

LITERARY SECTION

Excerpts from GUN DEALERS' DAUGHTER

Gina Apostol

About the novelist

Gina Apostol's second novel, *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*, came out in 2009 from Anvil Publishing. Her first novel, *Bibliolepsy*, won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1998. Her short stories have appeared in the Anvil anthology, *Catfish Arriving in Little Schools*; the Penguin anthology edited by Jessica Hagedorn, *Charlie Chan is Dead*, Volume 2; and Factory School's *The ThirdestWorld*, which contains essays and fiction by Eric Gamalinda, Lara Stapleton, among others. She has just finished a third novel, *Gun Dealers' Daughter*.

A fellowship at Civitella Ranieri in Umbria, Italy allowed her to do research for her fourth novel tentatively titled *Rizal's Sucesos*, about the Philippines in the 1600s, the Arezzo paintings of Piero della Francesca, Jack the Ripper, and Juan Luna's wife. She is currently based in New York and has a daughter, Nastasia.

CHAPTER ONE

Uncle Gianni met the girl at Nice airport. He held her hand as light bulbs flashed. Revise that: not hand. By the sleeve. He held her by the sleeve, gently. On closer inspection, one might note her slightly discordant figure. Something awkward about her arms. Bandaged, gauzed lump of hands. The girl does not raise her head.

A cordon held curious onlookers at bay, and a film crew, Gallic and impervious, skinny, tilting men in black, strode about the cleared path. The girl, dark and gawky, a lanky adolescent, moved along the cleared-up space of this orchestrated welcome, following the straight line of a utility rope. "A commercial," Uncle Gianni muttered. I shivered as a door blew open. A light bulb blinded me. A murmured rush toward something behind me—a lady walking a dog, or a lame man with a parasol. My suddenly myopic eyes distinguished someone's fleshy elbows; or was that a leash. Uncle Gianni tightened his grip and, almost dragging me by an armpit, moved quickly along. And in a cutting room somewhere, freeze-framed, on the margins of a black-clad crowd posing to sell condoms or perfume, the girl's stricken face—my gaze—looks down, denying evidence of its arrival, gaunt-cheeked and hollow-eyed.

No questions asked, no thoughts pursued. The days in a winter town, in the south of France, were a blur of boats. Medicated recall. Bandaged hands held me back, a drugged drag. My wrists in gauze, eyes dull.

By the look of our lodgings, it had not been planned: the place was not worthy of Uncle Gianni. Uncovered beams, rough wood. This cramped place by the water in a narrow street overlooking a threaded sea was, I thought, pretty. Uncle Gianni looked with raised brow at its haphazard renovation. The room was whitewashed: brown timber framed the paint, quaint restoration. Sometimes, the white walls seemed to reflect the silver sea, glints, an undulating glare. You could see the boats from a window, cutouts in a livid blue.

These boats were my daily destination. What was it about them? The distant, immobile toy-like view. They were like those miniatures that uncommonly move one, the odd perfections of their size. I could catch them if I clawed at the window. My heavy, swathed wrists. They were slowly, painfully healing.

Mesmerized. Lured. I liked to walk to the marina, to that still neighborhood of catboats and sloops. In the flashy part: weekend racers, transatlantic palaces. Private cruisers with clubby paneling, stocked bars, and wrinkled caretakers. These men and women mysteriously appeared amidships, smoking joints or dragging rope. But they were not interesting. The raw desertion of the ships. That was fascinating. Not to mention inert ropes, like horizontal allies, waiting in the sun.

They were winter boats moored for pleasure. I watched the angled play of masts, the modest geometries of massive hulls waiting for domestic ghosts. The air was always lugubrious and heady, a sharp intake of salt and gasoline. Held by the aberrant liveliness of these empty boats, the apparent acts they promised, I breathed in the sea-whiff with an almost crisp awareness, a growing sense of where I was. Meanwhile, Uncle Gianni swam on the beach, the only time I was left alone—a quick fanatical dip, from which he returned with disappeared lips, a defaced, chafed statue tossing his wet hair.

I walked the wharf, noting names and origins, boats from Guernsey and Oporto. None of the names struck my fancy, though one was a namesake: blue and sunless *Sol*, a gloomy sloop, dingy dinghy. Unappetizing clothes—denims, a hat, underwear—flapped, drying, on her deck.

Uncle Gianni, dressed and slippered, would wait for me by the ramparts, and midday we'd walk to the square. He ordered at an open-air shop, which was across from a merry-go-round. Awaiting for lunch, daily I gave the carousel man the merry-go-round ticket, a neon-colored heart. I rode the horse, a slow reverie of motion, my arms lifted toward an

artless sky. Now it raised a raw crisscross of pain: incipiently kelloidal. I have that kind of skin, tender, with a tendency to scar.

Evenings we walked around the town, up the Haut Castelet where a writer had pursued a novel in exile, and now it contained a memory of his name, hidden in frantic, atlantic bougainvillea. France is a whole *rue* of exploration, a vast offering of surface detail. Couples laughed in upstairs windows or coupled in adjoining rooms. When we ate supper, the same one-eyed dog, its absurd body truncated by heedless breeding, shat on the cobbles every evening as its patient owner watched, while the French diners drank their anise and I wished to retch. Thus were our days regulated. Dark shit lined our silent way home.

It was a stopover, a brief ruse. Uncle Gianni, never one at a loss, had general words to say at daily incidents. "How will the French evolve? They will have a third eye, at their chins, to notice shit." "Graham Greene lived on that street; no one remembers." "We must take a trip to Cap Ferrat: visit the Maugham villa, you know; I knew the old owner: a nice Jew."

When Uncle Gianni learned from one of the caretakers, a youngish sailor with receding hair, that the girl wished to know, in broken French, how her services could be of use on the boat, laundering or scrubbing, not for pay, just for board, once the yacht left the marina, Uncle Gianni took me away. First we had that scene, of course, the ridiculous drama on the jetty, my mad fall into the water.

It was my second escape. I had tried it in Manila. With broad, stupid knives. Big, messy gashes, a knotted misery in my wrist. Hullabaloo in the hallway. It was the maids who saved me, a stampede from the kitchen. Hard to die in a house of servants. All I have to show for my remorse, my dead feelings—this shallow well of scars.

At the jetty, Uncle Gianni had been walking along the stones, the lank seaweeds, and there I walked beyond him. He couldn't see; he was looking pensively at the horizon, at the green, jutting rocks. I walked until I reached the end, where, in a muddled move—I made this leap. A deep, chilling immersion. I tried to sink.

I tried to sink in the Mediterranean, which was hard to do.

I am no Ophelia.

I have always been a floater.

The calm ice waters of the Mediterranean buoyed me up, as if I were light-born. The sea kept lifting me toward the light. The chilly waves gently lofted me like a doting mother.

And then I froze.

I lay fluttering in the deep sea.

I panicked. Awash in that chilly, wide, engulfing sea, I felt myself sinking. The ice-waves rolled over me, a heavy rush thrusting me underwater. My legs locked, my limbs were frozen. I couldn't move.

Once more the sea rolled over me.

I began to struggle. I thrashed. I gasped for air.

I wished to live.

I saw my final images: a green-veined hand, a rock in the distance, a stern, unforgettable sky. I saw two goons in starched blue security guard uniforms, smiling and interrogating me, one holding a stuffed animal, "Ali Babar? Ali Babar?" Then they were holding on to my shins, dragging me down. In incoherent, sputtering flashes.

A lane in a department store, an infinite array of books.

Jed holding a banner, a look in his eye that was not comfort or appeasement. A strange absent tenderness—a hand against barnacled rock.

A wave spun me. I reached for the rock, visions rolling as I met the sky. Rain, sleet and snow, heavy, fat and diabolical. The weight of sand and rocks and that volumed, fickle water, and I sank, losing ground again, losing the features of my dull face; the pull of my heavy, tenacious hair; and Manong Babe, his belly slack and his shoes shined, holding a baseball bat in my old garden, smiling at me while I drowned.

A stick figure on the stones: Uncle Gianni. A quick, preternatural splash. As he swam closer, Uncle Gianni seemed to slow to an excruciating, meditative, languorous crawl, then to a towering grin as he held me, my thrashing legs against the rock, my floating, freezing tears.

Olive groves are medicinal. That was the verdict of the place's founders, who lined the path to the clinic with spare, gray-green trees, a view that was not optional. Stiff white sheets in an austere room, padded with those strange, sausage French pillows, uncomfortable and almost demeaning, as if I were not some human but a creature who thrashed against a cage. There was a crucifix on the whitewashed wall. That, too, was implacable: the corners of the cross were nailed fast, in anticipation of heretical moves. I was guarded by trim-Frenchwoman nurses and mild-faced orderlies with bronzed skins. In the chapel Baroque music played from absent, invisible speakers, and the haunting tones of a sourceless cantata convinced me momentarily of the presence of God. He was there in the screen. I cowered miserably before it. God spoke English with a German accent, but I didn't speak. I looked God wanly in the eye and didn't blink. My sobs echoed in the chapel, and God in hiding had nothing to say.

I planted tulip bulbs in a shady part of the garden, moving timidly with other patients, all of us passive and not meeting other eyes, as if afraid to be caught in each other's company, wearing our white uniforms with blue sashes. As I knelt, I tucked the skirt's folds through my knees in a perverse, modest way: as if the skirt were fastened in my crotch. It was an evolutionary gesture, in tune with ancient convent-bred women, Lola Felma, for instance, my grandmother frozen in childhood, squatting just so, folding her skirt between her thighs, so that her underwear did not peep through.

Vague things came back as I smoothed the earth, distant, trivial things: this same white and blue outfit, inexplicably worn in Manila a long time ago (the uniform of Our Lady of Lourdes); a little girl with desperate eyes and sausage curls; a refrigerator magnet I once bought in Boston. The white poster of a headless woman. An orphan and a giant fruit, maybe a guava. And then I thought of a body in the dirt, a head buried like this tulip, just so.

A cry like a relapse. Turning earth. I am pounding my fist into the soil, pounding the tulip bulb into a pulp. I am drumming earth against unyielding ground.

I am carried, kicking, away. I am not allowed out of my room. Once again. I watch the patients from the window, walking obediently, sedately amid the olive trees.

Try again. Is forgetting all you need if peace is what you want? It was good to handle the earth, to be outside. A good thing: it was material things that I recalled, neutral matters: the soft fist of the foetal flower that I buried in the cold ground was the damp skin of a doll I once had, this dimply marvel with a digestive tract. The wet smell of the earth revived, strangely, the smell of a book: what was its title? I sifted through the black film of earth, patting the tender tulip in, a fuzzy top, a creature burrowing softly in the ground. Though I could recall that I had read that book first in Brussels, or maybe Boston, then continued it on a train into Amherst, or maybe Antwerp, and finished it in Manila, or maybe Maryland—I couldn't remember the book's title. It had smelled always, whenever I opened it, of some kind of dankness, a mixture of pulp, offal and enclosed air—the mixed smells of this smooth, black soil. Then it came to me. Evelyn or Edward, William or Waugh. A book in green binding.

Brideshead Revisited.

Inspid, detail-filled days like this. Life was this multiplication of things, actions, trivial gestures. That had always been the case, and one is meant to accept this, the successive production of wasteful days. To seek this replication, to fertilize and shelter it. One is meant to *prolong*.

Still, it was troubling that, while subtle details occurred to me, banal facts resisted my net. In my first efforts at lucidity at the clinic, before the moose-like overbite of the German doctor, I called back the layout of my rooms in Manila, a mental furbishing: the book-lined wall left of my bed, the connecting door, and somewhere a poet's floating ghost, her kerchief dress. I put the intercom in the wrong place, by the left side with all the books; but what was on the right side of the room? The doctor waited. It was blank, a terrifying effaced empty portion of my brain; and it began to fill with the same old repetitive demons, the little girl with the curls staring at me in what seemed like despair, her guts impaled—in ludicrous, steady motions—by tridents, which my father himself held, like a serene scepter in his hand, which was only his cigarette holder, a cozy, ephemeral piece of ivory, and then, like a fast shuffle of cards, Jed, looking at me with a cigarette; together, in a haze, we soothed an inert creature, a fire ant, a spider, with a lighter made of ebony. The spider turned its face to look at me—

And then, stealthily but surely, it occurred to me: yes. The connecting door to a gym, my spoliarium. A solarium. That had been to the right of my bed.

The doctor nodded approvingly, *Goot*, and snapped his notebook shut.

Later, I sat before English buttercups, the concerned, pale faces of Uncle Fred and his family gazing at me, while we ate the picnic they had brought. My last refuge in Europe was this talkative, blustery southern English family in love with the outdoors; a soccer scrimmage was going on right on the moors, amid broom, buttercups and other Anglophiliac botanical things. The two sons, turnip-skinned, bracken-eyed boys, had an inordinate pride in their native pursuits; and at a loss for other topics, they kept telling me what in the world was correct and English, and what was not. In the meantime, a gray endless sky clutched the edge of the clifflike escarpment.

This was the world's justice. A field of buttercups—an abandoned yellow spray, like god's spit—on a hill in Dartmoor. Below, the steeple of the church of Widdecombe, or was it Wagglebroghe, steadied my distracted sight.

In those endless months, when we waited for news of final reprieve, waiting for some nameless storm to pass, an impasse beyond my grasp—during those months, the lovely, daily spell of the light of France followed my false steps. By a leisure town's rocky, medieval ramparts we caught the Mediterranean, true and changing and pensively woven by the sun that favored it. The light of Antibes. It lay at the corner, it lies in my eye—at the end of a tunnel, it beckons. Literally, daily, it was at the end of my walk down the cobbled streets, dogshit mingling with the sea breath of mussels and the vagrant malingering herbs;

and at the end, the ancient light welcomed us, the harrowing, gentle hue of France. Beauty for its own sake is said to be terrible: and creatures like us strode under it, under its blind-eyed benediction, its luminous and golden, mistaken myrrh.

CHAPTER TWO

I met them finally in New York. A day of rain, the mild bleakness of months away; or had it been a year, or two dozen months. In Europe, I had acquired pallor and an incoherent sense of time. Even my old, flexed muscles were gone, and when I lifted my hands to wave, I felt the soft prefix of flab, my substitute triceps, sadly dangle in the air.

When I embraced my mother, then my father, my flattish, soft body suggested welcome as well as it could, but even that was sluggish. In turn, my parents seemed to be this dull, tentative grouping, a woozy arrangement of flesh.

I had left part of myself behind, somewhere. In vagabond Europe? In even vaguer Manila? When I lifted my bags and felt their heavyweight adventure, their packed solid matter, I knew I had misplaced some important item, an organ—someplace. Everything else was filled and intact, my luggage, this extravagant bauble of Tuscan rooms that welcomed me, full of itself, replete, with sconces, buttresses and bays; everything was whole except for me: something had fallen behind, and was that a habit or an accusation?

But I couldn't tell where it had been lost, or which part or what limb, because no one asked. My parents moved around me, circumspect, as if I were some totem in danger of toppling. Oh, they looked concerned, of course—my father in particular had a wistful address, as if he wished to say something he had no language for. But nothing was remarked upon: thus, parts of that life were closed, like a remaindered book.

When things are not named, do they disappear? I settled in this throbbing place, and for a while the largeness of things alarmed me, the sofas plump like a sideways, floating baobab, and the cabinets and bookcases leering at me from a height, steadily rising with the curving ceilings. The arched, embellished entryways had this habit of growing thicker—massive sculpted heavens of paneling moving toward me until there was space enough to suffocate, if I stepped one foot closer. Enormous pomegranates on the balcony, facing my bedroom window, pulsed, engorged. I retreated against bloblike walls. Occasionally, out of nowhere, fat bamboo spirals grew out of gilded cracks; contours bled on the rugs, on the stained glass windows, and tortoise-shell spots crept and crawled toward me. Space yielded unaccountably.

I'd shriek.

Nurses and orderlies would rush in—they were always in and out, they followed me, white-uniformed, flaccid faces. They held me to the bed and soothed me, arrested me with their potions.

It took months before the world settled into a less mercurial attitude toward me, a sedated, regular sense of space and volume. Occasionally, the wingback of an armchair swelled into unnecessary flight. Then things discovered their integrity, turning into matters I could grasp.

At first, in that clinic in France, that had been my problem—finding the right angularity of things. The efforts I made so as not to bump against swollen objects were tiring. Merely moving an inch or two required at first supreme lucidity. But soon, that became easier. More unsettling, maybe, but less fathomable, was my miserable, recidivist dysgraphia, an almost untenable mental pit. Sometimes I was fine, as in that morning long ago looking at the Alpillles, when I had written a letter to a person named Vita, though I couldn't place her face; I told her about the hesitant, nail-shaving-like sprouts of herbs: thyme, rosemary and mint. Their smells developed before their bodies did. The nurse, on reading it, said that was because the earth remembered its old souls. "Good girl," she said, perhaps. She spoke French without apology. Humbly, joyfully, I acknowledged her praise. I could write, if I wished, bleak, simple sentences, many of them at a time, and it became my hobby, my way of staring at things, trying to get them right. But then I would unravel like a bad top, a reeling, slow yoyo: my brain was a clumsy, badly made toy.

In America, however, the postman reproved my crimes. I would scribble addresses on envelopes, and they would come back; I would note my returned-to-sender scrawl, my mad, syllabic combinations. I would stare at them, the unpronounceable syllables and awry consonants, as if they were badly behaving atoms of my extended flesh, inhabiting a void I had conjured but did not understand. I would slap my hands and begin writing, again.

Who was it for, the struggle to write, my unrequited mail? At first, in France, they had been exercises contrived by the nurse. But then deposited here in this quiet town, a quaint bluff against the Hudson, installed with my parents whose guarded, sympathetic eyes soon stopped following me around, who soon began to talk in normal tones before me, easily at ease in the world, as they were, I wrote at first out of some valiant attempt to practice.

I wished to be good; I wished the nurse to say, Good girl: though now my assistants were rabbity, dandruffed men and fulsome women who spoke to me in plain English.

Then I began to scrawl effortlessly, absentmindedly, words that came to me from thin air. Pendulously. Ruminant. Versification. Things I snatched from the window breeze. Scrofulous. Milieu. Duchess of Malfi. I found delight simply in listing them down. I spent hours at this. I began to write letters, to strangers and made up emancipated people, those in the world outside. Letters to Simoun and Vassily Kandinsky. To Ed, Fred and Jed. To Ching Byun Co. Chin Moon Wo. To the Big Friendly Giant, to Winnie the Pooh. An airy raft of names.

Names were the least demanding of words. They were the words most loosely moored to the material planet, the limited sphere of our investigations. They were the most arbitrary and whimsical portions of our language-plot. I wove long lists. And so it was upsetting and weakening to find it recurring, my sudden dysgraphic bouts, the old, unreasonable, slip-sliding dementia of letters, which hounded me, on and off, as I tried to move on.

But who knows—I make a fancy lunge—maybe there, in the graphic disorder, was a secret purpose. Who knows why it occurred? Maybe that coy cacology, the complex mangle of unreadable words, was, in fact, some confession. The unweeded garden. A stumbling exorcism. The one I've been trying to make, all along.