

SMALL TALK

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About the Author

Kristine Reynaldo graduated with a BA in English (magna cum laude) from the University of the Philippines Diliman, where she now teaches literature and college writing while pursuing a master's degree in Philosophy. She has worked as an acquisitions, developmental, and copy editor for academic, trade, and digital publishing houses. Her fiction and nonfiction pieces have been published in *The Literary Apprentice* and *Kritika Kultura*.

ONCE, A GIRL I LIVED WITH ASKED ME WHAT IT WAS LIKE INSIDE MY HEAD and I answered that I was only waiting to die. When I was five, after a scolding, I ran out of the house and plopped down crying on a heap of stones in the front yard, looked up at the stars, and asked God why I had to live. When I was six, my grandfather died, I tailed my mother for months because I was convinced that she would meet a terrible accident and I'd decided to perish with her. At seven, I knew the night, I dreamt of being swallowed up by the earth or falling into quicksand, I dreamt of following strange creatures in the moonlight and never being seen again. At eight, I sneaked out of the house on December evenings to sing carols with other children in the streets, I walked fast, expecting to be snatched away by hooded men at every turn. I have seen a man point his gun and shoot another in a melee. I have seen a man's bloody head under the wheels of a bus. I did not see the body of the student who jumped from the top storey of the mall. I did not see my high school senior squashed between a jeepney and a truck. I did not see the body of my cousin hanging from the spiral staircase of their home. I gaze into coffins at wakes with mingled fascination and distaste, the corpse never looks anything like the person who was alive. I find comfort in musing about the manner of my dying. I am more afraid of aging than of death, I identify the former with helplessness, the latter with rest. On my third day of no sleep during the hell week of my senior year, I fantasized about getting run over by a red car in front of my college building. I have written down a long list of directives for my wake and funeral. When I die, I want my body to be burned into ashes and thrown to the wind, I wish to be forgotten. When I told a friend that I planned to kill myself before I lost my sight and taste and hearing, before I couldn't help but piss or shit in my bed, before I lost my mind, she said that I might as well not make new friends or continue seeing the ones I had. I wonder if anyone would take care of me, I wouldn't want to take care of me. I have difficulty believing that my decease would damage anyone, I wonder if this were only because I have not experienced a death that shattered me, I wonder if this were not unthinkable. I was born in the morning of my mother's 26th birthday, three years after she miscarried what should have been her firstborn son. When I told my mother that I wish I'd never been born, she locked herself in her room for a week, finally I recanted and baked her a cake so she would stop crying. I will never have children. I do not plan to get married. If I get married, I intend to keep a separate room to house my solitude. In my parents' house I sleep on the couch and dump my belongings on my old bed. In rented apartments, I sleep on wooden floors. I like the tentativeness of renting, at my age I only need a place to call headquarters, not home. I have lived out of a suitcase for months. I have lived in a garret but not in a basement. I cannot live in a room without windows. I can live in a room without curtains if it is so high up a building that nobody can look in. I have moved out of a flat after a night of listening to lovers next door having sex, I could not read *Philosophical Investigations* while they quaked and squelched and moaned. I have shared the same room with a soft-hearted girl for a year and will never do so again.

I do not dread dying alone. In large parties where I don't know most of the guests, I stand in a corner, take out my phone, and pretend to text to evade small talk. When I am asked how I am, I answer that I'm all right and seldom elaborate. I find talking about myself tiresome, I doubt that anyone really wants to know that until high school I said I would never cry over a boy, until college I said I would never be friends with a pothead or a smoker, until my senior year I said I would never drink, until I worked I said I would never step into a Starbucks, until last year I said I would never get a tattoo. When I catch myself talking about myself at length, I am abashed and stop, there are far more interesting topics for conversation. Maybe I'm writing this so I have something ready-made to give to anyone who asks about me. Maybe I'm writing this so I can stop explaining. Maybe I'm writing this so I don't have to think about these things anymore. I can go for days without talking, locked in my bedroom or office. Sometimes, in strange towns, I pretend to be mute, I go to the market and point at rice cakes or bread or a piece of fruit, tilting my head and smiling; the vendors are often kind, I don't think I have been cheated. I do not gossip. I am more interested in ideas than in people. I would rather be in pain than be bored. Sometimes I get headaches so harrowing that I can do little more than lie down and vomit. When I am ill, I become six years old. When I am feeling affectionate, I pinch and punch and poke and bite. When I am pissed, I refuse to reply. When I am sad, I lie on the floor and wish to dissipate into the atmosphere or sink underneath the tiles. I do not like to impose my loneliness on other people. I am an excellent listener, but I am picky about whom to listen to. When friends long for my company, I am surprised, when they care for me, I am touched, when they tell me I inspire them, I feel ashamed and don't know how to respond. I fail to say "I love you" when it matters. I feel dishonest telling those I love but do not like that I love them, so I don't. I am difficult to love, there are times when this disturbs me and there are times when it does not. I am indifferent to popularity. I do not care about pleasing other people, but I am loath to be found wanting. I think that I am finally in love and I don't know what to do. When in doubt, I am paralyzed by overthinking. I have kissed a stranger in a faraway place to forget the taste of another tongue. I have been kissed on a hanging bridge overlooking the city skyline by someone I wish I had never known. I would rather fuck in the passenger seat of a car than share my bed with a man I do not love. I have been propositioned by much older men, married or otherwise attached, more often than by men who are my age and single. I have been propositioned in the backseat of a van, at a beach, in a cab, on a mountain, in my office, in a restaurant, by a river, by a soccer field, standing, sitting up, reclining, held down. I wonder if I would say yes if I were propositioned in a library, just by dint of setting, just by dint of it being so quaint as to come from the pages of a banned 19th century novel. I take pleasure in the sight of a nude woman while the sight of a strapping, naked man arouses no feeling. I find pornography boring. Constellations and distant, flickering lights fascinate me. I prefer dusk to dawn because I anticipate nightfall. I take long walks in deserted

streets past midnight. I have walked barefoot on asphalt at three a.m. with a man I love. I have walked miles across the border of two cities in high heels, crying. I have clambered up and down the steep slopes of two mountains in a day, muttering a litany of curses. I have plodded coughing through a valley of charcoal pits. I have spent a day in a toxic swamp of mud and trash, breathing methane from waste, watching children scavenging in mounds of junk for paper, plastics, tires, or metals, and women selling leftover food from garbage bins, rinsed, ground with batter, and deep-fried. In grade school I sold pastries, in high school I sold haiku and answers to homework and quizzes. I have sold books, concert tickets, drawings, eyeglass frames, handmade jewellery, needlework, papier-mâché trinkets, and a sofa bed. I have not been paid for anything I've written, I have not written for publications that pay. I seldom send my work to publications because I am ashamed of what I write. More than one writer has told me that I have talent but nothing to write about, I am all style and self-indulgence. I appreciate elegant, lyrical sentences, in my head I form them all the time, I am certain I have repeated the same constructions. I will stop writing when I am finally bored with myself, or maybe I will start writing when I am finally bored with myself, then I will cease into silence, perhaps significance. I have been so broke that I lived on peanuts and plantains from street hawkers for a month. There was a year when I ate only bananas, and a year when I did not eat anything for a full day every week, and a year when I sometimes puked five times a day. There were years when I computed calories and listed all my expenses with neurotic zeal. I have borrowed money from a stranger to pay the airport terminal fee, I stood beside the ticket inspector, smiling at fellow passengers as I asked if they had 200 pesos to spare. I have been left by a plane but not by a bus or a boat. I have hitchhiked in Southern Mindanao with a filmmaker named Malaya. Getting lost in a foreign city scares me more than getting lost in the countryside and less than getting lost in a forest. I have gone hiking on a moonless night on "The Devil's Mountain." I have paddled out to sea before dawn with a full moon undulating silver on the waves. I have learned two things from spelunking: bat shit sparkles and caves stink. I feel happier in places where I can see mountains, sky, and ocean. I think the city is only beautiful when half-erased by rain. When I feel crowded in, I have difficulty breathing. When a stranger brushes past me on the street, I growl. When I board the MRT during rush hour, I imagine meter-long steel spikes pushing out of my skin, impaling anyone who comes near me. I have plunged a knife into the flesh between my left thumb and forefinger. I have slit my right forearm on broken glass after pushing against a windowpane. I have burned my right leg against the exhaust pipe of a motorcycle. I have fallen backwards down a flight of stairs and landed with my derriere up in the air. I have jumped off a cliff into the sea without knowing how to swim. When underwater, with my feet off the ground, I lose all sense of direction and thrash about. When I sleep soundly, I do not move. I have fallen asleep by the very edge of a swimming pool after a night of binge-drinking, in the morning my friends panicked when they couldn't rouse me, they

thought I was dead. When a friend told me about his friend who took a swim after dark while intoxicated and drowned, I laughed. I have wept at the wake of a man I met only once, it was the expression of his son that moved me. My expression looks forbidding in stolen photographs. Being photographed unnerves me, sometimes I do not recognize myself in the shots. I take more photographs of places than of people. I take selfies but seldom post them. On most days I put effort into applying eye makeup, when I intend to intimidate, I put on lipstick, too. At the hands of the unskilled or underpaid, a pedicure can feel like torture, but less so than eyebrow threading, which is conceivably nothing to a Brazilian wax. A massage leaves me only a little less tense, when I am kneaded I imagine that my body is a dough of bread being rolled for the oven. Until I was twenty, I found myself fat and ugly, now I just find myself fat. My weight does not bother me until I try on a dress that does not fit. For sixteen years, I did not wear shorts in public because my legs were pockmarked from a childhood skin disease, a few weeks before my college graduation a dermatologist burned the top layers of my skin with acid, it was painful and when the skin started healing it was itchy but after some months the scars were gone and now I don't even need an epilator. I feel more potent in dark jeans and wedge heels than in a skirt and ballet flats. I do not wear shoes I cannot run in. I never want to fall too ill or get too drunk to walk, the idea of having to be carried repulses me. When I am drunk I laugh a lot and speak too much and too loudly with a Valley Girl accent. I cannot finish an alcoholic drink if it is not sweet. When someone sweet-talks me, I get suspicious. When I am called "sweet," I cringe. Receiving praise embarrasses me even when I think that I deserve it. I am seldom upset by criticism from others because they are never more caustic than my criticisms of myself. I think things through before offering my opinion. I usually think that I am right, though I don't mind being proven wrong. I derive the highest pleasure from learning. I have no qualms about failing students who plagiarize. I annotate library books. I doodle in class and office meetings. My best ideas occur to me while I am perched on the toilet or brushing my teeth. I have fallen asleep on my feet while taking a shower, I woke up to the sound of my roommate rapping on the door, thinking I'd slipped and fainted. I am prone to musing and melancholy, I am often staring into the distance even in company. Once, while I was riding a commuter van on the way to work, a song played on the radio, some oldie about love, I forget the title but I remember that everyone in the van sang along, all ten passengers and the driver, for a few moments it was as if we inhabited the same world. I believe in the salvation of art, in morality without God, in the indifference of heaven and earth to human strife and striving. I cling to my convictions with the thought that the only certain thing is death, I will change my mind when I do. The prospect of another life after this one is too depressing for me to conceive. My eyes never have their fill of seeing, nor my ears their fill of hearing, so my Facebook and blogs are always updated, I collect and recollect and recollect. I like contemplating

driftwood on otherwise empty beaches. One day, I'll lay my life as bare as a chewed-on bone, stripped of all noise.