F. SIONIL JOSE

mass

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F. Sionil Jose'

MASS

a novel

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For Alejo and Irwin Nicanor

Books by F. Sionil Jose

Novels
PO-ON
TREE
MY BROTHER, MY EXECUTIONER
THE PRETENDERS

Novellas
TWO FILIPINO WOMEN

Short Fiction
THE GOD STEALER
WAYWAYA
PLATINUM

All the events and characters in this novel are real only in the reader's imagination.

". . . They lied to us in their newspapers, in the books they wrote for us to memorize in school, in their honeyed speeches when they courted our votes. They lied to us because they did not want us to rise from the dungheap to confront them. We know the truth now; we have finally emptied our minds of their lies, discovered their corruption and our weaknesses as well. But this truth as perceived by us is not enough. Truth is, above all, justice. With determination then, and cunning and violence, we must destroy them for only after doing so will we really be free. . ."

From *Memo to Youth*
by Jose Samson

LET WATER BURN

MY NAME IS SAMSON. I have long hair, but there is nothing symbolic or biblical about it; most people my age just have it as a matter of inclination, and nobody really cares. My long hair is a form of self-expression, of a desire to conform, to be with *them*. It is a measure of my indifference to remarks, even to Father Jess's — to which I had countered that Christ had long hair and if God had intended us not to have it, He would not have given the likes of me a shaggy mane. I could let it grow down to my shoulders so I could tie it in a knot and then shave most of it off, leaving just a lock, a pigtail, such as the Chinese gentlemen did generations ago. And look at the Chinese now, at Chairman Mao whom so many of us revere — but it would perhaps only set me off as a freak, and that is not what I want for I desire to be anonymous, to be simply the *me* whom nobody knows, for this *me,* this Jose Samson, is a no-good plastic that should be burned or buried under tons of scum. But plastic seems to survive all sorts of punishment. Please, I have self-respect and I know my sterling potential and what I am worth (which isn't much), but this is how I was, this is what I am, how Mother knows me, and cutting my hair would not erase my stigma, my shame, or dim the glaring blunders of my past.

My name is Samson and I have always known I was different no matter how often Mother had repeated to me, shrieked at me or told me in soothing and dulcet words that I have an honorable name. But Jose Samson, Pepe, Pepito, Joe Samson is simply, honestly, irrevocably and perhaps resolutely, a bastard. It is not difficult to bear this — an indelible yet invisible tattoo, but not an Igorot facial emblem or a deep, keloid scar that even surgery may not be able to erase — thank God — (do I utter His name in vain?) — my origins have not been wrought on my face, nor deformed my physical being. Yet, this is me, unerring in the devastation of the inner self.

Sometimes, I wish I were never born.

Still, I like being here, transfixed on this plain, this vast limbo without rim called living. I like being here, feeling the wind and the sun upon my skin, the fullness of my stomach, the electric surge of an orgasm — now that I know it — course through me.

The only times I was really depressed was when I filled out those awful forms which demanded that I name my father and I would put "deceased." As far as I was concerned, he died long ago because I never knew about him then although Mother — and she is an honorable

woman — loves him still, his memory. Auntie Bettina, too — she worships him though she never told me who he was no matter what wiles I used. The way they had quarrelled, Mother always telling her to shut up for my sake — I knew that Auntie Bettina had known him well, that something in that dark shrivelled past, went awry. No — as Auntie had hinted, it was not Mother's fault nor anyone else's. It was in the stars, written with precision and clarity, infallible and inescapable, this, my damnation — to be in Cabugawan forever, a destiny that would hound me because a crime had been committed not by my mother and her sister, but by my father. I need no proof of this for I am here, wearied and rotting with self-pity and misshapen under a burden too heavy to bear.

Yet, I am Sagittarius and I am supposedly easygoing and frivolous. The planets cannot chain me to any spot for I am fated to strike out — but to where? Is Tondo any better? Here where for a year I have lived and known this warren of tin shacks and fouled air as I knew Cabugawan, too? But I am no bastard here; no dark shadow hounds me for I am Pepe, the scholar, the loyal comrade who will rise to any challenge, scour faraway places, and if I choose to be a priest, I would certainly be Archbishop, or if I veer the other way, I would be the czar of crime of the Barrio, mightier than Roger will ever be. After all, I organized the Brotherhood here, extracted the mindless ferocity from the gang and gave it a purpose other than thievery and drinking bouts. With this Brotherhood, I showed them how they could extort gin money, contributions for the fiesta from flinty politicians in the name of charity, civic pride and all those shibboleths that plastic nationalists swear by.

My career as a politician is assured if I so decide to become one — that is what Father Jess had said, shaking his ponderous head at the prospect. But I will never be a politician. Though interested in people, I detest being friendly to those I have no vibes with, not because I am not hypocritical — which I easily can be — but because it takes so much effort, so much violence to one's self to attempt friendliness where there is nothing but indifference or contempt. Sagittarius — I am friendly — this is my nature; I am open to anything. I have a mind like a sponge that absorbs oil, water, muck, dirt and a cast-iron stomach; I eat anything. They also say I am an achiever, that I can do what I set my mind to; in the two years I have been in Manila, what wonders have I done to my mind, to my body, to me? Two years — how many light years is it to the nearest galaxy and even if we got there, in the end, will the trip be worth it? How long did it take the pterodactyl to disappear from the swamp, for the diamond to be? A baby feeds on its mother's womb for nine months and is strangled slowly after birth because it does not have milk or proteins. Does it make any difference if it dies in nine months or before the age of nine? I have long known that time is an enemy rather than a friend, a deceiver because it lulls us into thinking it can solve

everything and, therefore, nothing. So it has been two years here in Manila and what can I show for those years? Calloused knuckles of a novice karatista, the muddled brain of an aspiring politician?

If I deprecate myself too much, again this is also my nature for I really cannot understand myself sometimes; for instance, why I was glad to leave Cabugawan where I was born, where I knew people and where people had been good to me. I don't know why I had been unkind to Auntie Bettina and to Mother most of all, for it had never been my intention to hurt them, but that was what I did when I left.

HOME — but where is home to this free mind, to this heart that throbs and expands beyond its prison of flesh? I could very well forget this home, this blob of black upon the green side of the earth, here where dreams are slaughtered, and having buried them, I could strike out to other reaches and lift myself away from this Cabugawan, this enclave to which I was doomed as were those before me — those stunted people from the North who first came here and are now but memories, their presence ever with us when we talk before our meager meals, when we unfold the *buri* mats and prepare for the night — they hover around us, their remembered images blurred by years — uncles and aunts and grandfathers and great-grandfathers, their names, their lineage, their ghosts drifting up the grass roof with the soot and smoke of the kerosene lamp, and out into the night; who are they but names of old men who fought with bolos, whose blood washed this land and whose bones are now embedded in the soil, their hatreds forgotten and unresolved, their ambitions unresurrected by those they left behind, certainly not by me, least of all, who could fancy an armalite spraying the sky not in anger but in wonderment that I could ever possess a two-thousand peso toy and, with it, perhaps rob some bank so that once and for all I would be away from this blob of black, this home . . .

CABUGAWAN is a village not really far from town so I cannot say I am a farm boy for I did spend a lot of my time in town, in the marketplace and around the moviehouse. Follow the dirt road from the main street, head south, cross a wooden bridge, and you are in Cabugawan. . . a huddle of thatch-roofed houses though a few are roofed with galvanized iron now for some of our neighbors have pensions from the government and a few families have relatives in the West Coast. Mother told me once that all who lived here were tenant farmers, and the bright ones were those who left.

The village street is just wide enough for bullcarts and an occasional jeepney. In the rainy season, it is churned into mud by carabaos plodding through. In some places, the village street is lined with *madre de cacao* trees — how beautiful they are when they are in bloom. On both sides are our homes, mostly walled with *buri* palm leaves, surrounded by

fences of split bamboo that rot and fall apart. The yards are swept clean. Fruit trees — tamarind, papaya, pomelo, caimito — surround the houses.

I know all the houses and their interiors — the cheap wooden furniture, the low eating tables, the kitchens sooty with years, the calendar frames and covers of *Bannawag* pasted on the walls, a cracked mirror here, yellowed photographs of weddings and funerals, and on one side, the crude wooden chests where starched clothes and trinkets are stored. The village road dips down an arbor of bamboo, green and cool in the sunlight, and beyond it, the open fields. I have wandered here, swam in the irrigation ditches, gathered snails and helped in the rice harvest.

It is difficult to explain my restlessness. I have not been hungry — as some of our neighbors had been during the planting season when they ate only twice a day. Thank God, Mother had good customers who paid her for her sewing, and Auntie Bettina is a schoolteacher. I cannot take pride in my being Ilokano; I am not industrious, frugal or serious but I do have this desire to rush into the unknown, and I did that through books passed down to me by Mother and Auntie Bettina. I have meandered into the recesses of the imagination, wondered how it was when they first came to Rosales — those ancestors who had named the villages after the towns they came from, but I am not eager to know about them or why they came, by what means and with what infernal motivations. Perhaps it is just as well that I was born in Pangasinan where, somehow, the Ilokano mystique has been diluted and where there is little affinity with the Ilokos, no real ties with the venerable towns that our forefathers had left; perhaps, it was best that I was thrown into this cauldron called Tondo for here, though we were still *Warays, Maykenis* and etceteras, the distinctions have been muted and we are what we are, and the great equalizer is the fact that we all live here and we live here because we cannot live in Santa Cruz, or Quezon City or Makati. Still, there was no denying it — the Iglesia Ni Kristo had more followers than Father Jess's Church. . .

As for home, I see Cabugawan as the end, a monotonous prison where people grow old yet remain the same. When the time finally came for me to leave it, I could not face Mother. So what if I did steal at school, from Auntie, from her? I just could not help myself. The last time Mother whipped me was when I was in grade six; it was also the year I flunked again. She did not have change for the five pesos of Mrs. Sison — one of her regular customers — so when she got home, she gave me a peso to return to Mrs. Sison. I never had money; I did go to town, but not to the house of Mrs. Sison. I went straight to the *panciteria* and ordered a peso worth of noodles. I would not have been found out, but Mrs. Sison ordered another dress in a week's time, and when Mother came home, I knew at once that she had found out. How could I tell her I

spent the money on noodles? I told her I lost it — not a likely excuse. She grabbed her measuring stick and lashed at me. The pain in my thigh was sharp, stinging; she was about to swing again when she paused, the bamboo stick in mid-air, then crumpled to the floor, gasping. I went to her, frightened. "Mother — Mother!" but if she heard, she did not turn to me; her hand clutched at her chest and after a while, she got up and sat on the stool. Her face was livid and her breathing came slowly. When she spoke again, her voice trembled and was almost inaudible: "Pepe — " she said, "what have I done wrong? I have tried to raise you the best way I can."

But there was only one thing in my mind — that she was ill and I had made it worse by making her angry. And since then, every time she was hard of breath, I would worry that it was my doing. I am a bastard born to do wrong and could not help myself.

When I finally left, it was without recriminations. Mother had always wanted me to go and had prepared for it for so many years. She had set her mind to my going to college, perhaps to compensate for her never having finished her degree. She had to stop in her second year, the year I was born.

You will be somebody, she used to say. And even after I failed thrice in grade school, she did not lose faith.

I love Mother — I only resented her wanting me catapulted to the stars when what I really wanted was just to be on solid, sordid ground, reading what I liked, eating *pancit* and bread if I could have it every day — not vegetable stew with salted fish, rice fried without lard, and coffee brewed from corn. I wanted more, but how could I tell her this when she worked so hard and yet made so little?

Auntie Bettina had cooked some rice cakes for me to take to Antipolo Street. All through the week, Mother had told me how to behave, to be obedient to Uncle Bert and Auntie Betty, to help in their house and do my own washing and ironing.

Unknown to Mother, Auntie and I had an argument. It was May, a month after my graduation from high school. Four years of it took me six years; and before that, nine years of grade school instead of six so that I was older and more mature than all of my classmates. It is not that I was dumb — as my Auntie used to say. Through it all, Mother had veiled her disappointment each time my grades were very low; her reproachful silence was enough. Auntie Bettina was right, of course. I did not try hard enough even just to pass. Arithmetic, for instance, bored me and I was absent so many times my teachers had no alternative but to flunk me. In one particular year, Mother got to know of these absences and she followed me one afternoon to the creek where I had gone to swim. She caught me there and lashed at me with a strip of bamboo so hard, the welts were on my legs for a couple of days. This and other forms of punishment did not deter me. In high school, it was not arithmetic — it was geometry, physics, algebra or

Pilipino — that senile euphemism for Tagalog — in which I could orate but whose grammar I could never learn although there was nothing grammatically wrong with the way I spoke. I have, since then, believed that the real enemies of the development of the national language were the grammarians and the sooner they were banished, the better for Tagalog.

But while I loathed science and math, I loved literature and was happiest when absorbed in a novel. I saw an ever widening world ennobled by the possibilities of eternity. I was visiting lands I would never actually see, also the darkest and grimmest of lives, the convolutions of the libido, and the subconscious. I trembled with the angst of the psychological storytellers and chilled to the bone with spy and detective fiction. Indeed, I grew up rich with books and they made our house different from all the houses in Cabugawan or all of Rosales even.

This interest in books was shared by Mother and my auntie. The library — one big glass-encased cabinet — was essentially their making. Though the selection was predominantly fiction and the classics, there were also cheap pocketbooks on the origins of man, history and Asian philosophy. Ortega y Gasset and Marx were side by side with Confucius and Shakespeare whom I did not like though I had read all of him. Most of the books were secondhand, or hand-me-downs from Uncle Tony when he was in the United States. I scaled the Himalayas, dined at Maxim's, savored the new wines of Australia, safari'd in Africa; indeed, I had thrilled to the excursions of James Morris, V. S. Pritchett, Santha Rama Rau, etc. I also followed the latest shows on Broadway, the winners in international film festivals, delved deep into the human spirit with Hesse and Boll, and agreed completely with Negritude and the struggle for an African identity.

A few times each year, Auntie Bettina went to Manila and she always returned with tattered paperbacks and copies of *Esquire, Look, The New Yorker, Encounter* and *Harper's* or *Atlantic Monthly* for she always forayed into the secondhand magazine and bookstands in Recto and Avenida. I kept them all in reading condition by taping or pasting them when they started falling apart.

But the life of books was plastic; it mesmerized me with the triumph of virtue, the goodness of man, the plenitude of rewards awaiting the kind and the honest when they ascend heaven, nirvana or some such Shangrila. Yet, all around us, even in this village, it was the rapacious landlord and the omnipotent politician who amassed rewards not in some unreachable netherland but here — here where I, too, could see how far, far away from this planet was the world of the imagination where I had thrived.

This wretched geography to which I was shackled was made livable only in the mind and to it I went all the time so that it was a full six years of high school instead of four — or even just three — if I tried. I almost did not pass in my senior year if Auntie Bettina did not talk with my

teacher so he would not press charges against me.

I was also a thief.

It started way back in grade school. I used to envy my classmates who, during recess, would go to the stores in front of the school and they would eat rice cakes, ice cream or *halo-halo* and all I would have at times would be a cold ear of corn or boiled sweet potatoes which Mother had me bring. During recess, I'd steal back to the classroom and ransack the bags of my classmates and sometimes pilfer a few coins. During all those years, I was never caught. Till I was a high school senior. My teacher left his Parker pen on his table and, as we were filing out, I simply swiped it; he had asked us the following day if any of us had seen it. I did not want the pen for myself. I wanted to go to Dagupan early in the morning, have a good meal, a movie, and come back in the evening, but I made the mistake of peddling it in the bus station to someone who knew my teacher.

There was a confrontation in the house, Mother crying at the dishonor I had brought her, Auntie Bettina asking why I did it, and what could I tell them?

My teacher was kind — he said he would not press charges after Auntie Bettina had talked with him, that he would pass me, too, in spite of my low grades and he even had a few kind words — yes, I was poor in many subjects, but was tops in literature and composition, and that if only I listened, was not absent most of the time, and studied. . . studied. . . But what was there to study? At twenty-two I felt that I knew enough of the world, that Cabugawan was its asshole, the repository of all its grief and agony, that I must flee it, even if only for a day in Dagupan.

Dust was thick on the street. It had already rained but not enough to bring a touch of green to the dying grass. Though it was only midmorning, with the heat it seemed as if it was already high noon. I had stripped to my shorts but it did not help. I wanted ice cream or *halo-halo* or just iced water, but we did not have a refrigerator. Auntie was cleaning in the kitchen; Mother had gone to town to deliver a dress. She supported me with her sewing; the sounds that I grew up with were the snip of scissors and the whirring of the infernal sewing machine late into the night.

I had read everything in the house, even Auntie's technical teaching books, and I could not go to the library anymore, nor face any of my teachers. I had even read the scrapbook by Tio Tony that Mother kept under lock as if it were some heirloom. I had wondered why, so I asked her once and it was then that her voice trembled and she showed it to me — articles mostly, on nationalism, on the uses of the past — and I sometimes thought about what Tio Tony had written and concluded they were a waste of time. Although he had long been dead, his memory lingered tenaciously. Of all the Samsons, he had travelled farthest and reached the very top; I sometimes wished I were like him if only for his travels, and when I told Mother this, she smiled wistfully as if I had made

her happy.

It was Don Quixote who really fascinated me. I read him when I was in grade school. We were having difficult times; Mother was working very hard to help send Auntie Bettina to college. We could not afford electricity although the line had already reached our village and many of our neighbors had it. I was so fascinated by that crazy old man; the kerosene lamp I fashioned out of an old pop bottle was often empty so I used to walk to the far corner and there, under the street lamp, with all the moths and mosquitoes about me, I would follow Don Quixote's meanderings.

I would often wander to Calanutan, too, follow the railroad tracks, wondering how long it would take if I followed them and walked to Manila although the trains no longer came to Rosales.

In the mornings, pretending that I was going to school, I often went to Carmen and watched the buses as they sped on to Manila. And when I was tired from walking, I would lie under the shade of trees and watch the clouds shape into boats and planes, palaces and faraway snow-capped mountains — all the compass points that I would someday explore.

It was all those books, their sweet poison, their untruths . . . which beguiled me. But I could not go far although I was already twenty-two. I did earn a little, polishing shoes and selling newspapers on holidays or gathering firewood and delivering it to regular customers in town, but what I earned went to *bijon* noodles and excursions to Dagupan.

On this particular morning, I was just listless and saying again and again, "Life of a shrimp, life of a shrimp . . ."

Tia Bettina came into the living room, her printed dress quite wet as she had been washing the earthen pots. A few years back, she had looked lovely, just like in her photographs, but she had become a teacher and got assigned to a barrio in the next town. Though there were some suitors, she never paid them attention and now, she was past forty, an old maid — but without the sour rancour of spinsters.

"What are you saying, Pepe?" she asked. "Why are you like this?"

"Why? Why? Because of this place! Everyone!"

"What wrong have I done?" she said, smiling, trying to humor me.

"You are contented," I said. "You are a teacher, you are Miss Samson, and you are happy."

"And you are young, talented. The world is before you. And next month you will go to college. You should be happy," she said.

She, too, had worked hard and saved to send me to college — no, not in Dagupan, but in Manila. In another month, I would leave to be the lawyer, doctor, or whatever they fancied me to be. I can understand Mother saving for my education, but Auntie Bettina need not have saved for me even out of gratitude to Mother. It seemed as if there was no meaning to all they did. I never wanted to be a lawyer or a doctor; what I really wanted was to go see a movie, devour a good meal, or tarry in

Dagupan just looking at the shops, the new shoes and clothes and denims for men, and go to the dance hall, drink a little beer and hold the girls, then dinner, not the vegetable stew we had at home, but plenty of pork or fried chicken.

"Why do I have to go to college?" I asked.

"Because that is how it will be," Auntie Bettina said, still trying to humor me.

But I was not to be humored. "Why do you and Mother have to work so hard for me?" I asked pointedly. "I did not ask you to. I could be an ingrate. I am already a thief. You cannot be proud of me."

Auntie looked at me, more hurt than angry, then she spoke, making each word sink like stones in a quagmire, without trace or ripple in the dark, opaque surface of my thoughts: "You don't know many things because you are young. You don't know how she worked so that you can leave this place and not suffer."

"I don't want you to be disappointed," I said. "All that I want to be is to be happy, to be. . ." I groped for words for I had never before given thought to what I really wanted to be. But now, in this illuminating instant, it was laid lucidly before me, gleaming like a polished morning — the dream, the purpose. "I want to be happy so I must go away. I have known nothing here but sadness. I want to be myself," I said clearly. "I don't want to be told what I will never be. I don't want to have a single worry and I don't care about this place. I want to leave and not come back . . ."

She stared at me as if I were some stranger and her voice was strained. "I don't want to hear this. And where will you go, and how can you go? You have just finished high school — you don't know anything, you are not trained for anything."

"I have hands," I said defiantly, knowing I was only hurting her more. "I can sweep floors, shine shoes. And if the worst comes, I can steal."

The dark thoughts, submerged for years, were being freed from their moorings.

Her countenance softened as she slumped on the chair before the sewing machine. Tears misted her eyes, rolled down her cheeks, but she made no effort to wipe them.

"Pepe," she said, "it is all wasted then, the years your Mama worked for you. No, I will not talk about myself. And for what? Please think about it again — you can finish college, if you only tried, if you stopped playing. There is no future here. You can see that in us. Only through education, if you only knew your father. . ." She stopped, shocked at her own revelation, and wiped her tears quickly. But I did not prod her into telling me who my father was for, by then, I no longer cared.

DESTROY THE BRIDGES

FIVE HUNDRED PESOS, that was what Auntie Bettina and Mother gave me — my tuition for the semester. I would still have enough left for etceteras. Within the month, Auntie would come to Manila to follow up her promotion at the Department of Education and she would bring me more.

Mother embraced me before we went down the steps then she started to cry. We walked to the bus station in the early morning, my stomach filled with fried rice, coffee and salted fish; all my clothes — three knit shirts, three denim pants, and some underwear — in a shapeless canvas bag that belonged to Auntie Bettina.

As we crossed the creek, I looked down the wooden bridge at the sandy river bed; it would be a long time before I would return here to swim. Some of our neighbors were up early, sweeping their yards. They asked where we were going and Mother said proudly that I was going to college, in Manila.

Before I boarded the bus, she reminded me, "My son, whatever course you will take, do not forget Cabugawan. . . you can only leave it if you study hard. . ."

Her printed dress was frayed at the hem and her slippers were soiled. Looking at her careworn face, her hands hardened with work, my chest tightened. I pressed her hand to my lips. I wanted to ask her forgiveness which I did not deserve, to embrace her again, but I was twenty-two and on this morning, I was on the threshold of a new life and should not be sentimental. "Mother," I said, "thank you. . ."

The bus crunched out of the dirt driveway. I looked back as we neared the highway and she still stood there, watching.

Auntie Bettina brought me once to Manila when I was thirteen — a two-day visit, all of which was now a haze. The land we passed was parched with sun, all through Central Luzon, and the towns that were stirring with unrest. It was the dry season's beginning and before the heat came and seared everything, the last lingering coolness of March brought with it, as if in some stubborn but futile protest, the burning red cascade of flowers from the fire trees.

The grass — now ready to die — had started to brown. The smell of rot, of decay, the familiar odors of garlic and dried fish which permeated the small restaurants were heavy in the small towns we passed. The heat had baked the mud which, in turn, the pound of feet, the slash of tires had ground into dust that now hovered over everything like mist in the

mornings; it was the dull glaze on the rooftops, a pattern on the roadsides, the patina over trees and with the dust, came the heat that went deeper, through the skin and into the bowels and festered there, to be released not at dusk when the heat diminished, but with the magic of *cuatro cantos* or San Miguel and when released, turned to violence. Be wary of Filipinos who are drunk — I read once that our amiable ways are a veneer which, when peeled away, would uncover the real frustrations, the dormant angers; in *vino veritas*.

I was both thirsty and famished when the bus rolled into its terminal at noon, noisy and awash with weary travelers from all over the North. The air around us was soggy with fumes and sweat. I had a quick lunch of *siopao* and noodles in the squalid restaurant within the terminal. Though I heard about how *provincianos* like myself were preyed upon by porters and taxi drivers, I was not apprehensive. As for pickpockets, I had my money, as instructed by Mother, pinned inside my shirt and I would have to strip to take it out. I had only twenty pesos in my plastic wallet, no watch, no ring, and it would be a foolish pickpocket who would consider me good picking.

Auntie Bettina's instructions were clear. I boarded a bus for Quiapo; through the steaming, clogged streets, I kept wondering how I would be welcomed in Antipolo Street, how relatives to whom I had never been close would take in a vagabond.

Manila — here I am at last, eager to wallow in your corrupt embrace and drink from your polluted veins. Manila, Queen City, Pearl of the Orient, Jaded Harlot and cheap, plastic bauble — luminous with the good life, I am here to feast on your graces, admire your splendor, your longevity. Be kind as a whore is kind to a virgin man. Lead me through your dispirited streets, your dank and festering neighborhoods into the core of your warm, affectionate heart.

All of the city was warm and Quiapo was the cauldron, bubbling with people, the spillover from all over the country, spewed in Plaza Miranda like sewage from the innards beneath it. They are all here, the evacuees from the folds and recesses of the villages and the small towns, all drawn to Manila as carrion draws a swarm of flies.

I walked around Quiapo, crossed the burning asphalt and took in the acid breath of the city, sought the shelter of the sidewalks filled with the swell of people, soot and greyness above me, the peeling, garish signs of stores, the pungent smell of cheap restaurants — the troughs where we would feed.

The length of Rizal Avenue was quite a walk. Although it was warm, my shirt was barely wet with sweat when I reached the Antipolo crossing. As Auntie Bettina said, the railroad tracks were the best guide so I followed them.

The whole neighborhood smelled of urine, or refuse that had accumulated there too long. On both sides were squatter homes, and the