

# The Creative Writing Workshop: Some (Provisional) Aphorisms<sup>1</sup>

**J. Neil C. Garcia**

THE JOURNEY OF art is the journey from the real to the true.

As Louise Gluck presciently intuits, the limit of what is real is what can be experienced; the limit of what is true is what can be imagined.

Writing, art, is about the business of what's possible, which can be anything, as far as the imagination is concerned.

Both reality and truth need to exist—need to be performed—in the text.

In between the origin (reality) and the destination (truth) are decisions that the writer will need to make.

My task in this workshop is to thoughtfully consider these decisions, in light of both the experience being represented, and the illumination of it that's being proposed.

1. Read by the author at the 57<sup>th</sup> University of the Philippines National Writers Workshop, AIM Igorot Lodge, Camp John Hay, Baguio City, April 2, 2018.

# Confessions of a Battered Parent

**Jaime An Lim**

*What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?*

—Robert Hayden, “Those Winter Sundays”

THE GOOD ARE rewarded, the wicked punished. Poetic justice. This was what we learned from reading fairy tales in school.

In the real world, life does not offer any such guarantees. I know that now, good intentions, notwithstanding. This simple fact should have been obvious to anyone who has ever paid the slightest attention to how the harsh laws of reality operate.

But we were young and naive. So perhaps we could be forgiven for thinking ourselves very lucky. My wife and I had found jobs immediately after graduation from Mindanao State University in Marawi, and our first child was born a decent interval after our unexpected early marriage. So we were on our way to what our generation had always dreamed of: a secure foothold in the bid for a decent life. The future beckoned with reckless optimism. Having a baby of our own was just another step in the grand scheme of things.

The baby, a boy, was delivered one late October night in the University Infirmary. He squirmed with vigorous kicks and cried with lusty energy. He looked ordinary enough: ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes, puffy face, pouty mouth, downy head, fair skin

translucent enough for the pink capillaries pulsing underneath to show through. But in the eyes of the new mother and father, nothing could have been more extraordinary.

We named him James. Not after the famous Hollywood actor who died in a car wreck, but after the half-brother of Jesus who wrote in his epistle that adversities in life build one's character and that genuine faith comes from action, not from empty words. Giving him this name embodied our dreams for him, hoping that it would serve as his guiding light during his own life's journey. We did not pray that he would grow up wealthy, famous, or powerful. Which was how a lot of people probably defined success. We just hoped that he would grow up to be a responsible and self-reliant human being, attentive to the wonders of the world and considerate of the needs of others. We just asked for a simple, loving, and well-grounded human being we could be proud of.

Cradling the seven pounds of vulnerability that fateful night, my wife and I had made an unspoken covenant as new parents are wont to do with their firstborn: that we would take care of him, protect him from harm, love him with all our heart. We thought that if we would be true to our promise, our dream for him would somehow work out in the end.

Where did we go wrong? For despite our loving care, James turned out to be the exact opposite of all our hopes and prayers. He grew up to be a cruel, abusive, violent, and domineering man. He became part of the new phenomenon in contemporary society known as the parent batterer. Hard to accept even now, but for many years my wife and I were battered parents. Battered by our beloved son, James. We woke up one day and found ourselves turned into bona-fide bedraggled members of the subcategory of the world's abused, along with the larger limping population of battered children and battered wives.

The painful transformation did not exactly happen overnight in one dramatic sweep. It went on quietly and insidiously over the years, the change happening in such small increments that it was hardly noticeable at all. Looking back, I realized that we were partly to blame. We were not vigilant enough. Or not strong enough. After all, our kid was our burden and our responsibility. What we did not realize, of course, was that our responsibility as parents was more than a matter of putting the milk formula in the bottle, or giving the medicine drops when he was sick, or scooping him up in our comforting arms when he cried in the night. More than anything else, he needed our faithful guidance. He needed to be taught how to become a loving human being, how to tell the right from the wrong. Good things did not just happen without hard work. Our ignorance, though astounding, was without malice.

The truth was we were still immature despite our having graduated from college. That was at the heart of our problem. Simply put, we did not really know how to

raise a kid. Where did that knowledge come from? Did it come naturally with time? Like walking and talking? Did it come from study and practice? Like riding a bike or shooting a hoop? Did it come from instinct and intuition? Childcare was something we never studied in school. It was never a part of the curriculum, like Childcare 101, although it should have been, considering how crucial it proved to be later on.

We thought love was enough. Love was the mantra. Love the convenient catch-all. The magic umbrella solution to all kinds of problems of the human body and the human spirit. That, and the commitment. We thought we would learn as we went along, the way you learned to swim after being thrown into the water. Swim or sink. Through sheer panic and desperation. We knew how to solve for the missing  $x$  in a mathematical equation, conjugate the Spanish verb *vivir*, or enumerate the pertinent rules of English grammar for employing the present tense. But we did not know the first thing about raising kids. Not really.

Our Dr. Spock consisted of the well-meaning relatives, neighbors, and friends who were also raising children of their own. We learned the nitty-gritty of childcare from intuition, from common sense, from looking around, from trial and error. We essentially matriculated in the School of Hard Knocks. Invariably, what we got turned out to be a mixed bag of facts, half-truths, and myths. Thrown together like the ingredients in our popular native concoction called *halo-halo*. For the more difficult questions, there was always the old reliable, the infirmary general practitioner, Dr. Samalio, who doubled as pediatrician.

How did the battering begin? It would have been easier if we had known what it was in the first place and where to look. We were postwar babies, born after World War II. Although the world was changing rapidly even then, the society we grew up in still believed in the traditional Filipino values of respect and love for parents and grandparents. It was part of our culture: the way we addressed our elders with the familiar honorific *po*; the way we greeted them, bowing and touching their hand to our forehead; the way we accorded them a place of honor in family celebrations; the way we always took their opinion into consideration in family decisions of grave importance. Parents as keepers of memory and holders of wisdom in the family. This was the paradigm we inherited, and the traditional values we lived by.

In short, for our generation, the idea of battered parents was so alien it did not even figure in any way in any equation of family relations. To us it was just inconceivable. Though all around us, perhaps unknown to us, tradition was being besieged by barbarian norms. We just did not notice, because we were too busy with getting a master's degree at Silliman University in Dumaguete and then a PhD at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. We were too busy working for tenure, for the next step in consolidating our

place in the struggle for academic survival and economic upward mobility.

What I barely noticed and did not take too seriously were the goings-on in the periphery. For instance, whenever the baby cried in the night, my wife was always the first to get up to check. Prompt as clockwork. While I lagged behind, half-asleep, eyes half-closed. Was the baby hungry? Did he have a stomachache? Was his diaper soggy? Did a bug bite him? Did he have a nightmare? James was what you called a colicky baby. While other babies good-naturedly slept all through the night with nary a whimper, James was a fitful sleeper, breaking into sudden fits of vigorous face-crumpling crying that sometimes lasted for an hour, two hours. A pattern was emerging: he would cry and my wife would promptly pick him up. Cry, pick up. Cry, pick up. In the morning, my exhausted wife would move around like a sleepwalker, bumping into the furniture. Later, we employed a *yaya* for the baby, and it became her turn to be the sleepwalker in the morning.

This unwitting conditioning became a recurrent feature in the bonding relationship between mother and baby. They were like Pavlov's dogs. To get what he wanted, the baby would just cry, and my wife would instantly respond. That was their language of communication. My wife did not realize that in their interaction, one acted as the controller and the other the controlled. Who was who? Who was setting the agenda? The baby knew. It was after all a primal instinct.

Our son used this strategy for the rest of his life. It worked when he was a baby; it still worked when he got older. To understand why it worked, it would be necessary to know how my wife and I were as parents. My wife's parenting style was a bit different from mine. My wife was essentially a nurturer. She was the dispenser of hugs and kisses in the family. She was demonstrative in her love and effusive in her generosity. If James wanted anything—a toy, a new pair of shoes, money—he went to his mother, not to me. For her, giving was the true measure of her love. Put another way, she was the Good Cop. I was the Bad Cop. I was the disciplinarian, the dispenser of punishment (if necessary), the one who said *No* (again if necessary). My hugs were perfunctory and few. So naturally mother and son became the allies, the buddies. I was the killjoy, the uninvited guest in their party.

When James was a bit older, aged four or five, we sometimes brought him along to the Lim Ket Kai Mall in Cagayan de Oro. Like most other kids let loose in a toyshop, he would become hyperactive. He would run hither and thither, drawn to every colorful toy, big or small: matchbox cars, inflatable figures of Batman and Superman, balloons, plastic swords and guns. He coveted all. He would frantically pull his mother's hand or skirt, imploring her to buy him this and this and this. He wanted everything. Initially, my wife would resist. Then he would use the full

arsenal of this persuasive power: sitting on the floor, kicking vigorously, crying with abandon, tantrum galore right in the midst of all the mall shoppers. A crowd would gather and stare at the spectacle. My wife would get embarrassed, her face growing more beet red by the minute. People could see her shushing was having zero effect. Evidently, he would not stop until he got what he wanted. So in the end she would give up and buy him the matchbox car or plastic toy gun. To stop the spectacle. To keep the peace. Out of the loving kindness of her ample heart. That became the pattern. The battering had begun. And we did not even know it.

Why say *No* if you would just relent in the end? That was always a worrying point in our subsequent argument when we got home. What was the use in saying *No* if it would just eventually mean *Maybe* or *Yes*? What did it say about us as parents and as figures of authority? Why force the issue if you would just give in? If you could not stand pat on your decision? Why not just say *Yes* in the first instance and then just set some conditions. Like: only this or that, not both because we still had to buy the groceries. In that way, we did not have to lose face in the tug of war between parent and child.

James became an expert in turning us against each other. Perhaps, that was not his intent at all. I wanted to believe he was not a devious child. But it ended up that way for us: my wife and I snapping at each at his unwitting instigation. We too had become like Pavlov's dogs, our son's Pavlov's dogs. I wanted to be reasonable, to put some sense of logic to how we were raising him. She did not see it that way. She thought I was just being selfish. She was always taking his side, no matter what. No matter how unreasonable or illogical. I guess it became her way of getting back at me for some imagined wrong. Sexual inadequacy? Emotional coldness? Again, another pattern.

When James wanted some candies at 10 o'clock in the evening, she would go out of the apartment building and walk one block and a half to the corner 7-Eleven to get some packs of M&Ms. Why? Couldn't it wait until the following morning? What was so urgent about eating chocolates at ten in the evening? I could not see any logic. What was she trying to teach him? That he could ask for anything anytime, and she would get it for him? Was that what she wanted him to learn?

Or in the middle of dinner, he would insist on having the fried chicken re-fried because he wanted it to be more crunchy and a bit more on the burnt side. Why disrupt the meal to give in to his whim? Would it kill him to eat the perfectly cooked fried chicken? My wife would just get up and re-fry the chicken. *Hey, no big deal.*

Or when he wanted to have ice cream before a meal. Before, not after. My wife would give him two hefty scoops. Why? I could not understand her reasoning. *And why not?* Because it would spoil his appetite. That's why. Oh, the senseless petty bickering! While he watched across the table: bemused, smug, triumphant.

Or the day he could not get what he wanted. Was it a skateboard that time? Or a BMX bike? He took a huge rock and violently hurled it against the glass picture window of the living room, shattering it into smithereens. He was teaching us something: that every denial would invariably lead to violence, so watch out. The housing department of the University charged us the equivalent of ten skateboards for the damage. We learned our lesson well.

Or that cold late afternoon when he was ten or eleven. He was going out with a friend who had dropped by. I told him to wear his jacket to keep warm. It was autumn; we were in Bloomington, Indiana, at that time. Out of the blue, my wife said, "Nobody tells anybody what to do." I was dumbstruck. *What the fuck.* Then she added, "*Anak*, why don't you have dinner first before you go?" The answer came back fast and glib: "Nobody tells anybody what to do." *Karma.*

Obviously, my wife and I saw our parenting responsibilities differently. I believed in limits, in logic, in doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason. She believed otherwise. She believed in a love that had no limits, no rhyme, no reason, no season. Spoiling James was her way of bribing an ally and at the same time poisoning his mind against me, the KJ. I thought our son was at heart of our problem. But the truth was our marriage was disintegrating for another reason: we were no longer in love with each other. We had found our respective significant other elsewhere. So we were ready to let each other go. Staying together only tested our tolerance for each other to the limit, and confused our son who was frequently torn between our contradictory exhortations.

We decided to get a divorce. She would have child custody. I would move out of the apartment. That day the divorce papers were signed, I went behind the row housing of Indiana University and wept. I wept because I knew I had failed our son. I had stood by while his life was being destroyed. I had allowed him to become the sacrificial lamb on the altar of our broken marriage. I knew even then that James would one day end up in a very bad place, given his screwed sense of entitlement as though the world owned him everything, and my wife's sense of quick accommodation, unquestioning love, and boundless self-sacrifice.

True enough, James grew even worse. At seventeen, he was taller and heavier than his mother. He now had more muscles, more bulk. He now had the firm deep voice of a grown man. He could now openly push his mother around, which he apparently did every chance he got. He would ask his mother to go to the market downtown and get him some ripe mangoes. *At twelve midnight!* If she came back empty-handed, he would aim a flying kick at her stomach. Or he would ask her to iron his new pair of pants. If the creases came out crooked, he would flatiron her face. He did not finish school and was jobless.

Worse, he had become a drug addict, so his relentless demand for money increased from week to week. First it was cigarettes, then marijuana, then *shabu*, then something else. If she did not have the money, he would threaten her with a kitchen knife. Or he would steal things from the house and sell them: her gold jewelry, camera, wristwatch, clothes, shoes, silverware, wall clock, bed sheets, anything. His mother became his punching bag, his ashtray, his milking cow.

The pattern of increasing demand and increasing violence at any denial had been set irrevocably. The demands had seemed so innocent in the beginning: matchbox car, Superman, M&Ms at ten in the evening, burnt fried chicken, ice cream before a meal, skateboard, BMX bike. Later the demands included monthly allowance for his growing family and daily support for his drug addiction. The price of denying his wishes? At first, public shaming in the mall or a smashed plate glass window; later, compulsive stealing and lying; and eventually, various forms of physical and psychological abuse. This pattern of battering repeated time and again over the years became more and more entrenched. It became as indelible as the marks left on the skin when the body was punched hard or cut or burned. Not to speak of the withering psychological damage that fear left in one's mind and spirit. The constant tiptoeing around the house. The anxious waiting for the next outburst, the next punch in the face landing unexpectedly. Finally, despite her pride, my ex-wife wrote and asked me to please come back to the Philippines. I was still in the States finishing my dissertation. She asked me to please come home and take control. She wanted out. She could not take it anymore.

What control?

By the time I arrived, the damage was already done. And it was clearly beyond repair. There was no ghost of a chance for any control whatsoever. The pliant sampling had become a sturdy tree. James was now a full-fledged batterer of his mother, his common-law wife, even his own sons. He routinely punched his wife Asela and chased her around with a bolo. He would set up Sonnyboy and Teddyboy as moving targets in a shooting practice, using a toy semi-auto gun with a revolving barrel that fired rubber bullets. He would play football with them. Meaning, he would kick them across the room when he got pissed.

The neighbors, afraid to get involved in other people's domestic troubles, just sighed in commiseration and looked the other way. His family did not to air their dirty linen in public, did not want to display their terrible shame for becoming battered victims, and chose to suffer in silence. The DSWD and the police were powerless.

As for me, I soon took the place of my ex-wife as a battering target. He battered me in a different way, or perhaps not too differently. He was a compulsive thief and a congenital liar. He would ransack my room for things to steal and sell, and later



protest his innocence. He would raid the refrigerator and get whatever he wanted to eat, demolishing the week's food budget and deliberately leaving the dirty pots and plates for me to clean up afterwards. He would kick me or box me when he got terribly angry. He would mock me and call me *hoy bayot, bayot*. He would ask for money, for this or that. Most times I would give in. No point in raising a world war over every issue. Very quickly I learned the necessity of accommodation as a conciliatory gesture of least resistance. But I would never go out at night to buy him mangoes or whatever he was craving for, as his mother used to do. If he wanted some, he could go and get them himself.

So he would recline on the living room couch, sulking, cocking an empty .38 caliber gun, and shooting at an imaginary head. Click, click. Bang, bang. Showering the air with threats of an impending death. Mine.

One day he told me: "It's so easy to kill you." I was shocked. What a horrible thing to say. To any human being. But to say this to his own father! I personally spoon-fed him his Cerelac. Rocked him to sleep. Held his hand when he took his first wobbly step into the world. I was in shock. This was my own boy. It broke my heart. He had meant to frighten me, like he did his mother, into submission to his power. His poor pathetic power. So I locked my door. But I refused to lose sleep over it. Against my better judgment, I refused to run. He was still our son, named after the half-brother of Jesus. He was still our burden. The consequence of our terrible failure as parents. Love was not enough. I knew that now, although it had taken me a lifetime to learn this simple truth.

On the bookshelves, we kept several of our framed vacation photos with him when he was small: gathering shiny pebbles and broken seashells on the beach in Bacong, Dumaguete; swimming in Lake Toba in North Sumatra; hiking to the Snake Temple in Penang; riding the roller coaster at King's Island in Mason, Ohio. I wanted him to remember the happy times when love still held us in the glow of its promise.

I wanted him to remember that time we almost lost him. It was the night he developed a severe reaction to the antibiotic he was given for his infection. His eyes were swollen shut, his face was bloated, his breathing ragged and shallow. He was burning and convulsing. My wife and I frantically bundled him up in a blanket and carried him for half a kilometer from our apartment near the Perpetual Help Church, half-walking and half-running because this was during Martial Law and there was curfew and there were no running vehicles around at midnight, just stray dogs on the quiet and empty streets.

In the darkness, I carried him in my arms towards the distant lights of the Silliman University hospital on Hibbard Avenue. I wanted him to remember how we loved him once, before he pulled the trigger.