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WILFRIDO D. NOLLEDO

I SEEM TO BE BORN . . .

— Bhagavad-Gita

WHENEVER IT HURT, the men crept back to Esperanza to hang on to their terrible scars that their wives healed in hysterical ways and they sang in Natividad and the widows combed their hair again, and the merry-makers slept from their carousel while a cripple squatted under the azotea to sing for his bread.

The town had been deserted and destroyed by reasons. Many men had vowed to burn it down because of some remembered insult shouted from the square where spinsters had heard and perhaps had laughed. The town, with its nipa and saints, its thirteen wells where women dipped their clay pitchers for water, shone proudly in May or shrank in the rains when sand turned mud and children built castles in memory of the plaza when the conquistadores barricaded it with mud fortifications against the Indios for three and a half centuries.

But Esperanza was in its temper after April and July. By October it revealed an inner complexion, with its altars cleaned and its religion borne on the shawls of convent girls condemned to Easter retreat with averted faces while their suitors, in either shyness or boldness, awaited their confirmation. November was the month of lanterns, and orphans made them as they whistled dolorously in patios, on porch steps,

pale posterior voices that could be contained in a keyhole. There they also sang. They sang about how it was to remain in Esperanza without a cow, without a patron, without seeing the parks in the city. Often they gathered around the mimosa and sang serenely for as long as men cannot reconcile the skin and the sky. At sunrise, they struggled out of bed, sniffing tobacco, blowing smoke at their roosters. Heavy with breakfast, they made a clearing in the haystacks, set up a trap. It is they you see stretched on the feeder road or carved in perspiration on a rock. Grumbling over their lungs and their asthma, they are the shadows of any town; the grains of the desert.

All year round people spoke of the epiphany. They were madrigals whose souls genuflected to the Holy Ghost while their hands caressed the corn. Dreamers sat on bridges; the banduria was tuned like an eternal pulse. They resolved their sorrows on the stove, chattering and chiding above the cackle of poultry and the nagging of toothless grandmothers who had already been buried by their kin on mossy verandas where they wove draperies as endless as their lives.

Their sons were sailors who roamed their illusions, who came back with accents as profound as the Atlantic in their eyes, the fathoms in their cheeks: adventurers with the monsoon in their veins; aging stewards with the years strained like masts on their tendons. They were welders who repaired the hulls of tankers in foreign docks or soldered junk into sculpture inside sunken talliers and they itched and scratched, skimping on their vices, belching after their meals—they were the cafes they ate in or the saloons they had forgotten. They were merchant marines and cabin boys who wandered their wages away and came home mutilated and could only mutter dazedly about reefs, storms and loansharks. With them restored to their aboriginal meekness like fancy jewelry redeemed from the local pawnshop, the breeze carried again the flavor of meat in the skillet as the women cooked for their men. Humiliated, humbled and apologetic, they swallowed their burning broths, were ashamed and were conscripted once more to the monotony and melancholy of pastoral behavior, thirty thou-

sand leagues beneath all civilized competition. Now dim, almost monastic, they were gradually hammered into place by a prevailing rural sentiment that decrees every protruding muscle must be subdued into ambiguous matter until there was no more individuality, only a foundation indivisible and indescribable, a community of anecdotes—the permanent occupants of the landscape.

I had been to the capital in the four years it takes to finish a mural for your parents' living room—the diploma. I had a bachelor's city: waiting for a debutante, fighting current events in a symposium of philanthropists with nothing else but aspirin and logic. There were those of us who worshipped the mountains and dreamed of surrendering the campus to hike up there, a gypsy with a copy of Thoreau in his jeans and instant meditation. All of us wrote verse and drank beer, cursing the injustices as no doubt all undergraduates of that climate will forever.

And so it was with joy I ran around that coastal town in my station wagon with a portable typewriter, a camera, and a tape recorder to take down the dialects of my race. Father and mother were vacationing in Cannes; Lisa, whom I had met in a bull farm in Candarias, Spain, was on the continent on a tour of ancient churches. She was to write me thirty one letters that summer. After twenty other towns in the Philippines, I had drifted to Esperanza with my equipment and my confusion to write a book whose title changed with the conjugal quality I found in my mail. In a week I had acquired a *cua-drilla*, young men who woke up in poolrooms but promised their mothers everything would be all right. There was Oliveira whom I called Ole. His father had broken mortar in a quarry, and there had been no charity, only children and the laundry. Oliveira had tattooed a tiger on his chest as a witness, a testimony that he forgave nothing. But he believed the Virgin Mary had saved him from the municipal courts and he skipped around the beach hunting for hermit crabs, winking at virgins. "I come from the glory!" he exclaimed, smelling of garlic and vinegar. There were Joselito, Zacarias, and Rafael who had defended a piece of Corregidor in the war and had

been driven out of Intramuros as squatters. There was the old man whose name nobody knew. There was Alonzo, a mute boy from Natividad. There was the bird, a maya, in a cage.

Sometimes we walked aimlessly for miles, passing a harmonica from hand to hand as though it was a gourd to drink from. Those whose fathers had rotted in jails and eaten the scrapings of relief kitchens clenched their fists. Whatever the provocation, we were hoarse and sad in our calypso penance and the mayor had to caution us for disturbing the peace. We went everywhere like a marimba band from Kingston, always with a maya and a smile for all the pretty daughters. Recklessly, I drove to the post office, wiring Lisa to tape her voice, with the boys rolling around in the station wagon as I toasted them with pineapple juice, reciting Tagore. Neighbors asked what star we were following, and we would only laugh.

"Zacarias, give us a tune," I would command. Instantly, Zacarias rose to it. The others talked about the fiesta. Jose-lito bragged he would coax a polka from Carmelita and never mind her five brothers.

"Would you die for her then?" I asked, avoiding a turtle on the trail. Joselito, who had been swaying, took out a scarf and tied it around his neck like an armor; and then we heard somebody singing. Alonzo sat up, smiling.

"Ayyyayyyayyyyy!" bellowed Olaviera, nearly falling off the front fender where he clambered like a monkey.

"Ole!" I giggled and raced through a field of African daisies. Señor, we were full of romantic error, and that night we spread our tents on the grass and while the knights boasted of their sex around the campfire, I tiptoed on my portable typewriter in reply to Kuala Lumpur where Lisa had stopped over to study the footprint of a rice god. After another shrine which she did in charcoal, she said yes; and yes, a volcano had erupted in Borneo, killing thousands. Would I pray for them?

By May, we heard the voice of Lisa. It was a small record with a running time of three minutes and it arrived with a miniature phonograph operated by an aluminum handle. We had

been locked out of a dance owing perhaps to our general misdemeanors (someone complained we sang too much and were wild dancers in the moonlight) and were standing outside the gates, Joselito holding our phonograph while his Carmelita danced with an army, and my boys sulked in their poverty. Before we knew it, Alonzo was winding the aluminum arm and into that gaudy terrace where a vocalist wiggled her hips came the sound of gongs, the creaking of tombs from the Gogooryo Dynasty, and then it was she. The dancing had stopped and everybody listened to what seemed to be half of Asia's relics, for every icon was in that voice.

. . . The history of the Mon-Khmers are organized in agricultural communities under the rule of chiefs who may fulfill the rites aimed at conciliating the spirits of the earth and the water, the true masters of the harvest. And with the harvests, flowers grow in profusion. A well-known variety is the frangipani. In Bali, it is called djepun and is mostly grown in temples. In Java, however, where the frangipani is called cambodja, it is a graveyard tree.

And

For you, I leave a josh stick in every church. Incense for all—Rafael, Olaveira, Zacarias, Joselito, Alonzo. . .

When they had heard her, Joselito marched off, Alonzo still pumping at the handle of the phonograph that had spoken his name. We left yet another meaningless dance, bearing our Lisa away, and there was not a creature there who did not feel the loss.

Like spontaneous animals we would rush to the tide, lonely but laughing. We waded to the river, to the moon there lying like an idol, to stand vigil over the prophecy. Clothes were flicked off in disgust, and with a wail, embraced the water. Suddenly there was only the sea and the ecstasy and the male stranded with his passion. It was then I began to tell the boys about the wedding, about the gift. Alonzo stood on a promontory, listening, pointing gravely to Natividad.

"The best veils are in Natividad," Zacarias said for him.

"What is that singing?" I asked.

"Bandits!" spat Rafael.

Alonzo poked a fist on his breast.

"They sing for me," Zacarias said for him.

Then we were under the stars. Rum had been bought from the store; Olaveira brought water colors; the old man had lugged a portrait of himself with his first wife taken in 1929; Joselito was mending a net; and Alonzo was throwing pebbles at the sky. By the third glass, someone began to hum. Olaveira had dropped his colors, had taken over the harmonica. The old man stooped over his picture of 1929 with a brush.

"Leave it alone, grandfather," Rafael murmured drowsily. "The thighs are done, the sword is gone."

But the old man did not heed him. He traced a renaissance over a woman, brown and virtuous, sampaguita necklaces in her arms, while her intended (the old man at nineteen) was arrested on his knees in the tradition and nobility of proposal as rationalized with tragic insight by Unamuno but remembered in lyric sunlight by Amorsolo. The old man crossed the woman's mouth with water color and Olaveira wooed and Joselito sewed while Alonzo attended me like a chorus. As we drank away the present, I sensed the old man crawling back to the past, retouching every wrinkle of 1929 with failing vision and an enlarged heart. For blood is thicker than water.

Again I read something of Lisa.

We rambled along, shedding clothes, squealing at our nakedness. I would go for wine and on return dragged back into my temporary but the halted youth swearing themselves away from adolescence. The wine I poured out in glasses, bamboo cutlets, palms, mouths. With a flame in the belly, twilight was spent in adoration of the alfalfa, in the bloom of some offended manhood. Lisa's telegram I then stuck like ivory on a pole, whereupon we danced around it with incan-

tation. I would croon to Alonzo and tell him of my bride and her buried churches, of plants in the north that industrialized every human bone. The wine gone, I collapsed on the dirt floor, victims all around me. I snapped their pictures slyly in stages of decomposition. They were strewn about like brown ashes. Like coals, I scooped them out, and when I mixed my solutions in the dark room, 36 exposures emerged from the pan of microdol developer with barbaric confrontations. I took pictures of the groves, the herds, the clustered sameness of adobe shacks, the wild and the withered of tenants who were superimposed with one another in repose. Everywhere they found me with camera, a vulnerable indecision, but an insistence too that no remorse of nature should be hidden in a cave. Equally everywhere was Alonzo. Lisa would hyphenate the name in her earnest way—Alon-zo. She would say, *Take care of your Alon-zo. So alone is the mute in the world. So alone...*

There were Sundays when the boys were in Natividad for the lottery. This was when I would think of my cousin Raul who was somewhere in the Middle East with a stethoscope and an emotional contract. He was a self-proclaimed Arab who had contracted the disease of good intentions. Early in school, he had read pacifist tracts and heard about the decline of the masses. One day he made me suffer when, as junior rivals for the favors of a haughty flower girl in a wedding, he recited the preamble of Civil Liberties and won her handily with his nine-year-old humanity. Consequently, mother hurried me off to a toy shop for reparation, to prevent, she informed father most discreetly, the maturation of a complex. Ah, Raul.

To Lisa I would write restlessly. I wrote furiously on the portable, frightening the villagers away who sometimes peered through the blinds. I would sit stolidly, sipping chocolate, dreaming of Kenya. I would think of Gauguin and his Maori women and how I would like to be an Iatmul husband, if in my fantasies, I were not already of the Arapesh. Or if I were descended from the Mundugmurs, what a wanton I would be. And among the Usiai people of the Great Admiralty, they say

boys and girls have been permitted a year of supervised gaiety together. . .

Coffee was in the kettle and the gift was in my mind. Carpenters planed their narra, foetus abided in the womb, casual courtships ended in clans. Infatuated by tribal temperatures, I wanted to belong, belong to what people made a shape of, that was brutal, continual. So I screeched off on my scooter, and Alonzo, alarmed by my ardor, would run after me, and my spear carriers would chase us along the shore among the nets, all of us smouldering with mambo down the cogonal—this quixotic boy with the *Vespa* and his mercenaries declaring their autonomy from public relations. Once out of the post office, her letter in my hand, the boys followed me, celebrating the mail in gasps: Lisa, Lisa, Lisa.

Natives are ordained from birth. They grow, they hunt, they beget. Nothing has been taken away, for it is all there: a kiss evolves a society, a custom becomes a generation, and their sewing and superstition soothes the harshness, fills the lack. Therefore they become farmers and till the acre, for they have conceived the flower without comprehending the fact. They hoe the soil, humor the sea and own nothing but their lazy, ignorant freedoms. They have not asked our questions but have simply known and when they share with you the stew in the pot, the lemonade in the tin cup, they give back a splendor that is more than culture. Because I had written Lisa about us, her letter inevitably underlined my boys' separate importances with counsels and affections. *Don't drink too much, Rafael. Play a corrido for me, Zacarias and Olaveira. Joselito, be faithful. I pray for you, Alonzo.* I read Lisa to them and they were quiet. By June she would be my wife. My writing was hazy and I did not know what I was doing in Esperanza. I wanted to leap into the ocean and get her a pearl. Meanwhile, in the mute's eyes, there was a reflection of veils.

Joselito was faithful. He hounded Carmelita into the markets. He bought star apples and cast them in her path. Laughing nervously, she would bend down, to pick up a fruit. In the Louvre there is a painting by Orozco and it says everything

I have not written; in my book there is a chapter called *The Peasant Waits* and it says that in the Louvre there is a painting by Orozco. As was our ritual, Alonzo sat by my door, strumming softly. I reclined in my cushioned chair while supper roasted. In this state we were both mute and there was only the typewriter and its phonetic ego; there was his guitar and its plaintive echo. Every night he spoke of the veils of Natividad, and it seemed he was speaking for me.

I am in a pagoda overlooking the Chao Phya, said Lisa in a wire. *Hello to Alonzo.*

Sometimes a man will grab a horn and on it blow a valid statement. On a piece of wood with strings he will drag out a frugal beauty. Alonzo and guitar, Madonna and Child. From there he pronounced it all, the infinite fruit beneath all vines that remains pure for the wine of the Mass. It may be for this that a campfire is kindled, and the campfire is the purest of communions when you speak of one creature reaching out for another. Any man's sadness is an indictment of some emotion, and it is for this that the guitar has been created and upon which everything is equal once more. Never underestimate the guitar. It is a cathedral.

Therefore did the mute sing to me.

The pain young men inherit from desperation is theirs by right since it is principally through the wound that the world is possible. And when I speak of pain as education, I am also speaking of women, for they are the worst of possible wounds, the best of possible worlds. My boys knew this to be true for more and more they followed me in the daytime and listened to Lisa in the evening and were now beginning not to be found in those quarters of Esperanza where men express their birthmark on the bed. Lisa spoke of the unexcavated grottos in Asia and their mosaic roots, but when the dust and lime of her sciences cleared, she returned to me and Esperanza and to my boys whom she rang like mission bells and from my reading they came away to come again the next letter with personal clauses that they insisted must go with my answers. In Lisa's name, I was given a turnip, a pencil, a golden

chain. Alonzo held up his hands angrily, making noises in his throat.

"I give you nothing," Zacarias interpreted. "But she receives already."

I had been amused by the correspondence at the start and only answered out of duty, but as her churches took her farther and farther away and her letters became scarce, I grew impatient and her few postcards with their private postscripts shut out her many courtiers in the campfire. They went home, to drink liquor again, to fight among themselves. When everyone was asleep, Alonzo took me to a cliff over Natividad. At first, nothing happened and I was very cross. I stomped and pulled out weeds. But at dawn, I heard a distant singing. I opened my eyes and saw that I was alone. When I stood up, it was to a scent of flowers, a strange, great fragrance that overwhelmed me. It was like coming to the end of a book and finding on its last page, a rose. Alonzo had waited five hours to tell me this. Yelling, I ran deliriously in the wind and the dew, for whenever I am confronted with the inexplicable, I react solely with the body, never with the soul. I went home and transcribed the incident on paper. However, when I read it back, I realized how remote narrative can be. Like my pictures of locale, my words on the dwellers had ache and ambition, but their images still belonged to those who had clung to Esperanza in their age and commonness and then disappeared, leaving neither their meanings nor their motives.

That summer I was to learn the identity of the peasant. You do not plant a land with tubers and hope to raise sweet potatoes only, for flowers grow everywhere, even in a man's silence. Yet I was to retreat farther into my body and resume a physical calendar. We went to the moviehouse and saw the movie. We visited someone's girl. We climbed for coconut. My hut began to fill with dirty dishes and missing fathers who sneaked in from the night and were unconscious for days until their children peeped into the windows and cried them home again. Now without Alonzo, my yard was always full, my cupboard empty. Leaves that were green became brown, became cinder, became sand. The grounds were un-

swept; the inhabitants unkempt. Dust powdered the furniture, so that I can truly say every living matter that stumbled into my place left a mark on me. Nobody cleaned anything and nobody cared. Everything had been given up. Everybody slept. It was over. Sometimes I woke up to find my premises surrounded with stragglers. I stumbled among them, taking care not to step on anyone. We had been brothers in the drinking but were strangers in the daylight. We sank into a stupor and did not move for anything. My book had been crammed in a vase; no letters came. In our withdrawal, I dreamed a troubador came and passed among us, strumming on a guitar, whispering in each ear. And so after another night, at sunrise, I led them out of the hut. We walked groggily to that cliff above Natividad, inhaling air like ice, chewing at fresh stalks. Then it came, just as it had come before, a total fragrance. We crumpled to our knees and inhaled and said nothing and a light drizzle fell and dripped on our foreheads like holy water. The drizzle became rain and we were drenched with the scent and the dew and the pollen of the mountains. I do not know how long we stayed there.

Then the bells of Natividad were ringing and we were running down hills and splashing in brooks and everybody was asking what had happened but nobody knew and the bells tolled us downwards until we felt the moist beach under our feet. They had formed a circle when we got there and we broke it. The first thing I saw was a veil tied to a stick which had been stabbed into the waves. A pair of hands were entwined around the wood as though it were a flagpole. Beneath the hands, a man. He had been running and been shot and had run and been shot and had run and then had died. Through a forest and across two valleys and down the beach he left his blood and now he had fallen and his blood covered him like red leaves. But somewhere he must have caught a branch and impaled the veil on it which neither bullet nor his bleeding had touched. We huddled around him and did not know what to do but look down and tremble. Old women pushed us aside, hissing, bickering, laying jute sacks on the body. The bells rang once more and they lifted him up and

it seemed all the blind and all the broken of Esperanza were taking him away from us.

"Alonzo!" I cried.

Then Zacarias was charging towards us, shouting, holding a telegram above his head. In my hand, it read: HOME, DAWN, LISA.

At dusk, I drove us all to the city. Our feet were hanging out, our hair was uncombed, the maya in its cage. The old man whose name nobody knew had a bunch of sunflowers in his heart and was wearing a necktie. I drove all night, feeling I was running after the sky, afraid it would leave me behind, running on the ground forever. Streaking down the highway, I felt that we were following and were being followed by someone and in the station wagon the chains rattled and the boys shook and the old man wept and a maya sang. An airplane was landing when we arrived and the airport was lighted with torches on all sides. We were told a typhoon had come and not yet gone and there was no electricity anywhere. Soon all of us had bought candles and were greeting the passengers. And then I saw her, a girl with spectacles, holding an image in her hand. We ran as one towards her; Joselito strumming; the cage with Olaveira; Zacarias and Rafael hoisting the old man aloft like an offering while he mumbled some courtly Spanish phrases; and Alonzo's veil in my palm. Lisa waved and called me and when she spoke my name, I shuddered.

"Deogracias," she said.

I placed the veil on her hair as though it were a garland for an only survivor and stepped back with the others. Shabby and shattered, we stood before her in mute attention, with only a chord or two on the guitar to speak for us. Perhaps someday she would find the remnants of old chapels in our minds and bodies, and light more candles. Perhaps among our personal ruins, a temple waited. That morning I drove us off, laughing, laughing all the way. But I knew that one night when we were finally alone, I would cry to her the pain of life.