

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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Philippine Studies vol. 33, no. 3 (1985) 295–303

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

The President's Special Research Project

MARIANNE VILLANUEVA

THE BUILDING was old. How old exactly, no one knew for sure. They had lost the records of the construction in the great fire that struck Manila in 1915. From the style of its architecture, however, and its ancient, weather-beaten look, it had been built at the turn of the century.

This was the building that housed the National Archives. The shelves were full of dusty, yellowing documents from Spanish times, newspapers with courageous names like *La Independencia* and *La Solidaridad*, and books on history and geography compiled by the Spanish friars. No one had looked at the books for a very long time. They were piled together in haphazard fashion on the shelves. The pages were coming loose from the bindings. The newspapers were slowly crumbling to pieces. Perhaps the past was not very important, or perhaps no one wanted to remember that before the New Society of the dictator Roberto Suarez Gomez, there had been such a thing as an intellectual life in the country. At any rate, the building's long, narrow corridors were empty. Nothing disturbed the shafts of sunlight slanting quietly through the high windows.

So many years had gone by, years in which the building had passed from a state of stately elegance to one of crumbling decay, that the Ministry of Buildings and Construction condemned it as unsafe. A team of workers was dispatched to begin the demolition. Perhaps the workers would never have found the old man if they had not decided to first examine the building from top to bottom, climbing stairs hidden in dark corners and trying doors that had never been tried. Perhaps he would have died there, with his books, his bones crushed amidst falling stone and metal, and

no one would ever have known what it was that had made him shut himself up in a windowless cubicle at the very top of the building for some twenty odd years.

When the workers found him, he was already very old. He had lived away from the light for so long, in a world of books and deep silence, that he had almost forgotten how to speak. Now he could only waggle his hand uselessly in distress at the workers' coming, at the sound of their intrusive voices and their heavy, thumping feet. They thought he would have been happy to escape from his narrow prison and be with other people at last but instead he cried like a child, the tears sprinkling the collar of his white shirt. At last they realized that he had been happy living there, and that the outside world terrified him. Perhaps he knew that outside there were no longer any books, for people had stopped reading when it became impossible to distinguish lies from the truth. Perhaps he knew that outside people walked around in ignorance, that the villages were full of abandoned mansions where wild plants and weeds had invaded the silent rooms, that the government news agencies and the Bureau of Censorship held the country in a grip so tight that if stories were still being written, they were being written in secret, behind sturdy doors in rooms without windows.

He had been sitting at a massive, wooden writing desk with a sheaf of loosely bound manuscripts and a ream of fresh type-writing paper pushed to one side. He had an old, cracked coffee cup in one corner and five fountain pens. All around him, on the walls and on the floor, were books of all sizes and descriptions. Filipino writers and historians, long gone, stared solemnly up from the dusty book jackets. Jose Rizal, Marcelo H. del Pilar, Francisco Balagtas, Horacio de la Costa, Salvador P. Lopez — they were names no one had ever heard of, yet reading them now gave the workers a strange sense of loss. It was as though they were all suffering from collective amnesia. They could no longer imagine what life must have been like in the old days, when books were prized and writing was an honorable occupation.

They knew the old man had been a writer of some sort, from the half-finished manuscripts and other writing paraphernalia on his desk. But they could not understand what he had to write about, locked away in his dreary surroundings. They said to themselves that he must have been a crank and they led him away, while his stick-like arms thrashed in vain and he babbled inco-

herently about "a project." An hour later, they delivered him to the barangay captain, a leering, uneducated man, and that night he slept on a hard pallet in a home for vagrants where huge rats nibbled on his toes and his cries went unheard by the grim-faced wardens.

If the workers had only cared to look at the top drawer of the old man's writing desk, they would have found there a faded, yellowing document bearing the seal of President Roberto Suarez Gomez and entrusting to one Nicanor Santos the sole responsibility for the "President's Special Research Project." The contract was dated 15 November 1960, a few months after Gomez had come to power.

A long time ago—this was in the springtime of his reign—a young and handsome Gomez, fresh from victory in a short but brutish civil war, had looked out over the green and gold rice fields of his new domain and felt the first stirrings of a need for immortality. He had just spent five years marshalling his forces in the soft, rolling hills of Central Luzon and marching from place to place, from the Ilocos provinces in the north all the way to Albay in the south, to do battle with the Lopez and Vargas factions. He was only thirty-five but he looked at the fields with an old man's eyes and thought of peace, and rest, and the future. He wanted to go down in history as the greatest President the Philippines had ever known. He wanted to be greater even than that old Spanish patrician, Quezon, who had guided the country through the turbulent years of the first half of the century. Therefore it was only natural that he should desire to leave a written record, a personal chronicle, of his reign.

The idea grew into a magnificent obsession. A search was begun for the man who would undertake the President's Special Research Project. From the tiniest island of Batanes in the north, to the southernmost tip of Mindanao, anyone who had ever written anything—a poem, a short story, a play—was forced to surrender the manuscript for inspection by a special panel of judges who would decide whether the applicant had the necessary literary flair, feel for history, and political neutrality required by such a project. Finally, after a prolonged search, they found Nicanor Santos, a lowly young professor of English at the University of the Philippines.

Then, the university was in a shambles. Classes had been sus-

pended for more than six months. Many of the professors were packing their bags for America.

Nicanor Santos was no fool. The signs of imminent economic collapse were everywhere. The Chinese, always the first to jump ship, were fleeing the country in droves, a sure sign that the banks were foundering. For himself, he only wanted a simple life, space to raise a family, enough money to live comfortably. He abhorred violence, and guns. He had made up his mind to take his family to Australia. He and his wife quietly began to make their preparations. On the day they were to leave, however, an army jeep filled with soldiers pulled up to the house. A tall colonel with tinted sunglasses and a skin-tight, brown uniform stepped out.

"Nicanor Santos," he bellowed.

Nicanor pressed his face against the glass of an upstairs window and felt his knees start to tremble. "What do you want?" he squeaked.

"You must come with us at once," the colonel said.

"But I have a plane to catch," Nicanor protested.

"No matter," the colonel said. At a sign from the colonel, three soldiers barged into the house. Nicanor's wife screamed. Pandemonium broke loose when she attempted to fend off a soldier with the points of her high-heeled shoes. She was easily subdued, however, and in no time at all she had been bundled off to the airport and put on the next plane to Australia. Nicanor was brought to a military camp, where he was informed that because he had once written a long epic poem about a sixteenth-century Filipino hero named Lapu-Lapu, he was now the official ghostwriter of Roberto Suarez Gomez.

He cried at first. He even thought of killing himself. When the soldiers first shoved pen and paper into his hands, he saw only blackness. He could not think, much less write. Finally, Gomez himself had to be informed of the situation. The official ghostwriter, his generals told him, was proving recalcitrant. He had refused to eat or drink anything for days and was now as thin as his own shadow. If the situation were allowed to continue, the generals said, the President would have to find a new ghostwriter for this one would be dead.

One day, there was a stir in the camp. A long black limousine had stopped in front of the bungalow where Nicanor was kept prisoner. Gomez, resplendent in a new military uniform, with

shiny brass epaulettes and rows of medals across his chest, alighted. When Nicanor saw the tall, imposing figure of the President stride into his cramped cell, he crumpled at his feet.

"Forgive me," Nicanor sobbed. "But I am not happy here."

"Why? What more do you want?" the President asked. "You have all the time in the world to do what you do best. You need never worry how you are going to earn your keep. Your wife will be sent monthly payments. You will be fed. You will be clothed. All I want from you is a little cooperation."

Nicanor looked around him at the stone-faced soldiers standing guard nearby and sighed.

"I would like," he said, "a little office near the National Archives, where I can sit and read to my heart's content. And, yes, write, if you so wish it."

Everything was done exactly as he had requested. They were at great pains to make him happy. The room they gave him was small, but serviceable. There were no windows, but then, he had requested that. He had already decided that he was going to be a recluse, and live the rest of his life in his mind. He had told Gomez:

"You're at the pinnacle now, but one day you're going to grow old and tired and worn-out. And no one will care about you, or about the memoirs I've written for you. The people will look at you and remember that, because of you, a father or a husband or a brother was put to death. Because of you, a family was ruined, and a field left to the rats. Their hatred will grow stronger and stronger until, one day, a man will break into your palace and stab you in your sleep, and my manuscript will be thrown into the gutter, along with all the debris from your regime. I'll be dragged down with you, whether I want to or not, whether it was my doing or not. Your end is my end. Our fates are now inextricably linked."

He looked at Gomez as though he were already looking at a dead man, as though he could already see the vultures descending on the presidential palace, the barricades flung up in the streets. He laughed, then, a bitter, mirthless laugh. He refused to stop even when Gomez had slapped him across the face. What was there to stop him from laughing? They could do nothing more to him than what they had already done.

Years later, when the first volume of the memoirs was completed, everyone who read it marvelled at the particularity of detail, the loving evocation of scene, that seemed to jump out

from the lifeless paper. How, they asked themselves, how was he able to do it? For here was Gomez's life, described in so rich and evocative a manner that it resembled no story anyone had ever read.

This first volume was entitled "Boyhood." Everyone had forgotten that Gomez had had a childhood, but now they remembered it again. It seemed almost like blasphemy to admit that he had not always been the great general, the conquering hero. They had grown so used to reading about his exploits in the papers everyday that they had almost come to believe he had sprung, fully grown, from his mother's womb. For that matter, they had even come to believe he could walk on air. But now here he was at seven, swiping caramel tarts from the neighborhood grocer and trading insults with the shirtless Chinamen hawking *champoy* and *titina* along the streets. Here he was at ten, surreptitiously climbing the *macopa* tree in the garden of a Mrs. Nieto and stuffing himself with the tart, crunchy, red fruit until the owner herself had to come, brandishing a broom, to chase him away. There he was in that sleepy, southern town, spending long afternoons watching the haze lift from the greenish water by the harbor pilings, smelling the sharp stench of the fires from the sugar cane fields and dreaming dreams of the sugar central, his mouth overloaded with sweetness, his ears filled with the constant rumble of the trucks as they lurched from pothole to pothole along the dusty roads, his eyes assaulted by the dust steaming up from the streets and the sun glancing off the white-hot tin roofs. Gradually it dawned on them that, yes, he'd had a childhood once, that once he'd known simple laughter and joy and fear, and that he had not always walked in that particular way that called attention to his arrogance.

Gomez found himself inexplicably hating the book. There was something melancholy about it, and about the later books as well. Beneath that powerful rush of remembered incidents and feelings was a strain of foreshadowing. The events seemed to be marching to one inevitable end.

Even as the young Gomez played in the tree-lined plaza fronting the old stone church, a secret voice whispered that the sun was setting and the shadows cast by the moss-grown walls of the church were creeping closer to where the boy had tossed his marbles on the hard, packed earth. Soon, the voice whispered, the sun would set. Then, in the blink of an eye, morning would

come. And in this fashion the years would race by, the boy would grow up, and his hair would be speckled with white. The fat wives of the hacienda owners who sat around in house dresses all day long, their hair in pin curlers, their soft, fleshy hands moving caressingly over the green-and-white mahjong squares, did not hear the drum roll in the distant hills that seemed to accelerate with each passing day, hastening them to their own deaths. The priest lecturing the dozing parishioners at Sunday Mass did not hear it. Neither did the man who sold *sorbetes* in the streets. But Gomez the President of the Republic heard it as he read, and the hearing filled him with horror. Meanwhile, the ghostwriter smiled his secret smile and kept on writing.

The years passed. Horror piled upon horror. The people were weighted down with misery. They walked the streets with gaunt, emaciated faces and dull, unseeing eyes. Nicanor could barely stand to hear the children wailing from hunger at their mothers' tired breasts, or the insistent chant of the beggars that besieged him on his way to work each morning. He became increasingly burdened with misery and self-loathing. Finally, he began to shrink, to grow deeper inside himself. So strong was his impulse to escape from the evil, the filth, the corruption of Gomez's regime. Each year he looked smaller, drier, more shriveled up. He was deliberately willing himself into oblivion. His dream was to make himself so light that, if fate allowed it, he would simply disappear into thin air.

The presidential palace was now a lonely place where the wind raced down empty corridors and through shuttered rooms. The place stank incredibly of illness and decay. The red brocade curtains over the tall, French windows were heavy with dust. The president sat alone in his office, behind a huge, narra writing desk, signing documents he no longer cared to read.

He had long ceased to care about what went on beyond the confines of his palace, preferring to leave the important decisions to a Cabinet of ministers. He had aged much faster than anyone would have imagined.

Now he only ventured as far as the balcony that overlooked the sluggish, brown water of the Pasig. But he never remained there longer than a few moments. Somehow, he could always tell when he was being observed and would leave quickly, his breath becoming hard and labored in his anxiety to escape scrutiny.

He no longer wanted to show his face because after his last illness it had undergone a startling transformation. His cheeks had become swollen and his eyes had turned small and pig-like. Now he looked quite comical. He looked like a chubby-faced, little Chinaman. And he could no longer give an impassioned speech without looking like a strident parody of his former self.

In the first few weeks after recovering from his illness, he had walked the streets and been shocked to discover that no one recognized him. A whore came up, her black eyes flashing, and thrust her breast in his face. He had turned away in disgust and she had laughed mockingly and spat. He was besieged by beggars on all sides—little children and old men and women, tugging at his sleeves with one hand, the other outstretched before his face. He stumbled and ran, losing his way in dark alleys where the only light came from gas lamps in the *tiyanggis* on the street corners where dark men stood drinking *ginebra*, cursing and laughing. After many hours, he found his way back to the palace, exhausted and shaking. Those who saw him afterwards said he had received a mortal wound that night. Now he wanted only to remember the glory days when, parading the streets in his military uniform, he had been surrounded by people pushing and shoving to touch his face, to kiss his hand. But that was a very long time ago, before he had even started to rule.

Now no one cared any longer about the social revolution he had proclaimed with so much fanfare twenty years ago. He had said that his revolution would take many lives, but that the bloodshed should be looked upon as a kind of surgery that would rid the state of its cancer and bring it new hope. Then they had believed him. That was before the prisons and cemeteries had become packed with fathers, brothers, uncles, and cousins. He had promised to give each farmer a parcel of land he could call his own, and to end food shortages, high prices, unemployment, and poverty. Then they had been convinced of the importance of sacrifice to achieve these aims, but after they had seen the generals enriching themselves, and the busy politicians accepting bribes to pass legislation favorable to this or that party, they had realized he was just another dictator, and turned away in disgust.

So much disillusionment, so much disappointment.

"I never wanted it to be this way," Gomez told himself. But no one heard him. They were already taking apart the presidential

palace, stone by stone. They had already gathered outside the gates, ready with sharpened bolos. They were yapping like dogs preparing for the fray. As for the ghostwriter, everything had happened just as he said it would.

There was a new Minister of Buildings and Construction. He had never heard of the President's Special Research Project. A group of Japanese businessmen had approached him with the idea of putting up a hotel on the site where the building that housed the National Archives now stood. It was located on prime downtown property, the businessmen pointed out. The Minister said that tourism was a dying industry; no one had cared to visit the country after the depredations of Gomez's regime.

"Ah, but just wait until 1997, when the British lease on Hong Kong expires. Then there'll be a mad search for a new mecca for international business. Why not Manila? Think of it—it occupies a central position in the Pacific, at the gateway to Asia. And labor here is the cheapest in the world. In a few years, the foreigners will come running. Roxas Boulevard will be another Queens Road," the businessmen said.

"What about the financing?" the Minister asked.

"Leave that to us," the businessmen said.

Now they were ripping out the guts of the old building. Now they were hammering at the old walls. Now the walls were shuddering, collapsing in a cloud of dust, burying Nicanor's books and the yet-unfinished pages of the final volume of Gomez's memoirs. For days the city reverberated with the dull explosion of the wrecker's ball hitting unresisting walls and the furious drilling of jackhammers. When the noise finally ceased and the dust lifted, there was nothing left of the old building but a flattened pile of rubble.

No one thought to tell Gomez about the ignominious end of his project. He sat alone, neglected, in his palace, listening to the strange sounds of destruction from across the river. As far as everyone was concerned, he had long ago ceased to rule.