

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

Charles Hayes

Barangay Super Bowl

Eyes beneath furrowed brows follow me as I stroll through the Barangay, a white foreigner trying to keep my step light and my heart open. When I utter Visayan greetings of respect, like a wrinkled sail to the wind, faces smooth over and Visayan replies are heard. I can speak the dialect and this matters. Sometimes the replies are in the English of my own. Other times I say nothing and just amble on, telling myself that as long as I keep to the common way it doesn't matter, I have no need to feel uneasy. It all depends on my mood. Always I try to remember that here respect is more than just a word. And my kind are not overly known for it. But I seldom become anxious because I know that if you just take it easy and don't try to always have your way the Philippines can be a laid back place. I also know that it can be a hot hassle if your tolerance of the different is low.

"Hey Joe, where are you going," a young woman sitting in front of a sari sari store asks. Joe is the common name given to many foreigners, dating back to the GI Joe of the World War Two liberation troops.

"Just there," I say, not pointing, but lifting my head and pursing my lips toward my direction of travel. The sweet smell of barbecued chicken wafts over from a little grill she is attending near the bench where she sits. The natural beauty of the women here can leave me a little tongue tied at times but my smile must say this for they seem to sense my appreciation. They are not stupid of their worth and my take usually pleases them.

"It is too hot for walking, take a rest," she says as she pats the bench beside her and scoots over.

I am twice her age but her eyes and smile make that seem like a small matter. I have seen her around the Barangay and at the local market. I think she is the owner of this store and lives in the added on back part. I am hot and she has invited me, why not? When I take a seat she is happy as she claps her hands, goes into the store, and returns with a coke which she offers. When I go into my pocket for money she says, "Oh no, it's in the house."

"You mean, on the house, free?" I say.

"Yes, on the house, people will see you and come to buy something to see what we are doing. I will make a few more pesos. You are nice to business."

"You mean good for business."

"Yeah, yeah, good for business."

Before we can continue our conversation another customer arrives and the young woman must go back inside. She was right, it isn't long before there is a small line of curious customers, eyeing me, and waiting to buy laundry soap, candles, or mosquito coils, among the everyday things that they use. I thirstily finish the coke and, after the line disappears, return the bottle through the little wire enclosure at the front of the store.

"I will go now, my name is Charles, what is your name," I ask as she takes the bottle.

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"I am Mary. Thank you for coming to my store, Charles. *Balik balik, palihug,*" she says, mixing English and Cebuano as she bids me to please return.

"*Salamat,*" I thank her and head off again feeling indeed rested and fresh under the tropical sun. Should I return this way I think that maybe I will be known as OK. It is nice for me here. With just a wee bit of effort, I can get along with people. Back where I come from, since the war, I have such trouble with people that I have just quit trying and screened off as much society as possible.

Living here is not as easy in substance, yet it is easier in style. Even with the various armed insurgencies in many places not far away, there is no patriotic requirement to be scared and drum up enemies that too often resemble the boogiemens outside of children's bedroom windows. Here they try to find a way to live with mal contents. There is no money to be made from war....by rich nor poor. Life is already cheaper, why push it more so?

At the edge of the Barangay I come to a large field bordered by coconut and banana palms with a well worn footpath cutting it in half. Following the path, I pass a young goat herder sitting on a large rock smoking. His goats are staked out and grazing on the scrub that grows there. He waves as I pass and as I wave back I can smell the distinct odor of marijuana coming from his smoke. When I do a double take on him he smiles broadly, I guess figuring that I will not tell the authorities. Or not caring if I do. He is right, I will not tell. It is even legal where I come from. One day it will be legal here as well. Reaching the other side of the field, I follow the dirt track that leads to the sea. There are no people along this way except an occasional returning fisherman with his catch. That's why I come here, to be alone and watch the ships tracking the Cebu Strait to their anchorage in the Mactan Channel at Cebu City. Far across the strait the Island of Bohol can sometimes barely be made out. This spot is a good place to sit and think.

The dark blue of the sea stretches to the lighter blue of the sky, embedded here and there with patches of high cirrus clouds. This Zen like tableau brings me to a seat in the sand where I can hurl my thoughts upon the sea and see what comes back. Far out near the horizon there is a small tug towing a large barge across the sea. Probably coming from Mindanao, the Muslim region, where there is much unrest. Yet negotiations and trade continue. Not like where I am from where wars against an idea have confiscated many of the freedoms we used to have. Always done in the name of the current war du jour. There, different generations have different wars to pester their thoughts. Even though my war was long ago parts of it stay present. Like the jettisoned flotsam that the currents carry here and there, it is kept ever swirling by each new war. Turning my thoughts away from that over which I am powerless, I bask in the salty air and hot sun and try to tune all else out. It is easier here..... in spirit.

After a while I head back the way I came, feeling lighter and more at ease. When I get to the short cut across the field I see that the goats and their tender are gone. Near the large rock where the tender sat there are now many men forming a noisy circle. Excitement in their voices as money changes hands is accompanied by laughter or resignation, depend-

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ing on which way the money is going. Two cocks, each with a razor sharp spur strapped to one leg, are leaping, flapping, and kicking toward one another in the center of the circle. It's hard to tell which one is winning except for the occasional flash of a bloodied spur. The fight lasts only a couple of minutes until, like a nesting hen, one cock squats to the earth and hangs its head. When the referee can not restart the fight by manually bringing them face to face the cock left standing is declared the winner. The loser immediately loses its head, gets scalded in a boiling bath set over a large fire, and plucked for the home pot. After bets are paid, a new pair begins another fight. Most of the money I can see is won by an older smiling Chinese- Filipino with a cock under his arm. He is a small thin man dressed better than most and wearing real shoes. One of the minority that is older than me but shown much respect by those he interacts with. While he counts the money his young assistant collects the winning cock and gives it a quick examination to determine if it can fight again. Finding it in fairly good shape, he strokes it a few times, affectionately smooths its feathers, and returns it to its cage.

I have seen these fights before and there is not much interest for me in the betting nor the fighting. However I find it curious that the cock, which is almost the national bird, plays such a role in this culture. A culture of give and take and, for the most part, acceptance. I wonder how it would be in America if we fought bald eagles instead of other people. Turning this over in my mind as I exit the circle of fight fans, I must be smiling for my thoughts are interrupted when I hear, "You like the cock fights, yes? You are from the United States?"

It is the Chinese mestizo. He and his assistant are leashing another cock before returning it to a cage. The cages are stacked in a nice new Toyota truck at the edge of the field.

"I think it is hard for the birds," I tell him, "but I guess it saves a trip to the market for the loser."

He laughs and offers his hand as his assistant continues to tend to the small flock, not paying much interest to our conversation, but all ears I can be sure.

"That is most correct," the old man says. "To waste when people are hungry is very bad. You are an American, no?"

I don't much like revealing my nationality, some places that can hurt, but this man seems honest enough so I reply, "Yeah, but that doesn't mean I have to win at everything. Your English is very good."

"Thank you. Maybe someday I can go to America. Only to visit. I would like to see New York, the place that so many wars come from."

"New York is OK," I tell him, "I'm from the other side, Seattle."

When he hears this his eyes widen and he begins to shake my hand again.

"Yes, yes, Seattle too, I want to see Seattle first."

Most of the people are now starting to exit the field, many with a dead bird plucked and hanging from their hand. Others, are fondly petting a

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winning cock under arm. By this time the assistant is standing by the truck with all the cocks caged. The older man glances at his waiting truck and hands me a small card.

“I go now. Here is my business in Tabunok. Stop by and see my many fine carpets sometime. Maybe you can tell me about Seattle some while I make good deal for you.”

“Maybe I will,” I say, as he waves and gets in the passenger side of the truck with his assistant now behind the wheel.

After the truck leaves I examine the card which says only, “Sun Chan, Fine Tapestries, Tabunok.” Placing the card in my pocket, thinking that Sun Chan seems a bit better off than the average Filipino, I follow the last of the cock fighters out of the field.

The bench in front of Mary’s sari sari store is occupied with customers as I pass by. It is past noon and my appetite tells me it is time to eat so I stop at the next eatery along my route, explore the contents of the various pots and pans, and order some squid, rice, and sautéed ampalaya or bitter melon. After paying eighty pesos or less than two dollars, I look for a place to sit. All the wooden tables that border the area between the eatery and the walkway are full of customers so I sit on a leftover cinder block near the corner of the eatery and begin to eat. A melody of clinking spoons and bowls is pleasant to my ears and it is easy to see that the people here enjoy their food. Many of the other customers are school children from the near by elementary school having their lunch and curiously stealing glances in my direction. No doubt they are wondering where I am from. It is something I have gotten used to with children. They are bold but polite in their inquisitiveness and rarely are they any bother. I would never be able to tolerate the whining, loud, shopping mall children of America in the same way as I do these kids.

The food is *lami* or delicious and I clear my plate quickly knowing that what I am eating is good for me and known by many experts as some of the best there is. These thoughts remind me of how different living here is from life in America and the value of an attitude that can see when less is better. After returning my dish and spoon I head back to my little rented place near the center of the Barangay, still thinking about how the obvious is not always so obvious.



NOT FAR FROM GAISANO IN TABUNOK, amid the clutter and pollution of a thousand vehicles coming and going, there are multiple businesses stacked upon and beside one another. One of these is a large two story cinder block building directly on the national highway. Attached to the front of the building is a large sign with Chinese characters over an equally large sign in English that reads “Chan’s Fine Tapestries.”

Dropping coins in the hand of the conductor standing on the back stoop of the jeepney, I step down from the passenger compartment and stare up at the sign. A loud musical air horn sounds and I quickly step onto the sidewalk before another jeepney pulls over into the spot that I have just vacated. It is always crowded here during the day and I am semi relieved when I make it across the stream of pedestrians and inside the

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building. I find it cooler and calmer in all respects compared to the outside. After my eyes adjust to the less sunny interior I can see that indeed there are many beautiful carpets hanging from the walls and cross beams overhead. A young Filipino approaches me when he sees me just standing there.

“You like to buy,” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I reply, “is Sun Chan available?”

The young man seems at first a little let down, seeing no quick sale at hand, but after a moment smiles and leads me to a back office before asking, “Does he know you?”

“No, just show him this card that he gave to me at the cock fight.”

He disappears through the office door and in a moment he is back with a smiling Sun Chan.

“Come in, come in, my friend,” Sun says before turning to the young Filipino.

“Antonio, get us some tea and part of the cake that’s in the refrigerator.”

Sun is positively beaming as he leads the way into his office.

“A pleasant surprise, amigo,” Sun Chan says, “I don’t even know your name. Please have a seat and tell me what I can do for you.”

“My name is Charles and with your extra winnings from the cock fight I thought that maybe you could give me a good deal on a nice rug.”

Sun Chan laughs, “What will you do with it?”

“I will use it here in my Barangay. My little apartment is pretty bare. I think it will brighten it up some.”

“I see, will you sell it if you take it to America? You could make an easy profit.”

“If I have to leave I will not take it with me. I will leave it here somewhere safe. It will become my mind beacon, a thing that I care for and look forward to returning to. A purpose to my travel.”

“A mind beacon. That’s pretty good,” Sun Chan says as he stands up from his desk. “Come with me. I think I might have something that can give you plenty of purpose.”

As we are leaving the office Antonio appears with the tea and cake.

“Just leave it on the desk,” Sun Chan tells him.

I follow Sun Chan up some steps to the second floor and down a long corridor to a large metal door with a big padlock and an electronic apparatus that appears to be some sort of coded lock. It is similar to some vaults that I have seen. Once Sun gains entry he leads me in and switches on the light. I can see right away that this is a very special room with several beautiful rugs displayed on bamboo racks. Sun leads me to the center of the display and a very nice medium sized rug of darkly shaded blues and greens with some bright patches of yellow near its center. Looking at it

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in a certain way, I can see the colors come together to form an impressive overall appearance of a lush garden in the abstract. It is very nice. We just quietly look at it for a time before Sun turns over a corner edge of the rug for my inspection. Branded into the fabric in Persian Farsi and English are the words: Made In Iran. There is also a price tag that bears a price way beyond my means.

"You like?" Sun Chan asks.

"Oh yes, it is very beautiful but way too expensive for me."

"Maybe not," Sun says, "let's go back to my office and have our tea and snack."

Back in the office and comfortably enjoying our snack, I am resigned to not having a Persian rug because of the expense but Sun continues his deal talk.

"My friend, you can have your mind beacon, as you call it, for free.... if you will help me with a business problem. Also if you have to leave the rug here because of travel I will secure your carpet in my vault until your return. Truly secure places are not easy to find for such large valuables and mine is one of the best. Twenty four hour armed guard, night and day."

"What is it that I can do for you?" I ask.

Sun Chan explains that he is in the process of trying to begin a business relationship with another Chinese businessman who owns an import export business in Seattle. This business has all the required licenses, shipping connections, and many other requirements needed to be successful in a global market. The man's name is Robert Lee, a big Seattle sports fan, particularly of the football team. Sun goes on to explain that during their communications he has pretended to be a fan also, hopefully to gain Robert's favor for negotiating a sort of partnership. Trouble is Sun actually knows nothing about Seattle nor football. And if I would tutor him in this, to his advantage, he would present me with the carpet for free.

This seems like so little to me that I find it hard to believe but Sun Chan assures me that, to him, it is of monumental importance. I know enough about football, even know some of the Seattle players from all their press, which I get on the internet when I read the news. It is easy for me to agree with this trade off and help Sun.

For the next couple of weeks or so I spend a few hours printing out internet stories on the Seattle team and instructing Sun in the basics of football. A quick learner no doubt, he digests all the different stories about the players and their opponents and soon can reasonably pass as an ordinary Seattle supporter. In fact he tells me that his notes and conversations with Robert are going very well. The prospect of their partnership is in full bloom. However, as fate would have it, Seattle wins the NFC Championship and the right to play in the biggest sports contest in the world, The Super Bowl.

As I enter Sun's store and close the distance to his office I can see him through the office window. Head in his hands, a small TV that he is not even watching planted on his desktop, he does not look good. I peck on

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the window and he waves me in.

"I am glad you are here," he says, "I just finished on the phone with Mr. Lee. He thinks that we can do business together and he wants to begin with a mutual bet on the Super Bowl. Plus he wants me to pick the spread, whatever that means, and the team, Seattle or their opponent New England."

"How much is the bet?" I ask.

"Two thousand dollars, a thousand each. I told him I would do it but I have no idea about this kind of thing. Do you?"

"Not really, when I do it I lose more than I win. What did he say about the spread?"

"He said it was Seattle and six points. What does that mean?"

"That means if you bet on Seattle they must win or not lose by six or more points. If you bet on New England that means that they must win by more than six points.

"What if it's only a six point difference, is it a tie?"

"No, there are no ties for the bet. The bookie or bet taker wins all ties. You lose."

Sun Chan's face is the most somber that I have ever seen.

"A thousand dollars," he says, staring straight ahead, seeing God only knows what. After what seems like a long time he looks over at me seated in the guest chair, wishing I was anywhere else but here.

"What would you do? You Americans are educated in such things. What can you say?"

"Let me go back to my place and study the internet some. All I can say right now is that I think New England has an older and wiser Quarterback. He is very good and I think that is why there is a six point spread to Seattle. New England is expected to win."

"OK, OK, you do that. Study hard and meet me here tomorrow morning about 10. We will go out and buy a snack and you can tell me what to do."

I am glad to get out of Sun Chan's business and catch a trisikad back to my place. The slower pace of the small bicycle with a sidecar gives me time to think. The sweating young man pumping us along the crowded roadway, the nearness to the road surface, and the other faces coming and going along its stretch, ground me back to where I am and what I am doing. I tell myself to just do the homework and then make my guess. Whatever happens, life and its ebbs and flows will go on. The carpet is a small matter over all. It's Sun Chan's luck that I hope will be good. I have few friends here. And I have no enemies.

The next day as we have the small meal between breakfast and lunch, which is called the morning snack, I look over my notes from the sports websites that I have surfed since our last meeting. We are seated at a small table in a Gaisano fast food shop near Sun's business. The air conditioning and relative quiet, mixed with the sweet and sour smells of seafood pre-

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pared in an Asian way, make it easy for me to relax a bit. Not so Sun Chan. He is edgy and worried about not being up to snuff on the Super Bowl, not to mention the money that will be at stake. "Sun, you must realize I don't have a sure answer for you," I say. "It's all pretty much a gamble. And you don't need to worry about the carpet, I can live without it. It's not a big deal. I don't want to be responsible if you lose."

"Yes, yes, I mean no, you will not be responsible if I lose the bet. Just tell me who you think will win and by how much. I have to talk to Mr. Lee later today and he wants my pick by then."

"OK, my best guess is that New England will win but Seattle is a younger team and I think they will give them a hard time. I don't think New England can beat them by six or more points. I would take the six points and bet on Seattle. It is only a guess, If you have to do it, Seattle is the one to take."

"Yes, that is good. I am glad to hear that. Robert says that he hates to bet against Seattle but if I pick New England he will bet against Seattle because it is a business decision. Our first business decision and an omen of what our partnership will be like if we make the deal to work together. Thank you Charles, I must go now and prepare for our phone conversation and the money transfer."

Sun Chan quickly gets to his feet, uses a table napkin to wipe his sweaty brow, and hurries out the door leaving most of his snack untouched.

On the Monday of the Super Bowl, which is Sunday in the United States, I am in Sun Chan's office where he has a large widescreen TV set up. Somehow he has managed to get a live feed of the game over his cable service. It is early afternoon here, not many customers in the business. Antonio seems to be able to handle all that is going on in the large area of the building outside the office. In fact it has appeared to me that there is really not that big of a demand for Sun's carpets. Maybe that is why he has placed such importance on this potential business arrangement with Richard Lee. Maybe Lee has a good market and Sun has a good price. But this is none of my concern and I wonder if I should have gotten involved in all this to begin with. Except for a Super Bowl halftime coke, Sun and I have not moved from our chairs in front of the TV. Late in the game, it is very close between the two teams. New England has just scored with a touchdown and extra point and leads by four points, 30 to 26. With Seattle plus six points, Sun's chances look very good since there is only 30 seconds and no timeouts left in the game. New England tees it up and kicks off. Seattle stupidly fields the ball in the end zone and runs it out but is immediately tackled by New England on the four yard line. On the next play Seattle tries a surprise draw play which goes nowhere as the clock continues to tick down. Using a hurry up offense and snap Seattle attempts to throw a hail Mary, all or nothing, pass for the last play of the game. However, the quarterback, now throwing from his own end zone, bobbles and drops the ball. He immediately picks it up but before he can throw it he is swarmed and tackled by two New England linemen. This scores a two point safety for New England as time expires and the game ends. The final score is New England 32, Seattle 26. Happy only moments before, Sun and I sit

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stunned, knowing that if the point spread ends with a tie, the bookie or bet taker wins all ties. For Sun Chan and his bet the score is 32 to 32.

"Oh shit, what am I going to do, I have lost it all," Sun cries, rocking back and forth.

I feel terrible. There is nothing I can do but offer up a feeble hope.

"Maybe since it was a tie Mr. Lee will not drop the whole deal."

"No no," Sun says, "we must win for the deal to go through. It is part of the omen for Chinese prosperity."

Except for the after game revelry coming from the TV, moments pass in silence as Sun holds his drooping head in his hands and quietly sobs. I reach over and turn the TV off and try to think of something to do that will make this situation a little better. But before I can pursue this thought the phone rings.

Sun's head jerks up and he looks at me with red eyes the size of saucers. Frozen like that through two more rings he finally says, "My God, that is Mr. Lee with the bad news."

I watch Sun's face as he answers the call. He mostly just listens and returns the conversation with an occasional, "Yes," and "I see," ending with his agreement, "Of course that would be fine."

The prior tragic mask of Sun Chan's face gradually changes to one of shocked surprise. There is a funny thousand yard stare on his face that leaves me completely dumbfounded about what has just happened. A moment ago he was sobbing, now he looks as if he is in a trance.

"Well what did he say?" I ask.

Seemingly by rote, from that same trance like state, Sun says, "We won. The money is being transferred to my bank right now, two thousand dollars. And he wants to be my partner. The papers are on the way. He made a fortune on the game, lots and lots of money. He said it's all because of me and the luck of the Chinese. Everybody was saying New England would win big but because of my faith in Seattle he went with my opinion."

Relieved but utterly confused I say, "That's great Sun. I am happy for you but I used to bet some and I know that bookies and bet takers are a tough bunch, they never give up a tie. That must have been some new kind of gambling system."

"No, I don't think so," Sun says, "I think that it's just part of a formula that Mr. Lee uses in his businesses. He is the bookie."

My little apartment seems to glow with deep blues and greens from the Persian rug and my toes like to curl among its soft bristles. Out my window the small noises of life can be heard, a distant barking dog, a girl hawking fresh shrimp from her man's catch, and the occasional scratch of a palm frond on my window screen. Always there is a scent of the sea in the air and the security of having my Zen perch nearby. At night, even at Christmas, I can look up at the balmy sky and gaze upon that hunter, Orion. He is on stand far above the pretty Christmas decorations of the Barangay and its search for peace on earth.