



**Aviary** (short story/ excerpt)

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 Manila 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 with arms crossed. "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, inspects 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 and shrugs; to him, it’s just another funny story. But we curse 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 from past Christmas seasons, and we have heard the blare of marching bands that celebrate every grand opening and ribbon-cutting ceremony. But have we ever 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. Her face is half-gone behind dark glasses, big and round like two black moons.

She lowers her glasses, looks at our shoes and clothes and faces with recognition and suspicion, as though we remind her of something she doesn't want to know. She was gone for years, since Alejandro was a baby, working as a singer or dancer or entertainer, in places with strange names: *Foo-ket*. *Do-bye*. *Straley-ya*. Now she's back, the blondest Filipina we have ever seen.

"Get out," she says.

But we don't move. We look just at her, then 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 good ceiling free of cracks and leaks and an equally sturdy floor. But we pity her. We know the things she does to live this life. We have seen her strolling down the street on the arms of businessmen—sometimes American, sometimes Japanese—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 sloppy 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'd 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 cursing Greenbelt Mall, thinking of the revenge Alejandro spoke of, and how we intend to get it.