

A Pilgrimage

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In 2014, out of the blue, Mang Cesar called me to relay Manong Frankie's invitation to Mookie and me for a trip out to the North. We had never been much to the North, apart from the most basic of tourist destinations, and by that time we had shared a couple of meals and conversations with Manong, so a large part of us was excited for the trip.

The other part of us was a little bit unsure. We had never sat down with him for more than an hour or two, and the idea of sitting in a car for an unknown length of time toward a vague destination was kind of unsettling.

What would we talk about? What thoughts did I have on his work? At that time, I had only ever read his short story "The God Stealer," introduced to me by a large fan of his that regarded it as one of his all-time favorite stories. That was a big thing to say, especially considering the fact that my friend was very well-read.

I really liked "The God Stealer." I should say that in fact I loved it. It was complex, it was tight, and it captured its times well. I imagined that I could talk about it at length if he asked me what I thought of his work. Knowing Manong, and having known enough about him before that, that was well within our expectations. I had heard him complain, not just twice, about his work not being taught enough at schools.

As a writer, I understood his concern. In fact, I saw it as a form of childlike honesty, a kind of surly impatience, rather than some kind of blustering, egotistic statement. Well, as a writer, too, I could see that it could have easily been both at the same time. But why, indeed, had his books not been taught to me in high school or at my humanities classes at university?

It quickly dawned on me that he might ask me why I hadn't read any of his other books, especially those he was most known for, that had been

translated into several languages, and that had most probably cemented his literary reputation here and abroad. The trip was just a few days away—we would meet up at the McDonald’s on the corner of North and Congressional Avenues and be sitting in the same car for at least a few hours.

I felt my quiet desperation grow as I checked my work schedule over the next few days: it was packed, as usual, with corporate cadence meetings and executive briefings and the like. And then there was an evening event on the night before the trip. I couldn’t avoid it because we were running that event. There would be no time to read a book, much less the five novels that made up the complete *Rosales Saga*—six if you counted *Viajero*.

I then devoted my time to working out a strategy. My other career, in the corporate world of marketing and advertising, necessitated the employment of a driver. This is because I regularly had upwards of five or seven meetings in a day, often in different parts of Makati, with some even as far as Quezon City or San Juan. Having a driver to take care of the shuttling and the parking relieved me of a lot of stress and wasted time, and also allowed me to pack more meetings into my working days.

I decided that we would meet up with Manong, and to avoid the double embarrassment of that prospective book discussion, we would take our own car and head out with him in a convoy. It would be awkward trying to set that up, but that other scenario would even be more awkward.

The dawn of that day finally came, and we rushed to our meeting place. I was bleary-eyed and my head was foggy because of that event just the night before, but I wanted to make sure we arrived ahead of Manong so I would have time to compose myself and deliver my plan.

Manong arrived a minute or two after I did, his slow, Hitchcockesque presence cutting an odd figure in the early breakfast crowd of young professionals and go-getters.

“Manang is in the van. You guys ride with us. Just tell your driver to follow us,” was the first thing he said, and that was that.

He took his seat beside the driver and I sat directly behind him, and I spent the next three hours or so looking at the back of his head as we threw our voices at each other in conversation. On the first long stretch of the journey we drove through Tarlac, and then through Pangasinan, right

into the town of Rosales, where his chain of celebrated novels takes place. I gripped the seat out of dread as he began to talk about his novels—how they had taken place here and why he thought to write them.

I unconsciously bowed my head down a bit to put myself in the brace position as I prepared to dodge questions and deliver vague answers. But the questions never came. Neither appeared the presumption that I had read any of the *Rosales* novels. Manong wrapped up his short commentary on the town—simple and peaceful and beautiful, as I recall seeing it as we drove by—and we left it behind us without making so much as a photo stop.

Where on earth might we be going, then? And what is this trip for? I wondered to myself, as the van headed westward at speed. Manong gave quiet instructions to his driver, and I was too preoccupied with my own anxiety to eavesdrop. Meanwhile, Manong went quiet and took a nap as if according to some precise plan in his head, and woke up just as the van crawled to a stop along a small random street, quite a distance off the main highway. He opened the door to announce that this was going to be our first official stop.

We walked over a few meters to a concrete marker by the side of a house that read:

CARLOS S BULOSAN

1911 – 1956

Internationally known short story writer novelist
and poet author of *Letter from America*

Voice of Bataan *Laughter of My Father* and *America is in the Heart*.

Born on Nov. 2 1911 in Binalonan Pangasinan

Died on Sept. 11 1956 in Seattle Wash. U.S.A.

As he stood by the monument he proceeded to talk about Bulosan. Mookie and I were familiar with his work, but Manong shared details that we had never known before. I can't recall if he had said anything about having met him, but I remember vividly how proudly he spoke of Bulosan and how important Manong considered his work was to Philippine literature, and to the Filipino experience. Frankly, we were surprised that a historical marker on him would even exist, that his hometown would remember to honor him.

We boarded the van again, and this time I heard him tell the driver where to go next: Lingayen, an entry point for the Japanese invasion of the

Philippines in 1941, and the site of the American landing in 1945 when they liberated their colony toward the end of the War.

Like Bulosan's marker, we had never been to Lingayen Gulf, and I was surprised to discover that it was a long, peaceful stretch of light grey seashore. Manong waited patiently as I took in the gulf and quietly imagined how this would be a perfect choice to stage an invasion or a reinvasion. He then spoke about his experience during the war, and how it felt when the Americans finally arrived to retake the Philippines from the Japanese. He spoke not as if he had written it all down on paper or in his head, but from direct experience as a young man at the time, but he spoke of the War so easily and naturally, in a gentle and suddenly youthful voice, as though he were talking about something that had happened just a few years before. It was only then that I realized he had taken this trip many times. I remembered someone, probably another writer, telling me how Manong had also taken him on a long drive to this very same site.

The next stop was quite unexpected. Manong suggested we pay a visit to Our Lady of Manaog, at a pilgrimage site that neither Mookie nor I had ever been to. We knew, of course, about the various miracles attributed to Our Lady, spread across several centuries of her presence in the Philippines since her arrival from Mexico in the 17th century. Besides these, there was a lot of history attached to the statue and the Basilica around her, but we had never thought to take the trouble to travel.

Manong waited in the van and told us to take our time. I don't know if it was because he wasn't quite that interested, or that everything would be self-explanatory and not require any commentary from him, or that he had taken guests there so many times in the past. Mookie and I were surprised that we had stayed longer at the site than we had thought we would. The history was deeper and more interesting than we'd expected, and the devotion was fascinating. As we boarded the van I realized that we had, in fact, taken part in the devotion.

Our final stop was a small city office in Bauang, La Union, where Manong was scheduled to inaugurate a small library named after the writer Manuel Arguilla, celebrated for the stories and essays he wrote before the War. This was a complete surprise to us. It turned out that it was Manong who had urged one of the provincial officials to dedicate the library to Arguilla.

The library was small, but in a small town like this, it felt powerful and full of hope. Manong had, on several occasions, complained about there being not enough Filipinos reading, and out of nowhere there was this small-town library that bore a name only Filipino writers really knew. Manong shook hands and exchanged pleasantries with the officials and the schoolteachers, while Mookie and I blended into the audience and attended to the refreshments and the treats. To our shock, before he delivered his inaugural speech, Manong introduced us to the gathering, along with a short description of us as young writers of a newer generation.

Manong recalled his speech about Manuel Arguilla in his column for the *Philippine Star* a few days later:

“I think no other Filipino writer has described the land, the seasons, the Ilokos and their villages with as much affection as he did. This love for the land was written with no less than his blood when he was executed by the Japanese for guerilla activities during the Occupation. No testimony, like Rizal’s, could be more sublime and noble as this....”

“I urge young writers to read the Yabes anthologies which include some of the best fiction produced by writers like Manuel Arguilla from the beginning of our literature in English in the twenties onwards to the outbreak of World War II, and on to the early postwar years. In this way they can form that iron continuum with the past and understand that our literature was shaped by a contextuality and a faithful affection for our geography, our sense of place.”

Not much later on, we heard that it was not quite a trip out of the ordinary. Manong frequently took guests on similar tours, covering Rosales, Binalonan, Lingayen, Manaoag, and sometimes, possibly even further north to Vigan or Baguio. There had probably been hundreds of these trips, counting writers, historians, and students, tripping across space and time and Manong’s personal memory. We were happy about that, happy to be two pilgrims among many.