

THE JOURNAL OR DIARY EXCERPT AS LITERATURE

By Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo



*Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, Ph.D. is a writer of fiction and nonfiction, and a literary scholar and critic, with more than 40 published books. The latest of these is *Collected Stories and Tales* (UST, 2019), a compendium of her short fiction over the years; and *What I Wanted to Be When I Grew Up: Early Apprenticeship of a Writer* (UP, 2021). Among the distinctions she has received are the Carlos Palanca Grand Prize for the Novel, the Gawad Balagtas from the Unyon ng mga Manunulat sa Pilipinas, and the Gawad Dangal ng Lahi from the Carlos Palanca Foundation. She has served as director of the University of the Philippines Press and the UST Publishing House, vice president for public affairs of the UP System, and director of the UP Institute of Creative Writing. At present, she is director of the UST CCWLS and professor emeritus of UP.*

I have kept a diary or journal (I use the terms interchangeably) since I was eight years old. I think it started out simply as an exercise notebook, an opportunity to practice my writing. Its earliest inspiration was Rebecca Randall's "Thought Book" in the childhood novel *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*.

Later, I came to regard it as a companion, a friend, much like Anne Frank's diary. I even gave her a name. As Anne Frank called her diary Kitty, I called mine Toni. She was a record of my days, a witness to my changing moods. As I grew older, Toni mirrored my growth, from girl to woman, to wife and mother, to professional writer and teacher. At some point, she acquired a different name: Tania. Written with my guard down, Tania is perhaps the most honest testimony of my tallest dreams, as of my deepest heartaches; of the things I fear, and the things I truly cherish.

"Tania has served me well—as bosom friend and confidante; as traveling companion; as exercise notebook or sketchbook; as sounding board for thoughts, both sacred and profane; as repository for memories, both trivial and momentous; as escape hatch, as hedge against depression and despair."¹

In 2009, I published a collection of travel memoirs, of the trips I took after Tony, my husband, retired from his job with the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and we returned to the Philippines. I gave this book the title *Travels with Tania* (UST Publishing House). I decided on that title because the book drew heavily on my journal entries for the accounts of those trips... to Canberra and Cambridge, to Indonesia, to Singapore; to New York City and Washington D.C., to L.A. and Norfolk in Virginia, to Sonoma and back to L.A.

But the journal itself I have never allowed people to read, not even my closest friends or members of my family. It was written with my guard down. I have several times entertained the thought of destroying it. However, when several volumes did, in fact, go up in smoke, in the fire that gutted the old University of the Philippines (UP) Faculty Center in 2016, I felt like I

¹ Hidalgo, Cristina Pantoja. *What I Wanted to Be When I Grew Up: a Writer's Early Apprenticeship*. University of the Philippines Press, 2021. Tania was the name I gave my diary when we returned home to the Philippines after 15 years of living overseas. Before that, she was called Toni.

had lost a limb. And now, here I am, submitting an excerpt from my journal as my contribution to this book. Does this give the lie to my claim never to have wanted strangers to read it?

Why do writers publish their diaries? I think for the same reason that they sometimes write the same material in different forms—as a novel, or a poem, or an essay, or a play—and then publish it.

Over the years, many writers have published their diaries. This suggests that diaries, for some time now, have been deemed worthy of being published alongside those writers' fiction or poetry or nonfiction. But diaries are personal documents, written, one assumes—at least originally—purely for the author's own eyes. Does this mean that they were published in their original form? I shall leave this question for now and return to it later.

Even a cursory reading of the published diaries/journals/notebooks of writers will reveal them to vary widely in both content and form. Off the top of my head, I can think of: Fyodor Dostoevsky, George Orwell, George Sand, Dorothy Wordsworth, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Andre Gide, Graham Green, Mary Sarton, Susan Sontag, Anais Nin, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg... Just looking at those names, one can imagine how their diaries must have differed from each other.

I might also mention the earliest published diaries that I know of, the diaries of those court ladies of 11th century Japan, like the *Diary of Lady Murasaki Shikibu*, *The Diary of Izumi Shikibu*, and *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*. These books are unlike any diaries that came before or after them. They are not even like each other. Each is truly unique. The label “diary” seems to have been a decision by their modern editors/translators, who did not know what name to give them.²

2 https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Diaries_of_Court_Ladies_of_Old_Japan/Introduction]

It becomes obvious that there is no point in speaking about what a diary or a journal *should be*, the way those “how-to-write” manuals might endeavor to guide beginning writers on how to produce a work of fiction or nonfiction. A diary or journal will be whatever kind of book the diarist wants it to be. Hence, some diaries consist of brief daily logs; others contain reflections or meditations on a variety of topics; some serve as a form of confessional; and still others might be like practice exercises in different kinds of writing.

They differ from other forms of creative nonfiction (the genre under which they are today classified), in that they were not originally written as literary pieces but as personal documents. Which brings me to this essay’s title, which may strike the reader as a bit of a paradox. If a diary is a private document, written spontaneously, without thought of readers, how could it also be artistic? Does not the modifier “artistic” imply artifice?

Personally, I believe that when the diarist is a writer—would-be writer, or professional writer—she cannot help but try to write artistically. No more than a professional singer can help singing *well*, and in her own particular style, whether she be doing it before an audience, or in the privacy of her home.

This brings me back to that other point. If the diary—or diary excerpt—is being offered to the reader as a literary piece, one would assume that, like all other literary pieces, it has been edited. But does not a diary or diary excerpt, which has been edited, cease to be an authentic diary? My answer to that is: it very much depends on what kind of editing it has undergone. I think it would be safe to say that all published diaries or journals have been edited. In their original form, there is much about a diary or journal which might be totally boring, or even unintelligible, to the reader who does not know the diarist personally.

There would be references to persons that the reader would not be able to identify; to events that would not be familiar to the reader. There might be certain phrases or expressions which are a private joke between the diarist and her family members or close friends. The editor (be she the diarist herself or someone else) would need to decide whether to omit all such references or private codes, or to provide some form of clarification or explanation. The clarification might be as simple as providing the full name of the person referred to, instead of just his childhood nickname; or as complicated as adding a digression into a historical event or a public controversy, to supply the context for the material the reader needs to understand and appreciate the text properly. It may also be necessary to prune some unnecessary or irrelevant bits.

On the other hand, the diarist needs to take care that these revisions, or additions or excisions, fit into the texture of her narrative without calling attention to themselves. They have to be all of a piece within the work of art.

In deciding to publish her diary or journal—or excerpts thereof—*as a literary work*, the diarist does so knowing that the work must meet demands similar to those that all other forms of creative nonfiction are expected to meet. The most important has to do with craftsmanship. Like the memoir, or the personal essay, the diarist should be aware that readers will regard her as the “persona” or narrator, and expect this narrator to be capable of engaging them in her routine activities, as was in her conflicts or crises. On the other hand, the narratives will be expected to recreate the narrator’s milieu (what in fiction is referred to as “setting” and “atmosphere,” albeit not as fully). The reader will also expect the narratives to include other persons besides the diarist, and that these “characters” also be interesting in their own right. The diarist’s tone and style, and her insight into the significance of the experiences that the narrative recounts, would evoke a response from the reader, perhaps emotional, perhaps intellectual, perhaps both. But, and

perhaps most importantly, the narrative must retain the honesty which is at the core of all effective nonfiction.

The journal excerpt which I chose for this book project is focused on just one year in my life—the year when our family returned to the Philippines, after living overseas for 15 years. The story that emerges, not surprisingly, is a narrative of re-entry. I was trying to resume my career as a teacher and writer. I was also trying to pick up my unfinished PhD. And all that, while trying to adjust to the present realities of the country, which seemed extremely unstable. My husband, for his part, was also attempting to carve a place for himself, having given up his career with the United Nations agency that he had been working for. (Buying the old house which became Casa Hidalgo, and setting up Magiting Gamecock Farm in its backyard was part of efforts to do this.) I decided to exclude those passages which didn't deal with those four themes.

A diary or journal is a kind of narrative, with passages of reflection or meditation scattered about. It is a combination of scene, summary, and description. It may be livened up with action and dialogue, with sensory images, with vivid and concrete details. Reflective passages may be lightened up with humor. But it is important not to overdo all this. Revision, yes, but within limits. To alter a phrase here and there, to introduce a bit of dialogue, to add an image or two, to exclude some paragraphs—these are different from writing new material and passing it off as original entries. Nor should characters and incidents be invented. This, in my mind, would be cheating.

In any case, as a literary form, the diary has its own advantages. By its very nature, it creates an impression of authenticity and intimacy. It has a built-in narrative arc. It allows for flexibility of structure, for digressions. It also allows for personal advocacy—if one is that way inclined—without the danger of preachiness.

That said, the form has its disadvantages. One is that it runs the risk of compromising the privacy of people who were involved in the diarist's life, and who appear in her life narrative as characters. In my case, these were my children. I solved this problem by simply not going there. The girls are mentioned, of course, but their personal experiences are not part of the substance of the book.

Another disadvantage is that one sometimes gets into the habit of writing in a diary when one is in a particular frame of mind; say, when one is feeling gloomy or pessimistic, as opposed to when things are going well, and one is feeling cheerful. So, the picture of the diarist that emerges is lopsided. But this may just be a peculiarity of mine, and not shared by other diarists.

In the end, I guess a journal excerpt is no more problematic than any other literary form. The problems concerned are simply different. And, for me, the job was probably easier since I didn't have to agonize over a first draft. The first draft was already written: it was the journal itself.

RE-ENTRY AND RENEWAL: PAGES FROM MY JOURNAL

by Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

21 October 1990

We have been home since October 2, but I have not written a word in this journal. I tell myself that I have only now acquired this notebook. But that's an excuse.

I think I just didn't feel like writing anything, anywhere. Is it possible that I do not consider the business of resettling here as important as settling in a new country? No, there is no doubt in my mind about the significance of this move for me, for our family. Perhaps I simply do not want to document my feelings just yet. For what would the journal entries be, but a list of my fears and anxieties, a record of all the misfortunes that seem to be falling on this country—a flood, an earthquake, yet another *coup d'état*, fuel shortage, jobless overseas workers returning from the Middle East, the sinking peso...

Tony is at loose ends. He tells me he can't get started on his projects while the peso-dollar exchange rate does not stabilize. He has bought us a second-hand Sentra, but is very disappointed at the quality control and service at the Nissan casa, even as he tells himself that disappointment and anger over what doesn't work is a waste of time. None of it is going to change. I tell him he should call up a couple of his old friends, play golf, play tennis—he spends most of his time by himself. But he says that, for him, this is not a good time for socializing.

For my part, I have been given a teaching schedule at UP, though I still have no appointment, nor an office. Classes start on Nov. 12. Both Tatti Licuanan and Shayne Lumbera —to whom I spoke some days ago—are

encouraging me to apply for a teaching post at the Ateneo. But I'd rather stay in UP. I want to finish the PhD I left behind when we moved to Bangkok; and those three years that I taught there were among the best in my life.

I wish I had a clear idea of what is to come. How does one make plans when everything is so unstable, so unpredictable? Tony suggests that I look at it another way: facing the unexpected is also exciting.

While I was waiting for Anna to finish her UPCAT [University of the Philippines College Admission Test] test, I spent some time with Carmel Almendrala (wife to the Philippine Ambassador in Burma when we lived there), whose Jenny—one of Anna's best chums in the Rangoon International High School—was taking the same exam. Carmel was expansive, optimistic, happy about Fred's new posting to San Francisco. I tried not to envy her. Maybe this is what Tony meant about this not being the right time to socialize.

I've decided to send my finished MS, "I Remember... Travel Essays," to Gloria Rodriguez of New Day after all, instead of to Anvil Publishing, which was what I had earlier planned to do. I owe Gloria my loyalty. This will be my third book that she will have published.

23 October

The president of Pasang Masda, Oscar Lazano, was shot to death yesterday. Classes have been canceled—even at ISM³—because of the scheduled *welga ng bayan*. Tony is becoming less optimistic about the country's future. When renegade army officers (who usually belong to the far right) join forces with the NPA [New People's Army] (who, of course, are far left), how can the center hold?

³ International School of Manila, where we had put Anna, to enable her to finish high school with her former classmates

5 November 1990

Today we spent the whole day in Makati. Tony wanted to get the Sentra in good working order, to dress it up, to iron out all the kinks. At the end of the day, he still wasn't done. The car stereo wasn't ready. The new car clock is a lemon.

Yesterday we went to Ermita, to check on the exchange rate. The official peso-dollar rate has dropped from P25.75 to P28. (The black market rate is, of course, higher.) Gas rationing is about to be imposed. Everyone is expecting a tougher time.

Tony said to me, "Why don't we just take a look at the antiques in Intramuros?" But the shops apparently close by 5:00 p.m. We settled for *merienda* at the Fundar Coffee Shop. The *tokwa at baboy* and *dinuguan at puto* tasted terrific. The grins were back on our faces. We walked around Plaza San Luis a bit, enjoying the restored Intramuros (a credit to Chitang Nakpil) [writer Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil]. We were home, and suddenly, all was right with the world!

We recalled that we had gone together to Vere's and Jess' wedding at San Agustin Church. It was a rainy June morning. And the flowers, candles, organ music, incense... the magnificent church itself... and Vere's trailing white gown, were as romantic as a fairy tale!

Was Vere the first in our group to get married? We girls were all in our early twenties, full of dreams about graduate school and glamorous jobs abroad... Within two years or so, we all got married and became housewives (though of course, we did not give up our jobs). In another year, we became mothers! Danner had been Rita's classmate in UST. Tony was only a year older than me. We were children!

And Linda, who had always said that she only ever wanted to find a good man to marry and raise a family with, left for Madrid to get an MA. The irony of it was not lost on us.

7 November

I decided to have my hair cut at this place that my sis-in-law, Marie, goes to, and they did a good job of camouflaging the way it has thinned out. Because of the stress, I think. Now it looks fluffy, which effectively disguises its real condition. I have also been shopping for more casual clothes—skirts, slacks, blouses—for work. The wardrobe of a diplomat's life will not be cool in the UP campus.

Having no room of my own (in the UP FC) [Faculty Center] is discouraging. My old friend, Connie Alaras (now our department chair), who approved my appointment, is on leave. And her OIC doesn't seem able to ask faculty members who have retired to vacate their offices to make room for new faculty members, and returning faculty members, like myself.

8 November

The prospect of war looms over the Middle East. Had Tony chosen to stay on with UNICEF, he would be out there in Jordan (this was mentioned to him as a possibility after his term as chief of the Asia desk in New York was over). The children and I would probably have been evacuated to Manila. And he would be much closer to ruining his health with excessive smoking and resentment over glass ceilings in the aid agencies of the United Nations. In that sense, we're better off here.

18 November 1990

The bus began its slow climb up the slope of the mountain, Then, suddenly, it came to an abrupt stop. The driver gunned the engine. Nothing happened. The bus refused to move.

No, wait... I should begin at the beginning.

I took along a small notebook to Mount Makiling, hoping to write down my “impressions.” Didn’t have time for writing, though. Looking back on it now, I feel a kind of gentle amusement at my own eagerness to attend this out-of-town UP English Department seminar. Surely I was no stranger to academic seminars? I had been teaching off and on, in different countries, for at least ten years altogether.

Maybe what excited me was the idea of it—being part of a forum of professional people, being among colleagues, being taken seriously, having something to contribute, having an identity distinct from what it has been all these years. (And, quite honestly, doing it away from the responsibilities of the home and family.)

Why do I feel deprived of a professional life? Is it that my work—as columnist, editor, teacher—in all those different countries where we lived, were just jobs, not a career? Of course, I was hired because of my credentials and accepted as a professional. But in the circles to which Tony and I belonged as a couple, and where we spent most of our time, I was, at best, a gifted amateur.

But to return now to our department seminar. The faculty of all four programs—Comparative Literature, Anglo-American Literature, Creative Writing, and English Language—were all in attendance. The topic was the new critical theories--postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, etc.—which to me seemed to be more connected to philosophy, epistemology, linguistics, political science, and other disciplines, than to literature. My own

background is still firmly New Criticism (which is anything but “new” these days).

In the bus, I sat with close friends from my early UP days—Helen Lopez, Preachy Legasto, Thelma Arambulo and Connie Alaras. (Helen and I had manned the freshman registration table during our first sem in the department; and, coming from UST which used a block-system registration for freshmen, I was totally overwhelmed by the chaos. But we were all old hands now.) Our seats were up front, close to the driver. Everyone seemed to be in high spirits. It felt good to get away from the city.

The bus began its slow climb up the slope of the mountain and suddenly came to an abrupt stop. The driver gunned the engine. Nothing happened.

“*May problema po ba?*” Connie asked the driver.

“*Ayaw pong umabante,*” the driver replied. He gestured to his foot, which was pressing on the gas pedal.

“Maybe his emergency brake is on,” Thelma said.

The driver shook his head. “*Hindi po. Tignan nyo.*”

Several of our companions, who had heard the exchange, promptly slid their windows open, leaned out, and cried: “*Tabi tabi po!*” or “*Makikiraan po!*” People in the back rows heard, and followed suit.

After a few minutes, the driver stepped on the gas once more, and the bus resumed its slow ascent. And everyone simply picked up their conversations from where they had left off.

“What just happened?” I said to Preachy.

She gave me an incredulous look. “We asked permission from the spirits to be allowed to pass,” she replied. “This is Mt. Makiling, remember? Mariang Makiling lives here.”

I must have looked as puzzled as I felt. “This is a sacred place,” Preachy said.

“You’re serious?”

“How else do you explain what just happened?”

“I don’t know... maybe an underground magnetic field?”

“A magnetic field that suddenly vanished?” she smiled. “Anyway, be careful. This is THEIR place. We’re intruders here. Everybody knows that.” She gave me a small nudge. “You’ve been living *sa abroad* too long.”

Preachy herself has just returned from a post-doctoral Fulbright fellowship in Cornell University. Our department is composed of urban, middle class scholars and writers, many of them with advanced degrees from foreign universities. Was our bus an example of what one critic has called “cultural simultaneity”?

Our seminar was held at the National Arts Center, which is also where the Philippine High School for the Arts is located. It’s a mountain reserve. We stayed in cottages nestled among the trees, five to a cottage, sleeping in a row, like in a dorm. The conference room was sunny and large, with walls which were actually glass doors that slid open to let in sun and breeze, and balconies overlooking the bay.

For three days, Preachy and a couple of other colleagues held forth on Saussure and Althusser and Derrida and Foucault; on Said, and Bhaba, and Spivak. The rest of us took copious notes. We had discussions that stretched through lunch, and spilled over into *merienda*. Before supper each day, we took off, alone or in pairs, to have a smoke, to stretch our legs, making sure we begged leave from the resident sprites, before wandering down wooded paths, and taking care not to point carelessly at anything, lest we give offense to whoever was ensconced in the tangled branches of the trees.

And after dinner, we gathered around in small groups, with our ice-cold bottles of beer, and exchanged tales about encounters with *encantos* or *encantas*, on this very mountain... and about what befell mortal men with whom the goddess of the mountain fell in love...While in another part of the room, Caloy Aureus strummed on his guitar and sang, in his Elvis Presley baritone, “Are you lonesome tonight? Do you miss me tonight? Are you sorry we drifted apart? Does your memory stray, to that bright summer day..”

And those evenings were the best part of the seminar.

19 November

Work on the house is ongoing. We are having our lanai roofed in, to make it a kind of extension of our living room. This will enable us to make room for the stuff we have shipped over, like Carmen’s piano. The lofts for the girls’ rooms is also ongoing, so Lara is staying with her Lola while the two younger girls camp in her room. That works out fine for her, since she is back to working in her Tita Marie’s shop.

My course—Autobiographical Writing by Women—is going well. First time such a course is offered. Under Special Topics. My students are mainly upperclassmen, Lit and Communications majors. The other three classes I haven’t met yet.

Had pleasant conversations with Edel Garcellano, Lydia Arcellana, John Blanco (a Filipino-American who’s trying to get an immigration visa for the Philippines!). Ran into Tet Maceda (who now heads UP’s Institute of Filipino Language) and Pepe Miranda who was surprised to hear that Tony has left UNICEF. Congenial company. I’m in the right place, and never mind that they all outrank me.

I wish Tony would find where he can belong. He is still withdrawn, still in retreat from the world. I guess he does not plan to seek out anyone until he has settled this for himself—what he will be and do.

Olga McGrath called to let me know that Kevin is to be the new UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] Representative in Manila. They will all be here by January next year. Will friendship between our families still be possible? I hope it will, but we shall see.

24 November

Our shipment still hasn't arrived. It has been two months since we packed the stuff. Yesterday, Tony and I went to Makati to catch a movie, *Goodfellas*, and have dinner, much as we used to do. It struck us how far away New York seems now, how it has receded from our consciousness. Life is going on in Westchester County. The trees have put on their autumn finery—that glorious display of flame and gold—which by now must be turning brown. I miss the evanescent beauty of the changing seasons, and the charm of our lovely house, and the availability of most everything that we needed. But not much else.

I've never seen Tony so withdrawn. It is clearly a trauma that he has suffered, the depths of which maybe he hasn't even begun to measure. I wonder if he sometimes feels desolate, at the thought of everything he has lost. Even if he chose this. If he does, he has not spoken about it. He often tells me that he is content. And, if his pleasantness is proof of this, then he is content.

He has more or less decided that he wants to push through with his plan to set up a gamecock farm. It isn't just a boyhood dream. He is very familiar with the sport. He has the experience, having raised a couple of gamecocks even in our first home (the duplex on East Avenue). And he

actually set up a small farm in the backyard of our house in Teacher's Village, which even then he called Magiting Gamecock Farm. (He even taught me how to hold a cock so that it couldn't flap its wings when he had to tend to its wounds or feed it vitamins.) He has estimated the cost for a farm that would be big enough to be able to earn him a livelihood. And he thinks it is doable.

I hope for his sake that he's right. I know nothing about the breeding of fighting cocks, or about running any kind of business, and won't be able to help him.

"Operation Desert Shield" is going on in the Gulf. The papers say this is the largest overseas deployment by the US since the Korean War—240,000 troops in the Gulf, and 200,000 more on the way. The UK has sent 50,000 troops, and other allies have either sent troops or committed to do so. The effect of all this on us is inflation so bad that the prices of even groceries change by the week.

Edel and Elmer invited me for coffee at the new Faculty Center canteen, and introduced me to Godi Calleja, who owns Kalikasan Press, a new outfit committed to giving emerging writers a chance. Godi teaches in UP as well. He asked me to send him any new MS I have. I took this as a compliment and was really pleased.

Nonetheless... I do miss our old life sometimes. Thelma Kintanar had to cancel our lunch date because Sylvia Guerrero, who was supposed to join us, left suddenly for Bali with Tatti Licuanan—a conference on women's issues I think. And they have all just returned from China. This was my Bangkok group—Tatti, Thelma, Sylvia.

But I know I must let this go. I haven't yet, not totally. It's happening. But slowly.

A thought: how will I keep on writing travel essays if I stop traveling?

30 November

We have been looking at land for a potential farm. A couple of days ago, we went to Tanauan to look at something, and Tony thought we may have found what he needs. A hilly place, one-and-a half hectares, planted to coconuts, mangoes, and other fruit trees. But the access road was in terrible condition.

12 December 1990

The UN Security Council has passed Resolution 678 sanctioning the use of force if Iraq does not leave Kuwait by Jan. 15. Only Cuba and Yemen voted against it and China abstained. This is the first time that the UN has authorized armed intervention since the Korean War in 1950.

Are we on the brink of war now?

I push that question to the back of my mind and think of Book No. 5. This book I shall offer today to Godi of Kalikasan.

18 December

My office now has a desk, a chair, and a bookcase. And, though they are all a bit timeworn and clearly mismatched, they will do for now. When our shipment is finally released from the Manila pier, I hope to find some pieces of furniture that I can use in their place.

Sylvia Ventura, the head of the UP Press, has asked me to give her something. I may give her the Burma book, if it ever gets finished. Have been rereading my diaries to get myself back into the groove. (When my classes get underway in UP, I know there will be little time to spare. Particularly when I am myself enrolled for my PhD.) Once again, I am stumped by the

form which will suit this new book. I am not satisfied with the one I used for my *Korean Sketchbook*.

The girls were distressed over there being no Christmas decorations in the house, save for a simple white star lantern hanging from the eaves outside, and a wreath made from pine cones sent by my mom. So I concocted some decorations from the odds and ends I found in our little stockroom under the stairs, and stuff which I borrowed from Mom; and have managed to come up with a “tree.” There were these bare branches painted white, which used to stand in a big blue vase on the landing. I trimmed them with little gold balls, and propped them inside an old Burmese jar. So now our dining room has a tree!

Drove to the *Times* to collect what they owed me for my last articles, took Carmen to buy some clothes, and bought stuff needed for the party which it seems we will be having at home. But I am not done with buying presents...

25 December (2:00 a.m.)

Tony decided he wanted to play *pater familias* to his clan, and to what remains in Manila of my family. After I had phoned everyone, I realized that they had all committed to coming, but at different times! What to do?

I consulted Bet Montecillo, my SPCQ [St. Paul College Quezon] classmate who gave Carmen cooking lessons long ago. And she did me the favor of preparing a complete menu for a buffet which would, she promised, be perfect. So my *handa* was a buffet consisting of platters of cold food—different kind of sausages (she specified which kind), different kinds of cheese (these I could manage for myself), a bowl of potato salad, a bowl of fruit salad, one hot dish, of course *jamon de china* (which may now be bought in Unimart, she said), and punch (for which she gave me her recipe).

Tony's brothers, Quinito and Doy, brought their families. Ce begged off, but all her kids came, including Angela (Skookums, the oldest, who was a baby when I was pregnant with Lara, and consulting Ce about baby care), and her new French husband. Manoling, husband to Carmeling (Tony's oldest sister) was sick, so the Villanueva children couldn't make it. Pa and Ma came, and Boy with Marie and Mikey and Michelle. And our girls (dressed in very sophisticated browns and blacks) got to know their cousins again. And the party turned out nicely enough.

By ten minutes after midnight, the last guests had left. Tony put on the only Christmas carols CD we have in the house (an old one with Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, which we had left behind for some reason). The girls brought down their presents, and got our presents from our room, and spread them around our exotic tree. We then opened them amid much hilarity. Lara and Carmen are now sound asleep. And Anna is stretched out on our Chinese divan in the living room, talking on the phone with a boy, who is supposed to be "just a good friend."

Not bad for a first Christmas Eve at home in a long, long time.

Today, we go to Tony's Tita Ata (his dad's sister) in Urdaneta Village for the traditional Hidalgo clan reunion. And on Christmas night, to my family in Broadway.

4 January 1991

"You want to buy a what? An ancestral mansion?" I asked.

"I wasn't planning to," Tony replied. "We've been looking for a place to set up Magiting, right? I saw this ad in the *Manila Bulletin*: 'Ancestral Mansion for Sale, San Miguel, Bulacan.' I got curious. So I drove up there to see it."

He said the place is about half a hectare, planted to coconut trees. Perfect for his planned Magiting Gamecock Farm. But it also comes with a mansion. The mansion is worn down and shabby, but fixable. And the selling price is unbelievably low--the land alone is worth much more. Plus it's right in the center of town.

"But what will we do with the mansion?" I demanded.

"You'll love it!" he said. "It's a beautiful house. I'll show it to you this weekend. Actually, I'd like to show it to your mom too—it was built in the '30s, her time. I'd like her opinion. Can you invite her?"

His plan—which took shape in his mind right after he had inspected the place—is to set up Magiting Game Farm first, in the mansion's sprawling backyard. Then he will repair and restore the house, furnish and decorate it with our own things (which are part of our shipment), much of which we were planning to sell anyway, since there's no way everything will fit into our townhouse. And then he hopes to resell the place, fully furnished with authentic antiquities. If the idea works, maybe we can turn it into another business.

The repair and restoration will take some time. And more time will be needed to advertise the place—to push the idea of buying a restored, fully furnished vintage house. In the meantime, we will use it ourselves, as a kind of country home. By the time the right buyer comes along, he hopes to have also found a more modest place to move Magiting to.

Tony says the town itself is interesting. It has an old church with its little plaza, and many other old houses, some still in use, others in various stages of neglect. And woodcarvers. And pastillas makers. And it has a history: Biak-na-bato is in San Miguel!

He is totally enthused. I have not seen him so animated in a long time. He's already thinking of maybe setting up a corporation. Maybe he

can find some people interested in investing in a corporation, which will purchase, repair, restore, and resell old houses. And he hasn't even been inside this Bulacan house yet!

"Oh, I've called the number in the ad," he told me. "The owner is called Lagandaon. I've made an appointment for us to see her."

7 January

We have made the first payment on the ancestral mansion. It belongs to an old San Miguel family. The street it is on is named after their family, the Tecson family.

The owner, Mrs. Celia Tecson-Lagandaon, told us that her ancestral house was built by her father, Don Mariano Tecson. He designed and supervised its construction, "picking out every plank of wood himself." She called it a "labor of love." When he died, none of her siblings were interested in caring for the house, so she offered to buy them out. However, she now can no longer maintain it either. Her family lives in Manila, and neither Mr. Lagandaon nor his children care about the house. They've been urging her to sell it, so the money can go into something more useful.

We could see that she felt bad about having to let go of it. But she told us that she had a good feeling about us, and believed we would take good care of the house. Which I took as a good sign.

12 January

I have been too overwhelmed to do much more than just make it through each day.

After New Year's Day, Mom had to undergo surgery, which gave me a scare. She is 81 years old. The operation was a success, thank God. But on

the exact same day that she entered the hospital, the brokers delivered the shipment that we have been waiting for since October of last year. Then Lara came down with what turned out to be pneumonitis. Then the Lagandaons phoned to say that the house was ready to be moved into; that, actually, we urgently needed to take over as soon as possible, since Simon Tecson and his family (Celia Tecson-Lagandaon's brother, who had been occupying the house in a sort of caretaker's capacity) had moved out.

In the meantime, classes have resumed in UP, but I wasn't able to attend mine. Our household has to be kept running with some semblance of normalcy.

And over all this looms the threat of war and its repercussions, like panic buying in markets, grocery stores, supermarkets. War may still break out. The deadline set by US Pres. Bush for Iraq to move out of Kuwait is January 15, which is two days away.

I'm assuming that this partly caused my killer headache, the likes of which I can't recall having since 1980. Everyone seems to feel the need to make some frantic preparations. But how does one prepare for a world war? By buying more groceries?

"Don't look that far," Tony says. "Just assume there might be shortages."

So I bought a sack of rice and double the groceries I usually get. And I registered our two cars with our barangay. In fact, it was the barangay that sent a couple of people to our little village, to register the residents' vehicles, instead of requiring us to go to their office. I asked them what the purpose for this registration was, and they said that it would make us eligible to obtain gasoline coupons, should rationing take place.

Tony, for his part, has tried to secure all the construction materials he will require for the repairs on the old mansion, in anticipation of a steep

rise in prices, war or no war. Repairs on the house have begun, as has the construction of cages for the gamecock farm.

Mama did come with me and Tony to have a look at the old Tecson mansion. We drove past Baliwag, Pulilan, San Rafael, and San Ildefonso, and then came to Barangay San Vicente in the town of San Miguel. Tony pointed out other old houses, some still in use; others in different stages of disrepair. Still others converted into something else, like a post office.

Then we turned into Tecson Street—it is not wide, but it is paved—and pulled up in front of this astonishing, two-story house. I wouldn't call a mansion. But it certainly *is* large. And, despite its state of shabby neglect, the old-fashioned elegance and grace of its structure are striking.

Mama was delighted. "Yes, it's of that time," she said, picking up instantly on some details, and pointing them out to us—the vestibule, the window grills, the fretwork under the canopies... and the sign up there, under the central eave. "That's the year of construction," Mama said. "Look, it says '1930!'"

She also told me there was a lot I could do with the garden. But she said I shouldn't have it landscaped in the modern way. She offered to help me with some ideas, when the time comes. This may have helped us decide.

18 January

War broke out yesterday. "Operation Desert Shield" is now "Operation Desert Storm." Local TV stations are covering the war, mostly with footage from CNN, which is focused on the war 24 hours a day. Thirty nine nations are part of the coalition headed by the US. This is the largest military alliance since World War II. Allied nations which are not sending troops, like Germany and Japan, have contributed financial support. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have provided the largest financial contribution.

Mama says that, according to Lola Mariquita, news of World War I would come to Manila by boat, which, of course, took months! World War II was covered by radio. The Vietnam War was the first war to be covered by television, and watched by people all over the world from their living rooms. Today, we are getting this war live via satellite! All these changes within one lifetime! Stupefying, Mama says.

Is this progress? Where information and knowledge are concerned, I suppose it is. But there is something chilling about it as well. Might this constant barrage not also lead to a desensitizing?

While we were living in Burma, Lara came home to Manila to start college in my old alma mater, St. Paul QC. She lived with her Lola, using my Dad's old room, which Mama has kept pretty much as it had been in his lifetime. A year later, Anna decided the Rangoon International High School was too tiny. She was going to enter her sophomore year, and decided she wanted to do it in the International School in Manila. So Lara and Anna lived in the townhouse we had bought so the family would have a place to stay when we were on home leaves. Luckily, Delia, who had been the townhouse's caretaker, (her husband Rodrigo was driver for my brother, Boy, and his wife Marie), was happy to become their full time housekeeper.

So only Carmen was left with us in Rangoon, and she missed her "Ti-Anna" badly. This is not how families are supposed to be, I said to myself, fighting tears. I had forgotten how many Filipino families break up early, and for more painful reasons. We were in Beirut when the first wave of OFWs swept into the Middle East. We heard their grim stories, firsthand.

When Tony was posted to UNICEF HQ in New York, both Lara and Anna decided to come with us. Delia came along too. So we were all together again. But had we stayed on in New York, Anna would have left home again by now, to go to university in another state.

This return to Manila has offered us a reprieve.

19 January

King Hussein of Jordan is giving a televised press conference. He's not saying anything new. But he sounds extremely sad. He is suggesting a ceasefire, actually. America and its allies are winning – why should they agree to a ceasefire? And Saddam Hussein of Iraq has always seemed intractable. Will he suddenly change? Perhaps this is the reason for the sadness of Jordan's king. He knows that his is a futile call.

22 January

Meanwhile, Tony is absorbed by his two San Miguel projects. He also has an eye out for other old houses that might be restored.

When Mama came with us to San Miguel, one of the houses that Tony pointed out to her was an enormous one, all of three stories, with a large garden. The garden has a grotto, and little stone angels standing on what look like stone baskets, and a little footbridge, and to one side, a stage, with "Celia Club" engraved on a fan-like structure behind the stage, like a backdrop.

Mama exclaimed that she recognized the house. This was the Sevilla house, she said, built by Don Catalino Sevilla, whose wife was a De Leon. "That house used to have a big ballroom on the third floor," Mama said. "We would drive up from Manila with friends (properly accompanied by chaperones, of course) to attend balls there. The Celia Club was San Miguel's Social Club, founded by the First Lady, Dona Trining, President Roxas' wife."

Later, Tony was able to gain permission from the caretaker to enter the house. At first the caretaker was hesitant. But when Tony introduced himself as the new owner of the Tecson house, the man willingly let him in, having indeed heard that *Ingkong* Nano's house had been bought by a *taga-*

Maynila. He says the house is truly grand, but has been poorly maintained, and looks like it's on the brink of collapse. A real pity.

“But how,” I asked Mama, “did people manage to care for houses this big—three floors, with a large ballroom, an azotea, a huge garden...”

“Oh, it was easy to get help in those days, especially if one lived in the province.”

I have had no word from Gloria Rodriguez about the MS I gave her – “I Remember.” I tell myself to forget about that now, and focus on doing the last chapter for my book on Burma. Now that our shipment has arrived, I have my books, notes, and diaries. I can get back to serious work. The problem is fitting it all in.

A bit of good news: I have received my appointment papers from UP.

I did not think I would derive this much satisfaction from getting my old job back. I think it's the joy of doing work I know I am good at; and delight in simple things, like having friends knock on the door of my FC office, and stay for a short (or long) chat, or invite me to have Selecta coffee crumble ice cream at Katag. (“Katag” is the name of the new faculty canteen in the FC basement, short for Kapihan at Tagpuan.) Sometimes, after my classes, as I walk to the FC parking lot, and there's a light breeze blowing, I catch myself smiling, at nothing and no one in particular.

30 January

While we were watching the usual TV coverage of the Gulf War, Tony said to me, “UNICEF has started an emergency airlift of humanitarian supplies to Baghdad.” And then he added, “I would have been charge of it,

had I accepted the post in Jordan they were offering me. The airlift could only be conducted from Jordan.” The note of regret in his voice was clear. He was admitting for the first time feeling bad about the career he threw away.

7 February

Julie Daza has reprinted my introduction to *Korean Sketchbook* in this magazine she edits, *Lifestyle Asia*. And today I received a letter from the editor of *Quest* magazine (which has just been bought by the Hofer Group, who publish the APA/Insight Travel Guides) inviting me to contribute. Norma Mirafior had given them my name. They pay 15 cents per word. It’s a bi-monthly “consumer -oriented travel and entertainment publication.”

The opportunities are opening up. My problem is finding the time to squeeze everything in.

I do wish Tony would find something that will enable him to use his formidable talents again.

17 March 1991

One afternoon, I had an unexpected visitor to the San Miguel house. Delia and I had started unpacking and sorting things out. But the cardboard boxes were still piled high in all the rooms, and the floors were covered with dust.

This stranger came into the room where I was, perched on one of the boxes, sorting out the contents of another box. He was a middle-aged man, very neat—even dapper—in a long-sleeved polo shirt and slacks, and he carried an old-fashioned wooden cane.

He paused at the door to the room where I was working, gave me a small bow, and said, “*Magandang hapon po sa inyo. Maari po bang pumasok?*”

Startled, I didn't reply immediately.

The man apologized for bursting in without an appointment. He was a neighbor, he said, and he hoped I wouldn't mind the intrusion. The gate was open, but there was no one around, so he had let himself in. His manner was very courteous.

I apologized, in turn, for not being able to shake his hand, mine being grimy. Nor could I offer him a seat, since there weren't any. I gestured awkwardly toward a large cardboard box, which was still sealed. He accepted as graciously as if it had been a throne, composed himself, and proceeded to explain the purpose of his visit.

"Nabalitaan ko po na kayo ay isang manunulat," he began. He had come to tell me a story that he thought I would find interesting, since my husband and I were going to be citizens of this town. He gave me his name, and told me he was actually a writer himself. I recognized the name vaguely. He added that he used to have a column, and named the newspaper where it used to appear. But he was retired now, and no longer wrote. He had a strong, pleasant baritone, and his Tagalog was as elegant as it was precise.

This was the story he told me.

This was the first time he was stepping into the second floor of this house, he said. He and all his clan were not welcome here. It was one of those family feuds, the beginnings of which no one remembers any more, but which everyone continues to cling to.

Once upon a time, there was a young lady—it was said that she was very beautiful—an ancestress of the owners of the house we had just bought. She had fallen in love with a bright, dashing young man, who was my visitor's own ancestor.

Because of the long feud, both families had naturally disapproved of the match. The young man's parents packed him off to the States to study—they wanted him to become a dentist, for the town needed one.

The young woman's parents intercepted all his letters to her, and all her letters to him, and eventually told her that news had reached them of the young man's having married another woman.

(At this point in my visitor's tale, I thought to myself: Wait, I've heard this story before. Wasn't this what happened to Jose Rizal and Leonor Rivera? Or was it to Crisostomo Ibarra and Maria Clara?)

But there was more to the gentleman's tale. After his graduation, the young man returned with his diploma. His parents showed him the brand new clinic they had already prepared for him. He was not interested. He asked only after the woman he loved, from whom he had not heard in all the years that it took him to obtain his degree.

When his mother told him that she was married to someone else, he went a little crazy, and hit out blindly, wrecking the clinic, and its shiny new equipment. Why had she done this? he demanded. What happened? Did she not receive his letters? Why had she not answered them? Why did she betray him?

His parents were forced to admit the truth—that the girl had been deceived, and that in her despair, she seemed not to care what happened to her, and had just accepted the husband her parents had chosen for her.

The young man was determined to see his beloved again. He decided that the only honorable way to do this was to go to her husband and humbly beg his permission to talk to his wife, one last time, just to say good bye. His parents tried to stop him. They were afraid that a fight might ensue. Someone – their son, most likely – might get hurt.

But the young woman's husband, had a good heart. Moreover, having known the other man since their boyhood, he felt pity, and gave his consent. So, the thwarted lovers saw each other one last time.

Not long afterwards, the young woman died.

I stared at my guest. "She died?" I repeated.

"Yes," he replied. "She died of a broken heart. It has been known to happen... sometimes." After a few moments, during which I groped for an appropriate response, he asked me what I thought of his little story.

I was having some trouble gathering my thoughts. So he continued, "It reminds one of the novel 'Wuthering Heights,' does it not? But this is a true story, I assure you. Everyone in this town knows about it, and about the feud between our families."

Then he resumed his story. "After the young woman died, a great composer and musician, her lover's best friend—I'm sure you know his name, Nicanor Abelardo—wrote a song for her. It is a very famous song—'*Nasaan Ka Irog*.'"

Still speechless, I nodded. Of course I was familiar with the song.

"As I said, I am retired, and no longer write," my visitor said. "But perhaps, someday, you will find some use for the story I have just told you."

He had risen, and, after giving me another small bow, he moved toward the door, walking a bit stiffly—perhaps sitting on a cardboard box, without a proper back rest, had been hard on his knees—leaning on his old-fashioned cane.

I accompanied him to the top of the staircase, apologizing for not having been able to offer him any refreshments. He waved the apology away. I thanked him for his visit, and for his... strange story. He requested me, very politely, to return to my chores. He had interrupted me, and did not wish to

take up more of my time. He had just come to tell me the story, he repeated. It needed to be told.

“Our families did the lovers a great wrong,” he said. “Since the house is yours now, I thought you should know their story.”

It was a long time before I understood what he meant.

5 April 1991

Connie has recommended me for tenure, with the endorsement of the department and the college. In the meantime, Shayne Lumbera tells me Ateneo is offering me a Creative Writing Chair! A shower of blessings!

Work proceeds apace in San Miguel. Magiting Game Farm is now operational. Tony is going tomorrow to a cockfighting derby in the San Miguel cockpit, on the invitation of a Tecson, who has become his friend. He is enormously pleased at this invitation.

The house has been completely rewired. The new water tank and pump are working now. The farmhands' bunkhouse is almost done. There was a room that had been built over the azotea, which was an eyesore. Tony decided to tear it down and restore the azotea, which is truly lovely. The grills from the windows of that dismantled room were used to fashion the fence and front gate. The owner of the hardware store in our street corner, who is Tony's suki, referred him to the town ironmonger, who took care of this. The brick driveway in front of the house is finished. The kitchen floor and the kitchen counter are almost done. The bathrooms require major repairs, and these are ongoing. Tony is elated about having found large black and white tiles for the upstairs bathroom, as well as a huge, fan-shaped Art Deco mirror and lighting fixtures to complement it.

When materials are available locally, Tony buys them here. What is not available, he gets from shops in Manila (Mama has been invaluable where

sourcing certain things are concerned), and carts them back to San Miguel in the boot of his car. It is tiring work, but Tony is enjoying himself hugely.

“This is the Year of the Goat. My year!” Tony reminded me. “And, look, my luck has turned again. This is the beginning of a new cycle. And who knows, it might be the best one yet!”

For me, the summer break began on March 23. At last, some breathing space! I have taken Delia a number of times with me to San Miguel, to help me begin opening the boxes, sorting out their contents, and moving what things can be transferred to the rooms.

I have also started working on the front garden, with the help of Jo Mari, one of Tony’s farmhands (Delia’s brother). Mama told me that if I wanted to retain the authenticity of the place, I should not have the garden landscaped. (“And no Bermuda grass; stick with carabao grass.”) In the 1930s, housewives were more concerned with practicality than with aesthetics, she told me. They grew trees and plants for the fruits they would provide, or the shade they would offer, or for other useful purposes, such as medicinal qualities (like the eucalyptus and the guava and the chico); or seeds that could be used for food coloring (like the achuete), or flowers whose fragrance made them suitable as ornaments for the hair of the daughters of the house, or for stringing into garlands to be draped on the saints in the family altar (like the champaca and the sampaguita). When they did think of beauty, it was balance and harmony that they took into consideration. An aratiles growing to the left of the front steps was balanced by another tree of more or less the same size on the right. Jasmine bushes had to border both sides of the driveway, not just one.

I pointed out a kalachuchi tree that had grown dry and scrawny. “Is it dying?” I asked her.” She shook her head. “No, it’s just sick. You might plant a bush under it—a flowering one, like gumamela or camia, and maybe some small pretty mayanas. Trees like company.”

Pete Daroy and Connie Alaras are among the first of our friends to visit the house, which we are now calling Casa Hidalgo. When we had finished unpacking the furniture that came with our shipment, we realized that we still needed a few essential pieces, if we plan to advertise the house as “fully furnished.” So we asked Pete to take us to his farm in Bustos (where he stores his antiques before bringing them to his house in the UP campus to sell). We did find a long, plain, wooden altar table that will serve as dining table, and 12 mismatched wooden chairs.

And we witnessed how the house—even while not yet fully restored—worked its charm on our guests. “Don’t sell it!” Pete said. “Turn it into a haven for artists.”

I reminded him that we do not have the resources to maintain such a place. Whereupon Connie suggested that we apply to the NCAA for a grant. The NCAA is the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, which was established by President Cory in 1987. Connie says she thinks it has a division that takes care of heritage conservation.

When I had lunch, separately, with two other old friends—Letty Magsanoc and Jullie Daza—they made similar suggestions before even seeing the house. “You could establish a foundation, and raise funds for the arts,” Letty said. “You could offer residencies to writers and artists,” Jullie said.

9 May

Our San Miguel schedule has become pretty regular. We spend weekends there, sometimes with, and sometimes without the kids. And Tony goes once more during the week, usually on Wednesday morning. He stays overnight, and comes home on Thursday evening. When he is there by himself, he doesn’t use the master’s bedroom, which is close to front of the house. He sleeps in Anna’s bedroom, which is the last in the row, and is closer

to the bathroom.

Over breakfast today, he told me something really weird had happened to him last night.

He had been asleep for a while when he suddenly woke up. A mosquito must have bitten him, he said. He checked his watch, which he always keeps on the bedside table—it was 2:00 a.m. Then he got up to use the bathroom and pour himself a shot of his favorite cognac, which he brought back with him to the bed.

He was lying on his left side, facing the window, and was just about to fall asleep, when he felt someone sit on the bed beside him. He believed he heard a small creak, and figured it was me. Then he suddenly realized that it couldn't have been me, since I hadn't come with him to San Miguel. Wide awake now, but lying perfectly still, he was completely certain that what had happened was real, and not a dream. After about a second, he told himself sharply: all right, turn around and face it, whatever it is! He turned quickly around.

There was no one there.

But he felt—very strongly—that there was someone in the room with him. It was not an evil presence, just a strange one. He felt that it was a woman. It was a woman, and she was looking at him. She did not mean him any harm, he felt. She seemed... “Curious,” Tony said. “She seemed curious about me... like she was wondering who I might be.”

After about five minutes, he stretched out again. And he must have dozed off, and slept undisturbed. Because when he woke up again, it was to bright sunlight.

If this had happened to anyone else but Tony, I would simply dismiss it as a dream, or a case of the imagination running a bit wild. But Tony, being

an agnostic, does not believe in the supernatural, let alone ghosts. Now that he is older, he has become more open to the idea that there are things that happen on this earth for which there are no scientific or rational explanations. But he does not bother much with these unexplained phenomena, and is not likely to have been thinking about a lady ghost, even subconsciously, when his mind had been filled all day with poultry supplies, wood varnish, and a missing hammer.

Part of me believes in ghosts, though. And now I'm intrigued: does Casa Hidalgo have a resident ghost?

