Remembering Franz Arcellana

Susan S. Lara

Many years ago, in one literary event attended by some foreign delegates at the University of the Philippines Executive House, the luminaries were asked to introduce themselves to the rest of the guests. Each of them gave their name and the country and institution they represented. The last to speak, a tall, stern-looking man with a booming voice, simply said, "If you do not know who I am, you have no business being here!" That brought the house down, because of course, everyone knew who he was. And everyone was relieved to know that they had a right to be there.

That man was Francisco Arcellana, and I don't know anyone else who could have pulled that off with such flair.

Franz was my first teacher in fiction writing. It was an elective, because my area of concentration was comparative literature, not creative writing — it was called "imaginative writing" then.

He seldom gave prescriptive advice. Most of the time he told stories, stories that held nuggets of wisdom. One of the first things he told us was to read, and read, and read some more. He shared the story of a writer he knew who refused to read other authors because he didn't want his writing to be influenced by them. He wanted to be original. But far from being original, he kept churning out stories that had already been told, in better ways, by other authors. And so his stories kept getting rejected, until he had enough rejection slips to wallpaper his room.

He believed that "nothing written may not be rewritten." He couldn't stress enough the importance of rewriting or revising, and often told the story of Dylan Thomas, who, in his last moments, could not let go of a poem, and kept saying "there is something bloody wrong with this line!"

By the time I attended the U.P. National Writers Workshop, I had already known Franz for several years. It was the time when fellows heard comments that made them cringe and weep, and sometimes give up writing altogether; comments like "Just go home and plant *kamote*" or "*Ibasura mo na 'to*." And at every session, a box of Kleenex tissues would be on every table, ready to stanch the flow of tears.

Franz, however, remained one of the kindest panelists. He spoke with authority, he was demanding, he had a stentorian voice that could make a young writer quake with fear. But he knew the power of words — how they could inspire or dishearten, fire up dreams or douse them with disparagement. And he always chose to inspire and fire up dreams. The closest he got to admonishing was when he told young poets, with eyes blazing, the importance of "prosody!" Or exhort them to give their writing everything they'd got: "Blow! Blow as hard as you can!" And of course, his most famous line, "Get real!"

I learned the most important lesson from him after the first story I submitted to him was taken up in class. The story was about a family constrained by middle class values, and had an epigraph — a line from T. S. Eliot, if I remember correctly. I didn't know then what I know now, that, as Heather Bowlan points out, "Once an epigraph is there in italics, looking important, it casts a shadow over everything that follows," especially, may I add, if the story itself is not remarkable to begin with. Predictably, my story was ripped to shreds, almost literally, by the class. And Franz, who was the soul of gentleness, said that the epigraph was well-chosen. I felt sorry for myself, but felt more sorry for Franz, as I watched him struggle to find something else to praise, aside from the portion that was not even mine.

Later that day, I made the first of many visits to Room 1074 at the Faculty Center. I confessed that I felt dejected, discouraged, and wondered if it was worth it for me to persist. "Look," he said, "you have a story. Only you know that story. Only you can write it the way you do. What if you die tomorrow? Then the world will forever be ignorant of what you know, and you will forever be responsible for that ignorance!" It turned out that he

had said that to many of his students, and every one of them remembered the fire and intensity in his eyes when he said it.

Thus, the concept of stewardship of one's talent was instilled in me before I was even sure I had the talent to steward. So while I started to write because I had to complete my electives, I have continued writing because I must. That word, "must," has to be taken in both senses: in its sense as compulsion, because I just can't imagine myself *not* writing, and in its sense as duty, the duty to honor a gift.

Writing is a lonely undertaking, and the temptation to give up is irresistible, especially when you're young, and you have many other options. Having a teacher, who not only teaches the craft of writing but also persuades you that your writing is important and meaningful to others, is a real gem. I am among the lucky ones who found this precious gem, Francisco Arcellana, and I will forever be grateful.