



CONTAINS SENSITIVE MATERIAL  
PARENTAL GUIDANCE ADVISED

RENATO BARRIA'S  
CHILDREN'S  
STORIES

As told by DANIEL TAYONA & GIGO ALAMPAY

RENATO BARJA'S  
CHILDREN'S  
STORIES

Artworks by  
RENATO BARJA JR.

Stories written by  
Daniel Palma Tayona  
Gigo Alampay

with Filipino translation by  
Rhandee Garlitos

## PREFACE

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It has taken Renato “Jojo” Barja nearly two decades to collect these stories.

Each child in this book is based on an actual if fleeting encounter in the city and suburbs of Manila. Jojo does not know why the fates have chosen him, but over the years – walking down the street, riding a jeepney, or even just watching television – strange, interesting, sad, challenged, and wonderful children have been revealing themselves to him.

In each child he saw a story, which he would commit to memory through quick sketches on his notebook, turning them into his muses, as they inspired empathy and infused his work.

Encountering Jojo’s art for the first time, and seeing its composition, the expression on the faces of the characters, and his deliberately chosen somberly dominant colors of gray, black, brown, and blue, one cannot help but be struck by the sadness, even darkness, that these works evoke.

The stories in this book do not shy away from sensitive issues. There is poverty, and unsafe homes, drugs and violence. There is hope too, which while born out of an understandable desire to look for happy endings, it is not naïve. It is one that recognizes the challenges that face children who find themselves in unfortunate situations.

As we worked to publish this book, we were at times uncomfortably aware of the sensitive nature of some of the vignettes, and the need to flag them for parental guidance and supervision. But, like Jojo, we chose not to sanitize these stories if only because we know that they do happen. And it is our hope that this book can be used in some measure to initiate meaningful conversations and deeper reflections.

Ultimately though, this entire project, from the paintings to the sculptures to the stories, is a triumph of Jojo’s art which we submit already ranks high in contemporary Philippine art. We are proud to have him join our roster of artists, and of our modest role in bringing yet another book – for and about children that we all encounter and yet rarely see – to the world.

**Gigo Alampay**

Executive Director, CANVAS

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## **The Blind Busker** *Ang Bulag na Mag-aawit*

"I used to sing in front of the church, but Father Ben only likes old folk songs. You know, the kind you don't hear over the radio anymore.

*Kuya Benjie*, the organist, also doesn't like it when I sing there on Sundays. He says if I don't join the choir, then I should find somewhere else to sing.

So now, I sing here in the market. More people pass by here, and my tin can gets a lot more coins... even paper bills!

Aling Mameng also gives me free coffee. She says my singing makes her mornings more cheerful."

*"Dati akong kumakanta sa harap ng simbahan, pero mga lumang tugtugin lang ang gusto ni Father Ben. Alam mo na, yung mga di mo na maririnig ngayon sa radyo.*

*Di rin gusto ni Kuya Benjie, ang organista, na nandoon ako tuwing Linggo. Kung di raw ako sasali sa koro, humanap raw ako ng ibang lugar na mapagkakantahan.*

*Kaya naman lumipat ako rito sa palengke. Mas maraming tao ang dumaraan, at mas napupuno ang aking lata ... may perang papel pa!*

*May libreng kape pa ako kay Aling Mameng. Ang pagkanta ko raw ang nagpapasaya ng kanyang umaga."*





# Garbage Gloria

## *Gloriang Kalakal*

“My mom makes me bring my four sisters along when I sift through garbage that people put out on the sidewalk.

I don't mind. It makes my job easier. I've taught them to be on the lookout for discarded electronic toys. The junk shops are willing to pay more for their copper wire.

We have three other sisters. One helps *Nanay* wash other people's laundry, and my oldest sister takes care of our baby sister.

No one stays at home during the day, in case *Tatay* comes home drunk again.”

*“Sabi ni Nanay, isama ko daw ang apat kong nakababatang kapatid sa pagkakalkal sa basurang nilalabas ng mga tao sa tabi ng kalsada.*

*Ok naman sa akin. Napapadali nila ang trabaho ko. Naturuan ko na rin silang abangan ang mga binabasurang electronics. Mas mataas kasi ang bili ng junk shop sa alambreng tanso.*

*May tatlo pa akong kapatid na babae. May tumutulong kay Nanay sa paglalabada, at yung sumunod sa 'kin ang nag-aalaga sa bunso namin.*

*Walang naiiwan sa bahay tuwing araw, sakaling umuwi na namang lasing si Tatay.”*







## **The Epileptic Princess** *Ang Prinsesang Epileptik*

"I used to play with our neighbor's daughter, but ever since that day Mommy brought me home from the hospital, I haven't played with anyone. She says it's best that I stay home so she can be there any time when the darkness comes over me.

I am not afraid, but I really don't like it when it comes. It makes me so tired and weak.

It has been a year now since the darkness last came. I still don't go out. I don't want to go out. I am afraid other kids will laugh at me if they find out about this darkness."

*"Naglalaro kami dati ng anak ng kapit-bahay pero mula nang iuwi ako ni Mommy galing sa ospital, di na ako nakikipaglaro kahit kanino. Mabuti pa raw na maglagi ako sa bahay para matutukan niya ako tuwing sumasapit ang dilim sa akin.*

*Di naman ako takot sa tuwing dumarating ito, pero ayaw ko talaga ito tuwing dumarating. Nanghihina ako at nanlalata.*

*Isang taon na mula nang sinapitan ako ng dilim. Pero hindi pa rin akong lumabas. Ayokong lumabas. Natatakot ako na baka pagtawanan lang ako ng mga ibang bata kung malaman nila itong sakit ko."*





"Papa said he grew up in an island in Sulu. He told me that we come from a family of deep sea divers. So when we moved here to Cavite, and I was old enough, he taught me how to swim and hold my breath underwater.

Now, my classmates call me *fish boy*, because I can stay underwater longer than any of them."



## **Fish Boy** *Batang Isda*

*"Sabi ni Papa, lumaki siya sa isang isla sa Sulu. Galing raw kami sa pamilya ng mga maninisd sa dagat. Kaya nang malipat kami sa Cavite, at malaki na ako, tinuruan niya akong lumangoy at pigilan ang paghinga ko sa ilalim ng tubig.*

*Ngayon, tinatawag ako ng mga kaklase ko na 'batang isda' dahil kaya kong manatili sa ilalim ng tubig ng mas matagal sa kahit sino sa kanila."*







## I am Superman Ako si Superman

"Mama and Papa are working abroad. They just send me everything I want.

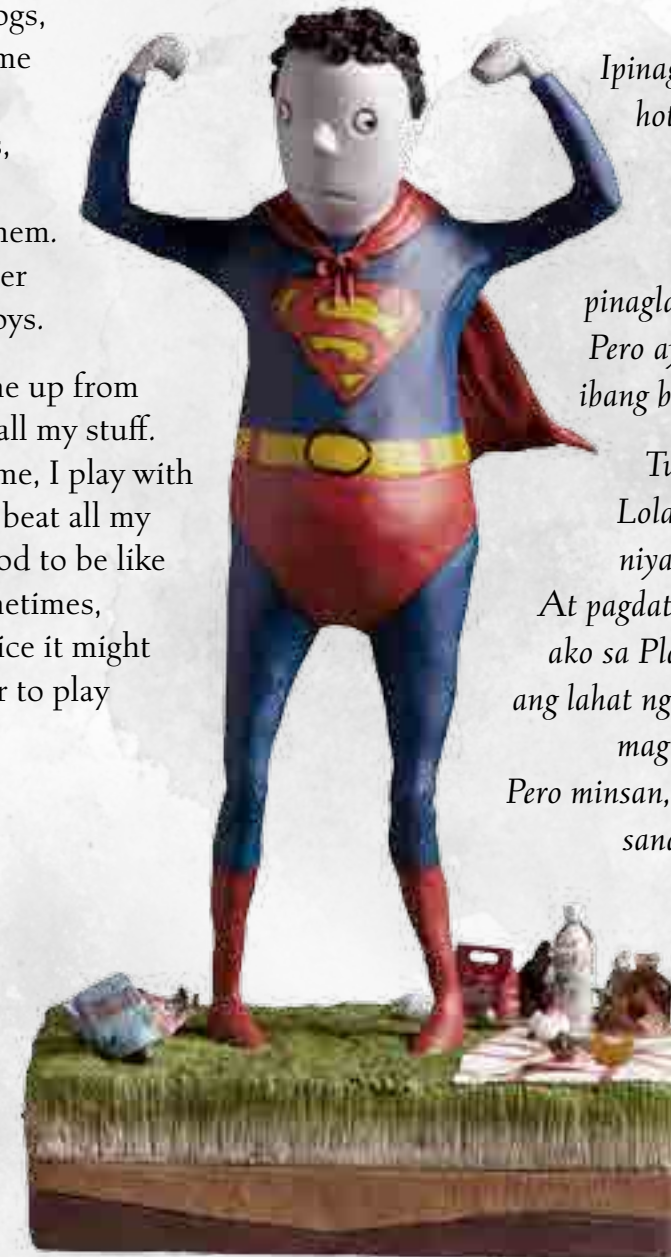
Lola prepares hotdogs, cake, and soda for me to eat at school. I also bring my toys, and during recess, I like to play with them. But, I don't like other kids touching my toys.

When Lola picks me up from school, she carries all my stuff. And when I get home, I play with my Playstation and beat all my enemies. It feels good to be like Superman. But sometimes, I think of how be nice it might be to have a brother to play games with."

"Parehong nagtatrabaho sa ibang bansa sina Mama at Papa. Pinapadala nila ang lahat ng aking gusto.

Ipinagbabaon ako ni Lola ng hotdog, keyk, at sopdrinks sa eskuwela. Dinadala ko rin ang mga laruan ko, at tuwing recess, pinaglalaruan ko ang mga ito. Pero ayaw kong ginagalaw ng ibang bata ang mga laruan ko.

Tuwing sinusundo ako ni Lola sa eskuwelahan, bitbit niya ang lahat ng gamit ko. At pagdating sa bahay, naglalaro ako sa Playstation at tinatalo ko ang lahat ng kaaway ko. Ang sarap maging tulad ni Superman. Pero minsan, naiisip ko ring masaya sana kung may kapatid din akong makakalaro."





## Reagan, the Honor Student *Si Reagan, ang Honor Student*

*"Lola named me after the actor Ronald Reagan. She says she loved watching his cowboy movies.*

*When I graduated class valedictorian, she said that if I keep on studying hard, I might become president of the Philippines someday, just like Ronald Reagan did in America!*

*I'm not so sure about that. I think I'd be happy if I just had a good job, maybe working as a prison guard like my Tito Jun."*

*"Ipinangalan ako ni Lola sa artistang si Ronald Reagan. Gustung-gusto niya raw ang mga pelikulang cowboy niya.*

*Nung grumadweyt akong balediktoryan sa klase, sabi ni Lola, kung magsusumikap lang ako, baka maging presidente pa raw ako ng Pilipinas, parang si Ronald Reagan na naging presidente ng Amerika!*

*Ewan ko lang. Mas masaya pa siguro ako basta may magandang trabaho, parang si Tito Jun kong nagtatrabaho bilang gwardya sa kulungan."*







## Jeshua Garces (The Bully)

*Jeshua Garces (Ang Bully)*

"My classmates are scared of me. They avoid me, and I like it that way. It's easier for me to teach them the lessons they need to learn.

Like this one time, this kid brought his Gundam to class to show to everyone. He was so proud of it. After class, I waited for him in the alley behind the school. I took his Gundam from him and broke it in half. Serves him right for being a braggart.

I'm not afraid to break all the toys of any of my classmates. I'm not afraid to be alone. They should know who's boss. I'm the boss.

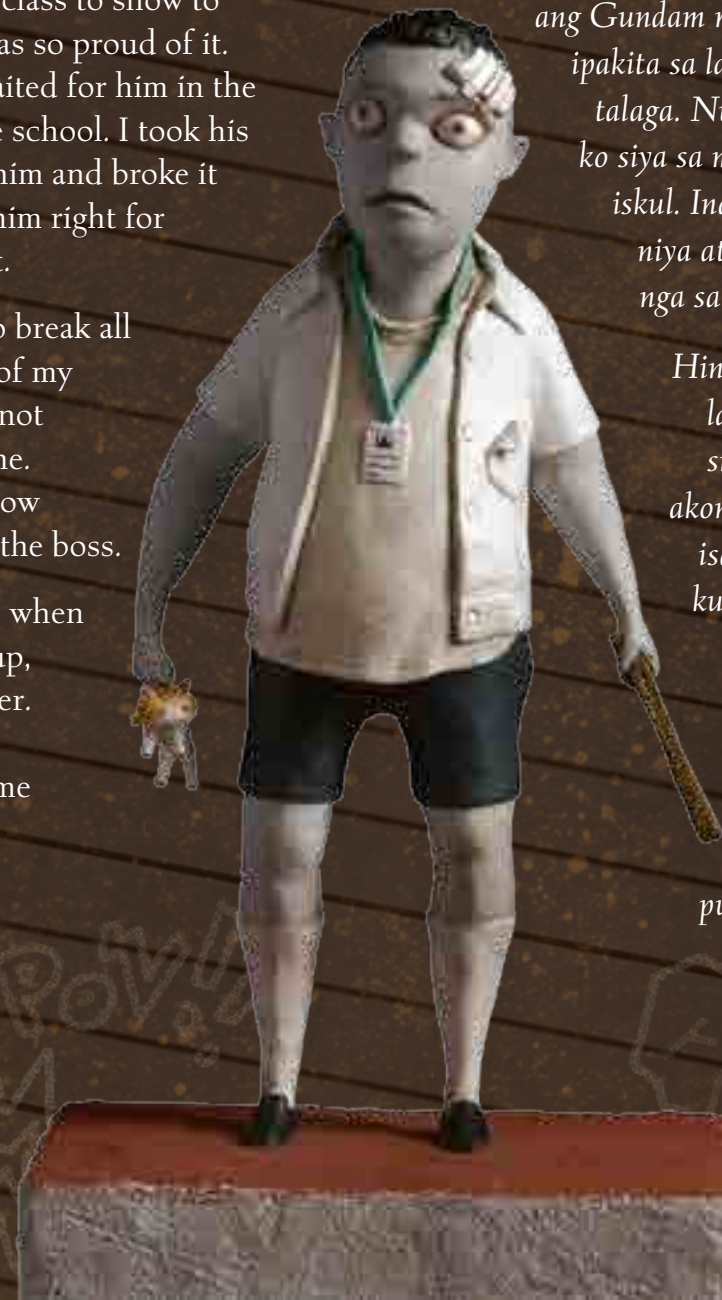
Maybe one day, when I am all grown up, I can be a teacher. Or better yet, maybe I'll become a policeman."

*"Takot ang mga kaklase ko sa akin. Iniiwasan nila ako at mas gusto ko iyon. Mas madali para sa aking turuan sila ng dapat nilang matutunan.*

*Tulad nung minsan, may batang dinala ang Gundam robot niya sa klase para ipakita sa lahat. Ipinagmalaki niya talaga. Nung uwian na, hinintay ko siya sa may eskinita sa likod ng iskul. Inagaw ko yung Gundam niya at binali sa dalawa. Buti nga sa kanya, mayabang kasi.*

*Hindi ako natatakot sirain lahat ng laruan ng kahit sinong kaklase ko. Wala akong pakialam kahit mag-isa ako. Dapat alam nila kung sino ang siga. Basta ako ang bossing.*

*Siguro, kapag malaki na ako, pwede akong maging titser. O mas maganda siguro, baka pwede ako maging pulis."*







## **Construction Boy** *Batang Konstraksyon*

“When I see other kids my age walking down the street, coming home in their uniforms, I think that it must be nice to just be in school.”

*“Tuwing nakikita ko ang mga batang kaedad ko na naglalakad sa kalsada na naka-iskul uniform, naiisip ko na masaya siguro na laging nasa eskwela.”*







## Gypsy Kid *Batang Limos*

“Each morning, *Tatay* writes on these envelopes, and give these to me before I go out on the streets. I jump into jeepneys and give one to each passenger, making sure that they see what’s written on them. Then I sing a song and beat on my drum – I made it myself! – and when I am done, I take back the envelopes. If I am lucky, a few would have money inside.

I am not sure what *Tatay* writes on the envelopes. I never learned to read. But he always tells me to put on a sad face when I give these out.”

“*Tuwing umaga, may isinusulat si Tatay sa mga sobre, at iniaabot niya ito sa akin bago ako lumuwas sa lansangan. Umaangkas ako sa mga dyip at binibigyan ko bawat pasahero. Sinisiguro kong mababasa nila ang nakasulat doon.*

*Tapos kakanta ako at magtatambol – ako mismo ang gumawa nitong tambol! – at kapag tapos na ako, kukunin ko uli iyong mga sobre. Kung sinusuwerte, may lamang pera sa loob ang ilan.*

*Hindi ko alam kung ano iyong sinusulat ni Tatay sa mga sobre. Di kasi ako natutong magbasa. Pero sabi niya, dapat lagi akong mukhang malungkot kapag iniaabot ko ito.”*





## Ronald Francisco (Grave Caretaker)

“My family and I live and work here in the cemetery. We maintain the graves.

*Ronald Francisco  
(Taga-linis ng Puntod)*

I make sure to clean the graves, and paint them even, a week before the dead's relatives come to visit on All Souls' Day. They give me tips and gifts. I'm proud of what I do.

There is a section of the cemetery that people don't visit often though. It's where the pets are buried. I visit it all the time, and when I have some money, I buy a flower or two. It's where I buried Bantay. She died three years ago.”

*“Nakatira kami ng buong pamilya ko sa sementeryo. Dito rin kami nagtatrabaho bilang mga taga-linis ng puntod.*

*Sinisiguro kong malinis ang mga puntod, pinipinturahan ko pa nga minsan, isang linggo bago bumisita ang mga kaanak ng mga namatay tuwing Undas. Binibigyan nila ako ng mga tip at regalo. Ipinagmamalaki ko ang ginagawa ko.*

*Ngunit may bahagi ng sementeryo na di gaanong binibisita ng tao. Doon nakahimlay ang mga alagang hayop. Lagi akong bumimisita roon, at 'pag may pera, bumibili ako ng isa o dalawang pirasong bulaklak. Dito ko nilibing si Bantay. Namatay siya tatlong taon na ang nakakalipas.”*







## Charcoal Girl *Batang Uling*

“The charcoal delivery truck comes at 3 a.m. twice a week. It takes *Inay* and I about an hour to pack all of it into small plastic bags before I go to school. She sells them in the market for twenty pesos each. It’s good money.

But *Inay* is sick right now, so I have to skip school. It now takes twice as long to pack this new delivery. I hope I can sell all the bags today.”

*“Dalawang beses kada linggo, alas tres ng madaling araw, dumarating ang trak na nagdedeliber ng uling. Inaabot kami ng halos isang oras ni Inay para i-repack ang lahat sa maliliit na plastik bag bago ako pumasok sa eskwela. Binebenta niya ito sa palengke nang bente pesos kada supot. Maganda ang kita.*

*Pero may sakit si Inay ngayon, kaya kailangan kong lumiban sa eskwela. Doble kayod ako sa pag-repack nitong bagong deliberi. Sana maibenta ko lahat ng ito ngayong araw.”*





# Gerry

“It was a good job, working for the lumber store. Mang Ador was a good boss and he paid well. He allowed me to use the power tools when the workshop was closed, and I made toys from the discarded wood. I planned to bring those back home to Mindoro for my brother, together with the money I saved for Mama.

But now I can't. Mang Ador caught Berting and me burning, with a lighter, a tiny crystal in aluminum foil at the back of the shop. I tried to reason with him, but he was so mad. He fired us both.

Two weeks from now I'm turning sixteen. I'm just hoping I'll have another job by then, so that I don't disappoint Mama when I go home for my birthday.”



*“Maganda ang trabaho ko sa tindahan ng troso. Mabait na amo si Mang Ador at nagbabayad nang tama. Hinahayaan niya akong gamitin ang mga power tool kapag sarado na ang workshop at gumagawa ako ng mga laruan mula sa pinagtabasang kahoy. Balak kong iuwi ito sa amin sa Mindoro para sa kapatid ko, kasama ang perang inipon ko para kay Mama.*

*Pero sa ngayon di muna. Nahuli ni Mang Ador kaming dalawa ni Berting na nagpapaningas ng maliit na kristal sa palara sa likod ng shop. Sinubukan kong magpaliwanag pero talagang galit na galit siya. Tinanggal niya kami sa trabaho.*

*Dalawang linggo mula ngayon, magdi-disisais na ako. Sana naman makahanap na ako ng trabaho para di manibugho si Mama pag-uwi ko sa bertdey ko.”*







## The Floating Kid *Ang Batang Lutang*

"I usually can get this small plastic bag of rugby for five pesos from the hardware store.

But there was this time I got lucky. While the shop owner was busy with another customer, I took a whole bottle that was on the counter. He didn't notice it, and I just walked out of there.

I called out to my friends and we went back to our home under the bridge. I gave everyone some of the stuff, and each one of us went to his corner and sniffed his share.

It makes you feel like you're floating, and you forget the hunger in your stomach."

*"Madalas kong nabibili itong maliit na supot ng rugby sa tindahan ng hardware ng limang piso.*

*Pero minsan, sinuwerte ako. Habang abala iyong may-ari ng tindahan sa ibang kostumer, kinuha ko yung isang bote na nasa counter. Di naman niya ito napansin, at lumakad ako palayo roon.*

*Tinawag ko ang barkada at bumalik kami sa tirahan namin sa ilalim ng tulay. Lahat sila ay pinartehan ko, at bawat isa ay nagkani-kaniyang puwesto at sininghot ang kanilang mga parte.*

*Mararamdaman mong para kang lumulutang at nalilimutan mo ang kalam ng iyong sikmura."*





## Beerhouse Brothers *Magkapatid sa Beerhaus*

"I really don't like sitting here. It's noisy and dark. It's hard to concentrate on my homework, especially when the music is turned on really loud, and all these men are clapping and shouting.

But I have to stay here with *Kuya* because that's what Mommy wants. She says it's safer if we're here with her. She doesn't want us to be home alone at night while she works.

When Mommy's not dancing, she sits at our table and makes sure we get our dinner. She even gets us extra hotdogs. Then she rubs our hair, and gives *Kuya* and me a kiss before walking back to the stage."

*"Ayokong maupo rito. Maingay at madilim. Di ako makapagkonsentreyt sa paggawa ng asaynment ko, lalo na kung napakalakas ng tugtog at nagpapalakpakan at hiyawan ang mga lalaki.*

*Pero kailangang nandito kami ni Kuya kasi iyon ang gusto ni Nanay. Sabi ni Nanay, mas ligtas daw kung kasama namin siya roon. Ayaw niyang naiiwanan kaming mag-isa sa gabi habang nagtatrabaho siya.*

*At kung di naman siya sumasayaw, tinatabihan niya kami sa mesa at sinisuguradong nakapaghapunan na kami. Minsan may ekstra hotdog sa plato namin. Tapos, hahaplin niya ang buhok ko. Sabay halik sa pisngi namin ni Kuya bago siya umakyat uli sa entablado."*







## **Burn Boy Boy Sunog**

"I don't remember how I ended up in this cold room. But I heard people from the other side of the door talk about how my father burned our house.

A woman came in just a few minutes ago and told me that an ambulance was on its way. She asked if I wanted some water, but my throat really hurts so I said nothing.

I hope the ambulance comes soon.  
It's getting colder and colder."

*"Di ko matandaan kung paano ako napunta rito sa malamig na kwarto. Pero narinig ko mula sa mga taong nasa labas ng pinto kung paano sinunog ng tatay ko ang bahay namin.*

*May babaeng pumasok ilang minuto lang ang nakakaraan at sinabing parating na ang ambulansya. Tinanong niya ako kung gusto ko raw ba ng tubig, pero sobrang hapdi ng lalamunan ko kaya di na ako nagsalita.*

*Sana dumating na agad yung ambulansya.  
Palamig nang palamig dito."*



# Evacuee

## Bakwi t

"I get very scared when I hear loud noises.

If Papa was here, I wouldn't be as scared.  
But I haven't seen him since that night  
when men fired their guns at our house,  
and he pushed me out the door  
and told me to run."

*"Natatakot ako sa tuwing nakakarinig  
ng malakas na ingay.*

*Kung nandito lang si Papa, di ako ganon  
katakot. Pero di ko na siya uli nakita simula  
noong gabing pinaputukan ng mga mama ang  
bahay namin, at tinulak niya ako palabas ng  
pinto at sinabing tumakbo."*







## The Combatant *Ang Manlalaban*

“My whole family and many other people in my village died when the government planes dropped bombs on our village. *Ka Tomas* tells the other boys and me that we are lucky to have escaped into the forest and found their rebel camp.

It has been a year now since the bombing, and he tells me that I am already very good at using an M-16. I can easily shoot a target a hundred yards away.

I can't wait until I turn thirteen. That's when *Ka Tomas* says I'll be old enough to go with him to fight the soldiers.”

*“Namatay ang buong pamilya ko at iba pang mga kapit-bahay nang bombahin ng gobyerno ang aming nayon. Sabi ni Ka Tomas, maswerte raw kami na nakapagtago sa gubat at natagpuan ang kuta nilang mga rebelde.*

*May isang taon na rin nang maganap ang bombahan, at sabi niya gumagaling na raw ako sa paggamit ng M-16. Madali kong asintahin ang target kahit sandaang yarda ang layo.*

*Hindi ko na mahintay na mag-trese anyos ako. Sabi ni Ka Tomas, yun ang tamang edad na pwede na raw akong sumama sa kanya para makipagbarkaban sa mga sundalo.”*





## Nebu Girl *Batang Nebu*

"The doctor says I have to wear this mask because of my asthma attacks.

I can't wait until it's okay for me to go out and play again. For now, I just imagine that I'm a fighter plane pilot, or a mountain climber, or an astronaut in deep space."

*"Sabi ng doktor, kailangan kong isuot itong mask dahil sa pag-atake ng hika ko.*

*Di ko na mahintay kung kailan ako pwedeng lumabas at makipaglaro. Sa ngayon, nagkukunyari lang ako na isa akong piloto ng pandigmang eroplano, mountain climber, o astronot sa kalawakan."*







## **Butter Face** *Mantikilyang Mukha*

“Turn your head more to the left,  
the photographer said, ‘to show your prettier side.’

‘No.’ I stayed put and smiled my biggest smile,  
facing the camera head-on.

Mama said, ‘Whatever your flaws, they can be  
overcome by a smile that is genuine.’”

*“Ipakaliwa mo pa ang ulo mo,’ sabi ng potograpo,  
‘para makita ang mas magandang bahagi  
ng mukha mo.’*

*‘Hindi.’ Hindi ko binago ang upo ko at ibinigay  
ko ang pinakamatamis kong ngiti, buong  
kumpiyansang nakaharap sa kamera.*

*Sabi ni Mama, ‘Ang anumang kapintasan sa  
iyong mukha, mapapawi ng ngiting totoo.’”*





## The Dumpster Girl *Ang Batang Basurera*

“Thursday afternoon is the best time to dig into the dumpster behind the rich kids’ school. That’s when they put out all these empty glass and plastic bottles, used boards and cartons, broken computers, old pipes, and other cool stuff.

The best part is when I find used toys and dolls. Just a few stitches on a doll, glue on a broken toy, or wiping an old teddy bear clean, and they’re as good as new! I sometimes give these to the other kids in my neighborhood. It is a real treat for them.”

*“Huwebes ng hapon ang pinakamagandang oras para maghalukay sa tambakan sa likod ng eskwelang pangmayaman. Ganoong oras inilalabas ang mga walang lamang basyo at plastik na bote, sirang kompyuter at gamit na karton, lumang tubo, at iba pang astig na bagay.*

*Higit pa ryan, may nakikita akong mga gamit na laruan at manyika, iyong inilalagak nila sa isang tambak. Kaunting sulsi sa manyika, pandikit sa sirang laruan, o linis sa lumang teddy bear, at mukha naman uling bago! Minsan, ipinamimigay ko ito sa mga bata rito sa lugar namin. Tawang-tuwa sila sa libre ko.”*





# ABOUT THE ARTIST

Renato “Jojo” Barja, Jr. is known for painting portraits that stand side-by-side with a full-body, 3D model. These faces are people he comes across in his daily commute to his studio or other places. These encounters – many fleeting, some regular – are “slice of life” and ones that Barja finds moving and revealing. For the artist, he believes that “if one looks hard enough, these faces will present themselves in all their essence.”

Renato “Jojo” Barja, Jr. is a painter and sculptor. He was born in Manila in 1982 and was admitted to the Philippine Women’s University’s Fine Arts Program in 1999.