

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 Psychology,”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.



If I am writing something darker and more violent, I pick up something to match the mood. But more than just functioning as mood setters, I use these stories as writing models. I read these stories for the purpose of seeing how the writer managed to pull off (or not pull off) what I understand to be the story's desired effects. I do quite a lot of reading before the actual act of writing a story. If I am to force a ratio between the amount of material I read and the stories I produce, I would say I read roughly ten short stories in order to produce one. Of course, this is not a firm ratio, nor do the stories in my reading list have to be completely new to me. In fact, my reading list usually contains several trusty staples, such as the works of Golding, Greene, and King, which I read alongside the stories of Nick Joaquin, Gregorio Brillantes, Gilda Cordero-Fernando, and Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo.

When I write my stories, I usually start with a character in mind. This character normally has an unusual trait that I find interesting. This trait is something that immediately calls out to me, causing me to want to know more about him. The trait can be pronounced, like a limp, a mannerism, or a particular quirk. It could also be something more subtle, like a guilty pleasure or a secret the character would rather not speak of. When I think about my characters, their unusual trait is what prompts me to delve deeper into their persona, in the same way an archeologist feels the need to start digging at the barest hint of a buried artifact. But unlike an archeologist whose task is to merely unearth what time has hidden, the act of writing a character involves a lot more generative energy.

My process of creating a character starts with the character's unusual trait. I then proceed to flesh out the entirety of the character's persona by imagining the rest—gender, race, class, physical appearance, personal history, and circumstance in the world. To aid me in this task, I borrow physical and psychological elements from people I know, including myself. As I form the character in my mind, I like to think of them as spherical entities composed of layers, similar to the layers of planets. The solid, burning core of the characters is that one thing that makes them unusual. It is also the very thing that makes them tick. I pad layer after layer onto this core until I feel that the character is round enough—no pun intended—to move about in the world of the story.

The next part is to allow the character to move. The character needs to do something, whether this be a passive act such as sitting by the sea, or something more active, such as dancing or firing a gun. I poke and



prod the character but largely allow him to move at his own accord. At this point in the writing process, I don't know everything there is to know about my character, with the exception of their one unusual trait. With nothing else to work with, it follows that my character's very first action flows directly from their core. This first act is the most truthful and is as naked the character can get. It is revelatory of the character's *why* and also of the character's *how*. Hence, it is of utmost importance for me to remember exactly how this action plays out. I replay this scene over and over again, relish it, and commit it to memory. I like to think of this scene as that one powerful mental image that stays with you after watching a movie or finishing a book. It is that iconic image that captures in an effective albeit distilled fashion the very essence of the character. This scene eventually figures as one of the high points of my story, either as the story's climax or its ending. More often than not, this scene becomes the story's epiphanic moment. I can also tease out the story's setting, tone, point of view, and even its theme just by meditating on this scene. One thing that this scene does not show is the story's plot. How the character ends up doing what he is doing is still a big mystery. This is when the grunt work begins.

With both the character and that one powerful scene in place, I proceed to build the story's narrative. My approach to the story's plot is rather mechanical. I take a blank piece of paper and draw Gustav Freytag's infamous pyramid. The powerful scene revealed earlier to me is usually positioned somewhere at the top of the triangle. I like to think of this scene as the story's given, which functions as the cornerstone around which the story is built. I then go to the very base of the triangle and plot events along the its slope. The objective is to come up with a narrative that connects the base of the triangle to the scene that sits somewhere at the top.

The story's introduction—the part where I lay out the character, the setting, and the initial movements of the plot—comes easily to me because it is drawn from the details in the given scene. The most difficult and probably least enjoyable part is filling in the rising action. Much agony goes into this part of the writing process, because more than just connecting the events of the narrative, the rising action needs to show a gradual escalation of tension. This escalation gives the story enough impetus to rise and meet the scene that sits at the peak of the triangle. As an added challenge, this meeting needs to be done in a manner that



readers will find easy and comfortable. Of course, this comfortable meeting does not always happen. There are times when I cannot sustain the escalation of tension, causing the story to simply fall off the slope of the triangle. To prevent this from happening, I spend an inordinate amount of time staring at the triangular graph of my story, carefully working the narrative's tedious climb from bottom to top. I don't type a word of my story until I feel that the tenuous triangle on my piece of paper is more or less secure.

I find myself intuiting portions of the narrative as I climb the slope of the triangle. It is here that the story opens itself up to unexpected gifts from the muse. Previously unknown details sometimes reveal themselves to me while I am in the thick of writing. Whenever I am faced with these little surprises, I try as much as possible to incorporate them into the story. However, there are instances when I come face to face with a certain detail that would significantly change the direction of the plot. More than being a gift from the muse, this detail can sometimes feel like a monkey wrench thrown into the cogs of the story. This makes the whole writing experience both exhilarating and infuriating at the same time. If the surprise detail is simply too good to refuse, I find myself reluctantly rewriting large swathes of the story. Sometimes, I even delete everything and start over from scratch.

Unlike other writers who write in white heat and edit in cold blood, I find myself editing and revising as I plod along. After I leave a certain part of the story and move on to the next, I am more or less satisfied with that part and only return to it in the final pass, just to make sure that everything coheres.

When the story is complete in terms of its formal elements, I let it rest for a couple of days. I read it again with fresh eyes afterward, this time paying attention to the movement of the character's emotional and psychic journey or what I call the "internal plot." I then tweak portions of the narrative or the "external plot" with the purpose of highlighting the character's emotional movement. When I am satisfied with the ground covered by the character's journey, I know I am close to the finish line.

This is the most enjoyable part. After completing both internal and external plots, I am more or less confident that the story rises sufficiently to meet the powerful scene that has been waiting at the top of the triangle. When this happens, I take a deep breath and write the



last few lines of the story. I like to add a little verbal flourish to the story's ending, like a ribbon that functions to tie everything together and present the finished story to the readers. This is the magical moment when the tables are turned and the story speaks to me. I usually have a physical reaction to a completed story. I know that I have the story's ending when I get goosebumps as I type the final words. Pleasantly exhausted, I put away my laptop, with the story finished and proudly wearing its tiny ribbon.

THE SUMMER OF GROWING UP: STORIES OF CHILDHOOD

The creative component of this thesis is a collection of short stories titled *The Summer of Growing Up: Stories of Childhood*. These stories feature the theme of childhood, with some having a more pronounced coming-of-age narrative than others. All stories are written with an adult readership in mind. The seven stories collected here span much of my writing life. Some of the stories are products of recent creative writing classes, while others are older stories. The oldest story in this collection was written while I was still an undergraduate student.

The title of this collection is a phrase lifted from "Sea Magic," the collection's first story, which also happens to be my first published work. "Sea Magic" is a coming-of-age story featuring a young boy and a mysterious girl from the sea. As is typical of my earlier writing, this story straddles the line between fantasy and realism, but with the story's heart firmly set in the real world. This story was published in the *Philippines Free Press* back in 2007. I have since updated the story to match my current voice as a writer.

"Two Stories from the Day I Was Born" is a story about a Filipino-Chinese boy's understanding of the events surrounding the day of his birth. While this story does not have a pronounced coming-of-age plot, I decided to include it in this collection because of its depiction of childhood, particularly the relationship between a boy and his *yaya*. The story also shows a more humane and hopeful way the fraught dynamics of social classes in the Philippines can be negotiated. An earlier version of this story appears in volume twelve of the *Likhaan* journal.

"The Mop Closet" is a personal favorite because of the story's technical complexity. In it, I experiment with an observer narrator, whose brief interaction with the events of the plot alter its direction altogether.