the coming-of-age experience because it is the first of our many encounters with the world's evil, as well as the first of our many encounters with the good.

READING AND WRITING THE PHILIPPINE COMING-OF-AGE STORY: A BRIEF SURVEY OF SELECT WORKS FROM PHILIPPINE LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

As one might expect, coming of age in the West is different from coming of age in the Philippines. At this point, it would be good to look at our own body of anglophone literature, which also has numerous examples of the coming-of-age story. While these stories share resonances with their Western counterparts, the Filipino writer mediates the coming-of-age experience with cultural and historic nuances, which are true for the Philippine reality from which these stories emerge. Thus, certain arguments can be made for what can possibly be considered the Philippine coming-of-age story.

In the two-volume anthology *The Children's Hour*, Gemino H. Abad and Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo gather several short stories in English written by Filipino writers. These stories feature the themes of childhood and coming of age. The first volume, edited by Abad, brings together works from the older generation of Filipino writers, such as NVM Gonzalez and Gilda Cordero-Fernando. The second volume, edited by Pantoja-Hidalgo, features the works of younger writers, such as Vicente Garcia Groyon and FH Batacan, among others.

While *The Children's Hour* gathers a fine selection of stories about childhood and coming of age, it cannot be considered an exhaustive archive of Philippine coming-of-age literature. In fact, the sparse introductions by both Abad and Pantoja-Hidalgo provide little to no insight into the editorial process employed in the selection of the stories. Absent from both introductions is a clear definition of "stories on childhood," in the case of Abad,[24] and an "initiation story," in the case of Pantoja-Hidalgo.[25] The fact that the editors used two different terms as qualifiers for the stories that appear in this anthology underscores the fact that the theoretical thread that binds the selected stories is loose at best. This leads me to suppose that *The Children's Hour* may have never intended to be anything other

24 Gemino H. Abad, introduction to *The Children's Hour Stories on Childhood*, ed. Gemino H. Abad, vol. 1 (University of the Philippines Press, 2007), vii.

25 Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, introduction to *The Children's Hour Stories on Childhood*, ed. Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, vol. 2 (University of the Philippines Press, 2007), x.

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than a collection of short stories centered around the theme of childhood. Here, I feel, is a missed opportunity to analyze with more rigor the formal as well as cultural characteristics of what could possibly be considered the Philippine coming-of-age story. Despite this shortcoming though, *The Children's Hour* is an important collection in that it is, to my knowledge, the first attempt to anthologize stories of childhood and coming of age written in English by Filipino writers. And because this anthology is arranged along a chronological timeline, this two-part anthology allows readers to see how our representation of childhood and coming of age has changed historically over time.

In this discussion, I attempt to put together my own brief survey of our coming-of-age stories in English. This is for the purpose of contextualizing my own stories within the current landscape of our anglophone literature. The selection of the stories in this survey is guided by a thematic concern that I explore in my own writing. This theme is the development of a child's ability to recognize good vis-à-vis evil, which to me is the primary marker of a child's coming of age. Hence, this survey does not seek to define the coming-of-age story in literary terms, which is something I would rather leave to the literary critic. If anything, it shows a particular aspect of the coming-of-age experience—a child's discovery of good and evil—and how this is rendered with cultural nuance in works written in English by Filipino writers, myself included.

With this kind of framework in mind, I have chosen to take a look at Manuel E. Arguilla's "Morning in Nagrebcan," NVM Gonzalez's "The Bread of Salt," Juan T. Gatbonton's "Clay," and Gilda Cordero-Fernando's "A Wilderness of Sweets." Taking off from the categorization of writers in *The Children's Hour*, these stories would most likely slide into the first volume of the anthology, which according to Abad represents our older generation of writers. It is interesting to note that these four writers experienced their own childhood and coming of age in the years prior to World War II, with Arguilla being born in 1911, Gonzalez in 1915, Gatbonton in 1928, and Cordero-Fernando in 1930.[26] As such, these works

26 In *The Best Philippine Short Stories of the Twentieth Century*, Isagani R. Cruz collects a number of notable works from Filipino writers in English. Among these writers are NVM Gonzalez, Manuel E. Arguilla, and Gilda Cordero-Fernando. Cruz accompanies the works with a bibliographic entry about each author, which includes their birth year. See Isagani R. Cruz, ed., *The Best Philippine Short Stories of the Twentieth Century: An Anthology of Fiction in English* (Tahanan Books, 2000), 199, 207, and 303. Juan T. Gatbonton's story does not appear in Cruz's collection but is anthologized in *Aura: The Gay Theme in Philippine Fiction in English*, edited by J. Neil C. Garcia. See Gatbonton's biographic entry in J. Neil C. Garcia, ed., *Aura: The Gay Theme in Philippine Literature in English* (Anvil Publishing, 2012), 352.

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give contemporary readers a glimpse into a childhood that may already seem unfamiliar, since it takes place in a vastly different place and time.

Manuel E. Arguilla's "Morning in Nagrebcan" is set in rural La Union, where Arguilla spent his own childhood. The story focuses on Baldo and his beloved puppy. It opens with an idyllic provincial morning—a scene that has come to be identified with Arguilla's literary style . Baldo's younger brother, Ambo, wants to play with the puppy as well, but Baldo does not let him. The puppy is tugged and pulled about, until a fist fight erupts between the brothers. Out of instinct, the puppy bites Ambo's hand, drawing blood. Things take a turn for the worst when the window of their hut is flung open, and their father, Tang Ciaco, drunk from the night before, sees Ambo's bloody hand.

The two brothers are frozen with fear at the sight of their father. More frightening for Baldo though is the piece of firewood his father carries as he makes his way toward them. In full view of his sons, Tang Ciaco bludgeons the helpless puppy to death with the piece of firewood. The brutal display of violence reduces Baldo to uncontrollable tears. After Tang Ciaco kills the puppy, he then turns to attack the weeping Baldo and, later on, Ambo as well.

"Morning in Nagrebcan" is a violently clear representation of a Filipino child's first encounter with evil. The brutal killing of the puppy causes Baldo to fall from innocence and come of age in a most traumatic way. The events that surround Baldo's coming of age are doubly troubling, because Baldo is not only faced with evil for the first time but also with death. As readers, we are quite certain that by the end of the story, Baldo is no longer a child.

The violence in Arguilla's story is quite shocking, especially given the idyllic setting in which the story takes place. For Baldo, evil intrudes into the quiet provincial home in the form of his own father. We learn from earlier on in the story that Tang Ciaco is a drunkard who frequently beats his wife and children, seeing them as the reasons for their poverty. When Baldo's father realizes that a crowd has gathered to watch in horror as he publicly beats his sons, Tang Ciaco cries out to them, "They are mine. . . . I feed them and I can do anything I want with them."[27]

Sadly, the notion of children being mere property is still prevalent in some rural areas of the Philippines. This is especially true in agrarian

27 Manuel E. Arguilla, "Morning in Nagrebcan," in *Philippines Short Stories 1925–1940*, ed. Leopoldo Y. Yabes (University of the Philippines Press, 1975), 353.

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communities where tending the fields requires no small amount of manpower. In impoverished farming villages, some parents still see their children as labor they must tap in order to ensure survival from land. In Arguilla's story, one notices the automatic fear with which the brothers regard their father. This is telling of a troubled parent-child relationship, where a parent's view of his or her children is mostly utilitarian. Having been born into a rural environment rife with economic challenges, it is possible that the brothers in Arguilla's story have had very little time to be children at all. In fact, the purest image of childhood in the story is Baldo's puppy, which evil comes for in a swift and violent way.

In comparison to "Morning in Nagrebcan," NVM Gonzalez's "The Bread of Salt," features a subtler kind of violence. The protagonist in Gonzalez's story is a young violinist who desires the attention of Aida, a mestiza lass residing in an old Spanish mansion. In desiring her, he also desires access to the privileged world she moves around in. He is briefly given access to this world when he is invited to play the violin at one of the parties at Aida's house as part of a band. The young protagonist's longing for Aida is quickly thwarted, though, by a knowing glance from Aida herself, who catches the protagonist helping himself too much to the food laid out on a table. The disapproving look from Aida is the young protagonist's first encounter with social grace, which, in this story, acts to gatekeep the boundaries between social classes. Similar to the narrator of "Araby," Gonzalez's young protagonist is suddenly made aware of the worlds he cannot access. At this point of the story, the protagonist experiences evil in the form of a disapproving glance from his beloved. When he picks up the humble *pan de sal* at the end of the story, the young violinist accepts the fact that there are certain places off-limits to him and certain people with whom he cannot associate.

J. Neil C. Garcia, in his postcolonial reading of "The Bread of Salt," points to the American public school system as an institution occupying a place of cultural significance in the story.[28] The concept of egalitarianism, a value engendered by the American-established public schools of Gonzalez's youth, is what allows the story's protagonist to

28 J. Neil C Garcia, "Translating the Real: Rethinking Postcolonial Resistance in Philippine Anglophone Literature," in *Myth and Writing Occasional Prose* (University of the Philippines Press, 2016), 74.

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entertain thoughts of associating with the wealthy Aida in the first place. When the protagonist is betrayed by his own hunger, feudal habits resurface, quickly dispelling any dreams of freely trafficking between social classes. Aida's disapproving glance is very much informed by her subject position as a member of the privileged elite. Garcia points out that American colonization, in spite of its promise to modernize the broken socioeconomic structures left behind by Spain, ended up merely rehashing the old feudal system by working through an already entrenched coterie of landed elite.[29] The young protagonist in "The Bread of Salt" therefore finds himself navigating a tenuous landscape, where feudal lines are still drawn between socioeconomic classes. This is the larger evil confronted by the child protagonist in Gonzalez's story. Sadly, it is an evil that persists up until today.

Juan T. Gatbonton's "Clay" is similar to the "The Bread of Salt" in that it centers on the desires of a young protagonist, except that in "Clay," these desires take on a more sexual tone. The protagonist in Gatbonton's story is a young boy, who, as he claims, is best friends with an American army mechanic named Clay. At the beginning of the story, the reader learns that the protagonist had introduced Clay and his teacher, Miss Rosete, and that both of them had met a previous party. A second party is held toward the end of the story, where Clay brags about his time with Miss Rosete. Although not explicitly stated, the reader understands that Clay had some form of sexual contact with Miss Rosete. Upon hearing this, the protagonist runs away from the party, leaving both Clay and the readers wondering why.

It is possible that the young protagonist, through the workings of some unresolved Oedipal complex, secretly desires Miss Rosete and is, therefore, unnerved by the fact that Clay successfully beds her before he does. But as Garcia points out, what is more interesting about this story is the male homosocial bond that exists between the young protagonist and Clay.[30]

Gatbonton's story is strewn with sexually charged descriptions of Clay. This clues the reader into the protagonist's clear infatuation for his American friend. As Clay performs his work as a mechanic, the protagonist seems thoroughly engrossed in his friend's beguilingly

29 Garcia, 75.

30 J.Neil C. Garcia, introduction to *Aura: The Gay Theme in Philippine Fiction in English*, ed. J. Neil C. Garcia (Anvil Publishing, 2012), 22.

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muscular body, as evidenced by the young boy's fixation on the sweat that "dripped from [Clay's] face and fell on his arms as he strained, tightening the bolts, running his dirty hands over the engine."[31] Clay's body comes into glorious focus in the story's most memorable scene—him swimming naked in a secluded forest pool under the protagonist's quiet but meaningful gaze.

The curious friendship between the protagonist and Clay traces its roots back to Ancient Greece, where tightly bonded pairs of male soldiers lived, trained, went to battle, and even perished side by side. Normally, one half of this pair is a younger man with less experience, while his counterpart is a man a few years his senior, presumably at the peak of his masculine prowess. By closely associating with an older, more experienced male, the younger of the pair hopes to gain some degree of knowledge and skill.[32] As can be expected, the two usually become lovers—best friends, so to speak—who also engage in sex. This type of male-male relationship has persisted throughout the ages as is still seen today in university varsity teams, the police academy, and the military establishment, to name a few, as Garcia correctly points out.[33] The only difference this time around is that the sexual act is hushed up, given patriarchal society's condemnation of sex between men. In Gatbonton's story, the protagonist's desire to associate with and be around the more mature Clay can be framed in this same manner.

When Clay brags about his time with Miss Rosete, the emotional turmoil it causes the protagonist is expected. Miss Rosete falls victim to Clay's predatory nature. On the one hand, the narrator feels guilty about his role in facilitating their introduction. On the other, it can also be argued that the narrator feels envious of Miss Rosete, wishing that it was him in her place instead. Furthermore, given the sexual tension

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31 Juan T. Gatbonton, "Clay," in *Aura: The Gay Theme in Philippine Fiction in English*, ed. J. Neil C. Garcia (Anvil Publishing, 2012), 120.

32 Homer's epics are replete with pairs of male warriors, a popular example of which would be Achilles and Patroclus. The bond between soldiers in the *Iliad* cannot be fully appreciated without an understanding of the Greek concept of arete. Roughly translated, the term means "excellence." For warriors, this means possessing excellent battlefield skills, as well as swiftness, athleticism, and strength. A warrior does not exactly learn arete, as arete is something imbibed through close association with a person who already possesses it. Achilles is one such person, displaying excellence in all aspects of life, including bodily perfection and sexual prowess. Since male virility is very much in the territory of arete, a young warrior like Patroclus would both want and welcome sex with the more experienced Achilles as a means to cultivate his own arete. For a brief discussion on arete, see Debra Hawhee, "Agonism and Arete," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 35, no. 3 (2002): 187–93, https://doi.org/10.1353/par.2003.0004.

33 Garcia, introduction to *Aura: The Gay Theme in Philippine Literature in English*, 23.

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simmering all throughout the story, it is also possible that the narrator feels betrayed by Clay, who chooses to divert his sexual energy to another object altogether: the female body, which is something the protagonist does not have. But having said all this, the most confusing possibility of all is that the protagonist may end up desiring his teacher even more, as it is through her that he can have some form of perverted access to Clay, both sexually and in terms of the latter's affections. This libidinal and emotional rush overwhelms the young protagonist. As a result, he feels that his only recourse is to retreat back to the quiet pool in the forest where he first met Clay.

In Gatbonton's story, the child's coming of age is brought about by the awakening of his sexual desires. The young protagonist is thrust by his own sexual awakening into an adult world where sex and sexuality are governed by the dominant rules of heteronormativity. The evil the young boy comes face to face with is the heteronormative paradigm that he must learn to navigate. As readers, we understand that this will be troublesome for the protagonist, whose homosexual attraction to the male body is evident throughout the story. Finally, it should not be lost on the reader that Clay is an American military serviceman. By extension, the young protagonist's relationship with Clay can be seen as a mirror of sorts for our country's fraught and confusing relationship with the United States. It is a relationship characterized by friendship, admiration, and desire, on the one hand, but also envy, jealousy, and hatred, on the other, all of which historically come to a boil during World War II and the years that immediately follow.

This brings me to the next story in this survey, Gilda Cordero-Fernando's "A Wilderness of Sweets." In this story, a young girl named Joy grows up in Manila during the years of World War II. The triumph of this story is how Cordero-Fernando lends a childlike playfulness to both Joy and her world through her writing style. It convinces the reader to very much root for Joy's love affair with Badel, as well as for Joy's family to go about doing their pleasant, mundane tasks. Due to the air of innocence that permeates the story, it is easy to forget that a war is actually raging all around them. "A Wilderness of Sweets" draws its power from this dynamic—a blissful world of youth rendered terribly fragile by a war at its very doorstep, ready to lay waste to everything that is innocent and tender. At the end of the story, the war does come for Joy, causing her and her family to suffer greatly. But what is remarkable about Cordero-

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Fernando's story is that in spite of the horrors brought about by war, "A Wilderness of Sweets" still manages to end with a feeling of lightness, which, if anything, is hope.

Joy experiences evil through the death of her older brother. She also survives the infamous Liberation of Manila, where the city is razed to the ground by both retreating Japanese forces and "liberating" American troops, effectively leaving a war-torn nation culturally and spiritually homeless at a time when a home is utterly necessary. Despite the unspeakable horrors Joy witnesses firsthand, she is able to maintain a sense of childlike innocence that even the ravages of war cannot touch. The story ends when an American tank rumbles by Joy's gutted home, showering pieces of candy onto the welcoming crowd:

> "One of the chewing gums in red-white-and-blue wrapper landed on the crossbar of our gate. I picked it up and kept it in my pocket, because my brother was dead, my brother was dead and I couldn't find a flower, but I would save him a piece of gum."[34]

Cordero-Fernando chooses to end this story with a piece of gum—a sweet, which if anything is a metaphor for Joy's innocence. Despite all she has gone through, the reader knows that Joy is still able to see the world in the way a child does, because only a child will be able to recognize the priceless value of a piece of gum and gift it to the dearly departed as the highest offering of all.

One thing that is evident from the stories of our older generation of writers is the air of innocence that appears to suffuse the atmosphere of their works—the peaceful provincial morning in "Morning in Nagrebcan," the smell of pan de sal in "The Bread of Salt," the quiet forest pool in "Clay," and the merry trifles of daily life in "A Wilderness of Sweets." I argue that this poignant, almost romantic representation of childhood is what brings about a sense of hope in these stories, or what can broadly be understood as the good. In addition to this, the stories surveyed also contain epiphanic moments. The epiphany provides a satisfying ending to an otherwise troubled growing up experience. As a stylistic device, the epiphany is an effective tool because it leaves the reader focused on the

34 Gilda-Cordero Fernando, "A Wilderness of Sweets," in *The Best Philippine Short Stories of the Twentieth Century: An Anthology of Fiction in English*, ed. Isagani R. Cruz (Tahanan Books, 2000), 344.

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revelation rather than on the story's oftentimes heartbreaking narrative. It can be argued that our older generation of writers made use of the epiphany because of its ability to somehow dispel the shadow that evil casts over the world of the child.

The stories from our younger generation of writers take on a noticeably darker tone. Given the compounded issues of poverty, political impunity, and the ghosts left behind by our colonial past, these stories are devoid of the innocent atmosphere seen in the stories of their older counterparts. Nor do these stories contain epiphanies that act as some kind of light in the midst of darkness. The change in tenor is quite striking, so much so that Pantoja-Hidalgo, in her introduction to the second installment of *The Children's Hour*, writes the following about the stories contained in the anthology's second volume:

> One misses the simple joy of the youthful violinist in N.V.M Gonzalez' "The Bread of Salt." . . . One looks in vain for the epiphany that serves as a shaft of light in the gloom. . . . In a country that is home to this generation of writers, childhood is a dark and dangerous place.[35]

The "dark and dangerous place" evoked by the younger generation of Filipino writers is starkly different from the troubled yet hopeful childhood worlds depicted in the previous stories. As if to match the complicated issues of our global and postcolonial present, our younger generation of writers approach the coming-of-age experience in a more sociocultural manner, as seen in the concerns raised in their stories, as well as in the ways their stories have been crafted.

For this section, I have chosen to look at Vicente Garcia Groyon's "On Cursed Ground," FH Batacan's "Accidents Happen," Israfel Fagela's "Creek," and John Bengan's "To the Night Market." These stories give the contemporary reader a look into a more familiar version of the Filipino childhood, with the authors experiencing their own childhood and coming of age from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Groyon's "On Cursed Ground" features the coming of age of two siblings amid the sugar haciendas of Negros. This is familiar territory for Groyon, who traces his regional roots back to Bacolod. The siblings in the story come from old sugar money and are used to spending summers

35 Pantoja-Hidalgo, x.

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in their hacienda outside the city. While life in the hacienda is peaceful and calm, danger lurks along its edges, as evidenced by the presence of armed guards hired to protect the hacienda's inhabitants from a growing communist presence in the area. As the siblings play in the cane fields, they make a startling discovery that stops them in their tracks: a dead body.

The children are then faced with a choice. The shock of coming face to face with a dead body pushes them to tell the grown-ups about their discovery. However, they both know that if their parents learn about the dead body, their summer trips to the hacienda will be over. In the end, the children decide to keep quiet about their discovery. They hide the dead body underneath the house and maintain the status quo.

The choice that the siblings make is a telling one. As children, it is understandable for them to want to preserve their childhood world. But given their knowledge of the unrest that has sparked all over the countryside, their choice to keep mum about the dead body shows their willingness to carry on and participate in the oppressive economic relations between landlord and tenant farmer, which is precisely the turmoil that has been roiling in the heart of Bacolod society for generations. Unlike the protagonists in the four previous stories, the children in Groyon's story do not simply learn to bear the evil that is visited upon them. Instead, they embrace this evil by choosing to perpetuate the systems that cause this evil to exist. Thus, the children become a source of evil themselves. The effects of this act linger with the child narrator, as Groyon's first line takes on a double meaning when read again in light of the story's events: "On some nights, the smell brings it all back to me."[36]

In Groyon's story, the siblings are immutable products of their socioeconomic class. Whether they like it or not, they are incapable of betraying the privileged world they live in, despite knowing the oppression that such a world causes. It is a story that is not only deeply Filipino but one that is deeply Negrense. The fraught socioeconomic dynamics of Bacolod society provide the kind of fertile—albeit cursed—ground from which a story like this can emerge. While the young violinist in "The Bread of Salt" learns to respect the boundaries of the worlds he cannot enter, the children in Groyon's story learn to preserve such boundaries.

The issue of class comes into play once again in Batacan's "Accidents

36 Vicente Garcia Groyon, "On Cursed Ground," in *On Cursed Ground and Other Stories* (University of the Philippine Press, 2004), 1.

Happen." In this story, Batacan gives us a glimpse into the life of Francis, the son of a corrupt and powerful politician. Comfortable as Francis' life may be, it is one that is filled with both anger and sadness. The source of this sadness is the neglect Francis receives from both his parents. Francis' father is barely at home, while his mother has been trapped in a drug-induced stupor for years, with the drugs being supplied by no less than Francis' father. This type of wealthy and corrupted lifestyle is one that Filipinos easily recognize, given the widely accepted belief that the rich and powerful in Philippine society can get away with anything and everything they want. Because of the dysfunctionality of his childhood world, Francis desires nothing more than to escape from it.

Through shifting time frames, Batacan leads readers to believe that Francis, in an attempt to run away from home, figures in a vehicular accident that costs him his life. Despite his father's resources, Francis' body is never found. In a classic narrative twist, it is revealed that Francis actually manages to run away from home by faking his own death. This is exposed by Juanito, the family driver, who is the one adult Francis ever gets close to. Because of their relationship, Juanito is familiar with his ward's behavior. As such, he is also familiar with the behavior of children in general:

> "Because he knows children: how resourceful, how relentless, how remorseless they can be. Because he knows they can plan and scheme and calculate, just like grown-ups, to survive in a grown-up world."[37]

Unlike the siblings in Groyon's story who follow the internalized dictates of their class, Francis does the total opposite. Although the privileged children in both these stories strike out in different directions, both act out of the same impetus: an urgent need "to survive in the grown-up world," as Batacan puts it. Survival though means two different things in these stories. In the former, it means preserving the world of privilege, while in the latter, it means escaping from it.

And escape Francis does. What is particularly novel about Batacan's story is that it gives Francis enough agency to act on his own desires. Since Francis' childhood world is troubled to begin with, his escape is a sweet victory welcomed by the reader. Batacan's story is worth highlighting

37 FH Batacan, "Accidents Happen," in *The Children's Hour: Stories of Childhood*, ed. Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, vol. 2 (University of the Philippines Press, 2007), 65.

because it shows a child protagonist who is not merely pushed about by the forces that surround him. Rather, the protagonist has enough agency to strike out on his own true path. But similar to the marooned boys in *Lord of the Flies*, the reader knows that Francis, upon completing his daring escape from home, loses his childhood in the process. The child in Francis dies, but we are left with the possibility of Francis going off to live a better life as an adult.

"Creek" by Israfel Fagela features two child characters whose lives become intertwined after one fateful morning. The story occurs in two temporal settings, one in the past where the protagonist, Luisa, is growing up in a middle-class subdivision and the other in the present, where Luisa is a wife and mother of three grown boys. Due to the amount of time spanned in the story, the reader can see the full effect of a child's first encounter with evil and how this holds sway over her life moving forward.

Luisa grows up alongside two boys, whose families come to their subdivision as part of a government relocation program. Needless to say, Celso and Manny are not the kinds of boys Luisa's parents approve of. One day after a typhoon, Celso calls Luisa over to a creek that runs right through their subdivision. In it, they find the remains of a dead girl, who had probably drowned in the creek the previous night. As can be expected, Luisa is shaken by the sight of the corpse. Like the siblings in "On Cursed Ground," the children in "Creek" briefly consider telling the adults about their discovery. However, Celso convinces them that doing so would only result in their parents forbidding them to play in the creek. As an alternative, he suggests a hasty burial. Luisa, although still reeling from their discovery, goes along with Celso's plan.

Luisa encounters evil for the first time when she sees the body of the dead girl. Her better senses tell her that she ought to inform her parents about their discovery, but she does not. Because of her role in the haphazard burial, Luisa develops the feeling of somehow being complicit in the evil that killed the girl in the first place. This is a heavy burden for a child to carry. The guilt festers over the years, up until the time Luisa is a full-grown woman.

As a mother, Luisa confesses to having episodes wherein she would imagine herself institutionalized in some kind of hospital. The visions turn violent when Luisa sees herself murdering her own son by smothering him with a pillow. The reader understands that these episodes are a direct result of the psychic trauma she received when she was younger. In her

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own words, "Something happened that day in the creek, some mystery of time and space, some great horror unlocked."[38] The horror Luisa refers to is none other than a young girl's awareness of evil and the knowledge that she herself is also capable of that same evil.

Toward the end of the story, Luisa chances upon a televised news report about a local politician from Nueva Vizcaya who is recently arrested for murder. When they flash the politician's face on screen, Luisa immediately recognizes the man as Celso. Not fully understanding why, she feels the sudden urge to travel to Nueva Vizcaya just to be near Celso. This is understandable because she and Celso shared the same fall from innocence. Similar to love, this is a bond that is not easily broken nor forgotten.

Unlike the wealthy children in the stories of Groyon and Batacan, Fagela's Celso is clearly underprivileged. In Philippine society, it is rare for children growing up in poverty to even have a childhood to speak of. As such, Celso is described in Fagela's story as looking "unusually strong and tall for his age" and having an "intense, brooding demeanor about him."[39] These descriptions signify that Celso, while biologically a child, is by all means an adult. The sad but true reality in the Philippines is that a carefree childhood is a privilege reserved for those who can afford it. Those who cannot afford it grow up prematurely, having little or no experience of childhood at all.

This reality is made starkly clear in John Bengan's "To the Night Market." This story revolves around three friends, Ikong, Tata, and Jairus, who have taken to rapping for spare change outside various restaurants and bars. Bengan's story is set in the Davao of the 1990s, during the reign of then-mayor Rodrigo Duterte. A vigilante death squad roams the streets at night, and a drug war is used to obfuscate all kinds of syndicated crimes—a scene that has turned prophetic for the rest of the Philippines. As one can expect, life on the streets is difficult for the boys in Bengan's story. In order to survive, they have to dodge criminal elements, as well as the police.

One night, the three boys are forcibly pulled into a car by two unknown men, who say that they just want to hear the boys rap. The men take the group to a row of seaside karaoke bars, one of which is equipped with a

38 Israfel Fagela, "Creek," in *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*, ed. J. Neil C. Garcia and Charlson Ong, vol. 10 (University of the Philippines Press, 2016), 33.

39 Fagela, 27.

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private room. As the boys stand trembling inside the room, the men tell them to strip. When they refuse to do so, one of the men produces a gun and places it on top of the table. Jairus pisses his pants out of fear.

The men order Ikong to go outside and get a mop. When Ikong leaves the room, he is of the mind to run away. However, he thumbs a slingshot he always keeps his pocket—a keepsake from his older brother, who is widely believed to have been slain in an encounter with vigilantes. Ikong knows that he will never be able to forgive himself if he leaves his friends behind. With mop in hand, Ikong returns to the room. When the perfect opportunity arises, Ikong pulls out his slingshot. He fires a nail straight into the face of one of the men, sinking it into his cheek. The man kicks the table over, sending the gun, beer bottles, and dishes scattering on the floor. Ikong then shoots the other man, this time hitting his leg. Amid the chaos, the boys make a quick and narrow escape.

Like Celso in Fagela's "Creek," the three boys in Bengan's story have their childhoods snatched away from them at an early age. Of the three boys though, it is Ikong who behaves most like an adult. Loyalty to his friends is what causes Ikong to ultimately cross the threshold between childhood to adulthood. He confronts evil in the guise of sexual predators and manages to best this evil through the use of evil as well. When he fires the nail into the face of one of the men, Ikong displays a clarity of mind that one does not normally see in children. Rather, the cold, almost remorseless resolve Ikong displays is characteristic of an adult, criminal mind. In Bengan's story, the sympathetic reader understands this trait as something children born into poverty need to learn in order to survive on the tough streets.

When one reads "To the Night Market," one sees characters who are physically children but psychologically adults. This is interesting when juxtaposed against some of the more hopeful coming-of-age stories surveyed earlier, such as Cordero-Fernando's "A Wilderness of Sweets." In Cordero-Fernando's story, Joy is seen as "playing" at being an adult. The story opens with Joy observing her reflection in the mirror as she stuffs a bunch of socks into her shirt, pretending they are breasts. In Bengan's story, the trio's curbside rap performances are quite the opposite. Because of the silliness of their rap, I see this scene as the three boys "playing" at being children. What happens here is a kind of psychic reversal through the act of play. In the case of Joy, her act of play is a performance of adulthood, while in the case of the three friends, the act of play is a

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performance of childhood. The tragedy here is that the boys in Bengan's story are already so far removed from childhood that they can see it from a distance and ironically perform it.

After examining these select stories from our anglophone literature, I would now like to offer a few observations on our understanding of the coming-of-age experience. Since this discussion chooses to focus on the entry of evil into the world of the child, the stories surveyed give the readers a glimpse into a particular kind of evil, which, if anything, is an evil that is culturally specific to the Filipino childhood. From the stories of Arguilla to Bengan, one will notice that evil is never a distant thing. Rather, it is nearby and can be found lying dormant in what can widely be considered the domestic space: the home, the school, or the neighborhood. These spaces—all supposedly safe spaces for children—are the very spaces where evil lurks. It can therefore be said that the kind of evil that causes the Filipino child to come of age is a domestic one. In more disturbing cases, evil takes on the guise of an immediate family member, a relative, or a friend, making that evil familial.

The existence of this familial and familiar evil can be attributed to the fact that Filipino children, more often than not, grow up in spaces that are both cramped and crowded. It is common for entire families to sleep together in just one room, with no walls to secure the privacy of parents and children. Filipino homes are often packed so tightly against each other that opening a door means allowing the entire village inside one's living room—the sounds, the smells, and even the children who wander in and out of their neighbors' homes. But it is not just the physical space that gets crowded. Due to the extensive web of social connections that form an integral part of Philippine society, a child's psychic space gets crowded as well. Everybody living within a certain radius of the home is a relative or is referred to as one. As such, bits and pieces of the community's daily life flow into one's psychic space, whether one likes it or not. With such limited physical and psychic space between our bodies and minds, evil is bound to be discovered nearby. For the Filipino child, evil is always literally too close for comfort.

I would also like to point out that not all Filipino children are privileged to have a childhood. If anything, the concept of a carefree and innocent childhood is limited to the middle and upper classes. For the vast majority of Filipino children born into either rural or urban poverty, boys and girls need to participate in the economic work of the family at the earliest time

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possible. This makes impoverished children come of age faster than their wealthier counterparts. From the stories contained in this survey, the children who come of age with nary an experience of childhood are Baldo in Arguilla's "Morning in Nagrebcan," Celso in Fagela's "Creek," and the trio of friends in Bengan's "To the Night Market." In these stories, one can even argue that due to the economic conditions of the children's families, the evil that causes them to come of age has been present in their world even before the they are born.

Coming of age in the Philippines of today is a difficult task. Not only do children have to deal with the intrinsic difficulties of growing up, they also need to deal with an antagonistic world that is rife with numerous problems, chieftest of which is poverty. Poverty has the power to rob children of their childhood. Given the country's chronic lack of opportunities, poverty in the Philippines is a largely insurmountable obstacle. Truth be told, it is difficult to imagine a positive future for a child born into poverty. This, I believe, is the greatest systemic evil of our culture and our time.

We must remember though that good and evil form two parts of the same whole. When the Filipino child discovers a proximate evil in the domestic space, this is also accompanied with the discovery of a proximate good. In the older stories sampled in this survey, the good can be seen in the stylistic devices employed by the writer. From a strictly formalist point of view—formalism being the dominant mode of criticism during the time these stories were written—the stylistic devices used can be considered suitable counterpoints to the evil that encroaches into the story. However, the problems of today go far beyond the page. Given current times, finding the good in our literature, both old and new, as well as the good in our lived experiences of childhood demand that critics and writers go beyond the rules of formalism and approach the act of reading and writing with a sharper set of cultural tools.

I argue that the good in the stories sampled in this survey can be seen in the social bonds of friendship and affinity formed between the story's characters. These are bonds brought about by an awareness of common suffering or the ability of one of the characters in the story—not necessarily the child protagonist—to empathize with the suffering of another. Ironically, the cramp physical environment that allows evil to enter the child's world is also the environment from which empathy arises.

Bengan's "To The Night Market" is essentially the story of a Filipino

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barkada. Ikong and his friends grow up together and regard each other as a single unit. This tightly bonded friendship is the motivation behind Ikong firing his slingshot, which liberates their group from the hands of their captors. The trio survives as one, in the same manner that they have doggedly survived in the streets of Davao thus far. At the end of Fagela's "Creek," Luisa goes off to seek the company of Celso. A reader sympathetic to Luisa's plight will understand that her searching for Celso is born out of an urgent need to heal. This healing may lie in reconnecting with Celso and their shared histories. While we do not know what will come of their reunion, it is not hard to imagine that it will offer some measure of understanding for things in the past. The story's resolution is not revealed. What the reader is sure of is that Luisa's connection with Celso, deep and troubled as it may be, is the path that will lead to that resolution. In Batacan's "Accidents Happen," the child protagonist Francis shares a bond of friendship with Juanito. Had Juanito been a force of evil in the story, he could have easily told Francis' father about the boy's escape. The fact that he does not means that he empathizes with Francis. This empathy is what allows Juanito to turn a blind eye to what the police have considered a cut-and-dried vehicular accident, thereby allowing Francis enough time and room to escape. Even the siblings in Groyon's story share this same empathic bond. Although they both act to preserve what is widely considered to be an oppressive status quo, they do so in tandem and out of a sense of care for what they perceive as each other's own well-being.

Similarly, this sociocultural good is also present in the stories of our older generation of writers. At the end of Arguilla's "Morning in Nagrebcan," the two brothers embrace over the beloved puppy's grave. In this epiphanic moment, Baldo and Ambo understand that their brotherly bond will get them through the current trauma caused by their father. It is not hard to imagine that this bond will last until the future, operating as a safety net of sorts, as the brothers navigate their adult lives. Although the young protagonist in "The Bread of Salt" is left forlorn at the end of the story, he is able to retreat into the company of his older bandmates. The exclusion the protagonist experiences in one space gives rise to his inclusion in another. The young violinist is able to find his tribe, so to speak, which is essential for one's survival in the world. At the end of "Clay," Gatbonton's protagonist leaves the party feeling distraught and confused. One person who is not confused is Miss Rosete. In the party that is held toward the

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end of the story, Clay's friends chide him for being "stood up" by his date. This small detail shifts the power from the hypermasculine Clay to demure Miss Rosete. By standing him up at the party, Miss Rosete actively removes herself from Clay's world in an act of defiance and self-preservation. The reader gets the feeling that the protagonist and Miss Rosete are joined in their common affection for and aversion to Clay. Although the protagonist does not realize it yet, Miss Rosete's nonappearance at the party can be seen as a lesson on how to navigate the tricky landscape of sexual desire, while putting one's safety and well-being before anything else. This is something that the protagonist will surely benefit from as he is caught in the turmoil of his own sexual awakening. Cordero-Fernando's "A Wilderness of Sweets" is the story of a community, in the same way that Bengan's "To the Night Market" is the story of a barkada. Joy's community of family, friends, and neighbors all weather the war years together, from the everyday trifles to war's great horrors. There is no question that the war inflicts much suffering throughout the course of the story, but the reader knows that Joy does not suffer alone. Joy's community shares in her suffering as she shares in theirs. Arguably, the colorful community life featured in the story can be considered the reason the reader comes away from "A Wilderness of Sweets" with a feeling of lightness despite all the horrors of war.

It can therefore be argued that while evil is clearly present in our coming-of-age stories, the good is present as well. This goodness is seen in the deep familial and social bonds formed between the characters of the story. Sometimes, these bonds are not formed but rather discovered, either by the character or the reader, as something that has been hidden in plain sight. The network of affective bonds in these stories can be better understood through the Filipino cultural concept of *kapwa*. Virgilio G. Enriquez describes kapwa as "the unity of the self and others" or a "recognition of shared identity."[40] Our concept of kapwa eschews the Western idea of an independent, individualized self in favor of a "Shared Self."[41] In this sampling of stories from our anglophone literature, the bonds that exist between characters are manifestations of kapwa, which, if anything, is our profound knowledge that the Filipino self is found in the other.

40 Virgilio G. Enriquez, "Kapwa: A Core Concept in Filipino Social Psychology," in *Philippine World View* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), 11.

41 Katrin De Guia, *Kapwa: The Self in the Other: Worldviews and Lifestyles of Filipino Culture-Bearers* (Anvil Publishing, Inc. 2005), 8.

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Pakikipagkapwa refers to the act of wholly being-with and feeling-with everyone in society. This inclusive act allows us to temporarily forget the distinctions between I and you, we and them, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. Without these labels, we are able to see each other in absolute equality, revealing the simple truth of it all—that we are all human. Hence, it is said that pakikipagkapwa is "humanness at its highest level."[42]

A comparison can thus be made between Western and Philippine coming-of-age stories. The Western coming-of-age story is largely concerned with a child protagonist's journey of self-discovery. In addition to understanding the self, the child also learns about the social, cultural, and moral systems of the world. These systems normally come into question, resulting in the child protagonist striking out on a path of his own choosing. Here, we are reminded of the anger seething in the eyes of the narrator at the end of Joyce's "Araby," as well as the way Ralph battles valiantly against the brutal society established by his fellow castaways in Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*. Through their ordeals, both these characters discover who they are as individuals, as well as how the moral systems of their respective worlds affect them. Eventually, they choose to question such systems. Whether they are rewarded or punished for their act of questioning is beside the point. What is important is that they identify a path to take and strike out bravely on that path. This is reflective of cultural values held in high esteem by the West, such as courage, identity, and self-determination.

In the Philippine coming-of-age story, the self that the child protagonist discovers is not an individual self but a social self. The child in our own coming-of-age literature grows up when he is able to see beyond his personal needs and starts caring deeply about the needs of those around him. This is a departure from the values espoused by the West. While the Western coming-of-age story highlights a journey of courageous self-discovery, the Philippine coming-of-age story is concerned with empathy. It would also be good to qualify that empathy is not something a Filipino child discovers from without. Given the extensive network of social ties already present in the world of the Filipino child, it can be said that empathy

42 Enriquez borrows the phrase "humanness at the highest level" from Carmen Santiago, who coined the phrase in her study of Philippine food culture. It has since become a much-quoted phrase by scholars of Philippine psychology in their descriptions of kapwa and pakikipagkapwa. See Carmen E. Santiago, "The Language of Food," in *The Culinary Culture of the Philippines*, ed. Gilda Cordero-Fernando (Bancom Audivisual Corp, 1976), 132. See also Enriquez, 12.

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already exists, almost like a latent state of being. Hence, it is more accurate to say that in our coming-of-age stories, the child protagonist awakens to empathy as it exists around him and within himself.

In terms of our lived childhood experience, the Filipino child comes of age primarily due to two events. The first event is when evil enters the world of the child through the tight domestic space the child finds himself inhabiting. The second event is when the child is able to empathize with a suffering other, forging with him a bond of affinity that combats the encroaching evil. I argue that the Filipino child finally "grows up" when he realizes, through the intrinsic wisdom of kapwa, that the wounds of a suffering other are his wounds, and that by offering a salve to heal those wounds, he also engages in the act of self-healing.

To close this section, I would like to briefly return to the concept of pakikipagkapwa. Enriquez clarifies that pakikipagkapwa is not a purely sociopsychological concept in that it also contains a moral and normative dimension. Pakikipagkapwa asks that our being-with and feeling-with the other is done with a sense of conviction for what is just. Hence, pakikipagkapwa touches on the cultural concept of *paninindigan*.[43] With pakikipagkapwa and paninindigan operating together, what we have is not just a passive act of fellow-feeling and community but a directive that obliges us to move firmly and uprightly in the service of the suffering other.[44] Relating this to the Philippine coming-of-age story, it can be said that the journey of the Filipino child does not just end with empathy but with a constant striving for what is just. This, I believe, is the good in our troubled society, as well as its hope.

SOME NOTES ON THE CRAFT OF FICTION

Before I write a story, I make it a point to read several stories that I feel are comparable to the one I am about to write. In a sense, I curate my own reading list, which I use for several purposes. The most immediate purpose is to set the mood for my writing. If I am writing something pleasant, I read something light and easy, like a children's picture book.

43 Enriquez, "Kapwa: A Core Concept of Filipino Social Psycology,"16.

44 It is important to note that Enriquez began discussing the concept of kapwa in the turbulent years of Martial Law. As a theory, kapwa's history is inextricably linked to our nation's struggle against injustice. Katrin De Guia, one of Enriquez's students, observes that kapwa was key to the formation of a unified consciousness, which, when coupled with popular will, culminated in the toppling of the Marcos dictatorship. The concept of kapwa is therefore useful in the discourse of social justice. It will be good to revisit this concept to see how kapwa can be reapplied to the Philippines of today, given our persistent problem of poverty, lack of education, political impunity, and the return of the Marcoses to power. See De Guia, 9.

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