will publish my long-awaited book. Then you will see the truth of our shared guilt.” The boos and jeers turned into laughter. “History is changed by martyrs who tell the truth—” The microphone was disconnected.

The author walked through the audience and out of the CCP building. When there was nobody to see him, he began to run, splashing headlong into the torrential rain. He caught a flight out that evening—just missing the unseasonable supertyphoon that would flood vast swaths of the city—and returned to New York via Narita, Detroit, and Newark. I saw him the morning of his arrival, the day before Valentine’s Day, when I rushed to his apartment on the pretense of dropping off a folderful of students’ essays from his missed classes. He was seated in his study, bedraggled but radiant, banging away at his typewriter. It sounded like machine-gun fire. He had not even bothered to change out of his ruined barong. Beside him, there it was: yesterday’s *Philippine Sun*, turned to the deaths and births page. Though the paper’s website had run an erratum, blaming an intern for accidentally running Crispin’s from their stock of prepared obituaries, you could almost hear the self-satisfied chuckle swooping in on the westerly tradewinds. I didn’t know how Crispin had taken it, so I asked if he’d had a good flight. And what had got him all fired up. Crispin smiled at me brightly. “Death,” he said, “is my Manila. I apparently have nothing more to lose.”

That was the second-to-the-last time I saw him.

Then silence too soon for one whose most pernicious enemy was silence.

If our greatest fear is to sink away alone and unremembered, the brutality that time will inflict upon each of us will always run stronger than any river’s murky waves. This book therefore shouldered the

weighty onus of relocating a man's lost life and explores the possible temptations that death was always present. The facts, shattered, are gathered, for your deliberation, like a broken mirror whose final piece has been forced into place.

—Miguel Syjuco, en route to Manila, December 1, 2002

- * Natalia Diaz, "Filipino Footnote," *The New York Times*, May 6, 2002.
- † Carla Lengellé, "Les guérilleros de Paris: de Hô Chi Minh à Pol Pot," *Le Monde*, July 22, 2002.
- ‡ Anton Esteban, "Grand Central Terminus," *The Village Voice*, August 15, 2002.
- * Lewis Jones, "The Salvador of Philippine Literature," *The Guardian*, September 21, 1990.
- † Crispin Salvador, *Autoplagiarist* (Manila: Passepartout Publishing, 1994).
- * *Lupang Pula* (Manila: People's Press, 1968).
- * *The Enlightened* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1965).
- * The story is renowned as the first fiction published by a Filipino in the magazine since Carlos Bulosan's "The End of War" in the September 2, 1944, issue. Marcel Avellaneda called "Matador" "over-earnest faux Ernest" and "a chapter edited judiciously from *The Sun Also Rises*."
- * *Jour, Night, Vida, and Amore* (New York: Grove Press, 1977–1981).
- † *My Philippine Islands (with 80 color plates)* (New York: Macmillan, 1980).
- ‡ *Phili-Where?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982).
- § *Because of You* (New York: Random House, 1987).
- * Dingdong Changco, Jr., sued for libel. Salvador famously told the court: "Whatever truths you find in my fiction are only universal ones." The book was banned in the Philippines after only 928 copies were sold nationally.
- † Interview by Clinton Palanca, *The Paris Review*, winter 1991.
- ‡ *Tao (People)* (Manila: Passepartout Publishing, 1988).
- § *Filipiniana* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1990).
- || *Scholarly Plunder* (Manila: Ars Poetika, 1981).
- * *Manila Noir* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1990).
- † *The Bloody Sea* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992).
- ‡ *Kapatid, QC Nights, and Ay Naku!* (Manila: Adarna House, 1987–1990).
- * Crispin Salvador, *All the News the Papers Are Afraid to Print* (Manila: Passepartout Publishing, 1993).

A battered wooden chest in the bedroom, its inlay shedding, its key finally found in a locked desk drawer. Inside: A recent diary (orange suede cover, hand-burnished a smooth caramel [inside translations, riddles, jokes, poems, notes, other]). First editions (*Autoplagiarist*, *Red Earth*, *The Collected Fictions*, *The Enlightened*, et cetera). A dilapidated overnight suitcase (white Bakelite handle; stickers from hotels long shuttered [the lock is forced open with a table knife: the scent pencil shavings and binding glue, a sheaf of photographs {slouching at the edges}, his sister's childhood diaries held together by a crumbling rubber band, pregnant manila envelopes {transcripts newspaper clippings, red-marked drafts of stories, official documents <birth certificate, vaccination records, expired passports, et cetera>}, a canvas portfolio {charcoal, graphite, ink sketches <horse facades, portraits, cutlery>}, a battered set of Russian nesting dolls {the innermost missing}, other assorted miscellany {a Parker Vacumatic fountain pen, inherited medals from the Second World War, a lock of amber hair, et cetera})).

*

My friend and mentor was quite alive the night before. The door cracked open, only his nose and eyes visible. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry." The blue door clicked shut, unapologetically. The dead body slid in with a finality I did not at the time recognize. I left and had a bacon cheeseburger without him, irritated by his uncharacteristic rudeness.

What could I have said to him? Should I have forced open the door? Slapped him twice across the face and demanded he tell me what was wrong? Days, weeks later, all the fragments still would not click together. The events seemed unreal, confusing. Some nights I'd tiptoe quietly out of bed, cautious not to wake Madison and risk igniting her anger; I'd sit on the couch, deep in thought until the sky turned lilac. Both suicide and murder seemed like two sides of the same prime-time seduction. In retrospect, this was healthy for me to feel. Clichés remind and reassure us that we're not alone, that others have trod this ground long ago. Still, I could not understand why the world chose to take the easy way out: to write him off simply, then go home to watch TV shows with complicated plots. Maybe that's the habit of our age.

Then, at four weeks after Crispin's death, I was telephoned by his sister (her voice as thin and pale as a piece of string) and asked to divest his life's possessions; I entered his musty apartment as if I were a crypt.

At four months, I found myself unable to sleep at night; I'd sit and listen to Madison's breathing, thinking, for some reason, of the parents I never got to know, and how I missed Crispin, with his stupid fedora and strong opinions.

At six months, I began Crispin's biography; the long hours in the library, the idea that his life could help me with mine, somehow kept me sane.

At eight months and one week, Madison left me for good; I hoped she'd call but she didn't.

Late in the night of November 15, 2002, nine months to the day after Crispin's death, I was watching my in box for any e-mail from Madison. With a bing, three new messages appeared. The first was from Baako.Ainsworth@excite.com. It said, in part: "Sharpen your love-sword rubad soundness. Help that breeds arousal victories. How to last longer making love and have more feelings

The second was from trancejfq22@skaza.wz.cz. It said, in part: “GET DIPLOMA TODAY!If you’re looking for a fast way to next level,(non accredited) this is the way out for you.” The third e-mail was about to be trashed when I noticed who sent it. The message said, in part: “Dear Sire/Madame . . . was informed by our lawyer, Clupea Rubra, that my daddy, who at the time was government whistleblower and head of family fortune, called him, Clupea Rubra, and conducted him round his fl and show to him three black cardboard boxes. Along the line, my daddy died mysteriously, and Government has been after us, molesting, policing, and freezing our bank accounts. Your heroic assi is required in replenishing my father’s legacy and masticating his despicable murderers. Mo information TBA.” The sender was crispin1037@elsalvador.gob.sv. I brought up a blank message respond. I wrote: “Crispin?” The cursor winked at me. I hit “send” and waited.

The next morning, I bought my plane ticket.

*

See the boy getting on an airplane. He’s not a young boy, but a boyish man, as he would describe himself. He sits in his middle seat, notebook open, pen in hand, en route to Manila (I almost wrote “home,” he thinks with a smile). It is a trip he hates, both the voyage and arrival. He writes at the moment, “the limbo between outposts of humanity.”

As the airplane is towed backward, he thinks of what he is leaving. Thinks of his lost friend and mentor, seated at the typewriter, working away in a slow accrual of letters, words, sentences, puzzling together pieces shed like bread crumbs on the path behind him.

The boy will return, heartbroken, lonely, dejected. His three brothers and two sisters are all abroad free from home—atop a hill in San Francisco, washed under the big Vancouver sky, hidden amid the joyful noise of New York City. His parents, whom he cannot remember, are in graves he cannot bring himself to visit because he knows their bodies are not there. The grandparents, who raised him as best they could, are in Manila, though he no longer has contact with them because of the emotional violence of their last departure. He is coming home, though he doesn’t dare admit it. He knows what empty houses are and the mischief memories can play when cast among unfamiliar echoes.

In the long hours spent in the airplane, he tries not to think about how his parents died, and therefore that is all he can think of. He flips through the Philippine newspapers, obsessively. He studies his files of notes, clippings, drafts. He unscrews the fountain pen he took from his dead friend’s possessions. Tries to write the prologue for Eight Lives Lived, the biography he wants to write about his mentor. He fidgets. Thinks. Observes his fellow passengers. Judges everyone, in the traditional Filipino sport of justifying both personal and shared insecurities. He reads some more, searching for a point of reference in a world that has never felt entirely his. He writes some more, trying to explain things to himself. He scribbles an asterisk.

*

Salvador was born to Leonora Fidelia Salvador in a private room at the Mother of Perpetual Help Hospital in Bacolod. Present were his eight-year-old sister, Magdalena (nicknamed Lena), his six-year-old brother, Narciso the Third (shortened to Narcisito), and their yaya, Ursie (no record of her real name). Their father, Narciso Lupas Salvador II, known to family and friends as Junior, was aboard the De La Rama Steamship Company’s M/V *Don Esteban*, en route from Manila, where he had been engaged with the Commonwealth Congress.

The newest Salvador came into the third generation of family wealth, acquired through a blend

enterprise, sugar, politics, and celebrated stinginess. The four years before the Japanese invaded would prove formative: throughout his life the familial roots in the Visayan region represented something promising and pure.

—from the biography in progress, *Crispin Salvador*
Eight Lives Lived, by Miguel Syjuco

*

. . . eyewitnesses reported two explosions, the second occurring thirty seconds after the first, both on the third floor of McKinley Plaza Mall in Makati. According to a spokesperson for the Lupas Land Corporation, there were no fatalities. No group has claimed responsibility for the . . .

—from Philippine-Gazette.com.ph, November 19, 2001

*

INTERVIEWER:

You wrote in the late 1960s, “Filipino writing must be the conquest of our collective self divorced from those we fear are watching.” Do you still think this true?

CS:

I used to believe authenticity could be achieved solely by describing, in our own words, one’s own fragment of experience. This was of course predicated on the complete intellectual and aesthetic independence of the “I.” One eventually realizes such intellectual isolationism promotes style, egotism, awards. But not change. You see, I toiled, but saw so little improving around me. What were we sowing? I grew impatient with the social politics that literature could address and alter but had until that time been insufficient in so doing. I decided to actively solicit participation—you know, incite readers to action through my work. I think of the effect of José Rizal’s books in our own revolution against Spain a century ago. I think of the poetry of Eman Lacaba, who traded his pen for a gun and lived and died in the jungles with the communists in the seventies. “The barefoot army in the wilderness,” his famous poem called them. The epigraph of that piece was wonderful. Ho Chi Minh: “A poet must also learn how to lead an attack.”

INTERVIEWER:

Was there something that made you want to lead that attack?

CS:

Pride and fear of death. Truly. You smile but I kid you not.

INTERVIEWER:

Your return to the polemical is a criticism often cited. Did you . . .

CS:

It’s viewed as two steps backward. Erroneously. When you reach farther and farther, sometimes you come full circle. The task then becomes all the more difficult, false steps more likely—though the eventual outcome may become more pertinent. This of course opens you up to accusations of being quixotic or, worse—or perhaps better—messianic. Mind you, pretension and ambition are different

words for the same thing. Truly, it's the artist's—the true artist's—desire for causality that trips critics up.

—from a 1991 interview in *The Paris Review*

*

Three more hours until I arrive. At Manila. I almost said “at home.”

It's a trip I hate, both the voyage and the arrival, the limbo between outposts of humanity. Remember when air travel was fun? Toy pilot wings and smiling stewardesses showing you the massive cockpit? Now they separate us from our valuables and herd us through security gates shoeless and anxious; they scare us with tales of deep-vein thrombosis; they pack us in like animals then run Keanu Reeves on screens on the seat backs to lull us into a squirming stupor. Soon after we fall asleep, they wake us. I bet anyone who is still a Marxist has never had an economy-class middle seat on a packed long-haul flight like this one.

Around me, in this tin can, my fellow travelers: we, the acquiescent, unaware insurrectionists; we who have left and returned so constantly throughout history our language has given us a name—balikbayan. Sloped-shouldered we are, freighted by absence; our hand-carries bulging with items that wouldn't fit in overweight luggage, all the countless gifts for countless relatives—proof our time away has not been wasted.

These are my people. (Crispin once called them the “splay-toed, open-hearted.”) Beside me, a stocky, sturdy man in an acid-wash denim jacket and a slipping eyeshade, his head thrown back and snore efficaciously. Likely a construction worker, one of the millions-strong diaspora indentured by the persuasiveness of dreams. To my other side, two older ladies, sisters by the look of them, fidget and flip through the inflight magazine for the sixteenth time. Their inflatable pillows around their necks remind me of yokes on water buffalo, if that's not too obvious a metaphor. One has a rosary wrapped around one hand. With the other, she turns the pages to the photographs. Her sister complains she's going too fast. Across the aisle, a petite Filipina with towering shoes rests her blond head on the shoulder of a Texas-big American, his glasses low on his wedgelike nose, reading Dale Carnegie in a pool of light. A snake-and-dagger tattoo slithers up his forearm. Behind sits a spry, elderly Caucasian with his white hair, warm-up jacket, and khakis rumpled in the fashion of intrepid Jesuits or vacationing pedophiles. To his side, a duet of tirelessly gossiping domestic helpers continue their nine-hour run. Their heads, wrapped in eyeshades that hold back their hair, peck at morsels of hyperbole, like pigeons at rice dropped on the pavement of park promenades every Sunday, day off to the maids who flock by the thousands in the big cities of the world. I've twice heard about what Minda did to Linda and thrice cringed at the horrible thing Dottie said to Edilberto. I took notes, smiled, when I heard one complain “She stabbed me in the back and my back wasn't even turned.” The women's bluster and brusqueness are crystallized by years of servitude, unconvincing confidence, irreconcilable distance from the things to which they once clung closely.

I myself didn't see what Crispin had become to me until he was gone. My own lolo, Grapes, has always been too remote, the way grandfathers often are, to make up for my father's death. He was hardly more than a ghostly silhouette I'd glimpse through the glass doors of his home office, writing letters at his desk or reading ribbons of paper from his telex until mealtime, when he'd come to the table and kid with me. The jokes had always seemed forced, and I laughed because I yearned for connection. I keep telling myself nobody's to blame. They'd already raised their children. By some accounts, they failed even in that. And suddenly they have six more. New orphans from Manila.

shipped wholesale to Vancouver, disrupting my grandparents' premature retirement—an exile which they had just learned to love.

Maybe the Filipino sounds in our English phrases, or the different ways we each looked like my father, reminded my grandparents too much of the life they had before the institution of martial law that drove Grapes from politics at the height of his career, that deprived Granma of her mahjong parties and battalion of maids, that turned them both into just another couple of doddering slant-eyed fools moving too slowly in the soup-cereal-baking aisle of Safeway. I had just turned five when we arrived. My grandparents tried their best, gave up the small home they had built, moved into an ugly McMansion, hired a nanny to help with us. Grapes and Granma were intent on Canadianizing us, prepare us for the melting pot into which we'd been thrown, and they prohibited us from speaking Tagalog lest we never master English. Even they cast off their traditional names, adopting my little brother's mangling of "gramps" and "grandmom": the man we knew as Lolo in the Philippines became Grapes ("sour," he liked to say); Lola became Granma ("Like the boat that ferried Castro rebels"). As we all came to discover the limitations of assimilation, we grew closer as a family. I remember one time, after school, Granma and I stopped at St. Thomas's to light a candle, as she did daily, for all souls gone and present and not yet born. A man sat up suddenly in a pew and started shouting at us. "Go back home, you gooks!" He must have been drunk or crazy, though at the time I didn't know such distinctions. "We're not gooks" was all my grandmother could say. "We're Filipinos." On the drive back to our house, Granma was quiet, ignoring my questions, as if I'd done something wrong.

I also remember, years later, us six kids with our grandparents in front of the TV. Dinner on the table had long gone cold as we watched images of Edsa Boulevard thronged with people in yellow T-shirts, praying and singing, nuns linking arms to stop armored personnel carriers, a young girl placing a flower in the rifle barrel of a soldier who was struggling not to smile. The CBS anchorman was saying: "This could be as close as the twentieth century has come to the storming of the Bastille. But what's remarkable is how little violence there has been." A small woman in glasses was shown talking to the people. "That's Cory Aquino," Grapes explained to us. The anchorman continued: "We Americans like to think we taught the Filipinos democracy. Well, tonight, they're teaching the world." Helicopters land and soldiers join the singing masses, everyone smiling. Then Granma said, tears in her eyes: "We can go home."

I've been old enough for a long time, but only now do I begin to understand. Around me on the plane, I hear what she meant: the singsong of Ilonggo from the aisle seat nearby, the molasses accent reminding me of the way my grandmother said things. From farther down comes the clunking consonance of Ilocano by the lavatories, Bicolano by the bulkhead. A stewardess is speaking Tagalog to an elderly fellow, a man the age of my own grandfather, telling him all the places she's been to. He nods at each, as if he's been there, too. Maybe these people are coming home to make a difference. Maybe I can be like them.

My seatmates glance at me as if I were a foreigner. I save my Tagalog words for the proper time, to surprise them with what we share. Their accented imperfections remind me of my own, like that time in class, my first day at Columbia, when I pronounced "annals of history" as "anals of history" and how I'd wanted to flee the room, though nobody had seemed to notice. I eavesdrop on my countrymen on their tentative English spoken to the cabin crew, never quite perfected despite years in the West: *f* still often traded for *p*'s, vowels rounded, tenses mixed, syllables clipped—only the well-practiced Western colloquialisms wielded with conviction. Like those phrases, we're a collection of cliché handy types worn as uniforms over our naked individuality. We are more real than that philosophic

conceit of humanity as the milieu of light: we are the milieu of sweat. Our industriousness, our inexpensiveness, two sides of our great national image. That image the tangible form of our communal desire for a better life. Someone kicks the back of my seat as a reminder to quit being so profound.

On my left, my seatmate has long capitulated in the battle for the armrest (involving my performing many a subterfuge and feint, about which he didn't even know), and I relish my elbow's lebensraum. When I tell the stewardess my meal choice, I feel my neighbor observing me from the corner of his eye. He chooses differently, oppositely. When our food is passed down and unwrapped, I immediately regret my beef and covet his chicken. I slather my hands with alcohol disinfectant gel. My neighbor looks at me and smiles. I pass him my little bottle and he cleans his hands as well. Then he nonchalantly puts the bottle in his breast pocket. We eat our rectangles of food as if our elbows are fused to our sides. I pretend to be deep in thought and stare into the darkened screen of the TV in front of me.

On my agenda, visit Crispin's childhood home.

Interview his sister and aunt.

Investigate those names found in his notes: Changco. Reverend Martin. Bansamoro. Avellaneda. Dulcinea.

Sift through the ashes of the bridges that he burned.

Reassemble his many lives.

I know when we touch down in Manila my fellow passengers will all clap at the pilot's landing skills. I know they will all jump, the plane still taxiing, to claim possessions from overhead compartments. I know a voice will reprimand them over the public address system and peeved stewardesses will swat at their upraised hands and shut the compartment doors. Always the same. That's good, isn't it? These fellow travelers have logged thousands more miles than most in the world, hugging hello and goodbye, working and saving, remitting money each payday, writing letters on onionskin paper to save on postage, telling their clan they'll soon be home, finally; they'll arrive unrecognized by unrecognizable children, to spouses whose kisses have become ostensible and indebted. It's like that aphorism of Ovid's that Crispin once shared with me: Everything changes, nothing ends.

Me, I'll arrive to nothing. That's really how I prefer it.

*

He doesn't know what he prefers. When the pretty stewardess rolls up with the drink cart, he wants ginger ale but orders a "triple" scotch. Drinks on international flights, you see, are free. Thrilled like a child at having his own screen on the seat back in front of him, he forces himself to stay awake to catch up on the latest Keanu Reeves movie. As the end credits roll, he tastes that exasperation we all know after we've prostrated two hours of our lives to be pillaged. Again and again he pilgrimages to the rear galley, to avail himself of free ice cream bars and tiny bags of snacks. He turns on his overhead light, tentatively, worried it will glare and awaken his neighbors. He reads the in-flight magazine. In an article about Bali, the photographs of Eurasian girls in day-glow bikinis lounging on white sand and triangular silk pillows excite him visibly, and he squirms beneath his seat belt and holds the magazine strategically, feeling as if he were thirteen and not twenty-six. He looks around. A few rows down there's a sexy Hong Kong Chinese girl he'd wanted to help stow her backpack as she filed into the plane. But he didn't have the guts, and so he stood in the aisle and waited for her to

finish doing it herself, surreptitiously studying her ass and the way her shirt rode up to reveal the tempting concavities above her waist. He cranes his head to see her now. He thinks, Something about cabin pressure makes me horny. He blames the long-haul boredom. Eroticism, after all, exists to break life's monotony. What if—he thinks—she feels the same as me? What if I just took her hand and brought her to the lavatory? The worst she could do is say no. He looks over but cannot see her. He does spot her naked foot sticking out from where she's tucked it under her leg and her armrest. He marvels at its rabbitlike beauty. Madison had manly feet. I haven't touched another person in so long. The way Madison held him when they made love often seemed his main purpose for sex. It was like his hands slowly being washed in warm water—needful, complete, and it cleansed him of that one thing he kept secret from her.

He rubs his stubbly chin, a silent-film villain deep in thought, and his watch reflects a locus of light that flies onto the walls, the seat backs, the faces of his slumbering seatmates. He covers his wrists, worrying his neighbors will see the crown insignia, wondering if they'll think it a Mong Kok fake. He examines it in the light. His grandfather had given it to him on his twenty-first birthday. This was years after the whole family had returned to the Philippines, years after things had begun to curdle, years after his grandfather had returned to his politics and his women. Stainless steel, pearlescent white face, Oyster Perpetual DateJust. His grandfather has one exactly like it. Almost. The boy's is counterfeit, even if premium—real beveled crystal rather than flat Perspex, but with Rado interior works. His grandfather had courageously followed a toothpick-chomping dealer, who he'd said reminded him of a hissing lizard, down an alleyway off Tung Choi Street and up three flights of narrow ramshackle stairs, to fork over two hundred U.S. dollars for the most real fake ever seen. The dedication to his grandson was later engraved on the back, and because of that the boy has treasured it. That and the savory memory of lost family dinners when the two would unclasp watches and trade and compare and marvel. The boy for so long now has passed his off as genuine that even he has forgotten and has allowed himself, along with everyone else, to be fooled.

*

He bursts in, like a bomb, the pearl handle of his Midnight Special glinting. "It is I," he shouts. "Antonio Astig. Reach for the stars!" But the room is already empty. The window open, its pane swinging tauntingly. He crosses the room like a hungry tiger suddenly uncaged at lunchtime. Looking outside, on España Boulevard, he sees Dominador's bald head bobbing below. He is swimming across the flooded street to a stranded flatbed truck. Dominador fights desperately against the raging current, debris hitting him at nearly every armstroke. Antonio hears shouts of men from behind him, the clatter of their shoes running up the stairs, down the hall. The police! Antonio leaps out the window and into the flood. The water tastes like the tears of all Dominador's virgin victims. When he surfaces, he sees Dominador on the back of the truck, cutting the ropes of a tarp with his footlong switchblade knife. Above Antonio, police crowd the window, aim their pistols at him. He dips below, swimming like a shark. In the murky water, their bullets cruise past him like torpedoes. He surfaces in time to see Dominador pushing a yellow-and-red Jet Ski off the truck. Its engine roars like a grizzly and Dominador speeds away, weaving through the stranded cars and jeepneys. Antonio spots a second Jet Ski on the truck. He swims toward it. Bullets zip by. They make popping sounds into the water. Antonio pulls himself onto the truck. In a single motion he pushes the Jet Ski off and starts it. He speeds over the flood-water, the wind fresh on his face. Through foggy shop windows, panicked people watch the commotion. As Antonio blurs past, he gives them his most winning smile.

*

E-mail from me to Crispin: Gee whiz, Mr. Wilson! I can't help but think Madison could've paid more than half what she paid her therapists to diagnose her borderline personality disorder. It kills me how these days everyone has clinical justification for their strangeness. My lolo was recently diagnosed with Freudian narcissism. He then had his secretary do research on the Net. Instead of finding all the bad about it, of course he saw only the good. "All great leaders are narcissists," he exclaimed to my grandmother. So rather than buy all the books about how the disorder can be overcome, and how the disorder hurts the people around them, he bought *The Victorious Narcissist*—a book about the triumphant qualities of Nero, Napoleon, Hitler, Saddam, etc. Hell, Grapes even bought a copy to give to President Estregan as a Christmas gift. LOL! Wonder how he'll take it. Don't get me wrong, I'm not angry with my grandfather. To be angry implies you care. I just feel sorry for him. Anyway, I'll be late for our bacon-cheeseburger date. You'll have to tell me the gory details of your trip home and that speech about the CCP. I'm dying of curiosity.

*

"Fittingly, my father's name was Narciso," Salvador wrote in *Autoplagiarist*. "At one time somewhere in the lineage before him, the name possessed the tragedy of the myth and the irony that such a name could be possessed by such a man so distinctly unnarcissistic. Upon my father, however, all such nuance had been lost: it was as if to him the name was bespoke, and the very act of christening him 'Narciso' authored a parody of a sacred sacrament, wherein one is named for his essence, for that worst characteristic by which he would be forever remembered. In fact, he is belittled further as 'Junior,' in that unabashed, and strangely Filipino, habit of giving ignominious nicknames. A self-fulfilling prophecy: try as he did, he was damned forever to be the tiny narcissus."

—from the biography in progress, *Crispin Salvador: Eight Lives Lived*, by Miguel Syjuco

*

"You're the most handsome of all my grandchildren," Grapes would often tell me. I never knew how to reply, so I smiled the smile of a shy child basking in attention. I of course didn't believe him. I was afraid to.

"You are the most handsome because you're the one who looks most like me," he'd say. Then "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"The sergeant of the army."

Grapes laughed, amused to no end. "Not the president of the Philippines?"

"Whichever is higher."

"I'll be president," he'd say, "and you can be the sergeant of the army."

He would pick me up with an exaggerated grunt and carry me to my own bed. He smelled of Old Spice and pipe tobacco, which, I realize now, are more of those comforting clichés. But that's really what he smelled like.

"All right, Sarge," he would say, tucking me in. It became his pet name for me. We all had then his private names that made us each his unique grandchild. Jesu was "Groovy." Claire was "Reina"

Mario was “Smiley.” Charlotte was “Princessa.” Jerald was “The Plum.” I was Sarge. Maybe it’s not “was” but “is.” I don’t know.

A lifetime later, Madison would call me “Beauty.” She’d look at me in bed, touch my face with her fingertips, as if afraid of breaking it, and she’d tell me: “You are a beautiful man.” I of course believed her. I was afraid not to.

Every night, under the covers, her foot would be pressed against mine. We always wanted to spoon but, because of my troublesome cervical curve and my orthopedic pillow, I had to lie on my back if I didn’t want neck pain the next day. We touched feet through the night, a gesture of reassurance that we’d stand together through the darkest.

“I love you,” I’d say.

“I love you, too.”

“Do you love me more than I love you?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” I’d say, sliding into the edge of sleep. “See you in a minute.”

“G’night,” she’d say. “In our dreams then.”

I never told her that I don’t have dreams or can’t remember whether I do.

*

From Marcel Avellaneda’s blog, “The Burley Raconteur,” February 14, 2002:

Happy Valentine’s all! But let’s get to the point: The nerve of that Salvador, no?! The biggest sin a Pinoy can commit is arrogance. Yes, dear readers, you may have already heard the latest literary scuttlebutt about our former comrade and compatriot Crispin’s most recent visit to our shores. Last Friday’s awards ceremony at the Cultural Center of the Philippines was marred when his acceptance speech turned into a tirade against our literature and a threat to publish something that would “lop your heads off.” How we’d hoped he’d mellowed. How I’d hoped my old friend would return humbled by failures. Autoplagiarist? (He should have ripped off from someone else.) There is a time and place for everything, my dear old Crisp. Haven’t you learned that by now? For those interested, literary blogger Plaridel3000 has posted a clip of Salvador’s speech on his weblog [here](#).

Some posts from the message boards below:

—Wat a twatface that Salvador is! Lets c wat his so-called *The Bridges Ablaze* has 2 say. I herd it hi at the Lupases, Changcos, Arroyos, Syjucos, Estregans, among other (Bethloggins2010@getasia.com.ph)

—It’s sooo sad a man like Salvador has lost himself to hubris. Shouldn’t literature do more than just criticize? Goes to show he doesn’t have the answers. (kts@ateneo.edu.ph)

—LOL! More power to you, Marcel! Lop the head off that commie. IMHO, he’s in with the Muslims for sure. (Miracle@Lourdes.ph)

—Hey, kts@ateneo, I think you are correct. But in fairness, do any of us have answers? (halabira@pldt.ph)

—Love dat clip of his speech. Hilarious. Check out the yellow armpit stains in his baron (fashionista@dlsu.edu.ph)

—How do you get rid of pit stains like that anyway? My bf has stains like that. (edith@werbel.com)

—Dilute a T-spoon vinegar in cup of water, den apply carefully w/ basting brush. Should work gr8. U wlcm! (doitursel@preview.ph)

- [click Lindy Smith's Mini Cakes Academy: Step-by-step expert cake decorating techniques for 30 mini cake designs here](#)
- [read online Switching to the Mac: The Missing Manual \(Yosemite Edition\)](#)
- [click Complete Book of Mixed Drinks, The \(Revised Edition\): More Than 1,000 Alcoholic and Nonalcoholic Cocktails](#)
- [What Great Teachers Do Differently: 17 Things That Matter Most \(2nd Edition\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [Secrets of the Knights Templar: The Hidden History of the World's Most Powerful Order online](#)

- <http://musor.ruspb.info/?library/Richard-Nixon--The-Man-Behind-the-Mask.pdf>
- <http://patrickvincitore.com/?ebooks/Hegemony-and-Culture-in-the-Origins-of-NATO-Nuclear-First-Use--1945-1955.pdf>
- <http://berttrotman.com/library/How-to-Write-a-Sentence--And-How-to-Read-One.pdf>
- <http://econtact.webschaefer.com/?books/What-Great-Teachers-Do-Differently--17-Things-That-Matter-Most--2nd-Edition-.pdf>
- <http://weddingcellist.com/lib/Secrets-of-the-Knights-Templar--The-Hidden-History-of-the-World-s-Most-Powerful-Order.pdf>