

**Aviary** (published in *Manila Noir*, 2013)

When we learn about the sign, we must see it for ourselves. So from our shanties we cross the railway tracks and charge toward the home of Alejandro, the only kid we know with a computer, the only kid we know with *electricity*, so that he can show us on the Internet a picture of the sign. He lives with his mother in the Financial District now, in a big-shot, high-rise condominium which, he has said, overlooks the world. But it's not so high that we can't reach it: despite the security guard's suspicions, Alejandro calls the front desk to give us clearance, so we file into the elevator, rising and rising to the uppermost floors. When we reach his door, it's already open, and he stands there waiting. "I'll show you on my computer," he says, "but don't touch the keyboard. Don't touch *anything*." He leads us to his bedroom, checks our hands to make sure they're clean, then herds us in. He flips open his laptop computer, types and clicks and types and clicks, until an image downloads, a picture of a sign posted on a shopping mall door. It says:

THIS IS A PRIVATE,  
CONTROLLED  
ENVIRONMENT.  
POOR PEOPLE &  
OTHER DISTURBING  
REALITIES STRICTLY

PROHIBITED.

THANK YOU!

*GREENBELT MALL*

“So the story is true,” says Alejandro, closing his laptop, “they really don’t want you there.” He half-smiles at us and shrugs, a funny story to him but we curse their name and unleash all the profanity we know: fuck you Greenbelt Mall, you asshole Greenbelt Mall, shit bitch motherfucker go to hell Greenbelt Mall.

Greenbelt Mall is mere kilometers from our part of Makati City. From certain vantage points and adequate heights, we have witnessed its nighttime glow of green and red during past Christmas seasons, and we have heard the blare of marching bands that celebrate every grand opening and ribbon-cutting ceremony. But have we been inside? No way! We have no use for Tokyo-inspired fur and leather winter coats. We don’t want imported and indigestible cheeses. Our lives are made no better by facial cleansers made from organic jackfruit and nuts. And say we did go there one day, say we purchased even the smallest trinket like a souvenir Greenbelt keychain or a stylish Greenbelt visor. We would be called swell-headed big-shots who think they’re hot shit. People trying to be other people.

But we will not be prohibited from entering. We will not allow ourselves to be banned. We decide then and there to act, to right this terrible wrong.

“And do what? Get revenge?” Alejandro laughs but we don’t.

The front door rattles open. “My mom’s home,” Alejandro says. “Leave.” He scoots us from his room, and on our way out, we see his mother staring out a wall of

windows, at a view of sky scrapers, palm trees, a grid of streets that from here look orderly and clean. She is wearing a dress as black and tight as a silhouette, holds a long brown cigarette in one hand and an amber-colored drink with clinking ice in the other. She is the blondest Filipina we have ever seen, and her face is half-gone behind dark glasses, huge and round like two black moons.

She looks us up and down slowly, with a stare of recognition and suspicion, as though we remind her of what she comes from. “Get out,” she says.

We look past her at the view. We look around her, at this roomful of things we will never have—a white leather sofa and a rug of white fur, a dining table with elephant tusk legs, a strong ceiling free of cracks and leaks and an equally sturdy floor. But our envy is tempered by our pity. We know the things she does to live this life. We have seen her strolling down the street on the arms of businessmen—Japanese, Indian, Saudi Arabian, American—and we know there are nights when Alejandro must find somewhere else to go, and on those nights he comes to us.

We exit. We enter the elevator, feeling our descent. It’s dusk by the time we’re home, and Auntie Fritzie is already scolding us as we come into view. In her yellow poncho and pink rubber boots, she has been scavenging through the dumps and trash heaps, and has lined up her findings in messy piles along the railway track. She tells us to hurry our lazy asses and get to work, says that if our mothers and fathers were alive, they would smack our faces for our laziness. So we sort through tattered shoes, sticky soda bottles, chipped plates, flicking away the things that cling to them. Toiling through muck and stench, we keep on cursing Greenbelt Mall, thinking of the revenge Alejandro spoke of, and how we intend to get it.

This morning, we don black. Polo shirts and corduroys, our only good clothes, the outfits we wear to baptisms and funerals. We grab satchel bags and slip on dark glasses, intact pairs collected from the years of Auntie Fritzie's scavenging, and as we make our way to the center of Makati City, they turn the gray day grayer.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5: Greenbelt Mall is made of five interconnected buildings, 4 and 5 the most elite, the ones that aim to keep us out. We walk toward the main entrance of Greenbelt 4, a fortress-like structure surrounded by colossal palm trees and twisty moat-like fountains, and glass awnings jutting toward the sky.

We arrive at a set of double glass doors. Inside, on a marble pillar, hangs the sign we saw the day before. We step inside and walk right past it.

Greenbelt air is cold, the coldest air ever, and why are the shoppers' faces so narrow and pointy and white? Back and forth across the shiny rows of shiny stores, up and down the escalators, these are the whitest Filipinos we have ever seen. No one regards us when we pass, as if we are the ghostly ones, not them.

We don't know where to go, not at first, so we follow a group of teen-aged girls not much older than us. We whistle at them, make cat calls, and though they keep their distance we stay close, and finally they lead us to a store whose name we have seen before but never said aloud—Louis Vuitton. The girls walk through the doors, but we stop just short of them, surveying the scene inside: skinny men with slicked-back hair stand behind long display cases full of leather bags and wallets, some so special they require their own glass encasement; women coo over them, like nurses in a room full of

new born babies. Light comes from every corner, giving the entire store a butter-colored glow, and when we finally step inside, we seem to light up too.

One of the skinny men, safe behind a row of leather briefcases, welcomes us with a meaningless nod. A woman who could be his twin sister approaches, heels clacking against the floor like a ticking clock. “Can I help you?” she asks.

We shake our heads no.

“Is there nothing I can help you find?” she asks. It may be a trick question; her eyes shift toward the security guard standing by the door.

We tell her we’re looking for a present, something special for our aunt, and before she can offer phony customer service we disperse, spread ourselves throughout the store, upstairs to the Men’s Universe, downstairs to the Women’s Universe, and we even infiltrate a room called The Private Salon, where two of the skinny men show a set of leather wallets to an old woman sitting in the middle of a three-person sofa, a teacup in her hand. The skinny men look up, their faces full of dismay. “Can I help you?” they ask together, but it’s the old woman who tells us to leave. In another reality, Auntie Fritzie would be this woman on the sofa. Though she scolds, belittles, and hits us constantly, it would be nice to see her sitting in something pillowy and warm. Such a moment might soften her; perhaps she would be easier for us to please.

“I said leave,” the woman says.

We do not move, not for several moments. Not until we’re ready.

Finally, we go.

We exit The Private Salon, return to the main floor. We gather at a corner display of what a sign calls “weekend bags.” They are leather bags with long leather straps, with

buttons, buckles, and rivets, all gold, everywhere. The price of even the smallest ones startle us. We have no idea what that kind of money could buy, how much of it, but the possibilities seem endless.

A few of us walk to the front of the store, pretend to accidentally knock over a rack of coin purses. Diversion created, the rest of us unzip our satchels and pull out plastic bags containing the bodies of small dead birds. We had heard that an aviary once stood on the land Greenbelt occupies now; imagine all those homeless birds, how they aimlessly flew, how swiftly they perished. Where we live, dead birds are everywhere: on the ground and in mounds of trash; they even make their way, somehow, into Auntie Fritzie's daily collections. The bodies are ashen, gray from death, dirt, dried up blood and exposed organs. Some crawl with fleas and lice. Carefully, without touching them, we drop a bird into the smallest compartment of each travel bag, one by one by one. When we finish, we slip out of the store, as easily as we entered.

We walk away twenty paces, then turn back toward Louis Vuitton. We imagine the people who will find these birds first, how they will first mistake them for balls of thread or yarn, wads of unexpected dust. But when they look closer, they will blink several times, shudder, then scream, disturbed by the thing they hold in their hands.

We leave Louis Vuitton behind, continue through Greenbelt 4, passing stores with names like nonsense words—BVLGARI, BOTTEGA VENETTA—and others that sound like sneezing—GUCCI, Jimmy Choo. Whole families drift in and out of them—what small boy needs Norwegian perfume? What stink could he possibly possess to require so expensive a scent? We might be angered if we weren't so baffled, so for a time we

simply ride the escalators and observe the wastefulness all around us. We ride up, we ride down, over and over, and sometimes glimpse ourselves in the mall's many mirrored surfaces. In certain moments, one wall reflects another wall, multiplying us as we ascend and descend, ascend and descend, as if there are hundreds of us, maybe thousands, seemingly everywhere, going nowhere.

From Greenbelt 4 we go to 5. On an empty bench we find a promotional pamphlet, with a customer testimonial that says, *Greenbelt 5—it's like you're not in the Philippines!* We crumple it up, toss it in the trash, then peer through a storefront window and watch a white-faced Filipino couple purchase jewel-tipped shoes and a gold-framed oil painting in the same transaction, while their small daughters play games or send text messages on their hi-tech phones. We leave this scene and walk down a row of stores, then stop at one we recognize, Kenneth Cole, because Auntie Fritzie once found a barely scuffed coin purse bearing a tag with the same name, a prized possession even now. But their window displays perturb us: each features a group of silver-bodied mannequins dressed in black and gray evening wear, some lounging about in twisty wire chairs, other posed to look as if they are in mid-conversation. But they're all headless, and we don't understand this. So we step inside the near-empty store, and find a tiny-bodied salesgirl folding black satin shirts into perfect rectangles. She looks up, startled. "Can I help you?" she asks, a question we are already so tired of, but this time we say yes, and we ask: where are the heads? What did she or her manager or Kenneth Cole himself do with them, and why are they not connected to their bodies? She blinks, shakes her head, says, "Excuse me?" We repeat our questions and she answers, "You need to leave." We do not. Instead, we

come closer, catching sight of ourselves in the concave security mirror in the upper corner of the ceiling: a circle of black figures surrounding one small girl, closing in, no chance for escape. Does she know how often we feel this way, between our cardboard walls, beneath our low corrugated roofs? Does she understand?

“Please go,” she says.

We are done here, so one by one we uncircle the girl, exit Kenneth Cole single file, and en route to the door we clear our throats and spit out a loogie on a row of leather gloves displayed palm up.

We charge through the rest of Greenbelt 5, entering and exiting any store we choose. Our presence baffles every salesman and woman; we never make our intentions clear. In Banana Republic, we stand in a line, trying on the same safari jacket one at a time, then leave it rumpled on the floor. In Prizmic & Brill, we take turns sitting on every chair for sale, but quickly, so as not to become too comfortable. We insert ourselves among the crowd of pregnant women inside Havin a Baby, then gather around an empty white cradle, which we rock back and forth as we remember dead babies we have known. At Spex, we ignore the glasses on display and simply look at ourselves in the lit-up mirrors, the mysteriousness of our dark glasses, our facelessness beneath. Then, when we pass Rolex, we pay our respects: not long before, a group of armed men robbed the store, smashing and smashing with the ends of their guns every glass case of watches. Most escaped, but one was shot dead by Greenbelt security. The news report said he was someone like us, a man who tried to change his life. We imagine him splayed on the store’s doorstep, his blood congealing on the ground beneath his dying body.



In front of Rolex, we gather in a circle. We have a moment of silence, then one of us takes out a razor blade, gives a quick slash to his palm, lets blood drip onto the mall's marble floor.

A samurai raises his sword over two lovers slurping thick, wormy noodles from a steaming white bowl. We half-wish it was real, that the samurai could come to life and lop off the heads of these diners. But the samurai is just a character in a movie projected on the wall of a restaurant called Johnnandyoko, a name as strange as the food they serve—slivers of raw fish that look like tongues, piled high on top of each other, and surrounded with leaves and dots of orange and magenta sauce, on dinner plates so large they're mostly empty. We cannot fathom becoming full off such small food, but as we stand here, lined up along the window and staring in, the diners seem to delight in the tininess of their meal.

We lick our fingers and draw X's on the window glass, over the diners' faces. We do the same at other elegant restaurants of Greenbelt 5—The Terrace, Chateau 1771, Chili's—watching up close the people inside, crossing them out. Strange as their food is, we can't deny the fact that we had no breakfast, but we fend off hunger by telling ourselves that we aren't wanted here, and even if they offered us a sample, just a small quick taste, we would never eat it.

We've breathed enough of the Greenbelt air. We exit through one of the many entrances, find ourselves in a cool and breezy courtyard, where parents lounge on blankets laid out on the grass, as their giggling children r

un circles around them. We stop and stare at some of them, then move on.

Then we see it, there in the distance: a dome-like structure like the top half of a UFO. We move toward it slowly, cautiously, as if it might take flight at any moment. But then we discover that the building is the Greenbelt Chapel. A place for worship between shopping; we are not impressed. Still, there are no signs prohibiting our entry.

We enter with no intentions. Then we are amazed.

We have never seen anything so wondrous, such unearthly beauty. Every wall and panel curves around, swoops up from the ground and meets at the top, where a stained-glass Jesus Christ surrounded by golden light gazes down upon us. At the other end of the chapel, choir members gather, practicing the first notes of some holy song. So humbled are we by this magnificence that we remove our dark glasses, file into a pew and drop to our knees. Terrible storms leveled off our church long ago; for years we have worshipped alongside the empty railway tracks, in the heat and in the cold, which, we realize now, has made it difficult to pray. But in this mostly empty church, we fall easily into prayer. Our heads bowed, we are so silent we can hear the sound of our own breathing, somehow in rhythm with the choir's song.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

We raise our heads, and then we see it, a shock of blonde hair, at the end of the pew of the very first row. Alejandro's mother. She crosses herself then stands up, still in her black dress and dark glasses. She picks up a pair of shopping bags by her feet, walks slowly up the aisle. We bow our heads again, hoping to remain unseen.

She stops at the end of our row, lowers her sunglasses, revealing a bruised black eye. She looks us over, one face at a time. "You don't belong here," she says, in a tone

that sounds like wisdom. Then she looks away at something behind us. We turn and see what she sees: family after family arriving for mass, whole generations, all in flawless clothing, perfectly shined shoes. Alejandro's mother moves on, and then we notice a man in a navy blue suit with gold buttons, the father of what looks to be a prominent family, staring at us from across the aisle, whispering to a woman who may be his wife, and our good clothes now look meager, the holes and frays of our shirts more noticeable than before.

We don our dark glasses. It's time for us to leave.

But first, we decide that this is the spot, the place we will leave our final mark. From one of our satchels we remove—carefully, delicately—a segment of metal pipe wrapped with blue and red wire, with a cell phone duct-taped to it. We place it under the pew before us, right in the middle, where someone whose head is bowed in prayer but not truly praying might notice it, if he or she looks closely enough.

We stand and walk out the Greenbelt Chapel, make our way home.

It will not detonate. Fake things never do. Instead of explosions there will be mass panic and hysteria, which we will read about in left-behind newspapers, or on the Internet, if Alejandro will let us look at his computer again. The Greenbelt Mall authorities will call it a hoax, a false alarm; they will promise the people there is nothing to fear. Still, the damage will be done. We will have created unease here, severe emotional distress, a disturbance they will not soon forget. And when they do, we will strike again, in ways we ourselves have yet to know.