

ON BECOMING
Filipino

*Selected Writings of
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Life and Death of a Filipino in America

I first saw death when I was a small boy in the little village where I was born. It was a cool summer night and the sky was as clear as day and the ripening rice fields were golden in the moonlight. I remember that I was looking out the window and listening to the sweet mating calls of wild birds in the tall trees nearby when I heard my mother scream from the dark corner of the room where she had been lying for several days because she was big with child. I ran to her to see what was going on, but my grandmother darted from somewhere in the faint candlelight and held me close to the warm folds of her cotton skirt.

My mother was writhing and kicking frantically at the old woman who was attending her, but when the child was finally delivered and cleaned I saw that my mother was frothing at the mouth and slowly becoming still. She opened her eyes and tried to look for me in the semi-darkness, as though she had something important to tell me. Then she closed her eyes and lay very still.

My grandmother took me to the field at the back of our house and we sat silently under the bending stalks of rice for hours and once, when I looked up to push away the heavy grain that was tickling my neck, I saw the fleeting shadow of a small bird across the sky followed by a big bat. The small bird disappeared in the periphery of moonlight and darkness, shrieking fiercely when the bat caught up with it somewhere there beyond the range of my vision. Then I thought of my mother who had just died and my little brother who was born to take her place, but my thoughts of him created a terror inside me, and when my grandmother urged me to go back to the house, I burst into tears and clutched desperately at two huge stalks of rice so that she could not pull me away. My father came to the field then and carried me gently in his arms, and I clung tightly to him as though he alone could assuage my grief and protect me from all the world.

I could not understand why my mother had to die. I could not

understand why my brother had to live. I was fearful of the motives of the living and the meaning of their presence on the earth. And I felt that my little brother, because he had brought upon my life a terrorizing grief, would be a stranger to me forever and ever. It was my first encounter with death; so great was its impress on my thinking that for years I could not forget my mother's pitiful cries as she lay dying.

My second encounter with death happened when I was ten years old. My father and I were plowing in the month of May. It was raining hard that day and our only working carabao was tired and balked at moving. This animal and I grew up together like brothers; he was my constant companion in the fields and on the hillsides at the edge of our village when the rice was growing.

My father, who was a kind and gentle man, started beating him with sudden fury. I remember that there was a frightening thunderclap somewhere in the world, and I looked up suddenly toward the eastern sky and saw a wide arc of vanishing rainbow. It was then that my father started beating our carabao mercilessly. The animal jumped from the mud and ran furiously across the field, leaving the wooden plow stuck into the trunk of a large dead tree. My father unsheathed his sharp bolo and raced after him, the thin blade of the steel weapon gleaming in the slanting rain. At the edge of a deep pit where we burned felled trees and huge roots, the carabao stopped and looked back; but sensing the anger of my father, he plunged headlong into the pit. I could not move for a moment, then I started running madly toward the pit.

My father climbed down the hole and looked at the carabao with tears in his eyes. I did not know if they were tears of madness or of repressed fury. But when I had climbed down after him, I saw big beads of sweat rolling down his forehead, mingling with his tears and soaking his already wet ragged farmer's clothes. The carabao had broken all his legs and he was trembling and twisting in the bottom of the pit. When my father raised the bolo in his hands to strike at the animal, I turned away and pressed my face in the soft embankment. Then I heard his hacking at the animal, grunting and cursing in the heavy rain.

When I looked again the animal's head was completely severed from the body, and warm blood was flowing from the trunk and making a red pool under our feet. I wanted to strike my father, but instead, fearing

and loving him I climbed out of the pit quickly and ran through the blinding rain to our house.

Twice now I had witnessed violent deaths. I came across death again some years afterward on a boat when, on my way to America, I befriended a fellow passenger of my age named Marco.

He was an uneducated peasant boy from the northern part of our island who wanted to earn a little money in the new land and return to his village. It seemed there was a girl waiting for him when he came back, and although she was also poor and uneducated Marco found happiness in her small brown face and simple ways. He showed me a faded picture of her and ten dollars he had saved up to have it enlarged when we arrived in the new land.

Marco had a way of throwing back his head and laughing loudly, the way peasants do in that part of the island. But he was quick and sensitive; anger would suddenly appear in his dark face, then fear, and then laughter again; and sometimes all these emotions would simultaneously appear in his eyes, his mouth, his whole face. Yet he was sincere and honest in whatever he did or said to me.

I got seasick the moment we left Manila, and Marco started hiding oranges and apples in his suitcase for me. Fruits were the only things I could eat, so in the dead of the night when the other passengers were stirring in their bunks and peering through the dark to see what was going on, I sat up. Suddenly there was a scream and someone shouted for the light. I ran to the corner and clicked the switch and when the room was flooded with light, I saw Marco lying on the floor and bleeding from several knife wounds on his body. I knelt beside him, but for a moment only, because he held my hands tightly and died. I looked at the people around me and then asked them to help me carry the body to a more comfortable place. When the steward came down to make an inventory of Marco's suitcase, the ten dollars was gone. We shipped back the suitcase, but I kept the picture of the girl.

I arrived in America when thousands of people were waiting in line for a piece of bread. I kept on moving from town to town, from one filthy job to another, and then many years were gone. I even lost the girl's picture and for a while forgot Marco and my village.

I met Crispin in Seattle in the coldest winter of my life. He had just

arrived in the city from somewhere in the east and he had no place to stay. I took him to my room and for days we slept together, eating what we could buy with the few cents that we begged in gambling houses from night to night. Crispin had drifted most of his life and he could tell me about other cities. He was very gentle and there was something luminous about him, like the strange light that flashes in my mind when I sometimes think of the hills of home. He had been educated and he recited poetry with a sad voice that made me cry. He always spoke of goodness and beauty in the world.

It was a new experience and the years of loneliness and fear were shadowed by the grace of his hands and the deep melancholy of his eyes. But the gambling houses were closed toward the end of that winter and we could not beg any more from the gamblers because they were also starving. Crispin and I used to walk in the snow for hours looking for nothing, waiting for the cold night to fall, hoping for the warm sun to come out of the dark sky. And then one night when we had not eaten for five days, I got out of bed and ate several pages of an old newspaper by soaking them in a can of water from the faucet in our room. Choking tears came out of my eyes, but the deep pain in my head burst wide open and blood came out of my nose. I finally went to sleep from utter exhaustion, but when I woke up again, Crispin was dead.

Yes, it was true. He was dead. He had not even contemplated death. Men like Crispin who had poetry in their souls come silently into the world and live quietly down the years, and yet when they are gone no moon in the sky is lucid enough to compare with the light they shed when they are among the living.

After nearly a decade of wandering and rootlessness, I lost another good friend who had guided me in times of helplessness. I was in California in a small agricultural community. I lived in a big bunkhouse of thirty farm workers with Leroy, who was a stranger to me in many ways because he was always talking about unions and unity. But he had a way of explaining the meanings of words in utter simplicity, like “work” which he translated into “power,” and “power” into “security.” I was drawn to him because I felt that he had lived in many places where the courage of men was tested with the cruelest weapons conceivable.

One evening I was eating with the others when several men came into our bunkhouse and grabbed Leroy from the table and dragged him outside. He had been just about to swallow a ball of rice when the men burst into the place and struck Leroy viciously on the neck with thick leather thongs. He fell on the floor and coughed up the ball of rice. Before Leroy realized what was happening to him, a big man came toward him from the darkness with a rope in his left hand and a shining shotgun in the other. He tied the rope around Leroy's neck while the other men pointed their guns at us, and when they had taken him outside, where he began screaming like a pig about to be butchered, two men stayed at the door with their aimed guns. There was some scuffling outside, then silence, and then the two men slowly withdrew with their guns, and there was a whispering sound of running feet on the newly cut grass in the yard and then the smooth purring of cars speeding away toward the highway and then there was silence again.

We rushed outside all at once, stumbling against each other. And there hanging on a tall eucalyptus tree, naked and shining in the pale light of the April moon, Leroy was swinging like a toy balloon. We cut him down and put him on the grass, but he died the moment we reached him. His genitals were cut and there was a deep knife wound in his chest. His left eye was gone and his tongue was sliced into tiny shreds. There was a wide gash across his belly and his entrails plopped out and spread on the cool grass.

That is how they killed Leroy. When I saw his cruelly tortured body, I thought of my father and the decapitated carabao and the warm blood flowing under our bare feet. And I knew that all my life I would remember Leroy and all the things he taught me about living.

The Writer As Worker

Why should I write about labor unions and their struggle? Because a writer is also a worker. He writes stories, for example, and sells them or tries to sell them. They are products of his brain. They are commodities. Then again, a writer is also a citizen; and as citizen he must safeguard his civil rights and liberties. Life is a collective work and also a social reality. Therefore the writer must participate with his fellow man in the struggle to protect, to brighten, to fulfill life. Otherwise he has no meaning—a nothing.

Now culture being a social product, I firmly believe that any work of art should have a social function—to beautify, to glorify, to dignify man. This assertion has always been true, and it applies to all social systems. But always art is in the hands of the dominant class—which wields its power to perpetuate its supremacy and existence. Since any social system is forced to change to another by concrete economic forces, its art changes also to be recharged, reshaped, and revitalized by the new conditions. Thus, if the writer has any significance, it should write about the world in which he lives: interpret his time and envision the future through his knowledge of historical reality.

And these are times that demand of the writer to declare his positive stand—his supreme sacrifice—on the question of war or peace, life or death. The writer who sides with and gives his voice to democracy and progress is a real writer, because he writes to protect man and restore his dignity. He writes so that this will be a world of mutual cooperation, mutual protection, mutual love; so that darkness, ignorance, brutality, exploitation of man by another, and deceit will be purged from the face of the earth.

A writer should be political also. Government or states are always in the hands of the ruling classes, and so long as there are states, there are also tyrannies. In a bourgeois state, under capitalism or imperialism, the tyranny is against the working class, against the majority. . . .

Filipino writers in the Philippines have a great task ahead of them, but also a great future. The field is wide and open. They should rewrite everything written about the Philippines and the Filipino people from the materialist, dialectical point of view-this being the only [way] to understand and interpret everything Philippines. They should write lovingly about its rivers, towns, plains, mountains, wildernesses-its flora and fauna-the different tribes and provinces. They should write about the great men and their times and works, from Lapulapu to Mariano Balgos. They should compile the unwritten tales, legends, folklore, riddles, humor, songs, sayings. They should illustrate that there was a culture before the Spaniards uprooted it. When these are written, they should extenuate and amplify. The material is inexhaustible. But always they should be written for the people, because the people are the creators and appreciators of culture....

The making of a genuine artist or writer is not mysterious. It is not the work of Divine Providence. Social conditions, history, and the people's struggle are the factors behind it. My making as a writer and poet is not mysterious, neither was I gifted by an unknown power. It was hard work and hard living. Suffering, loneliness, pain, hunger, hate, joy, happiness, pity, compassion-all these factors made me a writer. Plus, of course, my tenderness, my affection toward everything that lives. Plus, again, my participation in the people's fight for peace and democracy.

I did not know any writer until I had three books published. Some writers are reluctant to [reveal] which writers influenced them. I probably read most of the greatest novels, plays, short stories, poetry of many nations, but those who influenced me most are Americans, French, and Russians. In particular, Balzac, Jack London, and Maxim Gorky. But mostly Gorky in the novel and the drama, Nicolas Guillen and Pablo Neruda in poetry, and the Marxists in literary criticism. If you have ever lived in one of the slums of the U.S., I know you would also be influenced by it. I lived in the slums of Los Angeles, and I never escaped its terrors, its soul-sickening atmosphere....

I don't care what some writers in the Philippines think of me. That is their privilege. But I care about what they write, for or against war, for or against life.