



Rica Bolipata Santos

*Fragments from a Literary
Friendship*



Going to see Gilda Cordero Fernando, writer, painter, dancer, critic, producer, cultural maven, *fashionista*, mother, wife, and friend, is a lot like going to the fair.

I'm not talking the Disneyland, Enchanted Kingdom kind of fair, but rather the tiny ones that still operate in small provinces and even smaller towns. It is the kind where the highlight is the tiny Ferris wheel with only ten small boxes with big, round multi-colored lights that don't all work. Hanging at the top of the wheel still makes it possible to identify people on the ground (after all, everyone still knows everyone in this small town), and the whoosh of the air as it descends is satisfying enough to produce that small aha!

There are small pleasures for the picking at the fair: the three old cans stacked on top of each other waiting to be tumbled to win the prize of an itchy small teddy bear. The pink-colored popcorn or newly deep-fried adobo peanuts with lots of garlic. The native form of billiards where balls are made of slick smooth round circles of wood and the chalk that smoothens table and stick feels just like baby powder but smells nothing like it.

Why does anyone go to the fair? For the dazzling feeling of being suspended in a kind of place where anything is possible. To be enthralled momentarily by different tiny pleasures. To be with people one already knows in a different atmosphere. It is at once a chance to experience something foreign and to appreciate the homegrown.

I have been to the Gilda fair more than once, lucky to be considered worthy to visit the sights. Every once in a while, in the past three years (Gilda would identify this as a natural cycle of life), I will be summoned by her to take a small repast with a group of friends. I am aware that I will have to give up my whole day to accommodate this visit. I will come to lunch and stay until late afternoon. These are hours I do not mind giving up. There is nothing I would like to do more than to be there. I know there is a prize at the end of these visits.

* * *

I HAD FIRST heard of Gilda from my own parents, as their publishing firm Philippines International had published her first collection *The Butcher, The Baker, The Candlestick Maker*. I asked her how this alliance came to be, and if there is anything she can reveal about my parents. She herself is unaware even of how they met and merely concludes that the milieu of Ateneans and St. Theresa's college students must have thrown them together by fate. She remembers that my father was the kind of man who wanted to help artists. I laugh out loud at this as it dawns on me how this detail is a prophecy. My father's life would become about helping artists. Gilda laughs with me, both of us warmed by memory of my father's unconditional support of art. As for my mother, Gilda simply says, "*Mabait ang mommy mo.*"

I remember seeing *The Butcher, The Baker, The Candlestick Maker* in our bookshelves. I had read her works in more than one class both in high school and college. As far as I was concerned, she was a god, up there together with other literary gods who formed part of my education: James Thurber, Anton Chekhov, Bienvenido Santos, Greg Brillantes.

My first up-close and personal "sighting" of her strangely enough was at my sister's wedding. She married the painter Elmer Borlongan, who is Gilda's *anak-anakan*. She came in a *saya* and I could not believe she was ... (what's the word?) actually *alive*.

I can no longer recall how we eventually became real friends or how she became real to me, and no longer just a revered object of study. Perhaps it was

being continually thrown together at lunches, exhibits, various *meriendas* with other writers, where, eventually cell phone numbers were exchanged.

In time, I learn that Gilda is a nocturnal creature. I send her a text message early in the morning thinking she is the kind of woman who wakes up at the crack of dawn, to tell her that someone was requesting that she give a talk somewhere. At two in the morning, I get the response, “*Please puwedeng huwag na?*” Eventually, we become regular text mates. She would send me one about a book she was reading. I would tell her what I was busy with. There was never any small talk with her, even via text message. It is always straight to the heart of the matter.

I have come to expect such late night exchanges and have found comfort in the fact that I can text her any random thing at any random time. At one such exchange, I sent this message:

Me: Tita, I need to stop being angry with my mother.

GCF: *Mahirap ang may ina. Bilib ako sa’yo.*

At one lunch at Gilda’s, I hand her the first edition copy from my mother’s shelf. She oohs and aahs, amazed that such a version still exists in the world. I ask her to write something for my mother, my father having passed away, and she writes this: “To the mother of many artists, our thanks.”

At some other lunch, she tells me about her own mother, a subject of many of her non-fiction pieces as well: “I was able to make peace with my mother. I had once bathed her *nung matanda na siya at may sakit* and she loved it so much, as if it were the best thing I did for her. But I was glad to do it. *Nung namatay na ang mother ko*, that’s when I realized I also had a share in that sorry relationship. *May kasalanan din ako. Hirap ako talagang tanggapin kasi ’yung idea na* I was the child and she was the parent but I had to be the mature one. But then I realized, with time, that there are no fixed roles. Forgiveness eventually came. I don’t want to live a life filled with regret, or worse, guilt.”

She says this with a kind of calm that I believe comes from having known the truth and having accepted that ironic truth very early on in life.

“Rica,” she says to me indulgently, in the tone one uses to explain to a child how to be better, “conflict, friction, and tension are important. That’s how you go higher in the spiritual scale.” The look on her face seems to tell me that she is perplexed at why I am confused that I am conflicted about my mother. Isn’t that par for the course?

I write an essay about almost losing my mother and it comes out in a newspaper. I text Gilda and humbly ask if she would read it. She panics via text because the househelp have thrown away the papers. I tell her not to panic and I will fax her a copy. But “I want to read it already!” she replies. A few hours later she texts to say a miracle has occurred! The old paper has been found! The second part of her



Photo by Elmer Borlongan

message reads: “*Your pieces are getting less giddy. More focused on essentials.*” I keep the message to this day.

As a writer and woman, I revisit her works again and again, not only to study form and technique; but also to study a way of being, and maybe even a way of proceeding in life. Today, she is that voice in my head that spurs me to gamble more, say more *real* more, stake more, just *be* more.

At a rally mourning the death of the National Artists Awards, we are exchanging pleasantries, engaging in the inanities of fashion, me commenting on her hat, for example. I know for a fact that Gilda has been in the running more than once, but I also know that Gilda does not care about such an award. Photographers jostle to take a shot of her, not knowing this other woman with her. She insists I be in the picture and grabs my mother. And so there is a picture of my mother, Gilda in her hat, and me somewhere in this world.

* * *

FOR ONE LUNCH, it is I who request an audience. There are work-related matters I need to discuss with her. But the undertone of our conversation is that the work will only take ten minutes. The rest of the time we can make *tsismis!* She tells me to bring the writer Tara Sering. She will invite the director Raymond Lee. It is my

second lunch with Raymond. It is Tara's second summons by Gilda. She was completely surprised the first time she was called. I reassured her that it was recognition of her talent. "Gilda wants to learn from you!"

I ask Gilda why she likes to hang out with young people. She tells me that she enjoys being with from them and calls them "her peers." She replies, "*Minsan mahihirap ang mga matatanda*. They think themselves fossilized. *Ang mga gusto nilang activities, 'di ko naman type.*"

At many of these lunches, I enjoy just watching her, perhaps because she derives so much pleasure from listening to people. She is inquisitive, curious, hungry to know more about the world. From Tara, she wants to know her opinion on the art and publishing scenes. From Elmer, she is interested in how he is able to read his visual language and plot his development as a painter. From me, she's interested to know why our family is the way it is. She's right about our being her peers because we all remain active in the art world. Gilda's perspective on age and progress is decidedly fresh and non-conventional, which is probably why we keep coming to her table.

Gilda lives in a home completely surrounded by art. The main house is accessed by a winding garden with large ferns placed in plastic laundry containers, suspended on a steel railing. The walls of the entrance have an orderly climbing vine, which I've never ever seen vines do willingly.

"That is Elo's creation," she tells me proudly when I ask her if I can copy this style for my own house. She rings the bell and asks Lyn-Lyn to ask Elo where he bought the plastic containers. Elo is her beloved husband and he is a silent figure in the house, changing the way our footsteps tread on the floor.

The garden leads to a bridge and a large mural by Elmer Borlongan, my brother-in-law. I know for a fact that if you take the smaller path straight away, you will find a small stage with paper lamps. Poetry readings and dance sessions are sometimes held here, although in the beginning it was the stage for the grandchildren.

If you turn left you will find the main sala. There is a large bookcase on one side of the wall and sculptures by Julie Lluch all around. The formal dining room is there as well. At the last lunch in this dining room, Gilda had served an incredible paté made of artichokes and animal-shaped *pan de monay* bought in Antipolo. (She would text me the recipe for the paté days later, as promised.) To the right is her guest bathroom, which showcases a mosaic made of broken shards from daughter-in-law Lanelle's ceramic kiln. This will eventually lead you to Gilda's private quarters.

She sits on an Executive High Chair, literally; and it is upholstered in a leopard print. She hugs me the way my favorite grandmother does, long and full. When she puts her lips on my cheeks, her nostrils take in my smell and her kiss is noisy. She takes me in her arms and we do a hug-cum-dance for a little less than half a minute.

On her large wall is another Borlongan mural, his famous figures grounded on panels. There is a dining table in her room, a luxury that I find so Gilda but she reassures me it is not whim but necessity that made bring her the table in. She sleeps on a low bed with a table at the head filled with books she is planning to read.

“It is a collection of moving books. Sometimes I take them out of that pile *pag* give up *na ako sa kanila*,” and out comes that characteristic deep-throated laugh punctuating and hiding innuendos and truths.

On her closet wall panel are the famous paintings of her house help by Olan Ventura. Paintings are central to Gilda’s life. Her sala also has a painting by Onib Olmedo. One of her favorite stories of Onib is of how he would draw on a table and sometimes he would draw out of the lines of the paper and onto the table. Onib was instrumental in further widening Gilda’s views about art. On one particular painting she is currently working on, Gilda says, “Onib came to me last night and the painting just happened!”

Gilda likes to do this when she paints. She calls on the masters of painting to come to her and help her with her pieces. She calls on a motley crew of dead artists:



Photo by Elmer Borlongan



Photo by Elmer Borlongan

Khalo, Picasso, Van Gogh, anyone really who might be willing to teach her as she paints throughout the night.

“I also like to dance with my paintings,” she says deadpan. “It’s important to play with your creations so that they’ll respond to you and want to appear.” She has been up all night these past few months, painting, preparing for a one-woman show slated for the end of this year. I look at her paintings and I must say they look like they’ve been danced with. She takes out her current crop of paintings, pastel-colored, filled with figures of men and women, decidedly Filipino. Her paintings are stories too. One painting she has titled “The Urban Poor.”

’Yan hospitality girl siya na may love child. This figure, mother ’yan na beautician. Eto ’yung father namatay na pero wala silang pera pang ospital. Eto naman foreigner na nagpakasal sa chimay. Eto maton na dating prison inmate.”

She doesn’t understand what I mean when I ask her what her creative process is. I struggle with explaining what I mean until I realize it is not a relevant question for her. Creativity is so intrinsic to her person and soul that there are no longer any divisions between her life and her art. During some other conversation she does

eventually say that what leads one to create is, “Anger, and a great love for your work. Anger to help you face it in your art.” She never does define for me what “it” stands for.

Gilda has achieved perhaps the highest level of artistry—the transformation of a real life into a living work of art. She is the artifact, herself. You can tell this is true by looking at her most private space. It is homage to the creative spirit, the way the items are haphazardly but creatively placed. The dining table has chairs of different styles which have jewel-toned cushions. A paper lamp helps in dividing the space between bed and table. A china cabinet stands at the center. When the food arrives, it is served on exquisite stoneware. Glasses are ornate and heavy. At one lunch there is a small vase with white flowers. At another lunch, there are yellow flowers. At yet another, varicolored gerberas. I am reminded of Monet line: “Above all else, I must always have flowers.” Perhaps Monet had come one night.

* * *

AT A FRIEND’S wedding where she is main sponsor, she sits beside me during the picture taking. She comments on my choice of colors—I am wearing a purple dress with red shoes. I comment on her earrings which are shaped like *anahaw* leaves dotted with three pearls at the center. She tells me they are her mother’s earrings. As we converse, all kinds of people come to greet her like she were an Empress dowager.

But you can tell there is relief that her part of the wedding is finally over. The lines around her eyes are more pronounced. She passes me a Glad bag of cashews. I look at her in amazement wondering how her complicated outfit could possibly hide such a thing! “I need food for my sugar levels,” she whispers. I grab a handful of nuts as we continue to survey the various permutations of wedding pictures being taken at the altar. I tell her, “Gosh they’re still clueless about how hard marriage is going to be.” She nods, both of us aware that warnings about the future are pointless.

Gilda had secretly married her husband when she was 22. Their marriage and its many ups and downs are chronicled in both her fiction and nonfiction. But she has learned to make peace with him as well. The wealth of flavors at mealtimes she owes to him. “He is really a foodie and he has an extremely refined tongue. You think I’m the housewife? No way! He’s much better at it. I’m completely talentless in housewifery. Elo makes my life possible,” she says with all honesty. “On top of that he takes cares of me in every other material way. That is why I can write and paint and bum around. *Mabait talaga siya. Good na ’yan!*”

At the reception, she shares a table with one of her closest friends, Mariel Francisco, soul sister and co-author of *The Spiritual Pillow Book*. At this moment though, Mariel cannot find Gilda and is walking around the reception area. I am watching this from afar and I am amused. It seems like a story waiting to unfold. I

then see them both later, walking, arm in arm. Gilda sees my inner smile and says, “*Si Mariel talaga! Social climber daw ako! Nakaupo ako with Bien and Frankie kasi gusto ko rin daw maging National Arist! Ha ha ha!*” Bien and Frankie are Bienvenido Lumbera and F. Sionil Jose. Mariel shakes her head indulgently. The social butterfly’s wings are clipped for a while as they take their rightful places. A few hours later, they both move to the table of Bien and Frankie where the major gods of literature all reside.

* * *

THE NEXT TIME I see her she is thinner and almost frailer. The last time I had seen her, she had walked me to my car and had almost slipped, her left leg involuntarily crossing over her right. “Arthritis,” she revealed to me. She talked about how she had begun to feel “more infirmed” than ever before. She does not say this sadly or with regret. It has made her choosier about what activities to be part of. But what is an art activity without Gilda’s presence?

Having lunch, at the table this time, with Elmer Borlongan—summoned after almost ten years of not having had an intimate conversation with her *anak-anakan*—our talk turns to art and artists. She obviously loves artists’ company and is always ready to sit at their feet and learn from them. If I were to be asked what Gilda quality I love the most, it would be this: her insatiable hunger to know more about the world. She defies the idea that age ensures wisdom or that learning atrophies or that the old no longer need to learn at all.

Her favorite phrases when she talks about art and artists are *ang cute, kakatuwa, ang ganda, kakaiba, wa ako ma-say! and o diba?* They are hip phrases from a very hip Lola. She renders criticism (“His last work was sharper”), advice (“Don’t do it Emong, it will dilute your work”), observation (“*Ang galing galing na niya! May disiplina na ang kamay niya!*”), prophecy (“Even back then, *magaling na siya,*) and suggestion (“Try painting this one scene I saw of five men wearing the *sando* five different ways!”)—all like rapid fire, as she and Elmer rattle off names of painters at what point they are in their careers, and which of their recent works they have both seen. It dawns on me that Gilda has been to every major art show this year. She has also seen more plays and more movies than I have, and I’m not talking of old movies. Such is her social-artistic calendar. And she is not always known, or invited.

She offers this telling story: “I went to watch *Boses* alone and it was full house! The usher brought me to the front to sit at the steps *na walang sandalan! Ang sakit-sakit sa likod!*” I laugh and tell her the usher must have been clueless as to who she was!

But everyone is willing to take her places. Raymond Lee writes down the schedule of Cinemalaya and they make plans for Raymond to fetch her to watch the films with her. Tara, Raymond and I all exchange numbers and make future plans to meet and collaborate as well. That’s something about us who are friends

with Gilda—also all become instant friends with each other, as if Gilda’s being friends with us automatically means we are the best of friends too!

This is one of Gilda’s other gifts—making people come together with synergy and do their best for art. At one lunch where I was paired with a playwright, that lunch spurred me to write an essay about death and loss.

She’s very good at telling whether someone is gifted or not. She tells us of the artist Gilbert Daroy who does the editorial cartoons for a major daily. How she called him, just introduced herself (for he did not know her from Adam) and asked him to illustrate one of her children’s books, just like that. She asks Elmer about the artist Don Salubayba; she is interested in working with him. She asks Raymond to help her look for someone to do animation for her.

She pulls out the drawings from her new book and I am in awe of how active she still is. As of this writing, the special issue of *Budhi* featuring a collection of her works has been released by the Ateneo Press. There is the major forthcoming painting exhibit at Silverlens Gallery. She is working on a new story for children ... And did I mention she is 79?

* * *

“*PAG CHRISTMAS*, HIGHLIGHT *ang* Christmas pageant. All the mothers and fathers would receive a box of *retazo* and they would have to dress their families as shepherds or kings, *basta ang* baby Jesus *’yung pinakabagong apo. Hindi na natuloy ’yun noong* the youngest was big enough to crawl out of the soapbox manger! And then the children started to write the Christmas pageant. They titled it ‘Slaughter of the Animals’ and it talked about how all the animals in the stable are eaten at Christmas because that’s what we were having—lechon, lamb chops, ham, etc. *Ayan, so hindi na naulit.*”

We are finally seated for a formal interview at her dining table. It would take weeks to convince her to do it and my trump card was the promise that I would bring Emong along with me.

We spend an hour at lunch. Then she rises to dress because she knows we will be taking pictures and video taping the proceedings. She comes out of her bathroom in a bright yellow oversized blouse that she fixes with an Obi belt. I sigh and say, “And here I am, just wearing my decade-old teaching blouse!” She insists I wear one of her scarves and put on one of her new lipsticks. We look in the mirror and I believe she is more youthful than I ever will be.

It is easy to forget that Gilda was once a young wife and was not always this confident. I cannot imagine her younger life before she became “GCE.”

“My first job was as a teacher at Uson Colleges. As far as my father was concerned, teaching was the only job for me. *Hindi raw ako pwedeng* secretary or

journalist. I taught literature for third and fourth year high school students. I felt stupid sometimes. I would be teaching the poem ‘The Daffodils,’ which was irrelevant to their lives, and I had one student who was a starlet and one who was a stevedore! *Kawawa naman sila at kawawa naman ako!* The highlight of my days was stealing out to Ma Mon Luk during break periods for *mami* and *siopao* during lunch.”

“But Tita, what were you like as a mother?” I press, trying to search for the young Gilda in her face. There is a portrait of her that I’ve seen, with long, wavy hair pinned at the sides. She was beautiful.

“I was a playmate. More than anything I wanted my children to feel safe and secure. I did not want them to be afraid of anything. Children should be what they want to be and parents should not do what they want to do through their children!”

I ask her what I want most to truly know about her: what makes you so brave? She gives me an astounding answer:

“I am brave as an artist. *Sigurado ako lagi sa gagawin ko.* I’m certain that if I do this, it will come out good. I lost an arm and a leg with ‘Luna: An *Aswang* Romance,’ but no one will forget it. I have always tried my best. It may not always have been the best really, but that’s okay because that was the best I *could* do at the time.”

Weeks later I am at a dinner and she sends this text message: “*Alam ko na ba’t di mo nakuha ’yung text ko! Pinatext ko sa yaya at pinadala kay Recah!*” I smile from where I am, understanding her relish at this funny anecdote, the writer in her finding pleasure in the turning of the word “Rica.”

At our last lunch, I mention that even in my moments when I doubt my God and my faith, which is often, I will always say the line “and if I die before I wake, I pray to God my soul to take” right before I sleep. It is the last vestiges of a very Catholic upbringing. She admits to still having it as well; she finds herself reciting the “Act of Contrition” every night, but only as a mantra.

Gilda prays by meditating, having given up religion a long, long time ago and has chosen to work harder on her spirituality. She clarifies for me what meditation truly is: it is not time to imagine and play in your head. True meditation is an emptiness of thought. It is more than anything, an exercise in discipline. Her eyes sharpen as she says these to me. But she is honest, “I’m actually not very good at it. Your mind is supposed to be blank and you’re not supposed to entertain yourself but sometimes Beethoven appears and I can’t help it. Ha ha ha.”

I theorize that Gilda’s grand life is perhaps premised on this quietness. Despite what seems like evidence of a very public life, Gilda’s most precious moments occur in this room with the flowers, the dining table, and the paintings. It is here where she calls upon other artists to join her. It is here that she dances with her creations. It is here where she meditates and stills her mind. In this sacred space, Gilda can best act as medium for the life force that makes all things bright and beautiful.