

ESSAY

Lost Heartland

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On April 1, 2016, past 1:00 a.m., BFF Krip Yuson texted: “FC burning! ... 1st floor may be saved...” I read it only much later after sunrise in Antipolo. I texted daughter Cyan to check; she had a spare key to FC room 1062. Around eight, she texted: “FC still burning, cordoned...”

Now I know how it feels to lose a heartland! — perhaps, like losing one’s country? Country, like heartland, an abstraction and yet, no less real, for our words come alive with feeling in the mind’s imagination where feeling is deeper and wider than thought. Language, after all, is Imagination’s supreme invention; without language, there is no memory, no history, no culture, no civilization. One’s country is what one’s imagination owes its allegiance to: *Inang Bayan*, more feeling than thought, but no less real.

Yes, I take refuge in the mind’s shelter where all our words are, our only means to apprehend “our reality” — only ever a human reality, for the Real is a larger, mysterious cosmos where the spirit moves. From such makeshift refuge, I cast away “carriage comfort, despair,” and draw my faith, what strength, what constancy of purpose. Again, brave words! — they are all that I have, for memory, for a sense of what is real, for a possible grasp of our ever-troubled human world.

Until now, I haven’t had the heart to see for myself a present ineluctable reality: the Faculty Center all rubble and ash. Why dishearten myself with the sorry sight? All things pass, I solace myself; what matters is what you’re doing now, the things you do well (as you believe) is your destiny. Now keep all happy memories, your treasure trove. So, write! — when the

imagination sleeps, says Albert Camus, our words lose their meaning. Thus I prod myself from sun to sun.

In 1952, when Vidal Tan assumed the U.P. Presidency, he requested my father, who had been teaching with him in Far Eastern University, to organize the Department of Spanish in view of the “Spanish Law” just passed by Congress. We moved from our apartment in Lepanto, Manila, to Area I on the Diliman campus; at T-1004, we were a few yards from NVM Gonzalez’s cottage. (“T” meant “temporary”; the cottages had been built by American GIs for a camp after Liberation in 1945.) During my undergraduate days, I would sometimes show my short story to NVM; I recall his comment, gently delivered, on a story I had worked and reworked: “Jimmy, I think your story is constipated.” Sometimes, too, I would walk on a late afternoon to Area 17, for Franz Arcellana’s comment on my poems; he never said a word but would nod as he read in a way I took to mean I should try harder.

Right after graduation in UP in 1964, I started teaching as assistant instructor in the Department of English, as it was then called since 1908; its faculty had individual desks in a common room behind the mural at the lobby of the College of Liberal Arts (now Palma Hall). A year later, I was given a Rockefeller grant for graduate studies at the University of Chicago where I met again my former mentors who were finishing their PhD’s, Ludi Arvisu in English and Oscar Alfonso in History. When I returned in 1970, I was made assistant professor and given an office in the newly-built Faculty Center beside the office of my beloved professor Concepcion D. Dadufalza (CDD) who, together with Franz, later introduced my first collection of poems, *Fugitive Emphasis* (a special issue of *The Diliman Review*, April 1973). UP President Carlos P. Romulo (CPR) had persuaded the Rockefeller Foundation to expand its support for faculty development and provide the arts and sciences faculty an office building. (In 1962, I worked as student assistant in CPR’s office at Quezon Hall; my immediate superior was his fearsome executive secretary, Iluminada Panlilio, who expected me to know at any time the whereabouts of papers that went in and out of the office.)

I am the last, perhaps, of the English faculty of the ‘60s, though Amel Bonifacio is still with us in Likhaan: Institute of Creative Writing (ICW). I retired in 2004 but continue to teach as university professor emeritus, usually a poetry workshop course. I keep many grateful memories of my FC colleagues, including the much younger generation. My undergraduate mentors moved me to my life’s calling by their dedication to teaching and creative work, their commitment to critical thinking, their passion for literary excellence. All were exacting, and a few “terrors,” as students then bewailed whom they shook awake to clear thinking, fine writing: first among equals, CDD, Ludi Arvisu, Winnie Evangelista, Wilhelmina Ramas, Asuncion Albert, Damiana Eugenio; Leopoldo Yabes, Franz Arcellana, NVM, Felixberto Sta. Maria, Alex Hufana, Ric Demetillo (all in Elysium now); JD Constantino, Dan Rola, Thelma Kintanar, Ming Yap.

In our respective offices, we had precious time for reading, writing, checking papers, but anyone could just drop in. Oh, those welcome breaks! with Jing Hidalgo, Thelma Arambulo, Preachy Legasto, Butch Dalisay, Neil Garcia, Wendell Capili, Issy Reyes; my “angels” in the Creative Writing Center (CWC): Sandra Gonzalez, Ralph Galan, Andrea Pasion, Tara Sering, Paolo Manalo, Caroline Howard, Melissa Salva, Carla Pacis; and friends Krip, Greg and Lourdes Brillantes, Pepe Miranda from Chicago days... How often too I enjoyed hearty conversation with former mentors, CDD, Ludi, and Winnie, on topics of interest and sundry trivia — say, a controversy on academic freedom, or a movie, *Dr. Zhivago*, or an altercation between colleagues. Indeed, discussions in various Departments at FC sometimes turned incendiary, but the collegiality and respect for one another’s views and ideological commitments would in the end prevail.

A loosely organized *barangay* of former students since the ‘50s would often visit CDD at her cottage on campus, where sometimes the conversation would run late into the night; we would cheerily avow, “I too am a Karamazov!” In her office, Cesar Bacani, Jonathan Malicsi, and I would sometimes give willy-nilly our comments on her textbook, *Perceivings I & II: A Reader for College Freshman English in General Education* (1982). When she passed on, our *barangay* put together our essays about her into a book: *Who’s Afraid of Ching Dadufalza?* (2002). While Edna Manlapaz and I were working on the anthology, *Man of Earth* (1989), I would sometimes consult Prof. Yabes in his office, his private library open to me; always encouraging, he even gifted me with Rodolfo Dato’s *Filipino Poetry* (1924). In my aerogramme exchange with NVM while he was a professor at the University of California at Hayward, he would at times send me some of his own poems. He returned to UP Diliman campus in the late ‘80s; fire razed his cottage in 2005, but the family saved his poems, which enabled me to put together his poems since the ‘30s: *A Wanderer in the Night of the World* (2015).

Although a number of the University’s faculty were co-opted by the Marcos “conjugal dictatorship”, the FC became the haven of faculty and student activists organized into various protest groups. With Pepe Miranda, I joined *Sagupa* (*Samahan ng mga Guro sa Pilipinas*) and marched in protest rallies since the “Diliman commune” faced down Marcos’ soldiery behind their barricades on campus. (A furious professor even barged through, threatening to shoot; later, wrath students ravaged his FC office.) Many students and colleagues went underground or were imprisoned, tortured, slain, but UP, never intimidated, stood proud of its academic freedom during those oppressive years. I recall a day when a military officer, a UP High classmate, dropped by my office; when I teased him about his civilian disguise, he gamely took out his .45 caliber and handed it to me since, as I remarked, I had never yet held one.

I shall long cherish many memories of events and gatherings of colleagues and friends in my heartland — the UP Writers’ Night of lusty merrymaking in the open ground where Napoleon Abueva’s Nine Muses meet; the lectures, literary readings,

theater rehearsals, and performances, and only last February, the UP Press' Parangal for National Artists, in Claro M. Recto Hall; in the early '80s, the Philippine Literary Arts Council and their friends' exhibit of chromatexts (illustrated poems in their own handwriting on cardboard or other media) on the wall along the sunlit side of Recto Hall, and only last year, the tribute to NVM in large posters of his life's works and events along the corridors of the English Department faculty's offices (all lost in the conflagration); the talks delivered by colleagues and exchange professors in the Arcellana Library; the meetings and *salo-salo* with friends in ICW; the lively conversation in the Faculty Canteen on the second floor.

How Memory unperturbed speaks in mind's stillness; its words emit images that sparkle in time's oblivion and make real again what has passed. No fire can put out the lights that constellate over my heart's land.