

# Letters From Another Life

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I keep letters on my computer from as far back as 1989—composed, I can now recall, on WordPerfect 5.0—but not emailed, which was still a couple of years down the road for me, even in the United States where I did my graduate studies at the University of Michigan (MFA, 1988) and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (PhD, 1991). My letters were encoded, printed out by dot matrix, then signed and stuffed into an envelope for mailing to the world at large. Those letters and perhaps even some of those addressees may be long gone, but thankfully my files remain, and I've plundered them for these glimpses into another life. The first is a letter to Gina Apostol, who had done her MA in Writing at Johns Hopkins and had just gotten married to Arne Tangherlini, and I sent the second to Ramon Bautista (the Mindoro-born writer, not the comedian), who was doing his MFA in Wichita, Kansas and who had responded to a copy of my newest story, later published as "Under the Dinosaurs." Here they are, basically unedited—today, creative nonfiction, but back then, just letters to real, pre-Facebook friends.

5 Feb 89

Dear Gina,

This is sooo late, but CONGRATULATIONS and BEST WISHES, missus—for your wedding, and for your US debut (and thanks too for the copy—what company you keep, Ms. Apostol—or Mrs. -?) Before you read any further, let me warn you that this is another of those form letters I'm sending to a select few, and only the closest, friends, each of whom I should thank or say hello to for some unique and special reason. *Walanghiya, ano?* At least, *iba ang intro mo* (“Oy, kumusta na?” is the standard opening.)

How's the new year coming along for you? How much longer will you be staying at your seaside resort? It's freezing here in Milwaukee—it was 4 degrees yesterday, and when you walk outside with the wind ripping your face off you feel like basking under coconuts for the rest of your life. *Wala na akong ginawa dito kundi mag-aral at kumain*; I haven't been able to write anything creative for almost a year; *puro* academic papers (e.g., “Catharsis and Closure in D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*; “Irony and the Gods in *Troilus and Cressida*”, etc. etc.)

It's really fun to study in a good (not the best, but adequate) university like UWM (Wisconsin-Milwaukee), where people seem to know what they're doing, even though it's exhausting (tonight I'll have to read Bellow's *Seize the Day* and Dryden). *Ewan ko ba kung bakit napasubo ako dito sa pagpi-Ph.D. kuno; masarap lang pakinggan (at maganda ang toga)*. I still have to take my Qualifying Exams this May—an oral exam based on 50 texts from *Beowulf* to the present—30 texts from a given list, 20 of your own choosing. Because I have a fellowship, I got off from having to teach this year; but I will have to teach 2 sections (Composition and Creative Writing) next year, and this year I've been taking full loads (12 units/sem); *ang totoo nito, malapit na akong matapos sa course work ko—27 units lang* (beyond the MA—may 36 na ako sa Michigan) *ang* minimum dito *para sa Ph.D.*, aside from the dissertation (creative *pa 'yon*); but if I don't get a “high pass” on the qualifying exam, I'll have to take more core courses. *Kaya magre-review ako*; if you want a good reference book for English lit, *the* book to get is

Albert Baugh's *A Literary History of England*, which is quite old (1948, *pero may mas bagong edition na*)—a mammoth volume with excellent essays on all the periods; this, along with the Norton, is my reviewer.

*Ito lang ang maganda dito—ang daming libro!* There's a 4-story building here crammed full of used books, in downtown Milwaukee; I've started a personal project of getting hold of all the books on the Philippines or by Filipinos that I can afford, especially colonial literature; there are many turn-of-the-century books to be found here on the Philippines (e.g., *Our Islands and Their People*); I also came across and bought (for \$10—pretty expensive, by rummage-sale standards) a 16 mm newsreel of Manila during the “liberation”; old *National Geographics*, a copy of the 1936 *Story* magazine featuring Sinai Hamada's “Tanabata's Wife”, old novels set in the Philippines, etc.

(N.B. Depending on who you are, some of this will be old news—B.) I have to walk about 25 minutes to school, under about six layers of clothing, but it's not only sweaters that I'm buried under—*baon din ako sa utang!* *Itong mga lintek na credit card—*Visa, American Express—*napakasarap gamitin.* After 10 tries, I finally got a Citibank Visa by giving the magic answer on the application form (“Are you a US citizen?” “YES!”—*ayan, Amerikano na rin ako, sa ka-u-utang.*) It's such a convenience, however.

*Isa pang dahilan ng pagkabaon ko (hulugan, \$46/mo. for 24 mos.):* this computer I'm typing this letter on—a Leading Edge Model D, an IBM-compatible, which has enough memory (30 megabytes) to store 15,000 pages of text. It makes writing so much easier (so where's the novel?); there are even these software programs that can put in, arrange and alphabetize, say, footnotes or endnotes for you; *wala nang silip-silip kung may espasyo pa sa ibaba, wala nang Touch-and-Go*; the ridiculous extreme of it, of course, is that they now have poetry-writing programs (which will supply you with a menu of rhyming options, for example). If you should ever buy or get access to an IBM-compatible (or a Macintosh for that matter), tell me and I'll send you free software, especially the more expensive start-up ones—MS-DOS, BASIC, WordPerfect, Wordstar, MacWrite (word processing programs), etc. I can copy disks and mail them to you; in some

publishing houses and magazines, *ganiyan na ang sistema*—you submit your “manuscript” on a floppy disk.

*O, sigé, tama na muna ito. Balitaan mo naman ako; call me collect, if you want. Huwag kang madadala sa katamaran kong magsulat. At ang totoo nito, hindi naman talaga ito form letter; I just sent Isabel an “international” version (e.g., 4 degrees F = -15C) and Judy a “welcome back” edition. You should call Judy for the latest *chismis*; among other things, Maria’s left the department (*napuno na rin*); Krip, by the way, was here in the US (Houston and New Orleans) last week; Ricky wrote me from St. Louis; I think he’s trying to stay on for another year at least; do you have any news about people we know? And the old question: does anyone know where Fidelito is? Are you going to stay here for good? *Ako, gusto ko nang umuwi!* How wifey do you feel?*

And do send me copies of your new writing; I enjoy your prose, as ever.

Walkin’ in a winter wonderland,

Butch

12 January 91

Dear Mon:

Thanks for your prompt and generous response. I’ll take your comments into account when I sit down to a more thorough rewrite of the story—probably in a month or so (I always wait a while before I revise, to allow the story and the responses to it to sink in). About the only further explanation I can make at this point is that (and you don’t have to believe this if you’d rather not) I deliberately left a lot of things unclear or off-the-point, because (especially from a first-person POV) I think it’s more reflective of the actual textures of our thinking and memory. In other words, statements

and images may make a *cumulative* point or impression, without in themselves making immediate sense. You're very right when you observe that my characters' thoughts are always somewhere else (although I have to watch that it doesn't become too much of a mannerism); when people can't deal directly with their problems they talk about the silliest things, and my characters (probably like me) are largely ineffectual, even confused (personally and culturally); so that Norman Reilly may fancy himself to have been a savior, once, but deep in him he knows that he really didn't do anything, and in fact can't bear the responsibility of doing something. But enough of that.

I enjoyed reading your story and your poem, and after I write this letter I'll do a more detailed marginal or textual commentary if I can. I find it very interesting and reassuring (for both of us) that we seem to represent two different approaches to writing about the same country from this distance—which is the way it should be, the more approaches the better, because our national experience is ultimately too complex for any one sensibility to encompass (social realism, magic realism, minimalism, whatever). It's particularly interesting that we seem to be (consciously or otherwise) *resisting* opposite factors or influences: you resist (for want of a better word) “Americanization”, while I resist “exoticism”—and the *really* surprising thing is that both of us are failing, because it's in the nature of the thing—your island is being taken over by batteries and bulldozers, and my cross-cultural wishy-washies keep coming back to the island.

Of course this is based on skimpy evidence; I'm sure you've written “non-native” stuff, and much of the material I've written here actually goes back to (and stays in) the Philippines. Maybe we're going through phases or poses (sometimes we need to, to go on); whatever. The thing is, none of this can really be exclusive. Again, all for the better; note the differences (and inevitable similarities) between Garcia Marquez and Borges, both of whom I (and I'm sure you do, too) admire. Even our perceptions of what Americans will say and how they think must differ here and there; maybe *this* country is that complex, too (or our experiences of it). One of these years, I hope we can share notes over a beer; meanwhile, we can write more fiction, which is clearer than all polemics. I know it's tough to have

to deal with alienation, to study, to teach, to make \$4.25/hr., and to write at the same time (and deal with a mess of personal problems as well)—but we would neither be the first nor the last ones; cold comfort, but so it goes. I do wish I could lighten up—I certainly hope I will! In good time, things will fall into place... This is just pre-emptive anxiety, so that when I go home, I can be blithely indifferent to all the carping I'm bound to hear (*I'll* have to deal with that; you don't—not yet, not until you come back).

Seriously, I do feel obligated, and not only in the legal sense, to return and teach there; I don't feel messianic, but what else did I get this Ph.D. for? I went to the MLA in Chicago—and met 3,500 other Ph.D.'s or would-be Ph.D.'s, many of them looking for non-existent jobs; and you know as well as I do that in this country, if you want to teach any place other than the Northwest Chattahoochee Community College—and unless you've won the Nobel Prize in Literature and published 6 books—it's very difficult to get a real teaching job without a Ph.D. So staying here is no sure thing, either; but hey, I'll gladly teach at Chattahoochee if I have to, and one of these days I just might—but I have to go through this process first of giving home (and myself at home) a chance.

America will become clearer to me only when I'm back home (and vice-versa, as your fiction is doing for you now). Again, you obviously think differently, and that's your right and privilege, and I'm not going to insist on knowing what's keeping you in this place (aside from its obvious material advantages, which I appreciate as well) unless and until you feel like saying something. My own life here turned at one point into a huge, huge mess, and that's all I have to say about it; so everyone has all kinds of reasons, and you and I can tell the others, "What the hell do *you* know about living here?"

Good luck to both of us.... Gina is living in Baltimore with her American husband; she's writing (very well) in between part-time jobs at a bookstore and a publishing house (I think). I think she's happy here, and I'm so glad she is here; from what she tells me of the reception she got from people back home (UP, relatives) during her last visit there, I think she deserves better. Of course, I hope that at one point, when we Filipinos wake up to

the fact that there are *really* some things you can *also* learn out here if you put your mind to it (maybe no big deal, but if I could have learned as much in Diliman I'll eat my shoe—Ramas, Abad, Arcellana and a few others excluded), people like you and Gina can return to spice things up. We don't *need* to (I think Philippine literature can get along very well without us—I have tremendous respect for the work, and the attitude, of people like Krip Yuson, Fidel Rillo, and Boy Noriega), but it would be, well, fun.

I'll make some brief notes on the story and the poem, but here's another quick impression: the more I think about it, the more I prefer the poem to the story. The language and imagery in both pieces are very rich and highly textured, but I enjoyed the almost-wistfulness of the outhouse poem, in contrast to the insistent and sometimes formulaic (i.e., foundlings invariably mean mystery and trouble) mythologizing of the story. (There, I'm beginning to sound like one of these fucking critics I hate.) I think what I see in the story is a version of the age-old fertility or harvest-sacrifice myth; to fertilize the land (and, by extension, the barren woman here), something of value has to be given up—in this case, the unexpected blessing of the foundling.

So this is what happens, and to the extent that myths are, well, retold and therefore predictable, the story derives its freshness from the details and the effects (especially for foreign readers); what *I* liked most in this respect was your inclusion of modern and seemingly incongruous details—the plastic guns, battery-operated phone, etc.—which is of course part of the subtext, perhaps the *real*, implied story, the real source of the barrenness (the encroachment of capitalism—the Chinese middleman, etc.). Nice move! (Now I'm seeing more things in it.)

But I feel somehow more rewarded by the ironic humor of the poem, which builds up suspensefully, keeps the magic well within control (as the father in the poem ruefully experiences), and really plays with and upon its own (again) “exoticism”—Chinese gold, eh?

I can also sense from these two pieces that you've asked yourself here and there if you should use the native term, or its nearest English equivalent,

or explain a term on the spot (or in a glossary). My feeling about this is, unless it's absolutely unclear and necessary to explain, let the context bear the meaning out. *Bayaan mo sila*. We have to sort through quaint British, French and Russian terms when we read their stories in English; I don't think we should bend over backwards to explain our terms and cultural peculiarities, simply because they're not familiar with us. If the story is interesting enough, they'll find a way of understanding it more fully; let them work (as you did to establish, contextually, that Leinenkugel was a beer). This is probably why, when you come across, say, Singaporean or Malaysian fiction in English, you get the sense that there's nothing more to the language because it's all out in the open; it's one-dimensional.

*O, tama na muna ito*. Think about my comments (as I do yours) but don't take them too seriously, if you find them a hindrance to writing. There's nothing like production—and I better get cracking on a few more stories myself (my next one will be something called "Picnic"—what happens when rival Filipino-American organizations get together for a big social event—*nakakatawa, nakakadismaya*, as you well know!) Meanwhile, here's an older short short story (from three years ago), which I got published in *Indiana Review*.

Have fun.

Cheers,  
Butch