

Joven Obrero

**THE
GUMAMELA
IS STILL
RED**



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

TALES FROM THE FRONT, A collection of Revolutionary Stories and Poetry

Communists are known for our reliance on and understanding of theoretical knowledge. Our conception of education and self-education comes directly from Lenin's famous formula: "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." Yet, in our ongoing effort to acquire practical and theoretical knowledge, it may be necessary to engage with historical accounts of concrete struggles in which theory was both forged and applied in the sometimes murky complexity of real life. *Tales From the Front* aims to provide activists with concrete historical examples—both fictionalized and non-fiction—of those instances in which theory and practice mutually produced and intertwined with each other.

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*to Eva and to many unnamed friends
who took a revolutionary
into their fold*

Foreword

I am delighted and honored to write this foreword to Joven Obrero's *The Gumamela Is Still Red*, the sequel to her *Warriors, Poets and Friends*. These two books of poetry reflect the revolutionary struggle of the people for national and social liberation in Mindanao and the outstanding participation of the author, especially in educational and cultural work.

Like its antecedent, *The Gumamela Is Still Red* is mainly a book of poems but appropriately includes brief items in prose, such as narratives and correspondences, in order to contextualize the poems in historical, class, and personal terms from the revolutionary viewpoint of the proletariat, all toiling masses of workers and peasants and the Lumad communities.

I appreciate Obrero's use of the *gumamela*¹ as the metaphor for the revolutionary struggle of the people. It is a plant with large vibrant red flowers that grows abundantly on the mountains, hills, and plains of the Philippines. This key metaphor indicates the keen poetic imagination of the author who grasps what is meaningful and beautiful in what many other people may overlook.

The current book of poems of Obrero deserves to be read by all Filipino patriots and revolutionaries and by all foreign friends in solidarity with them. She is an excellent poet with the noblest sense of revolutionary vision and mission. Her poems are finely crafted to express in concrete terms and natural imagery the heroism, hard struggle, sacrifices, and aspirations of the communist cadres, Red fighters, and the masses.

Like I do, Obrero writes poetry in the tradition of Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Pablo Neruda, and Maya Daniel (Felix Salditos) who has a number of poems included in the book. Even in a few poems that appear to be roughhewn, Obrero suits the literal expressions to the actual direct language of the masses and to the need for spelling out the problems that afflict them.

Once you start to read the book, you are drawn in by her personal involvement and commitment to the revolutionary struggle, especially by her

¹ Hibiscus—Ed.

perseverance, despite tremendous odds and sacrifices, including the martyrdom of excellent cadres like her husband Ka Deo. Then you wish to know further about her self-fulfillment in the struggle and about other women in the struggle.

You find out about the self-fulfillment of Warmina and other women who join the tactical offensives after complaining that they are limited to nonmilitary tasks and demanding the equal right of women to participate in fighting. You appreciate the fact that the people's war offers everything to everyone who desires liberation from imperialism and all forms of reaction.

As you read further, you come to know and respect the man who never said no to any plea for help from the masses in need and to find ways of solving the problem. And for all his goodness and service to the people, the enemy would hate him and kill him. But his martyrdom becomes an inspiration in the most difficult times of walking and climbing on rough terrain in order to elude the enemy.

The book presents the plight of the tribes who have been repeatedly pushed out of their ancestral domain by the logging, mining, and plantation operations of the landgrabbing multinational corporations and their traitorous local partners. You share with the poet what she learns from the tribal chief Matigsalug. Thus, you admire the eagerness of the 19-year old Lumad to

join a guerrilla operation and you feel angry that the enemy would kill him.

Obrero is not confined to the fastnesses and communities in the countryside. The scale of her poetry keeps on widening. She knows the mass protests in the cities and celebrates them. She bewails the violence of the enemy in the streets. She is in touch with a friend in prison and with a child whose parents are missing and who is in the care of comrades. She criticizes gently the youth who are obsessed with selfies, posing as cute in Facebook and unmindful of the gravely sick social system and the need for social revolution.

She reflects on the Covid-19 quarantine and communicates with a slum dweller who represents the people most hard hit by the pandemic, the loss and jobs, the lack of *ayuda*² and the aggravation of the chronic crisis of the semicolonial and semifeudal ruling system, and the berserk tyranny, treason, butchery, and plunder under the Duterte regime. To demonstrate how well the revolutionaries learn from the masses, Obrero presents their conversation with the agriworkers. We learn how they lose their land to the multinational corporations and their local partners through lease and growers' agreements and how they are exploited through labor "cooperatives," which are in fact

² Help—Ed.

labor contracting agencies no different from the old cabo system.

Obrero indicates that the consequence of social investigation is the publication of the oppression and exploitation and, of course, the actions by the masses and the revolutionary forces to fight back. But twice in the book she finds the occasion to dream about genuine land reform and peasant cooperatives, in sharp contrast to the current suffering of the peasants and farm workers.

The book concludes that the gumamela is still red and urges the youth to rise up against the despotism of Duterte and the entire ruling system under which the broad masses of the people are suffering intolerable conditions of oppression and exploitation. Obrero sings odes to the Communist Party of the Philippines and to the protracted people's war. She does not mind the long wait so long as all efforts are exerted to make the long leap.

The protracted people's war has created the basis for accelerated people's war in stride with the worsening crisis of the semicolonial and feudal ruling system and that of the world capitalist system.

JOSE MA. SISON
UTRECHT, THE NETHERLANDS

Introduction

G*umamela* (or hibiscus) is a hardy, versatile plant that flowers throughout the year and blooms profusely. It is a complete flower with both the male and female reproductive structures—petals, sepals, and a receptacle and can be grown anywhere. With more than a hundred species, the gumamela is also a source of food and medicine. Its flowers are made into tea and are known for their red color, tart flavor, and vitamin C content.

In the Philippines, gumamela is more popularly used as poultice for boils and insect bites to reduce swelling and work like an antibiotic to kill bacteria and worms. Children use the sap to make bubbles. Among the mountain dwellers, the mature trunk of a gumamela plant is whittled and made into *balitang*, a strong and malleable stick, where the *duyan* or hanging bed is hinged. The gumamela

stick can bear heavy weights, doesn't break easily, and may be used for years.

I chose the Red Gumamela as a symbol of the beauty, usefulness and enduring strength of the People's War in the Philippines—a war that we have fought for more than half a century against the most vicious and powerful enemy in the world. It is Red because it symbolizes the communist spirit of our revolutionaries—their fierce loyalty to the Party and the working classes, and their unequivocal dedication to the revolution in the face of so many odds.

Written as a personal, biographical narrative, *The Gumamela Is Still Red* tells of guerrilla life in Mindanao and of the revolutionaries who people it—as culled from their stories, letters, poems, and songs. While it is a very incomplete picture of the People's War, this book serves as a manifesto of our long-held dream, a dream that will never fade through the test of time, typhoons, pandemics, and the relentless onslaught of imperialism and its puppet regimes.

The Gumamela Is Still Red is a book of affirmation and hope for all freedom-loving Filipinos to never flinch in their commitment to serve the people. It is especially dedicated to our young comrades working in the cities to remind them of the difficult and happy life that awaits them in the vast, towering countryside. To them I say, leave all your

burdens and comforts aside, and be as beautiful,
as useful, as all-enduring as the Red Gumamela—

*Your roots are imbedded in these mountains
Your petals are red, red as the blood of history
Your seeds are everywhere, ardent and alive
Irrepressible as the people. . . invincible with hope.*

KA JOVEN OBRERO

Chapter 1

This Love

*“stand up with me
and let us go off together
to fight face to face
against the devil’s webs,
against the system that distributes hunger
against organized misery.”*

PABLO NERUDA, *THE FLAG*

Why the Mountains?

Many people, including my nephews and nieces, have been asking me why I chose to be in the mountains, living the difficult and dangerous life of a guerrilla—when I could be in the city with the amenities of modern living. And I would tell them, “my life is here, among the peasants and comrades. . .”

“But why?” they’d ask again. And I would try to explain what it is about the People’s War that is so arduous yet so fulfilling I could never exchange it for any other life.

Thus, by way of explanation, I wrote this little book of poems and vignettes—some flashes of insight into the most endearing moments of mountain life. It is really not much of an explanation and can’t do justice to the intricate and vital tapestry of the war and why the Filipino masses have embraced it as their very own. For more than half a century, the People’s War has existed and endured in our islands—it is the longest-running national liberation movement in the world and all I could do is try to cover an infinitesimal fraction of this very great collective endeavor.

The people of the mountains who have taken up arms, they who have been constantly vilified, attacked, imprisoned, tortured, criminalized, blamed for all the bad events—they are the unknown heroes of our history. To write about

them in this book, to know the great things they are doing is an experience in itself. Not every writer is given the opportunity to get to know the revolutionary family of peasants, workers, teachers, warriors, communists—the direct participants of the struggle who are changing the landscape of our society.

Perhaps, I should start from the very beginning.

In the 1980s I went to the mountains. At first, it was really just for the fun of it—a yearning for landscapes. I was into photography then and was crazy about the geometric patterns of land and soil plowed consistently along the slopes, or a rice field with the shadow of a peasant at work. I thought it was just the “artist” in me trying to get the feel of things fresh and warm—away from the suffocating climate of Martial Law. Oh, yes, my brother was still in jail then. He was there for being an activist and from what I knew, he was heavily tortured during his first few weeks in detention. Truth to tell, I didn’t want to think about what he was going through. At that time, I couldn’t really place the connection between him and the picture framed so perfectly in the camera. For me then, everything was just for fun.

Then I met Deo. This guy was a singer and played the guitar. But he didn’t talk much. He was so quiet and so persistently asking me to sing with him. I would tell him no, I’m *sintonado* (out-of-tune), but he just kept on urging me so I could find

my voice. I've never met a man so beautiful and so perfect in the way he sang "*Babaeng Walang Kibo*"³ and, naturally, I fell in love with him. He was like the soul of the mountains who rose high up in the air, reminding me of those indefinable things I was searching for, things I wanted to find but couldn't in the daily grind of the office where I used to work as a government employee.

On ordinary days, Deo was even more dazzling and dynamic as I watched him listening and talking with the comrades or laughing with them over some nonsensical things. So, this is what an NPA commander looked like, I said to myself, just a guy who sang songs and laughed a lot. But no. The way he gave attention to detail, how he explained the physical and social structure of the mass base, how he clarified the questions about the war and why we had to be in the barrios, convinced me there was more to this man than the first impression I had of him.

And the comrades? They, too, were in some ways like Deo. These motley group of young mountain people had an air of joy and quiet resolve about them that gave me that sense of strength and assurance I had never known before—I always wanted to be with them. They seemed to be the most enabled people in the world, whose commit-

³ *Babaeng Walang Kibo (Woman Without a Voice)*—a song that urges the women to stand up for their rights.

ment and dedication made mince of the cruelties of the dictatorship. With them, I knew that nothing would ever be impossible.

Most of them were unschooled, some reached only the third grade, but they taught me a lot. First, they taught me how to traverse the steep trails, cross the rushing rivers, build a fire, cook, wash my clothes, wake up early, and rejoice in a full day's work of guerrilla life. The collectiveness of doing things together taught me the discipline that I would cherish and practice the rest of my life.

Most importantly, they taught me how to listen to people and find a home among the peasants and Lumad who told us about their life when big business came to take their lands away from them. From their stories I learned the true history of our dwindling forests, the theft of our minerals, the appropriation of ancestral lands through a system of deceit that went with projects called "development." And the bloodshed—ah, these were all over the bitter chapters of their narrative. Yet, they endured, and fought, and are still fighting.

Their singular dedication to hold on to their lands and their tenacity to live a communal life despite the most discriminatory laws imposed on them (first, by the colonialists then by the landlord-bureaucrats) gave me an insight into the historical inequities of our oppressed, colonial life. Then, I knew why the poor rose up against the rich.

Listening to them made me think of my father. My father, too, was a farmer. His hands were as brown and calloused as the peasants'. He was not unlike them, the one who worked so faithfully in the rice fields and lived a life of service not only for his children, but for his neighbors as well. He was a *masa*,⁴ like them, like these people who welcomed us in their homes and gave us food to eat and guarded us from the enemy.

Having made this palpable connection, the war then became a personal thing for me. Like I was fighting for my father and the peasants of the world, and for Deo who personified the beautiful and valuable in life. And what is more valuable than to be part of the great undertaking, of standing and fighting for what is just—to create a truly progressive and compassionate society—to even lay down one's life for a friend?

And the Red fighters who have laid down their lives for the people, are they not the bravest and greatest of heroes? Paking, Parago, Benjie, Toklai, Bokong, Udong, Flor, Vic, Yenyen, Val, Boy, Luis, Brod, Dondi, Deo, Mars. . . and thousands of others. . . their lives signify an indelible mark in our revolutionary history; their principles will live forever.

These days I have since redefined my happiness to mean having facilitated an assessment of a

⁴ Mass—Ed.

peasant mass movement, given a lecture on Philippine history to a guerrilla platoon, or planted fruit trees with the production unit in a guerrilla zone. The exquisite landscape I was so keen to photograph then has been taken over by images of the people's armed resistance—bloody but necessary, absolutely necessary, if we are to really cure ourselves of this colonial malady that has burdened and debilitated us for hundreds of years.

And I so love the mountain still, its myriad trails and the challenge of altitude that dares me to work and live in the direst of circumstances, as now, under a desperately fascist regime. You could say that after all these years I am still a dreamer, a happy revolutionary whose faith and hope in the masses is as strong as when I first met Deo, many years ago. That dream has taken on roots and bloomed to withstand the test of time and sacrifice.

The bombs and drones may be here, but the mountains will certainly not disappear. They will remain as the most enduring witness to the People's War. They will have a place for everyone and anyone who dares to defy the vicious enemies of the people and stand for what is good and just.

And they who ask, the curious ones—the millennials and young students, the comrades who choose to stay in the comfort of their offices, and even our colleagues of the first quarter storm whose memory of their youthful ideals may be

fading—hopefully they will truly understand what it is I'm trying to say.

It is my deepest wish that, someday, you'll dare to scale the heights and conquer the rivers with all the *kasamas*⁵ who braved this side of the People's War. A fulfilling life awaits you here. In this struggle—no one is ever too young, too old, too early, or too late.

The Red gumamela says, *MAKIBAKA, HUWAG MATAKOT!*⁶

⁵ Comrades—Ed.

⁶ Fight! Fear Not!

Ode to a Rifle

*You sit under the tree in dignified silence
With nary a word that portents the day
Your butt is clean and shiny, oblivious of
The dangers that lie ahead as I sling you
On my shoulders, heavy with the weight
Of a great responsibility. I know, they have
Warned me against you—those god-fearing men
Who said change can only come from the heart
Not from arms, that a better life awaits us
In another time, to suffer and accept our fate of
Lands seized, homes burned, children poisoned
With lies and the beatings of an old despot.
And when we could no longer hold our sorrow,
When darkness shrouded our lives,
It was when we adopted you as our very own.
You are our last resort, the hope of
A beleaguered people. For when you sing,
When I touch the soft spot of your heart
The enemy cries out in fear, the center breaks.
Then shall I hold you firmly, lovingly in my arms and
Teach you the ways of the Red warrior.
You shall be with us, with the people of these lands
Protector, faithful friend and equalizer
Who will trigger the birth of a new nation.*

Confessions of a (Revolutionary) Ghost Writer

“To take such an attitude is to seek truth from facts. ‘Facts’ are all the things that exist objectively, ‘truth’ means their internal relations, that is, the laws governing them, and ‘to seek’ means to study.”

MAO ZEDONG, “REFORM OUR STUDY”⁷

The first time I wrote a political statement it took me eleven drafts and half a pad of yellow paper before I finally took courage to submit it to our editors. Then I had to make another rewrite before sending it to the press. I remember it was a statement about the four army men who were taken as prisoners of war (POWs) in an encounter somewhere in remote NDF territory. The prisoners, who were conducting a military operation in the hinterlands, lost their way and were accosted by the *Milbay* (*Milisyang Bayan*),⁸ who turned them over to one of our guerrilla units.

The problem was, I just didn’t know how to go about it. The facts were there, clearly reported by the *Milbay*, but how does one incorporate those data into a statement? How to narrate an account,

⁷ *Selected Works*, vol. 3 (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2021), 12.

⁸ People’s militia

a small but significant event that would capture the true spirit of the People's Army? I thought I knew, but I realized I still had so much to learn and understand to be able to put fire and substance into the statement, and at the same time, stick to the facts with neither embellishment nor distortion.

Fortunately for me, the prisoners themselves unraveled their condition that would make for a very candid description of life in a guerrilla front. They were married men, in their early thirties, of mostly peasant stock and their worries for their families were common concerns which the Red fighters easily understood. In no time at all, they were exchanging jokes with the comrades and even joining the daily group discussion of the squad. In the "*talakayang buhay*" (sharing of one's history) they would relate about the existing "echelon of privilege" in their battalion, how supplies and booty were apportioned according to the whims of their superior.

"It's different here," they would say, commenting on how the officers joined the ranks of the soldiers, eating the same food, doing production work, and talking with the people like any ordinary member of the platoon. They were especially impressed with the camaraderie among the Red warriors and the iron discipline that made them essentially different from the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines). The prisoners were most

impressed by how the comrades worked on the land, and how the peasants treated them as part of their family.

After about a month, on the day of their release, a pact was formed, duly signed by the prisoners, stating that they would never again join a military operation that would harm the people, nor engage in activities like torture, *dukot* (forced disappearance), or extrajudicial killing.

But of course, I couldn't write all these—to protect the POWs themselves from the punishment and administrative charges that awaited them when they would have to face the AFP's high command. I wasn't sure they would stick to the agreement but my sense of responsibility dictated I shouldn't divulge what actually transpired while they were in captivity. They were enemy soldiers, yes, but they had also become friends, however fleeting, and had become part of the people, part of the subject forces of the revolution.

In the process of writing, we had to have a lively discussion with our editors on class analysis and why it was very important for writers to identify friends and enemies and even set a definite description of each—reliable or unreliable, strategic or tactical, genuine or false. I didn't understand this at first. To my mind, truth is the truth that must be written, no matter who you are, or to what class you belong. I was a disciple of what they called “objective journalism.”

But from whose point of view should we be writing? From the masses. Of course I knew it should be from the masses—but only in a superficial way, like some amorphous tenet that was mostly contained in our readings on Party education. It wasn't until I was actually doing mass work among the poor peasants that I began to understand what “point of view” meant. Mass work gave me a sense of direction in the most ordinary and mundane concerns of the masses. And I am proud to say I could write about food, hunger, land, school, family, debts, rent, oppression, etc., without getting lost—the people always occupied front page.

To write in the “language of the masses” and “for the masses” was a responsibility for every revolutionary writer, which, for me, implied a lot of things. First I had to put my pride aside, to free myself of the hubris and clear away the baggage that burdened me.

“Forget yourself and go to the people. Listen. Observe. Seek the truth from facts”—mantras that actually helped me to understand and synthesize things more deeply. And I had to relinquish the author's ultimate pride of writing one's byline, of being known in the world of writers. It was enough for me to be writing for the struggle and humbly listen to what others had to say. Of course, I was in the company of my collective—well-meaning

people who critiqued my writings and greatly improved my work.

And I needed a lot of practice, because writing is a battleground. In a regime that relentlessly preys on the people for the enemy's unholy ends, where the mass media and the Internet is controlled by a very devious ruling class—it takes a lot of guts to stand for the masses, and be able to express what it is they want to say, or cannot say. One must be ready to be called all kinds of bad names, maligned, demonized, arrested, or even killed if one takes the unequivocal position of siding with the people, the direct participants of the revolution.

I can't say I'm always a hundred percent ready and there are times when I do feel afraid. Afraid that I may be getting out of tangent, of not getting the picture, and being lax with my studies. But I do try, I try very hard to meet the people's expectation and serve them to the best of my ability. This is my mandate, I shall always do my best to live up to it—even if it takes eleven drafts or more.

Viewpoint

*What is the People's War?
But faith in the strength of
Those who nurture the land
And invoke green buds to grow
So that food may be served,
For all to eat, infinitely generous
Their open hands are for everyone,
Even landlords (who never worked)
Have their fill to their heart's content.
But how is it that they who
Produce the food have so little?
Hunger stalks them like a cold flame
They know neither beauty nor peace:
But the misery of nameless heroes.
What is the People's War?
But faith in the strength of
Those who spend their days
Making everything for us—
What we wear, where we live,
Every tool and instrument we use
Are made by their unceasing work
And by the wisdom of their hands:
Nature is transformed to serve our needs.*

*How great is their collective strength!
Like a multitude of roots,
The springwater that never dries-up
I am humbled by their self-giving
And have no other wish but
To be among them, creator of things
And stand with them in this war.
The masses will be our strength
We have unshakable faith in them
They will change the world
And bring beauty and peace.*

Parents who work as full-time guerrillas try their best to constantly communicate with their children. In this letter, a mother describes her days in the guerrilla zone to make her child understand the stony road she's taken as part of her commitment towards building a happy future for the upcoming generation.

Dearest Child

It has been ages since I wrote you a letter; I certainly hope this finds you and your friend in the very best of health. I've missed you both a lot. I've wanted to call you on the phone but voice prints are so much more indelible and I didn't want to put you at risk. As you know, there are "mad, rabid dogs" going around here and can't let our defenses down, not even for a moment.

We have become quite mobile, more mobile than before and it has given me a chance to know the countryside more. I am surprised to discover the hidden paths and alleyways of these mountains. There are so many crisscrossing trails—I tend to get lost. Never been good at directions. The peasant association has been so good and kind to us. At any time of the day there is a person to assist and guide us. They are quite ingenious in both land and waters. Even at night, they know where to go, how to navigate the lakes and rivers.

Once, during an enemy operation, we had to rely solely on the masses to bring us to safety, to the next community; and from that community to another community. Horses, carabaos, sleds, boats, and rafts were ready. And guides. Some were women. Their organization is amazing!

Of course, everything was done under the cover of night because of the air strikes. But for the smallest beam of light, the artillery man would shell us. He wasn't so accurate, though. Nobody was hit. The nearest he could do was the riverbank while we were on the boat. Which was scary of course, like thunder coming in on us and I thought we'd be killed.

Strangely, after that incident, I became a little less frightened of bombs and cannons. It made me think that people were faster and wiser and, in many ways, guerrilla warfare is so much more attuned to our terrain than the enemy's killing machines.

We have also adapted to our territories well, so we know exactly where to go. At night we walked. During the day we rested and conducted mass work in the nearby communities. Come to think of it, this is not unlike the dark days of Martial Law under the Marcos dictatorship. But it is more complicated now. The military uses all kinds of *psywar* to instill fear and pin the people to submission.

The people bow to them, seemingly obedient, but of course they always tell us what's happening.

They have cellphones (even the poor peasants) and we have devised a secret language that only the two of us can understand. This is perhaps why a military man gets so nervous when he sees a peasant with a cellphone. He knows there is danger lurking there in a simple text message.

One can't underestimate the enemy, though. They have taken so many mass leaders, murdered in cold blood, or imprisoned, or abducted, never to be heard of again. They were innocent civilians. Your Lolo Tibong and Inday Paula were taken by the army right in their farm. This happened in December. It is now June and we've got no word at all. People say they were shot and thrown to the nearby sea. I hate to think of it, but I know the enemy is capable of such brutality. Killing innocent people should never be part of this war, of any war.

As for me, everything has been simplified—the enemy or the people? And I choose the people—those “who have nothing to lose but their chains” and are fighting for total, unequivocal change. It is a demanding life, yes, but it is definitely good to defy a vicious and corrupt puppet regime and sow the seeds of liberation—a process that takes time but eventually will benefit our children and grandchildren.

I think of you when I think of the good things. Having you in the midst of this war has given me that special courage to stand up for “all the things

that matter in life”—and find joy and happiness in being a member of this revolutionary family, the family that is soon filling up our mountains, towns, and cities. I know it is taking a long time, but with our hands joined, we shall work to efface the old order, do away with all its sins and viciousness and build a new house—a house made of the strongest material.

I have absolute faith in the power of our family, and the young people of the revolution are my greatest hope. Not to worry about me then, Child. I am fine where I am, in the company of the very best sons and daughters of our mountains. They will always remind me of the good things in store for us, in store for the poor people of our land.

Do take care now, dearest Child. Take care of your friend, and take care of each other. Be good always. And remember, we love you very much!

Serve the People,

NANAY

This Love

*He spoke the language of the mountains
Of the wind that told the stories of trees
And how the land lay before us: a base
To anchor our deepest longings
Rooted among those who have
Nurtured the land and waited
Anxiously for the crops to grow.
Year after year we honed our hopes
Like school children who walked
The distant hills, eager to learn.*

*I can only think of you and wonder
How you are—are you safe, are you warm
Do you have enough food, and
What about the walks and thorns
That prick the inside of our soles?
And the rushing rivers that urge us
To move quickly, uncontrollable current—
But always triumphant at the other end
Because there were always hands
To help us cross this wild continent.*

*In seasons of self-giving, time flies
Like the wind that carries all the cool
Blessings of trees, sky, stones and
As we wait for sunrise, I think of you
I think of this love that never ends
Rooted from dawn to dusk, with
Longings that have withstood
The test of life, drenched in blood,
Bones broken, fists burned to a pulp
But never giving up. This love
Will always be here, This love.*

Chapter 2

Nice People Around

*On any day or any night,
We can tickle your weak point
To lure you into a grand reception
Along the most perilous routes
Or to hit another point beyond your guess.*

JOSE MA SISON, *WELCOME THE UNWELCOME*⁹

⁹ Available online: <https://www.josemariasison.eu/welcome-the-unwelcome/>.

The Eight Points of Attention

*To be able to serve the people well
We follow the eight points of attention
It's the norm that's been our mark
That endears us to the masses*

*To speak the truth and with respect
Because our words spell who we are,
We do not lie, and we speak politely
We are the Nice People Around.*

*To pay fairly for what we buy
And buy for what we really need
We try to live as simply as we can
We are the Nice People Around.*

*To return what we have borrowed
Big or small, we don't forget
For people's rights, we show respect
We are the Nice People Around.*

*To mend for what's been broken
A tool, a road, a nation on its throes
We put together to make them well
We are the Nice People Around.*

To utter no bad words, to the masses
We sing the sweetest songs and
Pay homage to them who make history
We are the Nice People Around

To never damage plants and crops
And respect the peasants who
For years have struggled for the land
We are the Nice People Around

To respect and love the women
To never harm nor exploit them
For they are an integral part of us
We are the Nice People Around

And last but not the least:
To never harm the captives
Befriend the POWs; treat them right
We are the Nice People Around.

The enemy has called us many names
But our true name has stuck,
No one can take it away from us
The masses simply call us
“Nice People Around.”

Warmina and the Women's Squad

"This Congress of the women's section of the workers' army has a special significance . . . There can be no socialist revolution unless very many working women take a big part in it."

V. I. LENIN, "SPEECH AT THE FIRST ALL-RUSSIA CONGRESS OF WORKING WOMEN"¹⁰

"But why are we always left behind with the backpacks and supplies? Why can't we be in the tactical offensive? What is this for?" pointing to their armalites, the female comrades were complaining for the inaction that seemed to be their lot.

"You want to join the tactical offensive?" the political officer had this doubtful look on his face.

"Of course! What is this for?" again pointing to her rifle. "We've been bringing this since, but we've never been involved in the actual fighting." Ka Warmina, the head of the group tried to explain in a soft, determined voice.

"Oh, you really want to join?" the PO (political officer) asked again.

"Yes, of course! Otherwise we will not grow!"

"You really want to join. And you seem to imply that it is now the command that's wanting. . ." The

¹⁰ *Collected Works*, vol. 28 (Progress Publishers, Moscow, vol. 28, 1974).

PO replied, this time in a more purposeful, if not aggrieved tone.

“It’s not that, Kas. But you know, we girls, we’ve been talking and we thought, I mean, we are of one mind that we could also be in the tactical offensive, with you, with all the kasamas. . . We don’t want to be left behind with the backpack while you go to war.”

“That’s fine then. You will join, Kasama.” It was now the Commanding Officer who replied, “because definitely we also want you to grow, not just in the kitchen but in the battlefield as well.”

“Yes!” the girls replied all at once. Not everybody though.

During the committee meeting, all the boys expressed their refusal to the women’s request. Each one had his reason.

“But you can’t be serious! This is just a lot of talk! You can’t even carry a Garand rifle. . .”

“Of course, we can. You just don’t give us the chance,” the women retorted.

“This is your pride getting in the way.”

“Pride? Of course it is! But this is what we call revolutionary pride!” Warmina could not hide the anger in her voice.

One of the older comrades tried to placate her. “No, Kas, don’t get us wrong. You know, you are so few. So precious. We can’t put you at so much risk.”

“It is because we love you!” Ka Mark, a young comrade spoke with so much emphasis, words and saliva came out all at once.

Everybody laughed. The tension was averted.

That afternoon the wargames started. It was to be an attack on one of the more abusive CAFGU¹¹ detachments. The mass organization had reported the continuing harassment from the said detachment, including an attempted rape of one of the schoolchildren.

The women, five of them, were deployed in the assault team. Three were to join the skirmishers. And another five were deployed as part of the main body.

The boys were still not convinced. To them, it was an irregularity, a defiance of long-held practice. . . Women must be protected. They must not be exposed to so much risk. It was enough, or more than enough that they joined the People’s Army. They could be medics and teachers and organizers, but not fighters. Not combatants.

Some of the women also thought this, but since they had already started, there was no going back.

¹¹ Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU)—an irregular auxiliary force of the Armed Forces of the Philippines with current strength of 61,200. CAFGUs are notorious for their abuses and human rights violations and are hated by the people. It was first organized by the Corazon Aquino regime in the all-out-war against the revolutionary forces.

They were already into the plan, and strict compliance must be followed.

Many, however, were skeptical. Could they move fast? Could they withstand the sacrifice? Most importantly, could they keep a secret?

Unfortunately, on the day of the attack, the situation changed. The CAFGUs were suddenly called to report to the Brigade Command and a checkpoint was set up. It was a different scenario that called for another tactic, so the whole plan had to be changed.

“We still want to be part of the next TO,” Ka Warmina told the command. “*Sayang naman*, we have practiced so much in the wargames. We are ready to fight.”¹²

And so they did. The same CAFGU detachment was attacked and the women who were in the assault team played a pivotal role, which garnered five high-powered rifles for the platoon. More importantly, the detachment was dismantled and the residents were so grateful, they slaughtered a pig in celebration.

As for Warmina and the women squad—they joined many tactical offensives after that. Since then, women warriors became an intrinsic part of the combat units in the base areas of Pantaron, Diwata, Tanggali, Daguma, and other guerilla fronts of Mindanao.

¹² It's a pity—Ed.

Although most of the women comrades still preferred to work as medics, community organizers and political instructors, they were also tasked to participate in the tactical offensives, side by side with the male comrades. *Women are capable of being combatants. Women are an integral part of the revolution.* We always reminded ourselves and tried to live accordingly.

Of course, it wasn't all that easy. Many still believed that girls were meant for the home, for bearing and rearing children, and must be protected from the vagaries and tribulations of the war. Even guerrillas (men and women alike, who mostly came from the peasant class) still held on to the patriarchal stereotype.

But we are changing all that. The Party is changing all that. Not everything all at once, but slowly and consciously, we try to dismantle the feudal, patriarchal norms that have burdened us for so long. We know that the woman's place is in the revolution as much as it is in the home, and we try to live by this principle in the practical day to day work in the front.

This happened years ago, during the early days in the guerrilla zone, but I will always remember Ka Warmina and the part she played in setting up a women's squad of the People's Army.

Birth

*I was born here, under the trees
Nurtured by the wisdom of the masses
And the inherent vigilance of warriors.
They taught me how to climb
the steep mountain trails,
To feel the wind and use my eyes, and
To never get lost in the maze of events.*

*“Concrete analysis of concrete conditions”
They always said. I tried to understand
But couldn’t. I was deaf and blind—
Steeped in grammar and metaphysics.
Then, one day, “Kablaaaaaaaam! Prrrrraak!”
“Run for cover!” the command says
“Alas dose! Alas tres!”¹³ I now forget my direction
Where are we going? I run to the clump of trees
“No, not there Kas! Here, take my hand.”
“Give me your pack, hold on, don’t panic.”
I hand him my life, my adrenaline
Never stops pumping, I have wings!*

*The gunfire is in my heartbeat
And we are walking running walking
When will this walking ever stop?
When will these hills ever end?
Where are my limbs my feet my body?
Why are we always walking?*

¹³ Twelve o’clock! Three o’clock!—Ed.

*“Here, we stop,” the command says.
They watch for any movement
And hone their ears. I am too tired to think
Or hear. But it must be safe.
They bring out the duyan¹⁴ and
Ever so gently, I let my limbs rest.
Aaah, the peace and quiet.
What a comfort to be with the Red warriors,
To know that we are safe
In the company of the very brave,
And yes, with concrete analysis.*

¹⁴ Hammock made of cloth, tied with a rope and hinged between two trees.

Post Script to a Visit

Welcome, Kasama!

I embrace you with my wizened arms and you feel strong and young and warm. So what should I tell you? What can we talk about? About the camp? The comrades? The surrounding communities? Ah, but there are too many things to tell. I think you're sleepy now and must be very tired from the long walk. For tonight you don't have to think of security because we have sentries and there's our Milisya who's always on alert. But you didn't bring a *malong*?¹⁵ It's cold here at night. Here's a blanket. You smile your thanks and instantly you fall asleep like a small log dropping on the *tarima*.¹⁶

Early morning. . . Footsteps. . . Marching feet. . . 1, 2, 3, 4. 1, 2, 3, 4. Already, you are up and about, in the platoon's morning exercise. How good to see you mix so easily with everybody, like you've done this all your life! I can see you've prepared well for this visit. Must have practiced jogging every day. Your quick limbs match the movement of the platoon—nimble as a peasant girl. . . Everybody is smiling now, watching you try to do the pushups. You break into laughter just as the sun turns violet, then a hazy red. It is a bright day for a bright visitor.

¹⁵ Cloth used as blanket.

¹⁶ Cot made from sacks.

We walk towards the nearby slope. Undulating leaves of corn greet your eyes. “You mean the comrades planted all these?” You sweep your arms gently to encompass the platoon’s production work. “Wow. You can feed an entire barangay! It’s really a production army!” You express appreciation so generously and I smile, pleased with the compliment. The sun is warm on our heads and we walk back to the camp.

You look around you, everybody is busy. So this is it! This is how an office in the mountains looks like. A kitchen. A conference hall. A comfort room. A small garden with seedbeds. A bodega for supplies. A big pit for biodegradable waste. Another pit for plastics. Watch tower for sentries. A field. A small pathway that leads to the river. Rows of tents. A clinic. A generator. Plastic containers for storing rain water. It is a self-reliant, moveable community in the deep green foliage of the mountain, under a multitude of trees. And always, there are people going about their tasks like busy, happy ants. You are visibly impressed. You keep on smiling and pointing to the little innovations. “Look, you even have a bakeshop—a tin can oven, for baking bread. It is a complete community!”

Those were the days of summer. We laughed a lot and talked a lot and did a workshop for the peasant and Lumad warriors who wrote their songs and stories. You also translated a poem and told us about yourself. Your life in the university. The problems of your

collective. You raged about the utter misdirection of living a bourgeois life in an age of turmoil and want. But you also spoke about your ailing grandmother, the one who nurtured you since when you were small. And the appeal of higher studies, the academe that offered another world.

Then we went to the barrio to do mass work—and for you it was a great discovery, one that you called “a gold find.” You didn’t expect such a loving, caring community existed. This was not the primitive society that you read about in books, but a vibrant community where land was tilled collectively and the harvest distributed fairly. You learned about their history and their tenacious fight to live in their own land. You noticed their unconditional love for their “hukbo”—the soldiers of the poor—who defended them and gave them hope.

“This is how I want to live,” you said wistfully. “But am I asking for the moon?” The leaves of trees seemed to nod their heads, but your eyes were somewhere else.

“Stay with us, Kasama. We need you. The masses need you. And there is so much work up here,” I replied—a mother wishing all the best for her child.

You smiled that sweet enigmatic smile. “Yes, I will. Just wait a bit. I have to say goodbye to Lola and make her understand,” you said, so simply, so matter-of-factly, I knew you would soon be back, not as visitor anymore but as a bona fide resident of the mountains.

But the weather changes. A year has passed, then another. It is summer again but the military

operation has not waned. There are drones and there are airstrikes. Nobody is hit, though, but for a *carabao* which couldn't run fast enough.¹⁷ A regiment of enemy soldiers are deployed but they don't dare to penetrate the hinterlands. I think they are afraid.

We are in the mobile mode once again. We have done away with the camp and live according to the whims of a vicious enemy, one that obliges us to follow the guerrilla life: walk, climb, cross river, climb again, look to right and left, watch sky for drones, organize, teach, wait, wait, standby, kab-laaaaaam! The sound reverberates like thunder, like earthquake, and those puny mortals in uniform disperse and move away. They cannot seem to penetrate our bases. It is a respite for us, but only for a while. Very soon we shall move again to higher, safer ground.

I hear you're planning to visit us again. You are so welcome to join us in this movable feast! Your friends here await you, await your laughter, your curiosity, your knowledge of language and history, your irrepressible joy. And ah, what a life it would be to live in the heart of these mountains! To scale the heights and trek the winding, stony trails, in search of the beautiful, elusive summit with the Red warriors—what a life it would be!

¹⁷ Water buffalo—Ed.

To a Red Warrior

*I hunt for a sign of you
In this dark blue mountain
Where foliage meets with grass
Lying in wait, steady as a trigger
I hold my breath beside you
All senses alive, a bonfire burns
Suddenly I think I can make out
Your eyes, sharp as blade
Zeroing in on the target
Never flinching. You are whole
Exact, pure, never giving up
Precise as a well-oiled rifle
And so I shall go with you
All the way, with nary a cry
Beneath the leaves, all
Throughout the dark night
In this long war, steadfast
Till the highest mountaintop
I shall go with you.*

The Masses, Our Teachers

*And so I try to learn dialectics
From my worker friends:
The light and dark of our war
Time, distance, speed,
the mechanics of action and reaction
the priorities of deployment.
Will this be useful to the masses
Will this enhance the war?
What policies should we take
For the army and the party?
What seemed so important then
Is no longer needed,
The part and the whole
The particular and the universal
Everything seems enmeshed,
Sometimes we get confused.*

*What we have built so painstakingly
The enemy tries to dismantle
They poison us with false news
Rob our words and mimic our actions
And try to sow a rift among us.
The masses only laugh (in secret)
They know exactly what the devils want:
To derail our intent with little toys
That could make us deaf and blind
With so much claptrap in our minds,
And the rubbish of petty things.
When contradictions are at work
We must ask the masses then
for clarity and guidance
To unlearn what we have learned
And lead us to the mountain path
That would bring us to the heights.
In this war which has everything,
The masses are our teachers.*

This story was told to me just when I was having a fit of asthma and had some difficulty breathing. As the medic massaged my back, she narrated this incident, which made me smile and realize I'd probably live so long under the care of these most dedicated doctors—our medics.

Breathe!

“I . . . cannot. . . breathe! Help me!” The man had been shot. On his lower left shoulder. His shirt and a brown tattered cloth, was sticking to his skin where blood had dried up. He must have been about 30 years old, a peasant who lived in one of the more remote areas of Pantaron. His neighbors had to carry him for about an hour on a makeshift *duyan*, to reach our camp.

“We found him in his farm. He was shot by a CAFGU.” One of the men who carried him said.

“In a military operation?” we asked.

“No, just one CAFGU, his neighbor. He was shot with a carbine rifle. After they had an argument, a land conflict.”

“Breathe,” the patient tried to say, pointing to his chest with his hand. Were his lungs impaired? We couldn't know for sure. There were no x-rays and laboratories to tell us exactly what was wrong with him. But from his wound we could see his left

lung must have been injured. And he had difficulty breathing.

We've managed gunshot wounds before, but this would be the first time we were handling a case like this. Again we examined the patient. A gunshot wound on the lower part of his shoulder. An injured lung. A lung that could no longer pump air. And he could hardly breathe. He would surely die if we will not do anything about it.

"I guess this time we have to give him a chest tube. A traumatic pneumothorax. The hospital is still hours away. So we have to do it now." I said this matter-of-factly, trying hard not to sound nervous or unsure. In times like this, medics have to be on top of the situation.

"To save a life," I said to the young faces surrounding me. "We must save his life, he must breathe, no matter what."

I knew I had to overcome my hesitation with courage and to will my memory to remember all the details of our advanced medical training. Please don't die on me. Don't die on us, I prayed silently, to no one in particular. And then, the patient looked at me with such trust and understanding. It was like he heard me and he was trying to reassure me that everything would be all right.

Minutes or hours passed. I don't remember how long. It was just me, the medics, the patient and the operating table that existed in the world. Very soon the tube was intact. And yes, the patient

started to breathe! Very slowly, but very surely, he was breathing! Ah. How good and great. As he breathed, all my sweat came out—like joy breaking out from every pore of my body.

Then, we heard footsteps. Comrades were hurrying towards us. “There are soldiers near the river. We have to move him out, quick. There is no time to lose. It wasn’t a land conflict after all, but a military operation.” As they said this, they were already preparing the *duyan* that would serve as his temporary bed.

In a few minutes, we were all ready to go to the third station—a village with a barrio medical group ready to receive us. Three medics were with me to monitor his progress. It was good to see him sleeping peacefully and breathing.

The following day, when things had been cleared, we called a meeting to assess what happened, analyze the patient’s condition, and plan the next steps. Everybody was in high spirits. The masses were smiling and talking. “These are our doctors. We are doctors.” They were very proud to say. Even the patient was trying to smile, gratitude written on his emaciated face.

I said to the group, by way of summing up the whole incident, “for as long as we put our hearts to it, nothing can go wrong.”

“. . . And the lungs too!” a young medic replied. “Don’t forget the lungs!” And we all laughed.

Later, when the masses brought the patient to a hospital for post op treatment, the surgeon was very curious and wanted to find out just how the “doctors of the mountains” were able to operate on him and save his life.

The Whiff of Dreams

In our assessments

We tried to quantify everything—

All the joys and griefs a life could give:

A lover, a child, a POW befriended

Enemy patrols wiped out,

A hundred rifles seized.

Towns and provinces recovered

A people's court and justice served.

Party branches and a new government

The smell of ripening grains,

Schools, hospitals, clean water,

The wide smile of women and

Children running free.

Ah, the whiff of dreams

The fresh red flowers

The mountain breeze!

To live among the masses

Find freedom in the process.

But there were also deaths

To consider and griefs beyond recall.

Milette and Vergel and Toklai

Paking, Rajah and Dags

*Brave warriors who gave their lives
With nary a word of doubt or regret.*

*And that dashing comrade
who gifted me with child—
Was he not the greatest of heroes?
Should we be sad for them
who gave us life? For them who
taught and nurtured us?
Or should we think of death
as a mere leavetaking, a flow,
a deployment in a far off territory
a part of the great collective undertaking?*

Ah, the whiff of dreams
The fresh red flowers
The mountain breeze!
To live among the masses
Find freedom in the process.

Chapter 3

Monsoon Diaries

*“But the forest is still enchanted.
There is a new hymn in the wind;
There is a new magic in the dark green,
So the peasant folks say to friends
A single fighting spirit has taken over
To lure in and astonish the intruders.”*

JOSE MA SISON, *THE FOREST IS STILL
ENCHANTED*¹⁸

¹⁸ Available online: <https://www.josemariasison.eu/the-forest-is-still-enchanted/>.

Monsoon Poems

Maya Daniel

I had longed to meet him, this poet-artist who trekked the guerrilla bases of the Central Highlands—but in 2018, the state's death squad chose to snuff the life out of this precious comrade. Maya Daniel, wherever you are, know that we would always cherish you, cherish the great undertaking that you've so faithfully portrayed in your poetry and paintings and find kinship in the life of living so generously and joyfully with the people. Here I took the privilege of reprinting your poems, my favorites—that represent some of the most enduring experiences of guerrilla life.

1. on the changing political situation

*clouds gather fast
over the blue range of the forest
it's raining there
but we have to go*

*trees smite their branches
against the sky, no birds dare to fly
and the river starts to swell
but we have to go*

*the road is desolate, slippery
the wind is roaring and the bamboo*

*shafts are struggling like a wild beast
but we have to go*

*there is wind, and there is rain
blowing fast the change
we can't stay, there are things to do
we have to go.*

2. rainwalkers

*it's silent now this late afternoon,
the rain has subsided and
we are resting at tatay pidyo's
farm hut, having finished
work in the fields, helping him
clean the rice paddies. . .
thanks for the rain and the
collective labor of our
mutual aid teams—
fields are ready for sowing
and the rice seedlings wait
like sentries on the watch.
tomorrow we shall move
to safer grounds.
tonight we rest,
and untangle the fatigue
from our muscles and bones.
it's nice to know, today
we've done our task,
red warriors not only fight and*

*organize but must also plant—
the people's army
is a production army.*

3. we have to wake you up

*at 2 a.m. we have to wake you up
sit for a few seconds
quietly clear the tract
we have to go*

*two-hour sleep isn't enough
we have to go
and find a safer place to rest
before the first rays of the sun
strike the earth*

*we survived the earlier hours
the fierce fighting, the explosion
all's well with the red warriors.
folks in the nearby barrios
would take that fighting their story
and the place of encounter
their reference point along their pathways
a ballad to be sung for generations*

4. clearing the mists

*in the misty morning
it's cooler now in the forest
there is a resurgence of greens and*

*gone are the brown patches along hillsides
 after days of gentle rain. . .
 just last night, it rained again
 the leaves welcomed the drizzle
 gentle enough to whisk us wet, too,
 marching rainwalkers, bringing
 torches within our hearts
 the message of the changing season.
 today, the sun returns claiming the earth,
 rising bright, clearing all the mists
 we think sharply, as the sun
 graces the nascent morning skies
 before another rain comes again.*

5. time to study

*we march in quicker cadence
 to the nearest cluster of houses
 tucked between tall bamboo trees
 comrades are there waiting for us
 with farmers, their home and kids
 it's time to get some update
 and study the current situation
 time to assess where we had been
 and what tasks lie ahead of us.*

6. we have not withdrawn from the mountains

*i went through the pages of your poetry
 and read them in silence
 it was indeed, moving, your march,*

*a pioneering work in the early years
of building our guerrilla mass base
climbing endless slippery dales,
foggy valleys and hills, fording
perilous rivers, through labyrinths
of thickets and thorns: an ambush of
death lay in every winding route.*

*we have not withdrawn from the mountains
and your poem rides the wind that blow
comes to ponder: the road that seems
abandoned, forlorn in summertime
now grows green, abundant with flowers.
there are silent feet tracing the road
following the march at the edge of the forest
that surround the cities.*

“Kokak, Ka Yenyen!”

Everything in a flash. A door opening. Another door being forcibly opened. A shot. Volume fire. The sound of running steps. Shouting. Volume fire. Fire! The shots are coming from everywhere. Down, down! An arm pushes me down on the ground. It is Ka Yenyen beside me now. Crawling, we reach the fence. There is a trail of red. From there we crawl some more to where the comrades are positioned, trying to get us out as they pin down the enemy.

“My shoulder,” Ka Yenyen tries to touch his right shoulder with his left arm. It is full of blood. “My shoulder, Kas” he tells me, writhing in pain. “You can do it. You can do it. Will get you the medic.” I tell him, trying to hold him so he wouldn’t move so much.

I remember this is not the first time that Ka Yenyen was wounded. The first time was during an encounter where he was shot on his right leg, M-16. It was good that bullet didn’t reach his bones. He simply waited for the wound to heal and immediately came back to the front, because as he said, he couldn’t leave his squad for so long.

Our walk now seems to be taking so long. Away from the encounter, the path seems endless and steep in the mid-afternoon. The sun is hot and searing—it has the smell of blood and gunpowder. Drops of red continue to flow from Ka Yenyen’s

shoulder. The right side of his shirt is soaked in blood. We try to erase the drops blood on stones, erase all the telltale signs of our exit. I watch the sky; I hone my ears for any sound—no bomber planes as yet. On the next boulder, the comrades stop to rest. He is heavy, Ka Yenyen.

Better to move than rest, the carriers say. We move again, it is a steeper climb this time. The *duyan* sways to the rhythm of our breath. Careful not to bump the trees and shrubs! I glance at Ka Yenyen. His eyes are closed, he does not seem to be breathing. I touch his head, it is very hot and white against the blood on his shirt. Stay with us, I try to tell him but his eyes remain closed, it is as if he is dead.

At about 5 o'clock the sun comes down and a light breeze seems to calm the face of Ka Yenyen. I try to stay close to him, to give him some reassurance, but the medics ask me to give space. A little later he calls us. I can see he wants to say so many things but he can barely talk. His voice has gone hoarse. He calls us one by one. He calls our names. Then he calls me, "Titser Kokak," he says. Kokak was the name we invented for our literacy classes, to honor the frog that got out of the well and discovered the vastness of the sky.

Then he names his parents. His brothers and sisters. His voice has gone to a whisper, he has trouble breathing. "Long live the revolution. Long

live the comrades. Long live. . ." Then, very slowly he closes his eyes.

We couldn't do anything but nod and wipe our tears away for this brave comrade who gave his young life for the revolution. I had known him for so short a time but I would remember him and his heroism for as long as I live. I would remember him in all the literacy classes that I would teach, where the vast blue sky would always remind me of his clear, curious face, the youngest of my siblings. And softly I'd say, "Kokak, Ka Yenyen."

Drawing Lessons from the Storm

*When the typhoons struck
Some trees were uprooted,
Leaves and twigs were blown away
What remained was the skeleton of the forest
(seemingly dead) and a sky so naked
With not a single cloud to cover it.
But life was moving underneath
Roots that were firmly planted on the ground
were shooting up, sprouting,
Growing leaves and buds, daring the winds.
In no time the forest was breathing once again
Greener and stronger than before*

*So too, the People's War.
Nothing downs the masses, as
young comrades laugh at our mistakes,
they slip and fall and rise again,
they taunt the wind,
and race with the rushing waters.
They are not afraid to test their strength
and rise above their senses
To fully understand the weather.
They will thrive in whatever season and
draw lessons from the storm.*

A Tribute to the Man Who Never Said No

He was the quintessential giver—the man who didn't know how to say no. To all our myriad requests, he was the one who always had a practical solution to problems that arose in the front. From the most mundane like gasoline, post, driver, motorbike, car, truck, food, medicine, pocket money, to the most profound like giving up his comfortable job with the NGO to work as an organizer in the guerrilla zone.

When his eldest son was appointed as a member of the Front Committee, he sent the comrades ten kilos of newly harvested *malagkit* rice to celebrate,¹⁹ with a note of thanks for having a very dear person who “will now share my responsibility of serving the people.” Then, he sent a letter to his son to remind him to “always follow the guerrilla life with the grace and compassion of a true revolutionary, and to do his utmost best in any situation and never back down—because that is what communists do.”

He was not rich. He was just like any comrade who worked and lived among the masses, but he was rich in a way that always seemed to make things possible. He was not a superman either; but to me and to a lot of people, he was a magician who was able to conjure the most practical solution to

¹⁹ Sticky rice—Ed.

a problem. Or maybe it was because he put his genuine faith in the masses, and the masses always rose to the occasion. "We can! We can definitely do this!" He would say with so much animated confidence, everybody put his best foot forward.

One time, when a land problem arose in the barrio, it was from him that the peasants asked for advice what to do. They couldn't pay the loan on time and the landlord now had started to bring in machines that would convert the land into a banana plantation.

Dutifully, he listened, then summoned the landlord to talk him out of his project. The peasants were there and many others who had lost their land to the plantation. They were ready for a confrontation. Then, in the most engaging way, he talked about what the movement was doing with its land reform program. It was a heartwarming story that gave flesh and blood to the long struggle of the countryside, and of the peasants who have tilled the land for years, long before the landlords owned the land.

Hearing all these, the landlord nodded, began to understand, as if to say: *Why not give in to this man? Why not sacrifice a portion of his property for this movement that seems to have the blueprint for genuine change?* So the plan to convert the land was canceled and the peasants continued to farm their land and pay their debts.

For us, it was a lesson in alliance work, what they called a “win-win” solution. For the peasants, land was saved and a near tragedy was averted. And for the landlord? In his mind, he was still the generous patriarch who gave an ear and saved the peasants. Did he really understand our land reform? I don’t know. Maybe he did not. But most importantly, he continued to relate with us, to relate with the peasants and the comrade who tried his best to make him understand. He even provided the gas for the trucks that ferried the rallyists to Kidapawan during the most trying days of the drought, but which sadly ended in a massacre.

After that confrontation, the peasants would always seek this particular comrade for any problem or situation that arose. And the problems continued to flow, like water that never dried up in the wells: a girl who was run over by a big truck and the owners didn’t want to pay the hospital bills. A man who was beating his wife whenever he got drunk. A drug pusher who tried to get into the barangay. The frustrated rape of a high school teenager. The killing of an ice cream vendor. Conflict between siblings over their properties. Jealousy of wife who suspected her husband’s infidelity. Low prices of rubber and bananas. Debts. *Tongro* and other rice diseases. A lost carabao. Hospital bills. Conflict in the communal farm over work points. Corruption in the consumers’ coop. A military asset who was selling drugs. Missing funds from the *botica sa*

barangay.²⁰ Goats that destroyed a vegetable patch. Lockdown. Hunger. Unemployment. COVID-19.

Of course, he couldn't save everything. Probably not even ten percent of the cases presented were solved by him. In reality it was the masses themselves and their mass organization who tried to find ways to solve their problems. But having him listen to their problems was enough for them. His optimism was balm to all their troubles, like a definite guarantee that things will turn out well. He symbolized the mindfulness and hope that the revolutionary movement stands for.

He was so popular and so loved by the masses, the enemy wanted to kill him. For many years, a dragnet was set to capture him—"dead or alive"—but he always eluded them. The masses had a more superior mechanism so that he and his team could move around freely without getting caught, despite the constant military operations in his area. Way ahead in advance, a text message or a person himself would be there to tell him about enemy movement so that his team knew exactly which areas to evade and what roads and alleys to take.

But it is not a perfect world. During the pandemic, when he and his team were busy handing out vegetables and root crops to beleaguered communities, he was suddenly accosted by the enemy. He had no quarantine pass to show. And his face,

²⁰ Village-run pharmacy

bereft of any disguise but a face mask, was instantly recognized. Point blank, the enemy shot him dead. Then, they declared it was a shootout between the government forces and the “terrorists.”

But the masses knew too well the real story. For them, and for the thousands of barrio folks who knew this man, he would continue to be a source of inspiration and hope—their very own cherished magician.

Grief is hidden, but fervor grows in the hearts of the oppressed.

For Brod, in the Forest²¹

*There were no rituals,
No tears, no warm embraces.
We neither had the time nor strength
To witness your leavetaking,
Our most precious friend.
Distance forbade us to say farewell.
The hand of terror,
The malevolent breath
Of this enemy that decimates its own people,
Prevented us from reaching out.*

*Still, we remember mornings
That illumed the sincere folds of your face
As you dutifully yielded to your tasks,
As you gladly deciphered
The zeroing of a shot.
Earnest.
Precise.
Principled.
Resolute
As you were with the correctness
Of the elements of this bold endeavor we are
waging*

²¹. This poem by Eva Guerrero was written in honor of Vincent "Ka Brod" Estrada, a very dear friend.

*To realize the good life that we want for our
children.*

*How could you leave so soon?
Just a few more seconds and the rains
Would have stopped for sunlight
To come through.
How could you let the mad dogs dim your light?
It's beyond belief how lifelessness
Can come to the unwearied and persevering,
Like you.*

*Obstinate one, hay!
Allow us to take refuge in our grief.
It's not painless to say goodbye
To that kind, but headstrong voice
That expects no less than iron discipline
From the only army of the people.
But know that we understand
How you must have heeded
The edge of your strength
Not for comfort, but for the benefit
Of those who can still advance.*

*You knew this—
That this protracted war will outlive us.
You knew we were coming back for you,
But you must've already taken comfort
In the new blood that will continue—*

*When you closed your eyes
And your brave heart beat with the Earth
To rest,
In courage,
In peace—
Content with a life well-lived
From your early days with the youth
'Til your hair grew of dusk and dawn
With the toiling masses—
The workers, the peasantry
And the warriors of the people—
Even if, tomorrow, you won't see
The forest vines that, you told us,
Point to the East.*

*We'll soon emerge from our grief,
And move forward, yet again, dear one—
Reassured by your dignified hands
That quietly took pride in serving
Only the masses,
Touched by your commitment
To responsibility and sacrifice,
And stubborn as your resolve
Of the grand plan.*

*And as unshaken as you were
With the trajectory of our struggle—
We'll be prepared to take down our foe,
Like you've trained us.
Ready and primed—
For the long walk,
The long haul,
The big blast.*

Walk, Walk, Walk

“Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”

ALBERT EINSTEIN²²

Right now, we are in the forest borderland of two subregions—quite a distance from the storm’s pathway, but we have prepared just the same. We have chosen this spot precisely because there are lesser trees and no indication of a landslide. And if the river rises, we can always go further up the hill. The water has turned brown and angry and I’m afraid to cross it. But we must cross it, not once nor twice but more than a hundred times!

We pass through the banks and into a sharp rise, then down again, and into small pathways only to find ourselves in the water again. This exercise wearies me to no end—and there is so much sand inside my shoes I wish we could all stop for a short break. But the command thinks we should continue while we can still cross the river, otherwise we will be forced to encamp—an unpredictable situation in this area. So, we move on and I try not to complain.

²² Quoted by Jamie Sayen in *Einstein in America: The Scientist’s Conscience in the Age of Hitler and Hiroshima* (New York: Crown Books, 1985), 231.

Walk, walk, walk. Walk for the cause, walk for the people, for the comrades. . . aaagh, I can only think of my feet, my sole that's full of sand, soaked in the river.

"Come on, Kasama. Let me bring your pack." A big comrade has been assigned to assist me. I know he has a very heavy load, but still he offered to carry my backpack. Steady and strong, he always held my hand firmly so I would not be carried by the current. *"Step on my feet. Here. Don't put your weight on that stone. Careful. Don't slip. Easy now. Hold on. You can do it. Yes!"* The voice of wisdom. He must have been born like a river deity who can never miss a step, evade the slippery stones, and traverse the roaring current. These slow feet of mine tried to follow his steps, tentatively at first, then sensing my hesitation, he holds my arm more firmly, as if to say: don't worry, I'm here, we can do this.

Is it still far? How many more minutes? I keep on asking but he doesn't answer. He knows he can't give the exact time when we are moving this slow. Already we are at the end of the line; the others have gone ahead. *Is the river still long? How many times do we cross it? How far? How far?* I say this only to myself, trying to negotiate with nature. Please end this river now. I want the land, not the water. I don't want to be here anymore. My feet hurt. My legs hurt. Stop!

As if hearing my thoughts, he suddenly stops and asks me. *"Would you want to take a little rest*

before we go up? On top of this hill, that's where we're going."

Ah, so this is it! I smile and a rush of adrenaline suddenly moves me. *No rest. Let's just go on, to catch up with the others. I'm fine.*

Dutifully I take back my pack, it feels heavy going up. No water now but this uphill climb is just too much. My back aches like I was carrying a ton. It's so steep! This land is so steep and the stones are so sharp! I grope for the roots of a bush that could support me. He extends his arm. *"Come on, kasama. Take my hand."*

My deity is here again to rescue me. And once more he takes my backpack. He gets his knife and cuts a branch from a tree, for my walking stick.

Oh this is just right. I thank him with a smile. He doesn't smile back but looks at the sky. "It's going to rain," he says. And before I know it, big drops of rain come pelting on the hillsides, on the pathways, everywhere. Ah, it was good my things are all wrapped in plastic! But what about this trail that's starting to get muddy? I slip and crawl, and try to stand up to get my bearings, but slip again. *"Oops. Here, here, hold on to this"*. His arm again. The conquering arm. I give him my full trust and we go up the hill, slowly, like lumbering carabaos.

Ah. After a lifetime, we finally arrive. The comrades have already put up the tents and all we have to do is tie our *duyan* on the trees assigned to us, to our squad. I smell coffee. And rice cooking on a

big pot. I lie on my *duyan* and let my limbs rest. Ah, how good it is to lie down. To lie down and sleep.

Little did we know that that very night we would be forced to walk again, down into the river, cross it many times, and up a hill again and down, in endless repetition, walk, walk, walk without flashing a single light! Crawl underneath the thorny *bokawe* leaves,²³ wade through knee-deep mud and walk again until I thought my limbs would disappear.

The comrade never left my side. He was always there to urge me to step and advance, rest a bit and walk again, until we finally found our true destination—safe from the enemy, safe from the storm, and very much at home in the bosom of a peasant community.

It was one great physical lesson for me that I would learn to accept as part of the idiosyncrasies of this war, and it would augment my stamina and determination to survive mountain life and put greater trust in its people.

To this very day, I still keep this walking stick, a strong and straight branch that my “comrade deity” made for me on that stormy day by the river.

²³ Bamboo—Ed.

Lost!

*With so many paths that criss-cross
I got lost on my way to the base
Walking here and there, running
Around in circles, hoping that a comrade
Or a bus would pass by (mad to think).
This was the Agusan forest—a complex
Geography of trees, land and
Rivers where, they say a croc resides
In a wayward outpost. I should have been
in the city where streets are marked
And began to think of misery—the harsh
bokawe thorns, the steep trails, the mud,
The constant readiness, the waiting and
The CSCs that shaved my old beliefs.
But why am I all alone? Why be here?
What kinship do I have with these trees?
Question turns to doubt, to fear, to anger.*

*Then a peasant friend arrived.
Ah, how nice to see a dear familiar face.
“Turn east,” he said. “Follow the sun
And always watch your landscape.”
Then, ever so gently he tried
To teach me how to identify the
Trees, the sky, the shadows of the sun
And to mark my path. I tried to
Follow him, but I was blind,
Full of self-importance and disbelief.*

*Little did I know the comrades
And the masses had scoured the forest
For hours, all work suspended
To find me, and bring me home.*

*Ah, how good to be at camp again!
How infinitely tender is the universe
That seems to watch over me
And the comrades and masses
I now know they will always find me
And bring me home. Safe
From crocodiles, safe from doubt
Serene, and soundly criticized.*

The Scent of Papayas in Bloom

A young man greets his mother before he goes to work on the bridge that connects two mountain ranges. It is a bridge that completes the entire network of roads and bridges of these areas. He smiles. There is a step of anticipation as he joins the batch of engineers in the cable car. From afar he could see Ana, an orange figure amidst the grey background of the building where she works. "Ana, Ana," he says softly, almost excitedly. Tonight, he'd tell her. After their dance lessons. Maybe he should sing a *kundiman*, a love song, like they used to, in the olden days. He'd tell her tonight. In his mind, he could see the beauty of her muscles as she tries to explain the details of the mass movement.

And she'd talk again of the community and the new things their committee was working on for the communal farms. They had designed so many farming tools and equipment and developed machines that made things grow in profusion. The community grew almost everything and was secure in every aspect of food. The communal gardens were awash in greens and yellows.

"In our world there is food and work for everyone. Nobody gets hungry because he has no food to eat or money to buy food," Ana announces with pride.

In the community, there is a great store room that is accessible to all who are in need of a meal: fresh vegetables and fruits from the communal garden, milk, eggs, meat, honey, all kinds of grains and rootcrops, fermented juices and wines, health drinks from the sap of trees and leaves.

A biologist continually experiments what plants and animals can be used for food. There was a time when a whole year of dry season ravaged the gardens but the scientists had foreseen this event and was able to plant palm trees and shrubs that could withstand heat for long periods. And the food preserves saved them. With everybody working, food crisis was averted. So much improvement has been experienced with the reforestation of forest lands and rotation of crops. With the trees in place, landslides and floods are a thing of the past. Contour farms and organic gardens lace the hilly countryside, which has greatly minimized erosion. And since everybody owns and works on the land, there is little conflict of wanting more.

“But I want you more!” I tell Ana and she smiles and says “Yow! That’s entirely different!”

Still, old viruses would creep in: to want to have more, to compete and be ahead of others, to steal and yearn for the old scheme of things—but all these are slowly being effaced with the new thinking, the new way of life. Laws and the

*Hukumang Bayan*²⁴ are only for extreme cases, like epidemics that must be handled urgently and well. Violators (they don't call them "criminals" anymore) are assigned to the more remote communes and are given enough work for them to think things over and try to be creative and humble. Then, to contain a possible epidemic, a general assembly is called and the viruses pointed out so that each one must undergo a healing process, in technical terms, pagpupunahan—a "criticism and self-criticism."

The untiring work of teachers and parents and people like Ana continue to hone the young for this new thinking—to work and live for the good of all. The schools are a most painstaking job, more painstaking than building a bridge or nurturing crops, or explaining quantum physics to elementary students. But this is a must—an absolute task for the young leaders if the community has to continue its great work and not be contaminated with viruses. Way back, people had to wield the gun to create this new order.

"It was very very difficult," his "*amasona*²⁵ grandmother" would tell him, recalling the hardships and the long, long years of fighting a very powerful, relentless enemy. "*The great mass movement with a socialist perspective was the only way.*"

²⁴ People's Court

²⁵ Female guerrilla

She'd say this over and over again not just to him but to all the young people in the community.

"And we, too, must always be wary, because even now, the enemy still lurks somewhere, ready to pounce on us," Ana tells him with a gentle reassuring smile, but with fear in her eyes.

"Enemy?" I wake up, suddenly roused from sleep, ready to engage, ready to face the gnawing reality once again.

Ah, it was but a dream, so vivid and so detailed—a dream that I would always recall when the air is heavy with the scent of papayas in bloom. Or while watching a drone pass through the trajectory of a waning moon—an angle that almost always coincides with the way my comrade smiles when we are about to climb uphill, all the way to the high point.

Chapter 4

The Tribe's Lament

*Our mountains will always be,
Our rivers will always be
Our people will always be
The foreign invaders defeated
We will rebuild our land,
Ten times stronger
Ten times more beautiful.*

ADAPTED FROM HO CHI MINH

Biographical sketch of a young teacher who found her true home in a “guerrilla school” among the Dulangan Manobo in Southern Mindanao.

Smile

Smile. That’s what the elderly Manobo has been doing. I smile too. Tentatively at first, then as wide as I could. What else can I do? This smile is the sign that bridges my language and his. He, as the chieftain of the Dulangan Manobo tribe, and I, as the energetic young volunteer who is still trying to take it all in: the highland, the make-shift schoolhouse, the innocent and open faces of the children. *Would I be able to communicate, I ask myself. Would I be able to come across the ABCs and teach the children as I had imagined doing?*

Smile, smile some more. It is my first day and I feel my jaws ache from so much smiling. The children smile, too. They know I am here to teach. Instinctively they know I am here with good intentions (or the chieftain must have oriented them well) and they open their arms to me, waiting. But my smile fades as I look at them, their emaciated hands reaching out, their hungry faces telling me what poverty and want is all about. How in the world did they get so malnourished, I ask myself. What do they eat, how do they get to survive in this wilderness?

As I came to know them, very slowly I was made to understand a lot of things: that theirs is a life made simple by their surroundings. It is a life lived in total harmony with the forest, the rivers, bereft of the comforts of civilization, unencumbered by the accessories of city life.

And yet, despite their poverty, they seem such a lively lot as they try to make do with what is left of mountains. To my unending questions they would tell me: "Yes, we still hunt but the wild boars have become so few and far between. Yes, we still fish but the river has turned dark and brown. Yes, we still look for wild honey but without the forest the bees have gone or died."

"So how do you live now? Where lies your subsistence?" I asked them. They brought me to their farm—a small lot planted with camote, corn, and some rootcrops. Too small for this household, I thought to myself. And forgot that they were once food gatherers and were still in the process of learning the ramifications of food production.

Food production. Bigger farm. Lots of crops. Food for the children. I tried to tell the Datu this. Yes, yes, yes. He nodded in animated agreement. But his smile faded as he pointed to a sign posted not too far from his farm: PRIVATE PROPERTY DO NOT ENTER.

Whose private property? Mining or logging company? Soon I discovered that under the veneer of his happy smile is the threat of another

dislocation. A long time ago they were dislocated by the logging company. And they had no other recourse but to go further into the wilderness. Now they will be dislocated once again. This time by a very big mining company that had goons and the Army behind them and had the power of the law to evict them.

“One that will disembowel the ancestral land and take away all our gold in it,” the chieftain tells me with his hands gesticulating, and his face full of suppressed anger. “That is why we want to learn to read and write. We do not want to sign more papers and more laws that would mean our death, as we had done before with the logging companies.”

I nodded in agreement, understanding the most fundamental reason why they wanted to learn the ABCs. By knowing the law, they would not be so easily eased out. They had been evicted once by the logging companies, they will not be evicted again by the mining companies. This was one of their ways of protecting their ancestral lands. Amidst all these, I continued teaching the children simple, rudimentary reading, and writing.

“Children, repeat after me: *A—aguloy! B—baboy! K—kasilo!*²⁶ And how many pieces of *aguloy* do we cook for breakfast? How many grains of *aguloy* should we plant so we could eat every breakfast?”

²⁶ *Aguloy*—corn; *baboy*—pig; *kasilo*—sweet potato

Our literacy-numeracy classes would start with the problem of food and end with practical solutions coming from the children themselves. And we would go to our small garden now alive and teeming with green *kasilo* shoots. It was the simplest, most engaging way of teaching both agriculture and math; of encoding and decoding a system of communication, one that we both understood using ordinary materials at hand.

Then, we moved on to the problem of ancestral land and how the community could continue defending it. The adult literacy classes overflowed in the makeshift schoolhouse as we studied together.

Each letter of the alphabet stood up for something familiar in their daily struggle for a better life: *A—aksyon! B—balaod! K—komunidad! D—depensa!*²⁷

On my part, I tried to study all the data and all the laws available. I gave them all that I knew. And they wanted to know so many things: from the history of life on earth to the history of our land, to the beginnings of our laws and why the tribes are marginalized and are now in the most remote mountains where once they ruled the plains. They wanted to know how to fight back and survive with their ancestral land.

²⁷ *Aksyon*—action; *balaod*—law; *komunidad* —community; *depensa*—defense

One history class led to another, one lesson unto a deeper and wider understanding. And I was no longer contented with just the *literacy* classes, or with just this Dulangan Manobo community. I wanted to live with the Lumad and all the oppressed and marginalized people of the mountains, learn their way of life and serve them. In the most incredible and unexpected way, I had come to love the People as I had come to a clear understanding of what I wanted to do in life.

And it all started with a smile.

He Was Barely 19

*He was barely 19, a young recruit
Whose parents and grandparents
Aunts and uncles were Red warriors
He was my student in litnum²⁸
And I, his pupil in the ways of the forest
Who taught me the meaning
Of leaves, weeds and earth,
What passed along this path,
And what the wind says.
“In war you try to see
And feel the world,” he said.*

*But I was a very poor student,
And didn't know how to read the signs.
He was a patient teacher though,
And laughed a lot. From him
I learned how to teach the ABC
And some History and Science
To the children of the tribe.*

*One day he said he wanted
To go and join the tactical offensive
Against the plunderers of the land.
“Yes,” I said. “Bring the rifle home.”
He smiled. “When you hear the guns
Then I shall be there.”*

²⁸ Literacy-numeracy

*Aaah. But why is the sky so dark?
Why did the alimokons²⁹ sing?
And what portents this silence?
At night they all came back—
But he wasn't there with them
He wasn't there, he wasn't there!
I ran to the trees to hide my grief
To censure the sky the clouds
For taking away this young friend.
Aaah, there would be so many many more
For him, this grief is rain that never ends.*

²⁹ Bird of ill-omen to the Lumad.

Food

*And I never knew what food was like, 'til now
Steaming kamote, a bucketful of honey
Frogs braised in coconut milk,
The insides of palm trees, and
Soup from river stones simmered to perfection.
Invention feeds the hungry athletes
And all the kitchens of the world
Must be standing in ovation
To what the masses have
So graciously offered
to their "distinguished guests."*

*Then I wanted to be the supply officer
so I could put more in my lunch box.
He smiled, with only the two of us could hear
"Here, take mine," he said so casually
"So you could walk faster."
Oh no! If the earth could eat me now,
and prayed nobody notices.
"Don't be shy," he said.
"Eat and be strong for we shall walk again."*

*This gentle prodding has taught me a lot
To share the food and think of others
To learn to be like everyone else and
To eat simply, like a Manobo from Pantaron.*

Some of the most articulate people I've met are the chieftains, those who interpret the world in the language of the tribe and make their people understand. Here I've tried to write down the words of a Datu that, in a succinct way, sums up the tribe's history and why it is to the "Sundalo sa Kabus" (Army of the Poor) he has placed his trust and hope.

Conversation with a Matigsalug Chieftain

"Through the years, we have suffered the innumerable abuses inflicted upon our people: our ancestral land has been taken away from us through laws imposed by foreign invaders. They felled our trees, denuded our forests, treated us like wild monkeys. We fled towards the remote interior only to be invaded once again by companies who wanted to siphon our natural wealth by building mines and plantations. They want to push us into hamlets or reservation areas and serve as exotic objects for tourists. They want to destroy the tribe, so they can have everything—the land, the gold, the timber, the sweat and blood of my people.

"We had no other recourse but to struggle and to fight back.

"They try to divide us at every turn by installing fake chieftains, fake laws, fake agencies that act as though it were for us but essentially

are inimical to us. PANAMIN, OSCC, NCIP, IPRA³⁰—government agencies bearing names and strange laws. . . to us, they are instruments of oppression and control.

“The state and their militaries are afraid that the Lumad could get stronger. They controlled our movements. They watched us, and we became like hunted wild boars. They didn’t even permit us to harvest our crops. We were like prisoners in our own lands. They bombed our villages, killed our leaders. They sowed terror, even threatened to burn our schools and kill our children.

“We have no other recourse but to struggle and to fight back.

“Our struggle has brought us in contact with the Nice People. Wary at first, we did not want to have anything to do with them. We shunned them. But through the years, we have come to know and understand their reason for being. We have come to love and respect them.

“And they taught us many things. First they taught us about our rights. Our rights to the land, our rights to our freedoms. Our rights to be named and to be counted as a legitimate member of the bigger Filipino community. They respect us for what we truly are.

³⁰ PANAMIN—Presidential Assistant on National Minorities, OSCC—Office for Southern Cultural Communities, NCIP—National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, IPRA—Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997—Ed.

“They also taught us to plant and produce food so we won’t go hungry. Where before we merely depended on the forest to give us honey, fruits, and meat, now we plant crops—corn, *kasilo*, cassava, vegetables, gabi and other rootcrops, even fruit trees.

“On our part, we taught them the wisdom of the tribe, our knowledge of the lands, our secret pathways, our herbal trees, our medicinal waters, our sky that is our map. We taught them the rhythm of our music and the beauty of our customs.

“From their own living example, we relearned the wisdom of collective work and equal sharing of resources. *For the common good* became a battle cry that spelled our work in the farms, our labor exchanges, our harvests.

“Most importantly, they taught us to be organized and to fight in order to protect our lands from the invaders. Without this Army of the Poor, we would be as nothing now: divided, scattered like dried leaves in the forest.

“Now we have become stronger, more united, more deeply dedicated to the land. And we are a vibrant, living part of the whole, of the Filipino nation and of the universe.”

Fighting, Learning

*What manner of crime is this
That targets children
That condemns them
To live a life of fear and ignorance?
“Bomb the Lumad school!”
The dictator declares
And the minions of the state
come to dismantle
What the communities had built—
Years of effort effaced in minutes.*

*The teacher tries her very best
to summon the gods of peace,
but the guns keep talking.
She confronts the soldiers
Commands them to stop,
Invokes the laws of the land
Or even plain common sense—
“Are you not parents, too?” She asks.
But the soldiers are deaf-blind
They do not seem to know any law
They only know the order
“Bomb the Lumad schools!”
The commander-in-chief said.*

*What manner of crime is this
That wants to kill children?
Or condemn the Lumad to a life
Of fear and ignorance?
But what is new?
Is it not the same all over again
The killing of the tribes,
The plunder of ancestral lands?
Have we not borne witness
To the displacement of the Lumad
In favor of the invaders?
Do we not see the stewards of the land
Pushed to the margins, driven
To a life of penury and servitude?
All our lessons are written in blood
And how is it that this regime
teaches the children to fight back?
Should we be blinded forever
By the whims of the state?
Would we simply watch
The schools dismantled, the people
Driven away from their homes?
Can the People's Army be content
To just sit back and watch?
Learning is fighting, too,
It is a lesson we all must learn.*

Monologue of an Empty Classroom

*What now my children, where are you?
Are you sound and safe in your new abode?
I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to protect you
When the birds of steel swooped suddenly on us
To wound the mountains with evil droppings.
I should have been green, like a thick forest
Or windlike as a swiftly moving warrior,
So we could disappear from the birds of steel:
But I am but of bamboo and cogon which
Your parents and their friends put together
So you'd have a place to learn,
Not just the ABCs, but the whys of everything.
I wish to hear your songs, as you map
Your communities into the globe,
With all the natural wealth intact and
A memory that traces our true history.
How you grapple with knowledge!
Your inquisitive minds never seem to rest
Asking about the earth, sky, living things,
And what happens to a mad dictator when
The masses drive him away from his lair.
I like your efforts to defend and nurture the land
Ready to question and change the world.
In you I find the hopes of tomorrow,
With your resolve that one day soon
You'll leave me—for the greater classroom,
Where the people await you,
Ready to fight for a new world.*

Light, Life, the Dream of Becoming

*I shall not dwell on the sorrows that
shape our fortitude, or what storms
refine our strength; time after time
we had to deal with the pain of
leaving without saying goodbye
as we must to this dear friend, now gone
a tender bud trampled to the ground.
I close my eyes and remember you
As you were before the enemy
Plucked you from the earth
A living breathing thing, warm
Like sunshine, kind as a newborn
Light, life, the dream of becoming—
The fine person you always taught
Your young students to become.*

*Still, it was not enough.
You had to leave that well-ordered life
To be with the people, understand
The cold and hunger,
Learn to till the soil,
Go up mountains and rivers and
Decipher the great teachings
Into a fine, livable language.
How fluent did the earth speak to us
So we could fully understand
This difficult and great undertaking
Like you always lived, resilient
As the monsoon winds
That secure our constancy.
You taught us to be patient
As we waited for the sun to rise,
and watch the sky turn Red,
Red like the blood that flow
To water these mountains to life.*

*If you must know, dearest friend
you can't die, your roots are here,
imbedded among us,
sprouting in joyful profusion.
Nurtured by the masses.
They will grow to be like you:
A fine, lovable person—
A revolutionary of the people.*

Chapter 5

There is Blood in the Streets

*“But I don’t shut up and I don’t die.
I live
and fight, maddening
those who rule my country.*

*For if I live
I fight,
and if I fight
I contribute to the dawn.”*

OTTO RENE CASTILLO

“There is Blood in the Streets!”

*Sometimes I stoop to smell the serene air of this war
And contemplate the hills tainted with red and
Those comrades who watered the lands with blood
Writing letters of hope and a clear path marked out.*

*But thunder comes spewing curses and the bloodied
Streets confront us, sorrows oozing from alleyways
The monster comes to drink the blood of innocents.
As widows and children cry in fear and anguish.*

*No, there can be no rest, no chance to talk of peace
When orphans litter the wounded streets
I hear their cries everywhere “we are innocent” they say
But the monster knows no law but his own brutal ways.*

*We are pushed to fight, and fight we must: there is blood
And bodies litter the streets. We can neither stop nor rest
Against the criminals in uniform who make the law and
Against the system that continues to produce them.*

*There is no other way for the children then but take
To the mountains and find a life with the People’s Army,
To dismantle the monster and his system
And with the masses they shall learn to live in peace.*

Turning the Page

*And we thought it was the evening star,
Aay, it was but a drone come to watch us
With its evil eyes. But what does it see?
Nothing but the shadow of its own death—
Carnivorous tiger bathing in its grave.
Thrashing and gnashing about—a dying predator.
Ay, let them. Let the enemies enter their own snare,
Let them grapple with the folly of their vicious schemes
Let them take the loot! Yes, let them.
For the masses are here, waiting in the wings,
Quietly ready, concealed beneath layers
Of denied justice and untold misery.
Beneath their open palms and hurt hands
They wait for their deliverance, ready
To turn the page of history.*

Letter to a Friend in Prison

My dearest Rosa,

Forgive me for writing you only now. It has been difficult trying to send this letter. The guards are very strict. They want to read and know everything that is brought inside and are always suspicious even of harmless letters like this. But know that I have thought of you every day and pray that you are well despite the harshness of prison life. Harsh must be an understatement. I heard that you are often sick and need hospital care. But has the warden listened? I don't know. I can only imagine the hardship you're going through, the physical pain and anguish of limited space—hot, crowded, claustrophobic. I wish I can help, but how? I don't know how.

The most frustrating thing is not being able to do anything. Out here it is also a big prison for us, with Martial Law and all the most inhuman policies of the state like EJKs,³¹ bombings, military operations, trumped up charges on many innocent people, plus of course the worsening poverty of the majority of our people.

The state has become desperate to defend the status quo; it does not tolerate or forgive any opposition. But people do oppose, openly and in secret. There is a boiling cauldron of utter disgust

³¹ Extra-judicial killings—Ed.

for what is happening today—the disregard for human life, the abuses of those in power and the total viciousness of the regime—all of which give us reason to rise up. How would the people be if there were no revolution?

Rosa, please forgive me for being so verbose. What I really want to say is: “Hold on, dear friend. You are a most precious comrade and we salute you for your bravery and constancy. In the most trying situation we know you defy the enemy and remain as our most trusted friend and comrade. We love you very much and we look forward to the day when we can all be here in the guerrilla base, doing revolution.”

Much much love,

KA JOVEN

Letter to a Child Whose Parents are Missing

Dearest Indai,

It is with great sadness to inform you that up to this day, we have not found your parents. We have gone through all the possible places where they could be—the military camps, the police precincts, the hospitals. We even looked for them in the morgues and funeral homes, but there hasn't been a trace of where they might be.

Though this is one of the most frustrating and trying jobs so far, we have not stopped looking for them. For as long as there is no clear sign of where they are, we will pursue this quest. What we only know is that they were abducted on their way to the front by hooded men riding a van, but nobody could pinpoint the direction that they took. The enemy has resorted to using these very unlawful tactics that is a clear violation of the protocols of war. They are criminals who must be tried in court and punished.

Indai, I know this must be very difficult for you, as it is for us. Their absence is a burden that we have to carry and will not give us rest until we know the truth. As you must know, each and every member of our revolutionary family must be accounted for, wherever they are, in whatever climate, their health and well-being are our concern. Their children are our children too. Thus, don't ever think that you are alone or that you will carry this problem all by yourself. We will always be here, by your side. And

we greatly wish that you could visit us up here, where your parents used to work, so we can have a long, long talk. The masses whom your parents have worked with are also eager to see you—when the political climate turns better. For now, it is still not advisable to come and see us. The enemy has mounted an ongoing military operation, complete with air strikes, artillery attacks, and a psyops campaign that targets our mass leaders and activists by declaring them “surrenderees.”

We are fine, though. The mass base is wide and deep enough; it is like the sea that can never be contained nor poisoned as the enemy tries to do. So please, don't worry.

For now, we are sending a comrade, the bearer of this letter, with whom you can discuss anything and everything, including practical matters like schooling, security, and finances. We are very much concerned about your situation, and whether you and your foster family are safe where you are. In any event, precautionary measures must be observed. We have prepared alternative venues—friends who will accommodate you, in case the enemy tries to harass you or your foster family. But we must always keep our wits about because we are faced with a very devious enemy, and we must do everything to fight it.

With all the love from all of us,

KA JOVEN

Defense-Offense

They have slain my children
Robbed my mountains
Enslaved my tribesmen,
How can my poems not turn to guns?
But for now, a battle of wits
Go, Army of the People
Let each one bring his spear and shield
His slingshot and his arrow
Prepare the suyak and the batik³²
Guard all entry and exit points
Lure him into the hinterland
Stop the enemy in his tracks
Dismantle his defenses,
Unmask his weaknesses.
He is but an old and ailing
Warden of the rotting order
Desperately cruel, bloated with greed
They have slain my children
Robbed my mountains
Enslaved my people,
How can my poems not turn to guns?
Go, Army of the People
Go for the deathblow
To build a new world,
We must destroy the old.

³² Bamboo traps

Counting

*In this long and winding journey
I have tried to learn my numbers
For didn't our Teacher say
To have a head for figures
Is a way to improve our work?
Yes, we do our math.
We measure time and distances,
We account for weapons seized. We note our wins.
We calculate the seconds that we must wait
Before the blast.
We record the number of barrios we've organized
To form the People's government
And its Milisyang Bayan.
And the peasant associations—
They count their outlay, their labor, their yield.
To collectively uphold what is fair.
What a joy to see them count their harvest
Sacks! Of grain and battles won against
the landlord and his foreign master.*

*But there are pests that devastate our lands;
And try to pillage our life's work
With their drones, artillery and guns.
They are deaf to the thundering steps of a mil-
lion people.
They have no will of their own.
They set out as "soldiers of the country"
But end up being puny forces protecting
The tyrant's cronies and his throne—
Sowing terror in communities.*

*What are they, if not mercenaries
Paid with taxpayers' money?
What is the groundwork for their "sense of
duty"?
With only orders from a mad slaughterer;
With only names of activists, people's warriors
To eradicate and how many—
Does their "triumph" amount to any more
Than just statistical victory?*

*While we—we're armed with our masses
And we have their trust. At any time,
They help their people's warriors.
Our principles have won their hearts.
And the comrades are charged
With patience that is fiery.*

*With patience that is fiery.
Many wonder if we ever grow tired
Of advancing our steps towards a future
When the oppressed and exploited are free.
These parts are incalculable, undeniably.
This war is not just about a game of quantity—
But of quality, too.
How can we not resume doing our math
When the things that count, we still have?
How can we not take the high road?
How can we not take on the horizon still so vast?
So, we may take two steps backward
And three steps up.
We fall, learn our lessons, and stand up.
We shall not stop. We shall rebuild,
Recover and expand. We shall rise—
Rise 'til the summit salutes us
With a gleaming view of the plains.*

Space

*Save a space for me in your heart
Leave me a place in the front
Among the lowly hands that till the land
With the stewards of the forest
Take me to the picket line
Among the workers of Sumifru³³
And the sacadas³⁴ of Negros
Leave me a place among the slums
Of this fractured city, take me home
To the tattered huts of Tondo
Save me a place in the guerrilla base
Make me a part of your collective
Among comrades and warriors
In this jungle of a city
I don't want to be alone.
Save a space for me in the front
For I must go back, I must go back
Save a space for me in your heart.*

³³ Japanese banana plantation

³⁴ Sugar workers

Chapter 6

Corona and Other Viruses

*“The lockdowns during the plague show
How the wealthy classes
Divide and rule the people,
Punish the poor without mercy.
The behemoths and their agents
Perpetuate the injustice and misery
Until the masses end the constant lockdown
By the ruling system.”*

JOSE MA SISON, EXCERPT FROM THE
POEM *THE RIVAL BEHEMOTHS TERRORIZE
THEMSELVES AND THE MASSES*³⁵

³⁵ Originally published on the website of the NDFP on May 1, 2020.

Reflections on the 51st NPA Anniversary

It is the Red Warriors 51st anniversary but our mind is caught in the harsh realities attendant to this pandemic—lockdowns, social distance, masks, curfew, medical workers, checkpoints, the police, and an invisible enemy that strikes anyone it chooses. What is it like in the city? Among the slum dwellers? I can only imagine. I could almost hear the mothers asking “But where could we get food to feed the children?” And the fathers scratch their heads and glue their ears to the radio, hoping to hear when and how they could possibly avail of the government’s much touted social amelioration program.

At no time in recent history has there been a more telling event of the severe ailment of the system—an ailment that seems to be more debilitating and lethal than this pandemic: corruption in government, inadequacy and unpreparedness of our health system, large-scale profiteering of the pharmaceutical companies, and a fascist regime that continues to be beholden and subservient to the dictates of its imperialist masters.

And here I take the gist of the anniversary message as we stood in the hillsides to celebrate the founding of our most prodigious and very special mass organization.

As we celebrate the 51st birthday of the New People’s Army, let us bow our heads and give tribute to the

brave doctors, medical workers, and frontliners who dedicated their lives in the fight against COVID-19.

As with our Red Warriors who lived and died for the people, medical workers are heroes whose selfless devotion to heal the sick and save lives not only during the pandemic but all through time, will always be a source of inspiration and strength for us all.

The corona virus that has caused inimitable human suffering is an offshoot of the overexploitation of our natural resources, the death of our forests, the pollution of our lands and waters. We have experienced this. We know how monopoly capitalism has denuded our forests through large-scale logging, and how they have destroyed our lands through mining and monocrop plantations. For as long as imperialism controls the world's resources, there will always be the threat of viruses such as we are now experiencing.

We must fight this pandemic, as we are fighting the three evils of society. We must move every Red fighter, every Party member, and every member of our mass organizations to fight this invisible enemy, this virus that brings death and hunger and untold suffering to the peoples of the world.

We must follow the health protocols prescribed by our scientists. We must train more medics for a viable health care system in all our guerrilla fronts. In our areas, we must continue to move our people

to fight for the land and plant more food crops. Food sufficiency is a must if we are to win the war.

In the cities, we must urge our urban cadres and organizers to persistently and painstakingly organize the youth and students, the workers, and the slumdweller.

There is urgent need for students and young people to go to the mountains where lands await them to produce food and make science beneficial and available to the people. One that does not discriminate against the poor. Wherever we are, we must always fight against society's deadlier virus—our colonial enemies and their cohorts—the very corrupt and parasitic state such as we now have.

Letter from a Slum Dweller During the Pandemic

Dear Ka Joven,

I write this while waiting for my name to be called. It is my third day here, queuing for the government aid that we are supposed to receive. I don't know how long this will be. My patience is almost at an end, but waiting here is better than staying at home. At least there are so many other hungry people here with me. A foot away, three feet away, what does it matter? Social distance they say, but how can we have distance in this long, long queue that has gone on for days?

I don't suppose my name is lost. Or is it in the list at all? I saw a man faint. Was it from the heat? Or maybe from not having had his name called after many days of waiting. I don't know. I don't wish to know because I imagine I am that man and I don't want to faint. I have two children at home, and really my name must be called or I will go crazy or run amok. I don't know.

There are troubles with government lists. During election, I also couldn't find my precinct number as there were several other people with my name, what they called "flying voters." I don't care. I just hope they don't misplace my name again. There are different lists. The DSWD³⁶ says there

³⁶ Department of Social Welfare and Development—Ed.

are 18 million in Manila, but that was in 2015. Now, they say it's 22 million. Who is right, I don't know. *Basta*,³⁷ my name should be in the list.

I'm so hungry, my insides hurt. I feel like I'm going mad. But I can't leave until they call my name. I don't want to go home empty handed. I can't bear to see the children asking for food.

This is the worst crisis I've experienced so far in my entire life. And I have gone through so many, but now it is different. And I don't know which to fear more—the virus or the police.

Every day you hear about the increasing number of cases, the deaths. So many doctors here have died, they say for lack of the proper personal equipment. If doctors can die due to lack of equipment, it is so much worse for us in the slums.

Many have been tested here but it has been weeks and they are still waiting for results. I know of a 23-year old guy who had a stroke, was rushed to the hospital and died after a couple of days. We think it was due to COVID, but up to this writing there is no clear declaration from the hospital if he really was infected. God bless him, he is dead, he has no more worries. It is the living who are burdened. Think of the millions of people in Luzon on lockdown. And the thousands of OFWs³⁸ docked at Manila Bay who have been on quarantine for weeks and are still waiting for their results.

³⁷ Enough—Ed.

³⁸ Overseas Filipino Workers

For us in the slums—it is not so much the result that we anticipate but the end of this lockdown, when we can have our jobs back, buy from the market and walk the streets without the police to monitor our every move. The police and the army here are quite brutal and inflexible; they always want to execute the “iron hand of the law,” as per instructions from their commander-in-chief who uses the pandemic to hit hard at the opposition, like a rabid dog, out for a kill.

They talk of this thing called “new normal” but I don’t know what this would mean for all the poor people of Manila. Would there be food? Would we have jobs? Would our houses not be demolished? Would we have free education for our children? Would hospitals and doctors be available for all? Would the killings stop?

For us who live in the lowest rung of the pyramid, it has always been an “abnormal life” of survival, and of dealing with calamities, like fire, floods, landslides, earthquakes, demolitions, viruses, and the police.

Dear friend, please do forgive me for complaining so. I just need to air what’s been bothering us, during this very trying period of our life. I do hope you are well and healthy and unscathed. Our regards to everyone.

Love,

KA ESPER

Reply from the Mountains

Dear Ka Esper,

We received your letter on the day when a full-scale military operation was in the offing, and it felt like the eerie connection to the suffering, anxiety, and anger we were all going through. Mountain or city—it is all the same under the reign of this mad despot and made more intense with the regime's callousness, and inadequacy in dealing with the pandemic.

We do understand your predicament, Ka Esper. What mother will not do everything she can to feed her hungry children? If only we can share with you the produce that we have here in this community.

Unfortunately, this lockdown has made things so difficult for all of us and we have to be content by writing letters that hopefully, will reach not only you but the millions of mothers who are asking the same questions.

The “new normal” that the state has been airing is nothing but a reiteration of the do's and don'ts that the citizenry must follow to avoid getting the virus. It is actually just the same cat with a slightly different purr. “New normal” is still all about the dominance of big business, their control of our resources, and the perpetuation of monopoly capitalism. Its objective is not to weaken the status quo but to strengthen it. It does not say about the more fundamental changes of a real “new nor-

mal”—changes that the people have been hoping for, not only to guard against a pandemic, but as a way of life that effaces the extreme gap between the rich and poor and offers democratic space for the struggle and eventual liberation of the poor and oppressed.

And what are these concerns? First is food. Everybody must have enough good healthy food in order to live—food that we ourselves have grown in our very rich agricultural country. We can't forever be dependent on importation, which relies on the global supply chain that is controlled by the giant multinational companies.

But to have food, we must have land—land to plant food crops in it. Landgrabbing must stop. The government must give the land freely to the peasants and not to the foreign agribusiness companies.

Then, we must also build the industries to make the machines. Without national industries, agriculture will be left behind and our food production will remain backward. We have enough natural and human resources to build the industries. Our OFWs can start coming home to the country to work here and offer their much needed expertise to our economy. We need a system that is not based on the drive for profit but to answer the real needs of the people.

Then, there is the matter of health. While we have started to train medics and health workers

in the guerrilla fronts, this definitely is not yet enough to be able to respond capably to the current needs of the poor people, both in the urban and rural areas. We need to build health care that is accessible and affordable to all the people. Health services and the pharma industry must be nationalized. Hospitals must be free. Rural health clinics must be built and maintained in the rural areas.

To all these, education is the key—a true education that transforms the students and the entire citizenry to practice the values of genuine nationalism, and work for the interest and welfare of the workers and peasants who make up the majority of our country's population. In our schools we must be able to produce graduates who will go back to serve their communities, and not to work for the multinationals. We must be able to inculcate the values of collective good above individual profit, cooperation above competition and simplicity of lifestyle above consumerism. DepEd's online learning is good only for those who can afford the gadgets and the Internet. And without proper and timely guidance, the children are in danger of getting lost in the maze of the cyber world which is actually controlled by the richest people in the world.

But can all these be possible if we just send a letter to the oligarchs? Will they give an ear? Will they not use all their powers—the media, the laws,

the courts—to silence us? Or worse, declare us as terrorists that must be imprisoned, or even killed?

And that is why, dear Esper, we must have our own *Hukbong Bayan*—our Red fighters, who are steeped in the highest principles of serving the people in order to realize a genuine transformation that will get rid of the viruses of our ailing society. Most importantly, we must continue to unite all the suffering masses into one undivided whole, into a great mass movement, a multitude rising up to destroy the old rotting order and build a just and humane society, a real untainted new normal.

Very truly yours,

KA JOVEN

“Give What You Can, Take What You Need”

When I read about the community pantries, the picture of the peasant masses immediately came to my mind. And I wondered: have the community pantries imbibed the spirit of the mountain people? Generosity. Kindness. A cheerful disposition. These are the qualities that one would often encounter among the peasant masses and Lumad who people our guerrilla zones and base areas. And I always wondered, where does this gentleness of spirit and welcoming attitude spring from? From the trees? No. From the sky? No. From their practice of cooperation and community living? Most likely.

My first experience of genuine, total generosity was in a remote Manobo community during their harvest of upland rice. On that day, everybody was invited to harvest. First there was a ritual to thank the earth goddess. Then the harvest, where each one was expected to reap as much *palay* (rice) as he can, using only the simple tools available. After this, the feast. Eat as much as you can, but what you can't finish you have to wrap and bring home. Towards the afternoon, when the *bangkakawan*³⁹ was done, all the harvesters may freely take their share of *palay*. Here again I saw the spirit of gen-

³⁹ Community dancing of the Lumad during festivities

erosity and mindfulness in a wonderful interplay of give and take—nobody took more than what his family needed for the day. There was no rush to amass more than he could take. Greed seems to be unheard of among these people who live and work collectively, sharing their simple resources.

Another beautiful experience was with the Mandaya masses. We were sleeping in a community near the Cateel river, when at about 3am, our host woke us up. I was instantly alert, thinking there were enemies nearby. Happily, it was just an invitation to a meal. On the table was a steaming dish. “This is *saugnon*, fresh from our *merkado*,” (meaning the river) our host said proudly. As he regaled us with stories of their *merkado*, the neighbors came in also with their catch of *daupingan*, *damagan*, and many other exotic fishes which they cooked in an open fire—for everyone. It was a feast like no other.⁴⁰ It was the tastiest and happiest meal I’ve ever had and I will always recall the taste and texture of that early morning breakfast with the Mandaya masses. This caring, gentle character common to the Lumad and the peasants of our areas have taught me so much more about what *servicing the people* really means.

⁴⁰ The Cateel River is the “mercado” or the market of the Mandaya, which provides them the fish they need for subsistence. Fishes from the Pacific Ocean such as *daupingan*, *damagan*, and *saugnon* swim upstream to the Cateel River during the spawning season.

How can I not learn from them who have given us so much—fed us, protected us, shared their resources, and even offered their best sons and daughters to the revolution?

In the cities the comrades there are also blessed with the outpouring of generosity that innately comes from the urban poor masses—the poorest who offer their services even in the throes of the most damaging storms, floods, fires, demolitions, state-sanctioned killings, and a multitude of disasters in the face of corruption, greed, and apathy of the regime.

Give what you can, take what you need—a mantra that has caught the imagination of thousands of people to help each other at this time of great uncertainty and fear. This collective give-and-take has grown into a powerful mass movement all over the country. Most importantly it is showing what genuine cooperation can do. It breeds what the Filipino people urgently, desperately need—the gift of Hope.

Simple, Direct, Unrehearsed

*I must be the only one in this world
Who does not have a Facebook
I am ancient beyond repair
But I am free as a bird. Yes!
To meet the world in flesh and blood
No gadget shall come between me
And my friends. I shall greet them
As the naked sun greets the day
Simple, direct, unrehearsed.
The mountains will be as they are
In constant motion, like us
Ever on the move, with the land
Solid and strong under our feet
There will be no Facebook to tag
Where we are; no selfies to show
Our well-rehearsed smiles.
But we are happy and safe
In the company of the masses
Beyond digital knowledge
Beyond the prying eyes of the enemy.*

A Gentle Reminder to Our Young Comrades

We need to sit on the [rim of the] well of darkness and fish for fallen light with patience. I read these haunting lines of Pablo Neruda and thought about our war, and the patience, and waiting that we've learned from it. Yes, patience. Fifty years! I can sense our young comrades, our millennials asking us, demanding an answer. Aren't we done yet? They ask, impatient all at once. Google it! Thousands of answers come out in seconds—methodical, categorized, but otherwise senseless to us who want to find the real answers. The frog has come out of the well but he is still trying to decipher the wide blue sky above.

So much for old schoolers like me.

The age of instant gratification swooped on us, so suddenly, into the long slow hours of the war, and some of us were caught napping. Or gently surprised to know that at the flick of a finger we can now access documents that we used to carry in our backpacks, those heavy items that had to be wrapped carefully in plastic, away from the rain, read and reread under the light of a kerosene lamp. Ironic that I miss those documents. I miss the smell and look of things read with much thought and introspection so we would be able to translate it to our peasant members and hopefully apply it to our daily guerrilla life.

And the letters. Back then, we would write our letters (we called the *komo*) on very thin paper that were easily hidden in the folds of a sleeve or in a pack of cigarettes, so that in case of a raid or a search, the courier could easily discard it. There were instances when couriers chose to eat and swallow the *komo*—information must be safely hidden from the enemy even if it meant sacrificing one's life. I remember Ka Jayar, tortured and killed when the enemy accosted him carrying letters addressed to the front. He was a very brave revolutionary, a hero, and I would always remember him each time I write.

Communication now is all so different. With the Internet, one could send an invitation to a rally to a thousand people with just one command, with the flick of a finger. But I don't know how effective this is. If one were to judge by the dwindling size and number of urban mass mobilizations, I would say it is not so effective. While the gadget can dispense information in a matter of seconds, it is not a magical wand that can move people to act and organize. There is no alternative for actual, person-to-person conversation to discuss the issue and listen to what others have to say and move them to action. And not just spontaneous action but organized, sustained mobilization.

Please forgive me for invoking the old methods, but I still think, and strongly suggest we do need to continue organizing the way we used to. We must

go to the people, go to the peasants and workers and the urban poor. We must have the courage to leave our gadgets every once in a while to be able to talk to the people directly, and talk to them with all the sensible arguments and passion, as if it were our last conversation on earth.

The Internet of course, has given us some space, but in reality it is still the state and their minions who have a stronghold of this platform. The Duterte regime for instance, has maximized social media to put itself to power and is spending millions of pesos daily for its trolls to create fake news, demonize revolutionaries, and justify the state's fascist policies and programs. They have to bury the more important events that deal with the nation's actual situation in order to give a semblance of normalcy, while the people's suffering has become exceedingly excruciating and intolerable.

And what of us who keep silent and safe? Are we part of the lie?

It is quite sad and bewildering to note that many of the things we see online are selfies, photo-shopped to look like a K-pop movie star. Well-rehearsed smiles amidst a manicured landscape. Do we perhaps think of the masses when we are doing a selfie? Selfies beg for recognition, but from whom? In this world that is so concerned with appearances and packaging, we are compelled to look and act as fashion dictates: flawless fair skin,

plunging necklines, skimpy shorts, multicultural attire to give a semblance of being “cool.” Who wants to look like a peasant with skin that has been weathered by the sun? Nobody.

There are comrades who delude themselves into thinking that by posting or doing these quite bourgeois things, they have somehow convinced the state that they are just ordinary citizens enjoying the “good life.” That they are not the “gd” (grim and determined) revolutionaries that have been relentlessly ridiculed, maligned, and demonized by imperialist propaganda. That they are safe from the persecution of the state.

More perniciously, through mass media and the ideological machineries of the state, we are bewitched by what neoliberal culture urges us to do: to get ahead. To buy more things. To be considered as “world class” and “modern.” As the Latin American writer Eduardo Galeano wrote—*everyday culture has come to revolve around symbols of consumption: appearance as the essence of personality, artifice as a way of life.*

The cancerous virus attendant to our colonial history continues to proliferate to this very day: individualism, consumerism, elitism, instant gratification, obsession with gadgets and computer games that rob us of worthwhile time with the masses, time that robs us of our humanity. I could name so many examples of these, *ad nauseam*, it

makes me sad and gives me an increasing sense of dread.

For there is so much in the world outside ourselves that demand our attention—peasants without land, laborers without rights, ethnic communities without a home, Lumad children without schools, persons whose dignity is not respected, innocent civilians killed. There is no other recourse but to reach out and unite with them for meaningful action, for organized resistance, for ousting a dictator. In actual fact, there is no other way for us. All roads lead to the avenues of armed revolution.

Chapter 7

The Masses, Our Teachers

We must make it the constant job of publicists to write the history of the present day, and to try to write it in such a way that our chronicles will give the greatest possible help to the direct participants in the movement and to the heroic proletarians there, on the scene of action—to write it in such a way as to promote the spread of the movement, the conscious selection of the means, ways, and methods of struggle that, with the least expenditure of effort, will yield the most substantial and permanent results.

LENIN, “REVOLUTIONARY DAYS”⁴¹

⁴¹ *Collected Works*, vol. 8 (Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1962).

When in Doubt. . . Go to the Masses

*But I think of drones, of death, of work yet to finish
And your safety. Words get entangled in my ears
And a silence so absolute and cruel:
Have you, perchance, forgotten me? And
What wilderness is this where you have deployed me?
Is banishment the penalty of a doubting heart?*

*“When in doubt, go to the masses,”
You told me once, and I did.
Found some solace there, and
Work—the peasants’ common sense.
Steady and strong they taught me
How to plant, where to sow the seeds
How and when to fight the pests and
Predators that fed on the weak
They were ever present but on the move
Unhampered by neither poverty, nor doubt,
Nor death (they had imbibed the ways
of the guerrilla warrior)
bound by a common dream, they work as one
Rooted to the mandates of the struggle
For a new life, a new page in history.*

A Conversation with the Agriworkers

Strange things are happening with the language in the plantation, and I'm at a loss for words. Or perhaps I am just a little short of hearing (and understanding) to be able to fully grasp what the agriworkers really mean when they mention words like *lease*, *contract*, *grower*, *quota*, *endo*, *co-op*, *deduction*, *loan*—words that would seep into the conversation like so much negative energies coming in. I could sense their anger and frustration over the mere mention of these words. The most quiet are those who had it really bad. “They say we still own our lands but in reality we don't own them anymore.”

“How did this come about?” I ask him.

“Because of the lease,” he says. “At first, we didn't want to lease the land. But the contractor, a man named Billy Baitus promised us that we would earn so much if we just would sign the contract. And then he offered advance payment. Ten thousand pesos, for a two-year lease. To us, who had never had this much cash on our hands before, we were tempted. And we had so many debts to pay, it looked like the right thing to do at that time. We didn't actually understand what it meant.”

“What do you mean?”

“The contract was for 15 years, and so we had no land for 15 years. When you lease the land to the company, you still own the land but only on

paper. You can't even plant cassava or *kamote* on its peripheries." The explanation wearies him, reminds him of bad times. It is a brief description of a 15-year forfeiture, a descent into the most abject existence they've ever had since coming to Mindanao as migrants from the Visayas.

"After 15 years you'll get your land back?" I ask.

"No. On the tenth year, the contract was renewed for another 15 years, because of our debts. . ." Clearly the thought offends him. He lapses into silence and I dare not ask him more questions.

The loss of peasant lands to the export-crop plantation has infected the entire island of Mindanao and hundreds of thousands of peasants, including the "agrarian reform beneficiaries" have been driven from their lands to give way to agribusiness.

"But are you not 'beneficiaries' who must have been given land and are enjoying the benefits of the government's agrarian reform?" I ask again. My peasant friend looks at me sharply and shakes his head. How can I say the word "beneficiary" when almost everything had been taken away from them? Their land, their livelihood, their food. Even the children's schooling had to be sacrificed.

"And if you had continued with your rice and corn farming, would it have been better?"

"Probably," he said. "At least we'd have rice and corn. Though we still have debts with the trader

who sells the farm inputs, but food can be grown and the children will have food to eat like corn and cassava. Not banana or pineapple or oil palm. Or rubber!

“Damn this land reform! May the lightning strike this CARP! Victims, not beneficiaries! Never beneficiaries! They are only good at saying things. . .” he says, furious and angry to the point of tears.

The peasants have much to be angry about. At the turn of the 1990s, when globalization became the “in thing,” a scheme called *agribusiness venture arrangement* (AVA) was crafted by the Department of Agrarian Reform with the agribusiness giants Dole and Del Monte. In the words of a government official, AVA would be the “perfect partnership for farmers who have the land and companies who have the capital.” But what partnership is this that has meant increasing wealth to one but poverty to the other?

“They said that if we would become a *grower* for the company, we’d get rich and be able to buy all the appliances like TV sets, washing machines and even a motorcycle. But it was all talk. Because the company had so many rules. They wanted the exact amount of chemicals to apply on the plants, the exact size and ripeness of the bananas. And only they can buy our products, at prices they dictated. So we were always short. A failure. And we had to take loans from the company until our debts

got so big there was no other recourse but to give up the land. And without the land, we are nothing.”

Their tirade kept me thinking. And how many poor peasants and agrarian reform “beneficiaries” had been forced to give up the land? 1.2 million hectares under the agribusiness venture arrangement, according to government statistics. And how many peoples were eased out of their lands from this number? About half a million peasants, perhaps even more if we are to include their family members.

“Without the land we are nothing.” The peasants say it again, lamenting the loss that has fractured the life he had known since he was a child.

I think of my father—what would he have done if he were to lose his land this way? Would he rave and rant and slash the banana plants in anger as so many peasants have done? Or would he join the underground peasant association so he could get his land back?

The loss of lands is only one of the major issues. There is also the matter with the “labor cooperative”—the cooperative which is not a cooperative but the company’s hatchetman.

An agriworker tells me, bitterly, “Because there are no labor laws for a labor cooperative. It is not accountable to the Department of Labor. The co-op can pay us below minimum, deduct half of our wages, have us pay for our protective equipment, demand that we must not join a union and

even kick us out for no reason—and there is no one to whom we can complain. The company sits pretty and simply waits for the produce which it will buy at a price that they dictate.

“In short, labor cooperative means we do the labor and must cooperate. Or else, Endo. End of contract. One fine day the foreman will say, you’re out. And that’s it.

“There are thousands or hundreds of thousands here looking for work, and we have to feed our family, right? *Kapit-sa-patalim*.⁴² You know what I mean?” He tries to explain, clearly he is aggrieved and exasperated with my questions.

The contractual system has put workers in a state of insecurity and unrest—because with one false move, the co-op could terminate the contract over its many stipulations. The most stringent of these is maintaining the daily quota or what they call “efficiency metric.”

“Efficiency metric” is a standard set by the company to measure the amount of work that must be produced for a worker to maintain his or her employment. The company has created so many fancy American names like deleafer, pruner, calibrator, propper, bagger, harvester, packing plant worker, cannery, etc., to hide or prettify the back-breaking, exploitative work of plantation life.

⁴² “Holding on at knife-edge”—to desperately fight for life and subsistence, in the direst situation.

For a pineapple worker: 4,500 pieces of pineapple crowns must be planted daily. Three sacks of fertilizer weighing 50 kilograms each should also be applied by each worker, covering about 60 meters. And harvesting of pineapple slips and suckers is at 3,500 pieces per day per worker. To harvest this much under the searing heat of the sun or the blinding rain is almost way beyond human endurance.

Work in the banana plantation is even worse. Ten workers are in charge of 15 hectares of land, performing 16 different operations like propping, deleafing, applying fertilizers, etc. Many workers are forced to have their children work to meet the “efficiency metric.” Failure to do these tasks could mean transferring the workers to other areas, farther from their families.

“Aerial spraying” is another prettified term for showering poison in the plantation and in nearby communities. Paraquat, Gramoxone, Lyphosate, Roundup Plus, Diazinon, Glyphosate, Carbofuran, Chlorothalonil, Mancozeb, etc., all come under the name “chemical input” that are enforced in the plantation monoculture in order to control the viruses. Some of these chemicals have already been banned in other countries and yet these companies have been granted “environmental compliance certificates” and their products are advertised as “providing the world with healthy and nutritious food.”

The language of deceit is everywhere and the state has become a master in popularizing harmless, nice-sounding words for the most vicious and brutal attacks on people and their rights. These days, a unionist is an “NPA *surrenderee*,” a human rights defender is a “terrorist,” state-sanctioned murder is “*na-tokhang*” (an alleged drug addict shot to death by the police), *Operation Plan Kapayapaan* is a military campaign that is wreaking havoc instead of peace, and *Chacha* or “charter change” is a proposal to change the constitution to facilitate the wholesale plunder of Philippine lands and resources in favor of TNCs.⁴³

I see the fields, the vast rich plains of my island, the huge areas taken over by the foreign multinational companies and I am at a loss for words. I grapple for terms that can fully represent the misery and suffering of peasants who have been driven from their lands in the name of “progress.” I search for the phrases that can describe the horrors people suffer under the relentless attack of those who rule and control the state. I am fully confounded by the language that agribusiness has imposed and popularized to gloss over and hide the system of exploitation and greed under the name of “globalization.” Perhaps a true and honest dictionary will have to be written in order to name what is actually happening in our lands. No fancy names, no

⁴³ Transnational corporations—Ed.

deceit, no misrepresentation of realities. Just the truth, nothing else.

Class Analysis

*Seventy-thirty to favor the lord
Five-six⁴⁴ for the usurers,
A hundred for a day's work and
Millions without food.
All the figures are familiar
The lines that divide us are evident:
But why must it seem so hard
To act? To rise against the feudal lord?
I think of my father's hands
Like roots from ancient trees
The varicose veins standing up,
Witness to the years of labor
How many centuries would it take
Before we could regain the upper hand
The bases that surround the cities
And the citadels of defense
Against marauders, and even
Against the loss of faith
Of those who trade a life of honor
For fleeting comforts and
the illusion of peace?*

⁴⁴ Usurious practice, where a loan of 500 pesos is paid with 600 pesos (20% per month interest or 240% per annum)

*But why deceive ourselves,
In a fractured country such as ours
Can there be real peace?
Will the birds of prey relinquish
What they've taken from the land?
Why must Efren go away,
How could he serve the wild
Lions that used to hunt him
In the forests of Bulol Lumot?
Could he forget the masses so easily?
But where is he now?
Thrashing and gnashing his teeth,
Bound to the monster's den like a mad dog.*

The Making of a Mass Paper

*"I sang for those who had no voice.
My voice hit doors that until then were closed
so that, fighting, Freedom could be let in."*

PABLO NERUDA, *CASTRO ALVES FROM BRAZIL*⁴⁵

"Kas, let's put up a paper," I said, handing him our proposal.

"What paper?" he asked.

"A mass paper, like this," I said again, pointing to a very old issue of *Asdang*.

"Why? Why should we put up a paper?"

"Because all the regions have one. I envy them."

"Envy is not reason to put a paper," the front of his brows puckered doubtfully.

"We're the only ones who don't have a paper yet," I replied, trying not to sound defensive.

"That's not enough reason, you know," he said again, all questioning now.

"Because we need to write our stories!" I said, still defensive, but more emphatic now.

"What stories?"

"Stories of the rev, of course!"

"Oh. I thought you meant love stories," there was just the touch of a smile.

⁴⁵ Published in *Canto General* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991).

"That, too," I smiled back, certain that we would soon have his blessing.

"Yours, then. We will publish your love story," he said and everybody was laughing now. "But be sure to make it good, then. With lots of action." He was serious all of a sudden.

"You mean tactical offensives. Mass movements. Mass work. Guerrilla Warfare. The works," I interrupted him, trying to overcome any opposition or hesitation he might be having.

"And the heroism of the masses," added a comrade.

"And of course agrarian rev!"

"And we should have a section on health!"

"And lots of illustration!"

Everybody was talking now, each one trying to voice an idea about what stories need to be written, each one ready to tell about his idea about what a mass paper should be.

So that's how the conversation went between our collective and our "lolo"—the head of the cultural-education department. He was all smiles now, and began to talk about publishing, and why propaganda work was very very important in the struggle. *"To write the history of the present day, and to try to write it in such a way that our chronicles will give the greatest possible help to the direct participants in the movement and to the heroic proletarians there, on the scene of action—"* he was quoting from Lenin, but it sounded like it was our most

urgent task now, a task that we must do heart and soul. So, we went on to discuss the real aims of the paper, what issues should be written and how they should be written.

“Of course, you must consider our readership. Our people are not exactly readers. But once they read that it is about them and their struggle, then they will surely be interested.

“It’s not a theoretical paper. It’s a mass paper. For the masses and comrades alike. Make it light, but heavy. Heavy in the sense that it contains the substance. . . You know how the masses tell stories. . .

“But still we must be able to translate our theories into practice, into the experience of daily life.”

Eventually, we settled on five general guidelines 1) that the paper should contain the more important things happening in the front in tandem with the general calls; 2) that they should be short but interesting vignettes about life in the struggle; 3) that they must be written in a language that the masses will understand and appreciate; 4) that they should come out regularly every quarter; and 5) that we must be able to raise the funds for its printing and circulation.

The most challenging was the fifth, as we did not have a single centavo to start with. So we wrote to the front committees, who promptly responded with not only their financial contribution, but stories as well.

The making of the first issue was a joyful riot. When the staff started to go around the fronts to gather stories, everybody wanted to be interviewed. Each one had a story to tell, and the editorial staff had a hard time choosing what to prioritize. Some articles had to be reserved for succeeding issues.

The more colorful vignettes and articles dealt with unusual events such as the story of a wedding ceremony that had to be concluded on the run due to an enemy attack. Then there was about the POWs who didn't want to be released and requested to join the NPA. And about the CAFGUs who secretly surrendered because they could no longer withstand the Army. There was also a story on the people's court that successfully resolved a land conflict, and on the peasant communal farm that turned in sacks of corn for the Red fighters. The most heart-warming stories were those of the Red fighters themselves who talked about the quirks of guerrilla life and how they were able to integrate iron discipline into their lives. The stories came in varying forms. There were anecdotes, news items, letters to the editor, critiques, poems, songs, jokes, monologues, haikus, notices, etc. They were as colorful and as beautiful as the people who wrote them.

Reading and arranging the stories was a lot of painstaking work. But it was also a humbling experience. The articles were like uncut gems and

all they needed were dedicated editors to flesh out the gold from within and arrange them for the reader to understand. Those articles may not have followed the rules of grammar and syntax; there were no clear plots, no definite structures as short stories must have—but they contained the many images of the war, the clear voices of the masses, the plight of warriors, and the essential elements of what the people genuinely aspired for. It gave an intimation of the future, of the communities we would like to build and the people we hope to become.

The Masses Are Waiting, Waiting for Us

*And I think of green undulating hills
A tent in the wilderness, the constant rain,
Sunlight so hot and thick it blinds
And the clean cool waters to wash off all our sins.
Out there, where everything is in extreme,
the good news and the bad crashing in on us,
laughter, grief, despair, hope rolled into one
we drink our coffee laced with
danger and adrenaline
Ready to move, ready to engage
Unhampered by neither doubt,
nor fear nor sentiment—truly we shall
win this war yet, just give us a little more time. . .
For what is a minute a decade or a year
in this great collective undertaking
that tries to rectify the sins of history?
And you, my dearest friend, are you ready
To move with me and scale the heights,
and find the highpoint of our dreams?
Would we live a life and find our strength
in the heartbeat of the struggle?
Would you leave your sorrows and your
Little comforts to find a true and solid home
Among the people? Let us not delay
The masses are waiting, waiting for us.*

The Tomato Vendor

*From her we learned to classify tomatoes:
The green from the red,
The ripe from the semi-ripe
And throw away the rotten ones
She directed us to identify
What to imbibe, what to throw away
“Oppression is the maggot
In a rotting tomato,” she’d say
“Withstand your hunger and fight.”
Ah, how she regaled us
With stories of how she stood up
Against the landlords of her clan
Cracking the whip, so we’d understand.*

*But I was young and didn’t know
What her words or her whip meant
Till I found my way to the mountains
And lived with the comrades who
taught me class analysis
in a patient, formal way—much like
Arranging and classifying tomatoes.
They taught me to understand
The hunger of the poor and why
They have to stand up and fight
In this long undaunted history of the war.*

*Perhaps she would not approve.
This occupation is so noble yet so poor
And does not conform to the conventions.
But she would be so proud to know
Her words are in my veins,
Her lessons imbedded in my conscience.
I shall be what I am as she had taught me:
To suffer and to rise, to fight, to rejoice,
To work in the service of others
To never flinch.*

The Field, the Girl, the Dream

I see fields—rippling fields of green and gold; vast areas of *palay* and corn. Across the fields, people are working. Men and women. About 20 of them. A young woman comes nearer, her head is wrapped in red—it is a red kerchief with an emblem in the middle. It is Dagway, the head of the farm collective. She is smiling excitedly. She is counting the sacks of *palay*.

“200 sacks for a hectare. 20 sacks to the people’s government. The rest we shall divide among us.” She looks at her notebook and smiles again, trying to explain in a clear soft voice.

“Now we own the land. It wasn’t like this before the war. When we had to pay the landlord so much. And the farm input was so expensive, we always had to borrow from Mr. Uy, the usurer. Now it’s different. Very different, because we own the land.” She walks ever so lightly, swift and sure in the middle of the fields, a girl in red, leading the brigade.

“But not everything was easy. We won’t be here we now were it not for the real land reform. Most of these lands used to be owned by the multinationals. Not anymore. *Kasamas* drove the company away and we were able to get this lands, for free. We are landowners!

“Freeing the land from the clutches of Del Monte and Dole was difficult. They didn’t want to

leave, of course. They got so much profit from the plantations. And had their goons—so there was fighting everywhere. People died. And so many imprisoned. But we fought. It was a very long fight.

“Now the people own the land. We have planted crops and we have planted trees. We have also grown pigs and chickens. All according to the plan. We can even expand to other areas and cultivate bigger fields. The land must be well cared for. We may have to join force with other farm collectives. We can do it. Yes, we can, we must!

“Our biggest problem is still those people who cling to the old ways. Those who hate to work but demand their share of the harvest. Or those who always want to get ahead without thinking of others. There are still people like that. But not as problematic as before. One must give all that he can so the collective can reciprocate. You know, the work point system. A day’s work will earn a day’s pay. This is true for everyone. Everyone must work hard and try his best to contribute so everybody can eat. Nobody should go hungry. Especially the children.”

Kas, Kas, wake up.

I open my eyes. A young comrade is here to wake me up. It’s almost 5, it’s getting light. There is just a tinge of red in the horizon. I fold my duyan and my malong slowly, savoring the dream, so vivid and familiar. I think of the girl with the red kerchief, amidst the green

rice fields, explaining our agrarian reform, painting the future.

Time to move! Today is reality. Today there is a scheduled assessment of the peasant association. I must not be late for this meeting. Agribusiness plantations are coming in like a plague, taking the lands away from the peasants. The venue is still a long way from here and I must hurry. There is no time to waste. And mustn't sleep so much if we want to make our dreams come true.

Chapter 8

The Gumamela Is Still Red

“If we have chosen the position in life in which we can most of all work for mankind, no burdens can bow us down, because they are sacrifices for the benefit of all; then we shall experience no petty, limited, selfish joy, but our happiness will belong to millions, our deeds will live on quietly but perpetually at work, and over our ashes will be shed the hot tears of noble people.”

KARL MARX, REFLECTIONS OF A YOUNG
MAN ON THE CHOICE OF A PROFESSION⁴⁶

⁴⁶ English translation of the original publication in the yearly *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* (Archive for the History of Socialism and the Labor Movement), Leipzig, 1925.

Ode to the Party

*Before I knew you, nothing was my own.
I was just a leaf carried by the wind
A bystander who couldn't read the signs
Blind to the temper of the skies and
Stranger to the land of our fathers.*

*And then I met you, your calloused hands
That were forged like a weapon, coaxing
The grains to grow, shaping wood,
Mixing gravel and sand, building
A strong abode, so no storms could destroy it.
And as you worked, you sang,
The beautiful sad song of our history and
I thought you were calling me, or
Asking me to sing with you and
I had to wake up, for sunlight was coming in
Treading softly through the open door.
I could see things more clearly now:
The strong house, the ripening the grains, and
Your magical hands that transformed
the earth to useful things, so the people
could own them, own the flag of hope.
And then I knew, I knew with certainty!
It was life calling me.*

On Taking the Leap

Dear Eva—It was unsettling, our conversation about your experience of the difficult but beautiful life yonder; and of living dangerously under the evil reign of a mad gangster.

Your experience seemed entirely different, almost unheard of in this other side of the island. The long unmitigated walks in the deepest trails of *bokawe* and thorns; the shortness of the *duyan* and rain curtain; the almost daily fare of only rice and *bulad* (dried fish); the precautionary distance from the communities; various kinds of drones; the 24/7 vigilance; and some peasants giving in to the pressure and terror by the military—underscored how limited my experience is! What damage these heinous state attacks has done!

Despite these, I was consoled by your assurance that people still can't help but open their doors to us—and wish to be organized—albeit extra carefully, at least, for now. Mass work and production work just took on a different form because of relative mobility. And tactical offensives are still being launched to stop the ravaging inroads of the regime's Oplan Kapayapaan. Guerilla warfare thrives against the most modern armaments of the enemy.

On top of all these, there's suddenly that noose hanging over your head. Then, I realize the breadth and depth of what you must be going through. Yet,

your remarkable understanding of the situation, and judicious assessment of your short colorful stay in the most dangerous part of the region, has given you the strength and power to embark on the fulfilling life of a revolutionary. I can only salute you and embrace you in my heart as my dearest comrade and friend.

Our struggle is protracted, long-lasting and needs to be interminably infused into our lives. We certainly would have to “redefine” a lot of things, or put them into greater perspective. Take for instance, freedom. Yes, freedom. Before, you could do all kinds of things, and could get all the comforts and amenities that the bourgeois world offered. It’s hard to picture how you must now limit yourself into a small space, do mass line at someone else’s home, whip up your meals in improvised cookware in a makeshift kitchen, and content yourself with what ingredients are available.

Yet, evening comes and you remember your enriching experience in the steep mountain trails; the rain that seeped into your tent; the mud that clung to your boots; the backpack that weighed a ton; and sunshine so fierce it hurt your eyes. You recall these appreciatively, though—because your consciousness of the larger context of our struggle now comes with the wisdom of having directly endured sacrifices and shared joys with our young peasant comrades.

To go beyond yourself, beyond the usual and the ordinary, in order to realize your deepest conviction is in itself—Freedom. Now, you know you can do anything with what you think should be done—without the neocolonial trappings that we grew up with.

I know this is difficult. As Kuya would tell me, “man (or woman, too) is a creature of habit.” When I first joined the Nice People, it was very difficult for me to get used to my morning ablutions. I wanted my bathroom: the nice, clean smell of the tiles, and the flush after relief. It was only after some years that I loved doing it in the comfort of the lush fields, while watching the vast blue-green horizon and afterwards burying my poop to add to the organic fertilizer that I knew would make the world greener.

What a life we have! It is a life of utter Freedom and utter Responsibility. To borrow Mao’s oft repeated phrase, “a million things are waiting to be done.” There is that article to read and understand so you can translate it into the simplest terms for the peasant friends. There is the curriculum framework to edit, the cultural orientation to develop, the methods to (as you would say) “operationalize” our plans and programs.

Responsibility is a deep, ongoing awareness of the others—a readiness to do and act for the inter-

est and well-being of the “madlang pipol.”⁴⁷ In the mountains, these are our peasant friends that we must organize, the comrades who need an ED,⁴⁸ the cadre wanting advice, the subject of our tasks and duties that wait for us day in and day out.

Who am I to tell you about responsibility? As the eldest child, you’ve known it all your life—pressed by hardship to work to the bone and temporarily setting aside “org life” until your youngest sibling finished university—until you’re free to go back. And this “stray cat” that you took into your fold to lavish all the amenities and comfort, and even to risk your life so she could safely continue her work, isn’t this something? It reminds me of a biblical line that speaks about laying [down] your life for a friend. What more can I say then, but thank you, Eva, thank you so much. The years of togetherness and constant communication have taught me a lot.

First, it taught me to think better and see things from a greater perspective. As we all know, ideas are not ready-made. Even with many decades of rev practice, ideas must be stilled, clarified, and infused with greater wisdom and understanding so we could see the whole picture—“ang kabuuan.” Second, it taught me to prioritize. What is needed most? What should I

⁴⁷ The general public—Ed.

⁴⁸ Political study—Ed.

do first? Your insistence to be in contact with the different sectors and groups and your eagerness to consult our experts—all these gave me a better idea of how to go about my work.

And your resolve to do a “tour of duty” to fully understand our educational work has also taught me to move forward to do my principal task and not be diverted by the myriad distractions. Most of all, your unequivocal generosity provided the flavor that surpasses even the best tasting food in the world, especially because it was given so freely, so gladly that I would relish it all my life.

Truly, there are many things I learned from you—your decisiveness to do the essential and not prevaricate; your openness to do the unexpected and unorthodox; your willingness to dispense forgiveness; and your good sense and humor that can translate dark beings to light. There’s also your unfailing faith in the natural workings of this universe. All these provided the space that would prepare you for the leap into this difficult but necessary undertaking.

Eva, greater things are ahead of you, ahead of us. Our aspiration to build The Community that we had envisioned might be demanding, but not impossible to attain—especially that we have the conviction to stand up with the underprivileged. This mindset is most essential.

As you must have experienced, this People’s War is a very long process where we must look

at time not in terms of years or days but in the actual performance of how the great masses of the long-oppressed shall rise up to overcome the enemy and endure all kinds of physical and psychological challenges. It is a test of will and endurance. It is never flinching in serving the people.

In the company of comrades and the masses, we know that things will be done. With our collective strength, history will not fail us—and all the waiting and the sacrifice will be worth it.

Permit me to end this letter with lines from a poem that we wrote together, that speaks of new and wonderful things coming our way—*The gumamela is still red. . . It grows and blooms for us. . . It is irrepressible as the people. It is invincible with hope.*

With my deepest love for you and for the people,

KA JOVEN

There Is a Universe

*There is a universe that waits for us
 In these difficult, wounded mountains
 Full of bamboo and weeds that graze
 Our skin, we itch and scratch,
 Red fluid dripping, like doubt or
 The dark dreams of death.
 How stony this path we've taken,
 With snakes and vermin and
 A predator on the loose that
 Spews the venom of a failing rule
 And threatens our every move.
 He's nothing but a paper tiger, really,
 But still, sometimes, we feel afraid.*

*We stop to rest our weary limbs
 Sleep and comfort comes easily
 In this duyan's soft embrace.
 Little comrade wakes you up,
 Offering rice, dried fish, and
 Cool water from a nearby spring
 "Dugang kadasig,⁴⁹ Kas," he says
 Smiling silently, arranging your tent
 Trying to say "Be strong, we still
 Have a long way to go, and
 Tomorrow we shall walk again."*

⁴⁹ Have more enthusiasm—Ed.

*Suddenly the universe tilts itself
And you get the full view of
What you've been looking for:
The royal blue of the sky,
Vast lands, proud people,
And the strong brown limbs of
These peasant warriors like
Sturdy trees that have withstood
The test of time and wrestled
Against plunderers and marauders.*

*Dugang kadasig, Kas, he says
And all your doubts and fears
are suddenly effaced. Indeed
there is a life that beckons us
to a time of wonder and faith,
Where neither virus nor
police can lock us up, for
the despot is ousted and gone,
And our wealth is rescued
From the claws of invaders.
Here there will be land, and work
And food for everyone, and as
We sing our songs, hope stems
from the barrel of a gun.*

Doors Open When I See You**(For S & L)**

*Doors open when I see you,
your questions carry me
to the blue palm of the sky
and hope flashes by with the
shimmering sun, or
a seedling bursting with song.*

*The future spreads itself
like a mat of many colors
woven with the hands of
those who weave their dreams
like your Ma, her patience
is a tapestry to behold,
and we could only watch
in awe and affection. . .*

*Could I bring you then
to the mountains of my abode
and introduce you
to our peasant friends?
Would you be so kind or curious
to feel the rough hands of
Mang Ador, that lowly peasant
who has tilled the land for us?
Would you greet this unknown friend
if we meet him in the fields?*

*Ah, but the textbooks never
taught us who he was:
Math and Science were strangers
to him who counted the days
And waited anxiously
for the grains to grow—
so we could all eat.
Or perhaps we did know,
for did we not go to the lake
Where your grandpa
used to work to nurture the fish?
And your father, trying his best
To see his reflection in the waters
To build a future for his children?*

*Happiness is the hands that work,
the voice that sings
the mind that asks so many questions,
the laughter of a sunny day.
As I watch the sky so clear, so full of hope
I hear your little feet like a future on its tiptoes
Gently now let's scale the heights
To find the world in its just beauty
Spreading before us in all its colors
Where the peasants shall have the land,
And the fishermen shall have the waters,
We live and work in the service of others
Happy, brave and true.*

Letter to a Young Activist

My dear Nadine,

I read a quote somewhere which said “*give me just one generation of youth, and I’ll transform the whole world.*” This quote reminds me of you, and that I should be writing the letter I’ve promised to write since when I saw you marching the streets of Kidapawan, carrying a placard, trying to bring to hospital the wounded who were massacred by the police. How events have pushed us to search for meaning and redefine our convictions!

Now I see a young girl, a millennial on a bicycle on her way to work. To work with the slum dwellers? To discuss with the young artists of her collective? To document the human rights violations of the men in uniform? Or to go to the peasants in the nearby countryside? I don’t know. My sight is overwhelmed by the picture she presents: brown skin, jet black hair, eyes that shine and dance. Then from out the blue she suddenly smiles, raises her fist and says, “*Makibaka!*”⁵⁰

Ah, the vision of a young activist! Careful now. From across the street the police is eyeing you, trying to figure out if you are one of those who has joined that lightning rally, the fast ones who flash along the busy streets crying “*Patal-sikin ang Diktador!*”⁵¹ There is defiance in the way

⁵⁰ Fight!—Ed.

⁵¹ Oust the Dictator!

you stamp on the pedals, the rush of adrenaline pushes the bike onward with a speed that eludes the forces of the state. Whizzzz!

Aay, my dearest Nadine. If you must know, the picture I see gives me a sense of strength and assurance. I think you must be doing pretty well and have acquired the stamina, fortitude, and wit to find your way in that jungle of a city. Most importantly, you must have finally found the job that really matters, a job that corresponds to what you really want to do in life: fight against all injustices and oppression, defy the terror of Martial Law, oppose the state's subservience to its foreign masters, combat the greed and corruption that permeates our society—and work for the welfare and interest of the poor and marginalized.

I am very much aware there is danger in what you do. The state has declared war against all and any opposition. It has labeled activists as terrorists, mass leaders as criminals and slum dwellers as addicts who are condemned to spend their days in jail, and/or be killed. There is danger in standing up for one's rights and voicing protest. But you are not fazed. Fear is not in your vocabulary. Or maybe it is, I don't know. You show a very brave, erect figure and I feel absurdly happy.

Still, there is a more insidious enemy to think of, an enemy that is not in uniform and does not carry a gun but carries a multitude of goods and

urges us to buy, to compete, and to package ourselves into the myth of “beauty and modernity” that the media moguls have spun for us. Commercial culture and the corporate world tries to give a prettified picture of reality and snare us into the “free market” of globalization. We know their only real interest is to make profit and perpetuate the status quo. I have met many millennials whose topmost priority is the selfie, the gadget, the money that would bring instant gratification. I do not blame them. They are but victims of this mad world controlled and dictated by powerful big business.

I see your picture in the Facebook, and (thank god) it isn't a selfie. You are with a group of artists, in front of the Department of Labor and you are cooking a big meal for the group of workers on picket—a millennial among the masses. I feel a rush of instant pride like the quickening of blood for a very close kin.

When your father was alive, he left his landlord home to be with the peasants and led the movement for the free distribution of land. He was always there, a dashing figure in the great mass movement that forced the state to look into the age-old problem of land. He was so loved by the people they would remember him years after his demise and sing the songs that he composed.

And I see you have the same temperament—easy to go along with, solicitous of others, gen-

tle and reassuring, like the songs you sing for the workers who suffer under the weight of a very oppressive system. Fighting for what is fair and just and humane has always been the teaching of your parents which gave you a powerful tradition for transforming yourself, and the world. Yes, transforming. I know that you come from a landed family, but I am certain you've turned your back on your class and have fully transformed to embrace the proletariat and the peasantry, the vanguards for social change. Of course there is always the danger of giving in to the attraction of "a comfortable, lavish life"—as it can easily be within your reach. But would you be at peace? Did I not hear you say "happiness is serving the people?"

My dearest Nadine, how I wish you can be here among us, here in the mountains to organize and mobilize the multitude of workers and peasants, to give light and music to the direct participants of the People's War. For we do need somebody like you, an energetic young person ready to confront the odds, an artist of the people, who dares to work for her highest principles to create a world that is truly free.

I end this letter with a descriptive quote from Maya Daniel's poem:

*i hear songs, freedom songs
clear and high—*

*a gathering of wind is coming
my spirit learns to dance with the trees
the forest is pregnant
with more victories.*

Much Love,

KA JOVEN

To the Long Wait

*Don't be impatient now, dear friend
Let us not apply the measure of time
In this long wait there is no age
The goodness and acumen of
A comrade may not be measured
By how long he served so faithfully and well
his days ablaze with sacrifice
Do not speak of wrinkles or
Hair grown white, or this ailing heart
Or a wound that would not heal
I will not count the hours or days
You chose to remain silent, unforgiving,
battered by the weight of circumstance.
You know full well I've loved you
Loved being with you in this war
I took no notice how long, as you always said
"Serving the people has no constraints"
This long war is not measured in days or years
These battles are as droplets in the
Long dry spell of history; for were we not
Captives of a thousand years? Did we not
Count the scars? This callous heart waits
No matter how long it takes, I'll wait.*

The Gumamela Is Still Red

*The gumamela is still red
Still fresh and very red
It grows and blooms for us,
For all the poor people
Of our mountains.
Hardy as the peasant
Who has worked the fields
Its roots are firmly planted
On the ground, its leaves are lush,
Its petals fervid, it thrives.
It has endured the onslaught
Of thieves who have tried to
Uproot its wealth.
This flower will not be a prey
To the whims of invaders.
It shall not bow down to them
Who ravage our lands,
On its leaves are written
the hurt of history.
Its petals are enraged,
Tinted with the blood of martyrs
who have defended our
mountains for centuries
and fought with the people
Neither man nor beast
can kill this flower
It is resilient from the
monsoon winds and rain.*

*It paints the mountains red
It grows for a reason,
nurtured by the masses
It advances along cliffs and
Guards the mountain paths
like a warrior that never sleeps.
In whatever season
The gumamela will grow and
Bloom throughout the land
The long years shall not fade
The redness of its petals
Nor efface the lushness of its leaves.
Its seeds are everywhere,
Ardent and alive
It is irrepressible as the people,
It is invincible with hope.*

The gumamela is still red.

Thank You

*Thank you for this home.
Thank you for the children
And all the green things growing.
Thank you for the promise of greater things.
Thank you for the morning after.*

*Let us unite.
Let us be one—
In ousting the dictator
In overcoming the pandemic
In defending our people, our
Seas and our lands.*

*Let us protect the wealth of the world,
Let us join hands—
In collective work,
Let no one be idle, hungry or sad.
We are our only hope.
The future lies in our hands.*

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