

"These warm, tender stories capture the longings of immigrants and what they never truly leave behind. This is a book of 21<sup>st</sup> century global experiences of love and disconnect, tradition and change. From Manhattan to Malaysia to Manila, de Jesus delivers a luscious sense of place and a compelling narrative voice that makes you want to read straight through to the end. Here is a writer of poignancy and grace."

—Anne Panning, author of *Super America* and *Butter*

"Carefully crafted and richly observed, these stories are filled with unforgettable women—devoted, deceitful, deluded, and so real, they might have been someone you once knew. Across climates and cultures, they show the immediacy of desire, the rawness of betrayal, the universality of pain and loss."

—F.H. Batacan, author of *Smaller and Smaller Circles*

Blood Collected Stories  
© Noelle Q. de Jesus, 2015

ISBN 978-981-09-6488-7

Published under the imprint Ethos Books  
by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd  
28 Sin Ming Lane  
#06-131 Midview City  
Singapore 573972  
www.ethosbooks.com.sg  
www.facebook.com/ethosbooks

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

*Supported by*



Cover photo credit: Ed C. de Jesus, and used with permission from subject  
Cover design by Nurul Syafiqah and Kum Suning  
Layout design by Word Image Pte Ltd  
Printed by Ho Printing Pte Ltd, Singapore

Typefaces: Adobe Garamond Pro in 10pt; Avenir in 15pt  
Material: 70gsm Prima Antique Cream Bulk

---

**NATIONAL LIBRARY BOARD, SINGAPORE CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA**

Name(s): De Jesus, Noelle Q., author.

Description: Blood : collected stories / Noelle Q. de Jesus. | Singapore : Ethos Books, [2015] | pages cm

Identifiers: OCN922623030 | ISBN 978-981-09-6488-7 (paperback)

Subject(s): Marriage -- Fiction. | Families -- Fiction.

Classification: LC Classification PR9570.S53 | DDC S823--dc23

# BLOOD

collected stories



Noelle Q. de Jesus

To my parents  
DJ and Mely  
without whom, I would not be a writer

And to Tanny  
without whom, this book would not exist

all my love and gratitude

## Contents

A SMALL CONSOLATION	9
MERIENDA	33
COLD	35
THE DAY BEFORE THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY	45
DÉJÀ VU	53
BABIES	57
KLEIN	71
CHILDREN'S STORIES	81
GAMES	97
MIRAGE	101
A HAPPY MARRIAGE	113
THIRD LIFE	115
PASSPORT	131
WIND CALLS	133
THE FIRST TIME	139
IN THE END	147
OVERCOMING	153
MILK AND SWEAT	157
THE DRESS	159
THE WASH	163
EQUIVALENTS	181
FIRST LOVE	193
POLAR VORTEX	195
OFF THE DROP	217
BLOOD	223
<b>Glossary</b>	236
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	238
<b>About the Author</b>	239

## Cold

**The heart** is an adaptable muscle. That's what she's read. But Katrina, who is weak and cold with homesickness, decides skin is more adaptable, although not her own. She imagines she is a creature newly emerged from massive frozen boulders, her skin still intact, pulsing, vibrant even after the mighty arctic winds. But as she shops for thermal underwear and a warm winter hat at Beller's, the only department store in this small mid-western university town that she's come to, Katrina suspects she just might belong to one of those species that became extinct in the ice age. Her skin will not toughen up, rather it will shrivel in confusion. It will do only what it does back home in her country. Its pores will open, expecting the sweltering heat, poised to perspire, but the sweat will freeze instantly, and she will turn into a slab of ice.

The letters Katrina writes home are filled with these sorts of observations. To amuse her family, she composes lists of the things that happen here but don't happen at home. Here in America, she writes, the mail comes twice a day. The afternoon light has a pink cast. The air outside seems to always smell of wood.

It's not as though she hadn't expected the differences. She had known it was going to be cold. She looked forward to seeing green leaves change color. She wanted to see snowflakes drifting from the sky and dreamed of shaping snow into the snowmen of her childhood books. However now, faced with this cold, she worries that her skin will not adapt.

“How cold is winter going to be, really?” Katrina asks Alison, a small, curvy, rather girlish woman with blonde hair cut high on her neck, sleek as a velvet cap on her shapely head.

“Imagine you’re in the freezer, with, like, the door closed. Only it’s way colder than that, even,” Alison replies, amused but matter-of-factly, her tone only exacerbating the forlorn homesickness in the pit of Katrina’s stomach.

“Even though you’re wearing your coat?” Katrina asks, thinking of the plush black wool jacket she bought at Beller’s.

“Sure, you’ve got a coat on, but like, the door’s still shut tight.” Alison laughs at her and Katrina longs to laugh like that. It reminds her that she has not laughed in a long time. Instead, she has an inside face with furrowed eyebrows that puzzle over the things people say, the jokes she doesn’t find funny that are met with laughter. But she hides all of that with her outside face: a smooth smile, a controlled command from brain to lips.

Her mother’s letters lecture, “You must make friends.” But there is no one; there are only strangers. It’s hard enough that she feels like a stranger, even to herself. She met Alison the day of graduate school registration. The American had laughed, delighted by Katrina’s remark that no one that she’s met so far fit any of the ideas she had about Americans. They registered for classes and shared their mutual nervousness about being teaching assistants. They even exchanged tentative stories about their childhoods. Katrina heard herself manufacturing an American drawl and hoped that they might have dinner together, because she did hate to eat alone. But afterwards, Alison hopped on her bicycle, waved goodbye, and disappeared.

They have the Shakespeare survey together, and after class, Katrina joins Alison and another young woman named Jennifer to a party at a bar off-campus. Jennifer’s hair is a rich reddish brown that sets off eyes that are an amazing green and skin that is milky white

and pink in the cheeks. Under the streetlights, Alison’s yellow hair and bright blue eyes glow. Katrina stares at all their vibrant colors and feels sad and drab with her shock of black hair and her black eyes that she says, for the record, are brown, because someone once told her no one really has black eyes.

It is a crisp night in late September. There is a small bite to the air, and a breeze nibbles at Katrina’s ears. When they enter the bar, the rush of smoky warmth surrounds them, mildly intoxicating. But soon, it’s much too warm. Through two bottles of beer, she sits and laughs at the appropriate times, even though she feels the strain in her cheeks and her eyes water with the stress of exaggeration. She is grateful to be with others, but she can’t help but feel lonelier than ever.

In late October, the sunlight is no longer real. A chilly white cast arrives in the morning, and the warmth only teases for a few hours in the afternoon. At the end of her day at school, she marches down one of the two main streets and again, the air is cold; the sun gone. Winds push her with a strange force, almost sliding her down the street like she’s on wheels. Her nostrils dry up and the strands of her own hair sting her face like miniature whips.

The scariest thing is the way the cold seems to have numbed her brain and frozen her speech. English is all of a sudden clumsy and tough on her tongue. She has come all this way to teach freshman composition so that she can pursue a degree in literature, and yet she feels it is she who must learn the language all over again. Now, all the sentences and paragraphs are strung together in a liquid drawl, so sometimes, she can’t even make them out, much less understand them. She finds herself enunciating, speaking slow and setting her words apart as though she were picking tiny stones from a pan of uncooked rice grains, just the way she was taught to back home in her mother’s kitchen.

“You’re from the Philippines? But you speak English so well,” they say. Still, she feels lost, always groping for the right words,

faltering in her lectures, tripping into Tagalog. She sees her students frown and raise their eyebrows at one another, but she is helpless. In its natural habitat, her English is breaking down.

Katrina recalls her panic the day she arrived. The two-hour drive from the airport to the town she was surprised to hear people call a city was a shock. The airport sedan sped through miles and miles of cornfields, spreading out towards a domed horizon in every conceivable direction. Her eerie thought: if something should happen to her, who would ever know? She felt cold pebbles plop one after another into the pool in her stomach.

In November, even the people themselves seem cold. Even their good-natured enquiries—*How are you? How are you doing?*—sound like questions tossed hastily into the air that don't wait for any answers. In her classes, the faces are either aloof or absent. When she speaks, they seem to know what she will say, and they have no patience to wait while she struggles with words, so she feels she must rush. She sense eyeballs rolling up to the tops of their heads; she feels the judging glances.

"You cannot be so sensitive," her mother writes, and Katrina reads the reprimand in the dashes and lines of her mother's graceful, curving penmanship. But in Modern Poetry, George Hunter sighs when she speaks. Tracy Wallace and Kay Petrocini whisper to one another. An older bearded man whose name Katrina cannot pronounce shakes his head. Helen Mitchell is kind, however, and listens to Katrina with rapt, wide-eyed attention that makes her feel worse.

One day, John Markman, with whom Katrina shares an office, invites her to his house for Thanksgiving. His wife, Janie, calls her on the telephone to finalize the details.

"We're having a traditional turkey dinner with all the trimmings. You haven't had that, have you? And I've invited someone from the business school as well. He's a very nice guy from Korea. I just know you two will hit it off."

Katrina is polite and says she is sure they will all get along.

To the dinner, she brings packets of dried mango that her mother packed in her suitcase for just these occasions, and feels a pang of homesickness as she hands them to John, who takes them along with her coat at the foyer.

"What's this now? Something from Korea? Well, thank you very much!"

"Something from the Philippines," Katrina forces herself to say, but he seems not to hear.

At the table, she is seated next to Mr. Sohn. He is about her height and on the heavy side with a genial face. He is an engineering major who is also taking a few graduate business courses. "He's single, I think," Janie whispers.

He shakes her hand. "You are from *Philippine?*"

Katrina nods.

Janie Markman sets down a dish of creamed onions.

"You two get to know each other, and I'll get the sweet potatoes."

Katrina is irritated by Janie's tone and how the two guests have been lumped together, two complete strangers who don't even speak the same language. "Whatever," she imagines Janie thinking. "Same difference."

John hands her wine in a crystal glass, as delicate as the icicles that hang above the windows.

Finally, the food is served and they are all seated—John and Janie, their six-year-old little boy, Max, and Paul and Lisa, another couple they know. Paul is also in the business school.

For a moment, the warm colors at the table hypnotize Katrina. The centerpiece of leaves, dried flowers and ears of brown corn with kernels like colored beads, all in different shades; the turkey is a golden brown and the cranberry sauce is burgundy like the wine.

The side dishes shimmer—green beans, orange sweet potatoes with puffs of toasted marshmallow, and creamy silver white baby onions. A tangerine pumpkin pie and a beautiful apple pie with an ornate latticework crust sit on the sideboard. Here are all these dishes Katrina has only ever read about in books but has never eaten. For once, she is glad that no one pays attention to her, and she does not need to speak. Mr. Sohn, too, is silent beside her.

“How are you doing, Mr. Sohn? Make sure you get enough to eat now,” John says, patting the back of his guest’s chair.

“Is very good, all of this... this Thanksgiving about Indians and *Pergrims*... yes?”

Little Max lets out a peal of laughter. “Pilgrims! Not Pergrims!”

“Max,” Janie chides.

“You’re exactly right, Mr. Sohn,” John smiles. “Now eat up, and make sure you save room for dessert,” he warns. Everybody laughs as though this is a hilarious joke. Katrina finds the smile on her outside face, secure and automatic. But when she glances at Mr. Sohn, she sees the same frustration in his nothing else but black eyes. They do speak the same language.

Just when her smile begins to wear thin, they say goodbye. She keeps it bright but fears it’s as cold as the crystal wine glasses. On her walk home which is streets and streets away, the wind stabs at her ears, thundering cold. When she finally winds her way up the concrete pavement towards her apartment building, she slips on a glassy patch of ice and falls on her hands and knees like a child. Later at home, under the light, she finds her knees skinned. With numb fingers, she presses the flesh together, but her blood is frozen and will not flow.

\*

The first day of December finds everything blanketed with a new and glistening snow that bounces light into sunshine that for once, feels

warm like a layer of hope. Katrina feels inexplicably light-hearted. She lets her students off early, and they return her smile. She has had a good class today, for a change.

While she gathers her papers together, one of the kids in the back, a blonde boy named Bruce Forrester, saunters up to her table. He missed the last class and wants his paper, he says. He looks at her without blinking.

“Can I get my paper back?”

Katrina finds it in the pile, and hands it to him. It’s marked with an F in red.

“I’m afraid you’ll need to revise this, Bruce,” Katrina says.

“What for?”

“It just... it won’t do,” Katrina starts. “I can’t pass it. You need to work on it some more. You don’t have a thesis statement, and... and your argument only begins in the fourth paragraph. You have a lot of comma splices, and you need to correct the errors in subject and verb agreement.” She pauses.

“You need to... it needs—” She falters as Bruce Forrester stares at her with his gray eyes. She shivers. The light hairs on his face shine white from the sunlight flooding the classroom. He just stares at her. She stops talking and stares back.

“Tell me what I have to do, then.”

“It’s all in my comments. Read the sample paper and rework it, according to the rubric. It doesn’t pass the way it is. Revise it, and this F doesn’t have to go on your record.”

Bruce is silent and sullen.

“Look, you can turn it in on Wednesday. That’s two more days,” she says, trying to be kind.

And then, out of nowhere, he says it.

“Fuck you.”

He says it quiet, almost under his breath. But there is no mistaking the words. Bitter shock and humiliation swirl together in Katrina's stomach. She stares back at Bruce Forrester. What was he thinking? That she wouldn't hear? That she wouldn't understand?

Katrina is shaking with fury. She would like to hit him. Bring her fist to his face. Her hands are clenched and freezing, like packed snowballs. She reaches for the words.

"*Putang ina mo!*" she says.

Bruce Forrester looks confused.

"What the hell? This is fucked." He shrugs, takes his paper and walks out of the classroom. Katrina sits down, still trembling.

*Your mother is a prostitute. Your mother is a whore. You are an animal.* She wants to scream. But he will not understand. The words in English are all wrong. They are not what she wants to say. She wants to say, *Gago, Leche, Hayop, Tarantado, Putang ina mo!* And have those words strike him across the face like his words did her.

She leaves the classroom, and walks through the hall. On the floor, she finds Bruce Forrester's essay, adorned with footprints, its ink smeared. Outside, the sky is dark. It has begun to snow again.

That night, after Shakespeare, Alison asks her to join them for drinks, but Katrina says no.

"Come on. You need a break."

Katrina shakes her head.

As she puts on her coat, Alison asks, "Hey, are you okay? Is something wrong?"

Katrina longs to answer, to really answer. She wishes she could tell her everything, about Mr. Sohn and the Markmans, about the people and the cold, and about Bruce Forrester. She wants to tell her how words run from her clumsy tongue, which is coated in the same ice that she slips on. She wants to tell Alison how she wishes she

could hear her own language and speak it, and peel off all these layers of clothes and thaw out her brain and her skin and be warm again.

"I'm fine. It's nothing." Katrina shakes her head, careful to keep the hot tears frozen in her eyes.

Later that night, Katrina cannot stop shaking in the cold. She curls up in socks and dons a sweater over the flannel nightgown that was sent to her in a box by an aunt in another frozen town somewhere in America. She tucks the ends of the garment under every inch of her body, pulling her arms into her sleeves and holding them close so no cold can enter. She pulls the blanket over her body, over her head, and does the same with the bed spread. But she cannot still the shaking. Katrina begins to count. She inhales at one-two and exhales at three-four, her breath whistling through her gritted teeth. Slowly, she stops shivering. She continues to warm herself with her hands, no longer counting, only whispering, *Kailan, Kailan kaya?* When? When is it going to happen? She breathes to warm her skin, and waits for her heart to make the proper adjustments.