


Silliman in the Seventies: A Personal Journey

ANTHONY L. TAN

I remember the words of Rilke's "Ninth Elegy": **Maybe we're here only to say: house,/ bridge, well, gate, jug, olive tree, window—/ at most, pillar, tower...but to say them, remember,/ oh to say them in a way that the things themselves/never dreamed of existing so intensely.** Albert Faurot, the music teacher, gave me a bilingual edition of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. His dedication "To another poet and friend" gave me one of the high moments of my life in Silliman. His End House was a favorite haunt for Butch Macansantos, Armando, my younger brother, and me; yet when he passed away I was not even around to pay him my last respects.

When for the first time I came to Silliman, I was trying to escape from the limitations of my island home in the Sulu Sea. I was in search of another island, disdaining a humdrum destiny that was mine at birth, the destiny my ancestors, even from their graves, seemed to have foisted on me. I had thought then that I was urged on, like Tennyson's Ulysses, by hunger for new knowledge. Even before this hunger had been appeased, a deeper kind of hunger was growing inside of me. It masked itself as the hunger to move about, but in reality it was not wanderlust but, my enemies would think, the other kind of wandering and lusting. I must be kind and just to myself and think simply that this new kind of hunger grew out of the demise of an old love, unfortunately because of my immaturity. (Because, Mr. Kahlil Gibran, I did not at that time want to bleed upon the thorns

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of love; that I was not, unlike your sheaves of corn, ready for "love's threshing-floor".) I wanted to make up for that loss, and I thought a new island would be the right place to start anew because, in a manner of speaking, my old island home had been washed away by the waves of time and misfortune.

So it was then that in the summer of 1970 I found myself in Silliman.

I was like a shipwrecked sailor who had come upon an island, and I was learning the names of things which I thought did not exist.

Many things crowd into my memory when I look back to that time nearly 30 years ago. I remember the languor and rhythm of the afternoon, the horses' hooves clip-clopping down the asphalt streets, the pleasant rattle the *cochero* made when he touched the spokes of the turning wheel of his tartanilla with the handle of his whip. In the noon heat the sea just off the boulevard would be shimmering and blinding as if someone had thrown a million shards of mirrors on the water. It was just like in the old home with the sea breeze coming in from another island. The staid, white houses of the elite facing the sea reminded one of the relaxed atmosphere of the boulevard. Late afternoon it would be full of the happy sounds of children, their concerned parents or *yayas* watching over them. But there would also be wrinkled habitués promenading in the sunset, or into the sunset of their years. Meanwhile, the boats docked at the wharf, but soon to depart for other ports and to carry away someone to another country, to strange seas and climes.

After sundown or early evening, as you walked down to the university cafeteria to eat supper, you would hear again the clip-clopping tartanilla pass by. And again late at night when you paused from whatever it was you were doing or reading. The ending of one of Nick Joaquin's stories would come to life except that here there was no resonance or suggestion of romance but simply the humdrum sound of tartanilla. But who knows what was taking place behind the *cochero*? Maybe a pair of lovers, coming home from a movie downtown, were kissing behind the *cochero*, their hearts beating each to each.

Unbeknownst to a provinciano like me, living in this untroubled paradise, with only my yearning for love as a kind of unrelieved pain, deep trouble was already brewing in many parts of the land. There was profound discontent among the masses. The president who proved to be a dictator, was stealing the money from the people and depositing it in banks outside the country, while his wife was buying shoes and shoes and vats of perfumes and body lotion to keep her young and beautiful. The generals were jockeying for power while their wives were ingratiating themselves with the First Lady. Meanwhile, the lowly-paid, underfed,

ordinary foot soldiers were dying daily in the hinterlands of Mindanao at the hands of the communist rebels, or in the jungles of Jolo, redolent with the smell of durian and rotting lanzones, they were being slaughtered by roving bands of bandits and zealous mujahedeens. Unbeknownst to many in the country the president was planning to suspend the writ of habeas corpus and later to declare martial law.

As a graduate student in English in 1970, I had to enroll in a creative writing class. In summer this class happened to be the famous National Summer Writers Workshop.

Although I had no ambition to be a creative writer, I was excited to be in a writers workshop. Here was an opportunity to sharpen my skills in writing even if I did not intend to be a writer. At that time I did not know what exactly I wanted to do with my life.

Some of the writing fellows in the 1970 summer writers workshop, mostly from Manila-based schools like UP, Ateneo and De La Salle, have today become nationally famous, although not all of them turned out to be the poets that they at first thought they would be. Many of course are hardly heard of these days, deciding perhaps to do something better. Some joined the underground movement in order to fight the coming dictatorship. In the aftermath of martial law some changed their occupations, becoming journalists instead or copy editors in some lucrative advertising firms. And some went abroad, to the U.S.A., to do something else like taxi driving. Taxi driving might seem embarrassing, but it is not without precedence in literary history, a precedence that moved Albert Camus to remark that art is gratuitous because look what Rimbaud did in Abyssinia after he had left the writing of poetry.

The few who persevered have become well-known writers and are now harvesting the coveted awards that are given annually by the Manila-based weeklies and the Carlos Palanca Foundation. One name stands out today, Carlos Ojeda Aureus, the Bicolano writer whose book of short stories, *Naguenos*, is the Philippine counterpart of James Joyce's *Dubliners*. The other famous name is Ricky Lee, a scriptwriter of Tagalog movies. And of course there is Conrado de Quiros, a well-known columnist with the big time *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

There were others in that batch like Willie Sanchez, Albert Casuga and Celedonio Aguilar who for one reason or another have stopped writing. The members of the panel of critics in the 1970 workshop, aside from Dr. Edilberto K. Tiempo and Dr. Edith L. Tiempo, were Myrna Pena-Reyes, Raymond Llorca, Bien Lumbera and Mig Enriquez.

In retrospect the writing fellows and the critics formed an august body of

intelligent men, but at that time, because of my ignorance and naivete, because of my lack of ambition to be a serious writer, I did not feel the awe that was due to this group of men and women. There is something about me that until now is not impressed by importance, literary or otherwise, but I take off my hat to kind, honest, intelligent men and women.

Since I was not a writing fellow but a graduate student enrolled for credit, I had the leisure to sit back and listen 99 percent of the time to the fellows and critics discuss the manuscripts submitted to the workshop. I remember that the only time I had the opportunity to speak was when Dr. Lumbera thought that it would be good to let the fellows and the students talk first. Uncharacteristic for a timid person like me, I immediately, boldly grabbed the opportunity, opened my big mouth, bared my fangs like a dog lately unleashed. Having honed my critical sword in the periodical section of the old Silliman library, on the whetstone of such periodicals as *Modern Fiction Studies*, I decided to wield it on a short story that did not live up to the standards of good fiction, pointing out the failure of characterization and the consequent improbability of the story. Apparently Dr. Lumbera noticed what I did because at the end of the session he approached me and talked to me about something, maybe it was about my work. I remember saying that I was looking for work because I had already resigned from a teaching job with the Notre Dame of Siasi. He suggested that I see the Tiempos, but I was too timid to follow his advice. I would meet Bien again six years later when I was a writing fellow at the UP Writers Workshop.

How Doc Ed got me into the English Department of Silliman is a long story itself. Looking back I could say it was one of those turning points in one's life that did not seem, at the moment it was taking place, momentous at all.

After the workshop, after we had gone back home and had returned to campus, when classes for the first semester were about to begin, Caloy Aureus, who had become a friend, asked me to accompany him to the residence of the Tiempos because he had to arrange the schedule of his classes. The Tiempos had promised him a teaching job so that he could at the same time study for his master's degree in Creative Writing. As a writing fellow, Caloy had submitted a short story which, in spite of its subject matter (a rape near a cathedral), impressed the panel of critics. Dr. Tiempo, or Dad, as we later came to call him, was the dean of the graduate school, and Mom Edith was the head of the English Department.

I had no inkling that that very evening, that Friday evening, still warm and pleasant as if the long days of summer were not over yet, the tide of my fortune

was going to change.

It was my first time to be at the residence of the Tiempos in Amigo Subdivision. I remember the warm glow of the lights in the sala and in the adjacent dining room. There was snack for Caloy and me, brewed coffee I think it was, and cookies. While Caloy and the Tiempos were busy with the schedule of Caloy's classes, those that he was going to teach in the undergrad and those that he was going to attend as a student in the graduate school, I sat back, looked around the sala, at the books and bric-a-brac on the shelves, the large, wooden stereo set and the large records, hardly enjoying the brewed coffee because in two days I had to pack my things up and go back to that God-forsaken island in the Sulu Sea where I came from. The prospect of going back, of repeating history, that is, the family history of store keeping, gave me that sinking feeling that there was no justice in the universe, the feeling of a sailor in a rickety boat driven into the teeth of a storm.

We were walking to the iron gate when some good angel bent over Doc Ed and whispered to him, urging him to ask me what I was going to do. As calmly as I could, although the tide of dejection was rising to my head, I explained to him my situation, the dreadful prospect of return, without giving him a hint of that dread, and the desire to stay on in Silliman if possible. He said there were available scholarships in the graduate school. Was I willing to work as a graduate fellow and also study for a master's degree? Could I postpone my return trip that Sunday? Could I see him on Monday in his office and see what could be done?

Those words and my affirmative response cancelled out the other possibilities of my life, turned the possibilities to might-have-beens: like I could have been a rich but discontented store keeper in a loveless island, or a rebel with the MNLF.

In Dumaguete and Silliman I stayed on and stayed on and stayed on for the next thirteen years.

Every year I looked forward to summer and the workshop. In 1972 I worked as the assistant of Mr. Joe Torres, the reliable typist of the workshop manuscripts. I mimeographed the stencils that he had cut in that small room on the ground floor of the old library, which was an extension office of the English Department because at one time or another Mr. Jess Chanco, Mr. Darnay Demetillo, Mr. Joe Teague and Mr. Antonio Enriquez held office there.

The following year I qualified as a writing fellow. I submitted a few poems and a short story about Tausug vengeance. It had an epigraph from Will-

iam Butler Yeats's poem about things falling apart because the center cannot hold. The story was hotly debated by the panelists and writing fellows. I was thrilled by the reactions of the participants, whether they were favorable or otherwise. It was then that I realized that anything about Tausug was interesting to many readers. Somewhere on the fringe of my subconscious I began to entertain the idea of someday writing a novel about my God-forsaken island.

The late Mr. Rolando Tinio was a panelist that year, and he played the rôle of the devil's advocate to the hilt. There was no story or poem that pleased him. I remember an incident one afternoon when a literature-teacher fellow showed his poem to Mr. Tinio. It was under the acacia tree in front of Larena Hall. A circle of benches surrounded the tree. It was where idle students would make *tambay*, where the laundry women on Saturday and Sunday afternoons would wait for the students to pick up the laundry. After a quick reading of the poem, Mr. Tinio dropped the piece of paper, bent down and covered it with a pile of sand, and remarked that the poem deserved the burial. The way he scooped the sand with both hands, wordlessly pouring the grains of sand on the paper, how he quickly stood up and delivered the punch line was a brilliant comic action. We were all entertained. We all laughed, including the mustachioed victim of this joke who, we learned later, he invited to teach with him at the Ateneo de Manila.

Except for the summer of 1976 when I was at the UP Writers Workshop in Diliman, I attended the Silliman workshop every year in various capacity: sometimes as a tour guide to the visiting writing-fellows from Manila and Cebu, the role being performed by Mickey Ibanez and Victor Padilla today; sometimes as an unofficial, unpaid panelist; and later with Butch Macansantos, as jester who entertained the writing fellows with ethnic jokes. I remember those long, carefree evening hours, lying on the ball-field between the men's dorms and the nurses' home, exchanging jokes with the fellows while above us the moon sailed by in the cloudless summer sky.

The writ of habeas corpus was suspended in 1971. The rumor of martial law was in the air. The campus weekly was full of omens and portents of things to come, side by side with pictures of Fidel Castro and Che Guevarra as icons of rebellion and liberation. Although Mao was equally qualified to stand as icon, his picture was not often reprinted in the weekly because (and this is a wild guess because I did not know the editors of the paper) Mao had some ethnic resemblance to the aspiring dictator. Everywhere in the dormitory rooms, the walls were plastered with these pictures. The excessive presence of Che's bearded image moved one run-of-mill lawyer to complain that instead of Che the students

ought to hang the picture of the clean-shaven Richard Nixon, then president of the United States. With his lower lip protruding, he asked in earnest "Why not Nixon?"

We would get free copies of various Marxist writings. Mao's little red book was easily available; the quotations were familiar. *The Internationale*, in English and Pilipino, sounded inspiring. When sung in protest against beauty pageants on campus, or some irrelevant cultural shows, it could move you to righteous anger. Let me hasten to add though that the airwaves were still dominated by American pop songs, by *MacArthur Park* and *Leaving on a Jet Plane*.

One day the late Senator Benigno Aquino came to campus, and everybody was at the gym to listen to him. A brilliant, charismatic speaker, he warned the country that Marcos was going to declare martial law, that the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus was merely a dry run in order to gauge the reaction or opposition of the body politic. According to Aquino, Marcos had repeatedly denied he was going to declare martial law, but don't you believe Marcos, he said, because Marcos, Goebbels-like, was a congenital liar. I had heard of incorrigible liar and inveterate liar, but it was my first time to hear of congenital liar. Imagine, to lie as soon as you are born. True enough, exactly a year after the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, martial law was declared.

The night before September 21, we were already burning our piles of *The Weekly Sillimanian*, returning the little red book to its rightful owner, removing from the walls and cabinets the pictures of bearded heroes and replacing them with glossy pages from some magazines whose heroines had long legs but were not necessarily beardless. I learned early on that you can be a rebel but you don't have to go to jail; that when your enemy is pushing you against the wall, a quick change of hair, color or wave, is absolutely necessary. Put the hair somewhere. It can save your life. So while some of my dorm mates had to flee to the provinces, I stayed in the third floor of Woodward Hall, partly out of necessity because I didn't have the money to go to far Zamboanga.

There were three kinds of rebel-heroes. The real ones lived in the mountains, shoeless and in rags so that the suggestion that they were naked was not without basis; hence they were called *hubad na bayani*. The ones who believed they were rebels but who couldn't let a day go by without smoking imported cigarettes, and who devoured PX goods, were referred to as *huwad na bayani*. The last and worst kind were those who sold their souls to the regime so that they could enjoy the luxuries their neighbors were enjoying. They were referred to as *tuwad na bayani* because in order to sell their souls they had to bare something

physical.

It took Silliman a long time to open again, probably the last of the private schools to resume classes. The reason was that according to military non-intelligence, Silliman was full of rebels. It had that impression because the campus paper printed Marxist writings, and there was hardly a week when some pictures of Fidel or Che did not grace its pages. But as a matter of fact, there were hardly a hundred students who were really that serious about rebellion. I had been a witness in one protest march against a cultural show held in the gym. There were only about thirty placard-carrying students who marched and shouted in front of the gym. They hardly made a dent on the show inside the gym until an agent provocateur advised them to get into the gym and do their shouting and marching there. Only then did they succeed in disrupting the show. But sheer number there was none. Out of a population of 5,000 students, you have only thirty. What percentage of the population is that? Is that enough to say that the campus was swarming with rebels?

When school resumed some changes were in order. Before martial law, the physical setting of the campus was such that it was integrated into the larger Dumaguete community. Anyone could get in and out of the campus. After martial law, some wire fences had to be put up per instructions from the military. The freedom to move about was already restricted by the construction of gates near the dormitories. Curfew was imposed on the residents of the dorms. We had to climb the fence once the gates were already closed, or we had to cut away a few feet of wire to make a hole in the fence. The administration, trying to tow the line, had to impose the wearing of short hair. In protest one of my professors had his head shaven.

It took sometime before the campus paper was given the license to operate again. When it came back there was none of the usual Marxist writings, absolutely none of the pre-martial law pictures. In its first year of resumption I was the faculty adviser, meaning my job was to see to it that no such thing happened in the paper. On the other hand, the paper did not sing praises to martial law, but went quietly to do its job as a campus paper and as a workshop for aspiring journalists of the College of Mass Communications.

The presence of the wire fences and the uniformed security guards manning the gates made the campus look like one huge garrison. Under the seeming sense of normalcy there was a seething hatred for the dictator. The Silliman community as a whole consistently voted *no* in referendums and plebiscites when the dictator asked for a *yes*, and *yes* when he asked for a *no*. An excellent example

of how students thought about the so-called virtues of martial law was the English translation of the propaganda *Isang Bansa, Isang Diwa*. An agriculture student from Leyte translated it as *One Day, One Eat*.

Slowly, imperceptively, people got used to martial law like a puppy getting accustomed to its chains after several days of lusty protest. There were occasional outpourings of hatred for the dictator and his dragon lady. We as graduate students returned to the library to read again the complete works of such and such a poet. It was Eliot, then Auden, then Yeats and Frost and Dylan Thomas. Later it was Conrad, Lawrence, Joyce and James. Then the critics. Then the journals put out by American universities. We were becoming Anglophiles. Even on Saturday nights, when most of the undergraduates were out with their friends, we were in the desolate library pouring over books or periodicals.

It took me sometime to finish my thesis so I did not graduate until 1975. Caloy had finished earlier; and as soon as he had his master's degree, he left Silliman and went to UP. Lack of ambition, lackadaisical attitude, and the desire to just stay on in Silliman campus were the reasons why I did not finish in two years. But one day it occurred to me that I wanted to move up to Baguio City. To inspire me to get the degree I wrote on a piece of paper *Next Destination: Baguio*. I pasted it on the mirror so that I could see it every morning. In one semester I finished the thesis and defended it in time for graduation in March of 1975.

I went to Baguio with the intention of finally moving there, but when I saw the city I was disappointed. The UP Baguio campus was so small. The terrain of the city was so uneven. The houses were perched on hillsides and gave the impression that any rainy time they would fall on the houses just under them on the next tier. I felt like it was being on tenterhooks everyday of your life. I did not want that kind of precariousness. But I think the main reason was that it was too far from the sea. Having grown up on the seashore, I could not for the life of me live far from it.

So I went back to Dumaguete, back to old, cozy Silliman, in the security of the century-old acacia trees. And I stayed on until finally I thought I really needed a change of scene.

In 1983 I resigned from the English Department, quietly, without fanfare. When Doc Ed learned about it, he did not talk to me. He could not accept that I was leaving, that I who had stayed the longest when everybody else had left for one reason or another, that I too was leaving. I couldn't shake off that *Et tu, Brute* feeling. But I had to leave for the sake of my sanity. I am amused now when I remember that morning during the 1983 workshop. Krip Yuson, Cesar

Aquino and I were in Krip's room at the Alumni Hall. Dad came in to see Krip who had just arrived from Manila. Although he talked to both Krip and Cesar, Dad completely ignored me. Oh where is that angel that made him talk to me thirteen years ago? I tried to put myself in his shoes. How would a father feel when his son was going away from home?

Life indeed is a series of arrivals and departures, mostly departures, someone said. And when we bid good-bye in this life, we are just rehearsing for the final good-bye we all must bid someday. Right, Mr. Laurence Sterne?

Another thirteen years went by. In September, 1996 I learned that Dad had passed away quietly. Like a dutiful son I came to Dumaguete to pay my last respects. I crossed two bodies of water, traveled ten hours just so I could be at his funeral. For the first time in my life I became a pallbearer and delivered a eulogy. But I envy what Mr. Ernesto Yee did when he learned that Dad had passed away: he went to the house to polish Dad's pair of shoes. I wish I had done that myself, for Dad deserved that act of kindness. In spite of his detractors and enemies, he was a kind man whose heart was not only in the right place but was also, as Cesar Aquino put it in a glowing tribute, as large as Africa.