

THE INDEX OF FORBIDDEN BOOKS

PAUL S. DE GUZMAN

a. Alimuom.

He looks up. What he sees is the space, shaped like a U, like a jaw, cut out from the upper floor. The gap of the U is where the corrugated steps of the escalator ascend, flatten, vanish; the U itself is toothed with iron banisters, framing a fraction of the upper floor's ceiling: parallel lines of fluorescent lamps, the jutting steel coronae of the smoke detectors, a security camera affixed to the exact centre. The camera rotates calmly, taking everything in: God's eye spying on the world's transgressions.

It is cold. It's only been two minutes since he entered this building, and here, as he stands facing the escalator leading to the fourth floor, he feels the hairs on his arms stand on end, now free of moisture's weight.

The escalator's humming cowers under seething layers of piped-in music. In the lull between songs, he searches for this sound. This sound is constant: when the music stops, when the chatter dies down, the escalator's whirring is there where silence should be.

This is the National Book Store Super Branch in Cubao, Quezon City.

He gets on the escalator, lets himself be taken upstairs. He discovers a rhythm to the escalator's movement: hum, hum, hum, catch; hum, hum, hum, catch. He imagines a secret message is being conveyed to him in Morse code by the wheels and axles underneath the rising treads. He doesn't understand Morse code.

With the rise in altitude is the rise in humidity and temperature; it's as if the transition between floors requires him to feel the subtle gradients that lie between cool and dry, warm and humid. As he steps off the escalator he finds the air-conditioning on this floor has been switched off.

This is the fourth floor. Hanging directly over the escalator head is a red plastic plate with white letters across it. 'PREVIOUSLY OWNED BOOKS.'

He looks around. There must be a little more than ten thousand books here, shelved with the spine out, the spine turned away; the front cover exposed, the back cover exposed; the others not shelved at all, just left in piles on six large tables.

He inhales and automatically thinks of a Tagalog word. *Alimuom*. The smell of airborne dust weighed down by rain. The fleeting middle ground between wet and dry, dust and mud.

On this floor, with these books, it's almost as if this middle ground were preserved, or slowed down. Humidity takes its time-lapse toll on ageing paper, melting the glue of each book's spine to loosen moisture-fattened pages.

No one besides him is on the floor—even the security guard who usually takes it upon himself to be on the lookout for shoplifters, or prostitutes soliciting clients, or the saleslady who cuts rolls of clear plastic wrapping into one-metre, two-metre, and three-metre fractions, is conspicuously absent.

He turns around again, like the eye-of-God security camera, taking everything in.

b. Rust.

Two and a half of this floor's four walls are made of floor-to-ceiling glass, but makeshift plywood walls have been put up next to the east- and south-facing windows. Behind these enclosures are boxes containing more books, each box stacked carefully atop another.

Not that there is anything worth seeing outside: just badly maintained buildings lining streets that don't quite form a decent grid, like the ruins of a civilisation that existed before the discovery of urban planning. He walks to the west-facing glass wall, stares out. It's the Araneta Coliseum just across the street, sporting a garish new yellow-and-blue paint job, draped in banners announcing a phone number for pizza delivery, an international cockfighting derby, game three of the All Filipino Conference championship basketball games. He turns back, walks to the rack of books closest to the windows.

One habit he has never gotten rid of is repeatedly sweeping the roof of his mouth with his tongue. Occasionally he's surprised at the absent fissure in the middle of his hard palate; all there is is smooth, warm flesh.

He was six when his palate was surgically corrected. Now at nineteen he still remembers the taste of blood after waking up from surgery: liquid rust seeping from his mouth's soggy roof. He was scared of opening his mouth, imagining blood escaping and trickling out. He didn't immediately attempt speech to know whether there would be a difference.

He knew there were microbes thriving in the surgical wounds; they generated a sick-sour taste, an odour of decay. He kept his mouth shut, feeling with his tongue the recovery of the soft-

palate flaps that had been stretched and dovetailed over the fissure. Whenever his adoptive parents asked him how he was, he didn't say a thing. He looked at them. Smiled with his lips pressed tight.

He picks out a book. *Mon Dernier Soupir, autobiographie* of someone called Luis Buñuel. In French. He knows neither Luis Buñuel nor French. He puts it back, picks another. Nathalie Sarraute's *Tropismes*, beat up, back cover gone, spine shattered, also in French. He doesn't know Nathalie Sarraute, either. There are two more copies.

c. Speaking Slowly.

Eight out of ten times people's response to what he says is 'Ha?' There's no point in talking; the response is that one syllable anyway. In the few instances he can convince himself that people will respond to him differently, he speaks slowly, patiently. Repeats himself. As if he were talking to a stupid child.

When they do respond, they speak to him slowly, patiently.

Cleft-palate surgery must be done as early as six months after birth. Not knowing this, his mother waited till he was six years old and had adoptive parents willing to shoulder the expenses.

What his mother found was a couple in their fifties whose kids were all married and living elsewhere. His mother told them, 'He's a very quiet child.'

'We love quiet kids,' the couple said. Turned their attention to him, smiled, pouted their lips in the direction of the *Funny Komiks* he was holding. 'Do you like reading?'

He nodded. He looked down, turned the komiks to the next page. 'Planet op di Eyps' by Roni Santiago. He didn't know this was a spoof of the Charlton Heston movie. He didn't know who

Charlton Heston was. He knew nothing about the Statue of Liberty lying on the beach. He didn't yet know about the Statue of Liberty. But he found 'Planet op di Eyps' funny and thought it was perfect that *Funny Komiks* was publishing it.

A few weeks later he was wheeled into the operating room. When the anaesthetic wore off, he found the couple watching him, making funny faces, giggling, wriggling their fingers before his eyes. 'Ooh, our baby's awake.' He didn't ask where his mother was.

The longer it takes for patients with cleft palates to be operated on, the smaller their chances are of speaking normally. They are also at an increased risk of suffering from chronic otitis media, which then raises their risk of losing their sense of hearing. He didn't go deaf, but his voice failed to appropriate the fricatives, plosives, and sibilants of conventional language. At first he had lessons with a speech therapist, but after a few months without any perceptible difference, he just refused to be brought to the clinic.

His adoptive parents insisted on being called mommy and daddy, and thought the way he said them cute. When they asked him something that required an answer other than yes or no, they ceremoniously prepared themselves to listen to him. Made eye contact. Controlled their breathing. Held his hands. When he was done speaking, they always said 'O.K.,' smiled encouragingly, congratulated him on the improvement in his speech. 'O.K., that's good, you're just as normal as the other kids at school,' to everything he said. But whenever they sent him to the sari-sari store, he didn't think the 'Ha?' the storekeeper said signalled improvement at all. He didn't think the barely controlled snickers he heard around him whenever the teacher forced him to recite in class were a sign of improvement, either.

Having read about people who lose legs and yet feel ghost pains in the space where their legs used to be, he believed the congenital cleft was still there, making its presence felt every time he spoke.

d. Incunabula.

He must have been in fifth grade when he first heard the expression, 'read between the lines'. He literally did that. He enjoyed looking at Magic Eye prints, those pictures of seemingly random shapes, which, if one stared at for a while, would reveal a bigger, three-dimensional-seeming image. He treated the pages of books as though they were Magic Eye prints; he went as far as intentionally crossing his eyes while looking at the page, thinking the spaces between letters and words and paragraphs formed coded messages. They did not. But one time, he was already in high school, he crossed his eyes so hard he thought he saw something between the neat lines detailing the different phyla in the animal kingdom, from Porifera to Arthropoda to Chordata, in his biology textbook. He thought the patterns resembled pictograms. After a while his eyes hurt, unable to decrypt the lines.

He decides to survey the books spine by spine, shelf by shelf, rack by rack. He walks the spaces between the rows of books, the way his eyes searched for meaning in the spaces between lines of print in his biology textbook. Anything that seems remotely familiar, he will pick up; anything that is wittily titled, he will pick up. He sees Stephen King's *Tommyknockers*. He sees the 'Les' that precedes *Tommyknockers*. He discovers that books in French have spines on which the titles go up instead of down. Keep away from those, he tells himself.

Angels, the 'stunning' debut of someone called Denis Johnson, who in the 'about the author' page claims to have lived in Manila for a time. 'One of the best novels of the year.' The year is 1984.

As old as I am, he notes. Fifty pesos.

John Banville's *The Newton Letter*, a 'Rubik's Cube of a book, full of alignments and variations,' 'now filmed under the title *Reflections*, directed by Kevin Billington, with a screenplay by John Banville.' Thirty-five pesos.

The 'ground-breaking—no pun intended—and comprehensive' *A Guide to Buying Real Estate in Quebec: 1978* by Rémy Marathe and Helen Steeply. Fifteen pesos.

'Devoted to short fiction that ignores preconceptions, fiction not found in conventional literary magazines ... works that test the boundaries of form and content.' *Between C&D, New Writing from the Lower East Side Magazine*, edited by Joel Rose and Catherine Texier. 'What can you find between C and D?' he asks himself, reads the back-cover blurbs. No explanation, so he puts it back. Fifty pesos.

Vanna Speaks: The Untold Story of Vanna White, the perpetually smiling and clapping woman who peddles vowels in the American game show *Wheel of Fortune*. One hundred thirty-nine pesos.

At least that last one he recognises.

e. Witness.

He didn't go straight to college; he 'rested' for a full year. 'It's O.K., baby,' his adoptive parents, who were on their way to retirement, said. 'You want anything? We can buy cake and candies from the grocery after work.' He rarely replied to their questions. His voice too was on a sabbatical. He stayed in his room, reading the detective stories of Sue Grafton, going from 'A' is for *Alibi* to 'I' is for *Innocent* in three months.

In between chapters he would look out of his bedroom window and watch the maid of his next-door neighbour working in the kitchen. There was something almost solemn about the banality of chores: something resembling ceremony occurred with the preparation of meals, the washing of dishes, the disposal of trash. Everything to him seemed fraught with significance. Food smells were like smoke signals, the switching on and off of lights like lighthouse warnings.

The maid mostly had her eyes cast down, unaware of being observed. Sometimes she would dance without warning, her limbs flung in different directions, her facial expression stretched to its limit, like a theatre actress straining her facial muscles for the benefit of the people in the back rows.

Halfway through '*F*' is for *Fugitive* he started noticing the man going furtively in through the back door after lunch, after the youngest kid of the neighbour had been picked up by the school bus. She looked left and right before letting him in. Quiet would settle in the house. Less than an hour later he walked out, looking like he had just stepped out of the shower. Whistling. Then she, in the kitchen, continued her interrupted dishwashing. More singing and dancing, facial expression and movement now even more elaborate.

When he started reading '*H*' is for *Homicide* he stopped seeing the man visiting his neighbour's maid. She too was gone. The schedule of food smells and light signals had been upset: all cooking occurred in the morning when he was not yet awake, all washings in the evenings when he was already asleep. At midday there was only silence.

f. Right Answers.

A private consultation with his fiction-writing teacher, a belletrist whose first book of stories was hailed as 'one of the best Filipino short-story collections in English.' The book set

a record in local publishing by selling out its print run of five hundred copies within a mere five years.

This was in his first fiction workshop, the first semester of his second year. ‘What exactly do you want to say in this story?’ the teacher asked him. A lock of his usually slick hair falling over an eye. Reading glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose. Veins popping out of his hands. Dovetailed fingers resting on his desk.

‘I write because I can’t speak,’ he wanted to say. It was a line he had embedded in an earlier submission: the story of a deaf-mute child given up for adoption who becomes a best-selling crime novelist. The teacher underscored that statement. ‘Show, don’t tell,’ he admonished. ‘Avoid easy sentimentality, editorialising, cheap tricks.’

‘I don’t know,’ he replied, although he knew that wasn’t the right answer. ‘I mean, I know. I’ve got a lot to say, but somehow I can’t get it out. They’re just there.’ It wasn’t accurate either, but he thought that would have to do.

He could see the teacher trying hard not to look like he was having a hard time deciphering his speech. ‘You know what a film critic once said about that? “If you have nothing to express it is very much like thinking you have so much to express that you don’t know how to say it.”’ His teacher smiled and continued: ‘We don’t mean to be snide, but we need to know where you’re coming from. We’re not saying your stories are bad; all we’re trying to say is that they are too ... different from what we’re teaching you, and we need to at least get a handle on what you’re trying to express and why you want to express it.’

He didn’t know what to say: too many words had been let out, too many ideas; after close to a minute he was still trying to decrypt what his teacher meant. ‘Who do you enjoy reading?’ the teacher suddenly asked.

‘Stephen King,’ he immediately said. ‘Especially the mystery-type books like *Dolores Claiborne* and *The Green Mile* series.’

‘O.K. Who else?’

‘I enjoy spy and crime novels. I like Trevanian’s *Shibumi*. Tom Clancy. I have read until letter “Q” of Sue Grafton’s *Kinsey Millhone Mysteries*.’

The teacher disassembled his dovetailed fingers. Took off his glasses. ‘How about The Canon?’ The capital letters in his speech rose like monuments.

He blinked, sat still.

The teacher shifted in his seat. ‘You know, Dickens, Flaubert, Hardy?’

‘Oh yes. I like the Hardy Boys.’

‘*Thomas Hardy. Jude the Obscure? Tess of the D’Urbervilles?* You’re an English major, for Christ’s sake. You’re supposed to have read these, or at least recognise the names.’

He must have looked terrified. The teacher softened. ‘Look. We’re sorry. But let us tell you something. Stephen King’s O.K. Sue Granton and Tom Fancy too. But let us ask ourselves: given say fifty years will the commercial appeal of Tom Fancy and Stephen King continue? These books will disappear, unlike Shakespeare, Austen, or Dante. Go for the universal, the timeless, as opposed to the ephemeral. O.K.?’

His voice degenerated into a whisper. ‘But have you read them?’

A beat, two beats. His teacher gave in to the temptation of saying the nonword he most resented to hear: ‘Ha?’

He stood up, looked at his teacher. ‘Nothing.’

g. Apocrypha.

The Sue Grafton novels are his adoptive parents'. They both would have wanted to become lawyers, except that he had got her pregnant just before they filed their application to law school. Instead the man has spent more than two-thirds of his lifetime teaching political science in a small private college, while the woman, who started as a public-high-school teacher, has spent a good thirty years of her life as a Special Education coordinator at the district office of the Department of Education.

They liked—still do—thinking of themselves as good parents; they tried hard to make him feel as if he were their biological son. 'We love you, baby,' they kept telling him. 'Don't you ever forget that.'

They encouraged his reading. They allowed him unrestricted access to the library of crime and mystery novels in their bedroom. Musty old volumes of *The Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*. They loved catching him sneaking into their bedroom. They would get mock-angry at his intrusion, and when he was about to cry, they'd hug him and laugh. 'No, it's O.K. You may come in as often as you want. You don't have to ask permission. After all you're our baby.'

Our baby. As a kid he bristled every time he heard it; he didn't understand why, but he didn't like the way they said it. It was as if the more they tried to treat him like their real kid, the more he felt like he was adopted. He thought that they were merely guided by some secret checklist on how one could be a good adoptive parent, or forcing themselves into an ideal space within which good adoptive parents should easily fit.

When in high school he learned the word 'condescend', he was able to convince himself that he had found the word to describe the way they treated him.

During that quiet year between high school and college, he discovered the alphabetical row of Sue Grafton novels in a special section in their library. *'A' is for Alibi* down to *'O' is for Outlaw*. Kinsey Millhone, methodical and cerebral woman investigator, the point of whose men troubles he didn't quite get. But Kinsey values her independence. Puts her life on the line. Solves mysteries by the end of the book.

By the time the neighbour's maid disappeared, he had closed his windows shut, ignored all sounds coming from outside. To entertain himself during reading breaks he left the humid darkness of his room and entered the air-conditioned coolness of his adoptive parents'. He stared at the bookshelves. Made as if the spines of the Sue Grafton books were alphabet blocks. Rearranged them every day to form words, only partly hoping his parents would notice.

At first he lined up the following: *'C' is for Corpse*; *'O' is for Outlaw*; *'D' is for Deadbeat*; *'E' is for Evidence*. He said hello to them one day by putting together *'H' is for Homicide* and *'I' is for Innocent*. The longest word he was able to spell out was *'C' is for Corpse*; *'O' is for Outlaw*; *'M' is for Malice*; *'E' is for Evidence*; *'D' is for Deadbeat*; *'I' is for Innocent*; *'A' is for Alibi*; *'N' is for Noose*. They never noticed.

One day they came home with a surprise. 'Guess what, baby.' They brought home *'P' is for Peril* and *'Q' is for Quarry*. In his excitement he finished both books in one day. Then there was nothing else to read. When he went back to his parents' bedroom to return the books, he put four volumes together: *'H' is for Homicide*; *'E' is for Evidence*; *'L' is for Lawless*; *'P' is for Peril*.

h. Babel.

He finally sees something he knows he will like. Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park*. 'Now a major motion picture from the director of *Coal Miner's Daughter*.' Three bodies found buried in

the snow covering Moscow's Gorky Park. Faces sheared off their skulls, the whorls on their fingers burned off. The enigmatic police officer Arkady Renko investigates.

He sits down on the floor, surprised by its coldness. Starts reading the 'best thriller since *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*'. Between pages four and five he hears footsteps. He listens, thinking the security guard or the saleslady has finally taken their post.

The giggling of a girl. 'Stop. Don't.'

A man's voice. 'Why not? There's nobody here.'

'But there's a camera...'

'That doesn't work.'

'How do you know?'

'Trust me. That doesn't work.'

He tenses up, tries to be as quiet as possible. He closes *Gorky Park*, sliding it in between two volumes in a tight row of books. The available space is much too small. What he does is slide out the thick volume lodged between Leonard Maltin's *1982 Movie & Video Guide* (fifty pesos) and the *1979 Sarah Lawrence Review* (forty-five pesos). The book is shedding its onionskin-thin pages. Its front and back covers are gone, and the title page speaks in what seems to him the language of spells and prayers. *Index librorvm prohibitorvm. Typis polyglottis Vaticanis. MDCCCXLVIII*. It sells for thirty-five pesos. He puts it facedown on the floor.

More giggling. 'Stop, stop. We might get caught.' There are blank spaces sawn out of the back panels of each shelf, and one can see through them as far as ten rows down. He peers, and sees

the back pockets of faded jeans, about six rows from where he is. The concertina pleats of a black-and-white-plaid skirt, fluttering from behind the jeans. He recognises the plaid skirt to be the uniform of a nearby Catholic school.

From where he sits he can see blue jeans and plaid skirt facing each other. 'Don't worry, I'll take care of you,' says blue jeans, his hands groping plaid skirt's ass. His right wrist has a barbed-wire bracelet tattooed around it. 'We won't take long. We won't get caught, promise. Trust me.' 'O.K.' And then the wet sound of kissing.

He needs an excuse: he can't be caught watching. He picks up the book he has left on the floor. He opens the book to a random page, and is surprised that it isn't *Gorky Park*. Names and words and dates from a babel of tongues tumble across the page. Dulaurens, Henri-Joseph; *La Chandelle d'Arras, poème héroï-comique en XVIII chants*; 1766. Dumas, Alexandre (filius); *La question du divorce*; 1880. Dumas, Alexandre (filius); *Omnes fabulae amatoriae*; 1863. Dupin, André-Marie-Jean-Jacques; *Libertés de l'église gallicane: manuel du droit public ecclésiastique français, suivi d'un appendice contenant plusieurs questions sur l'Index, le pouvoir des légats, l'abus des excommunications et la question romaine*; 1860. Dupin, Louis Ellies; *Traité de la puissance ecclésiastique et temporelle*; 1708. The meaning of this enumeration fails to register in his mind, so he looks up from the page, watches them again.

'Please.' 'No, I don't like.' 'Do it for me, please.' 'No, I'm scared.' 'I'll take care of you.' 'It's embarrassing.' 'Put a, just shut up and do it!' The owner of the plaid skirt seems to sink into the floor. The waist of the skirt, then the white blouse, the sloping shoulder, the white neck. And then the face, in profile.

Her eyes shine with either fear or excitement. She can't be older than seventeen. Her hair was dyed to approximate the colour of fire. Some clumps cling to the man's faded jeans, as though

burning the fabric. She unzips the jeans before her, the hands with the barbed-wire tattoo grabbing her head.

Then she looks to her left. Notices movement six book racks down. Shrieks, springs up. ‘There’s somebody there.’

‘Where?’ ‘There, look!’ ‘Putang ina! Hoy! What are you doing there? Hoy! I’m talking to you!’ He hears the squeak of rubber soles. The squeak crescendoes.

He freezes on the floor, listening, waiting for any sign that will tell him what to do. He hears the voice of a woman belting out ‘Naninibugho ako bay-beh, pag may kasama kang iba,’ through hidden loudspeakers, the muted rustle of the open book in front of him, the accumulating threats and approaching steps of the couple six rows down, the barely detectable ‘Hum, hum, hum, catch; hum, hum, hum, catch’ of the escalators further away. ‘Stand up! I’ve already seen you, you pervert!’ The heat of the room draws beads of sweat across his back and from beneath his scalp, so he touches the floor, as if channeling the cold through his skin, willing it to course through his now shaking limbs. He trains his sight on the book lying open on his lap. Crosses his eyes at the line that says, ‘Gregorovius, Ferdinand; *Geschichte der Stadt Rom in Mittelalter vom v-xvi Jahrhundert*; 1874.’ Looks for a secret code, strains to catch what it means. Looks again. Strains some more.

‘Hoy!’

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