

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/1

Charles Hayes

A President Is Elected: November 7, 2020

On the ground outside a rural German town near an old World War Two Jewish concentration camp lie three small plaques. This is the spot where a few of the holocaust victims that died in the camp are buried.

When American troops liberated this concentration camp these memorialized dead were discovered stuffed into the doorway of one of the buildings. After gathering their bodies into a jeep wagon, the Americans pulled them into the center of the small town and called the inhabitants out.

The townspeople gathered as the American Officer, from his perch atop the back of the jeep and the connecting wagon tongue, informed them that they had been aware of what was taking place in this camp and that, in fact, they had supported and abetted it. Therefore, they should carry the dead to the edge of town and properly bury them. Not feeling to kindly, the American Officer paused in his instructions just long enough to take a deep breath and survey the frowning faces of the German populace,

“Or Else!!!”

To this day that memorial is kept by that German town and it is done with honor.

I think that a similar memorial, done in a similar manner, should be placed outside a small rural American Heartland town to commemorate the quarter of a million Americans dead from the coronavirus hoax.

Rice Paddies

Squatting on a rice paddy dike behind our bamboo shack under a hot sun, I wonder at the quiet here among the rice shoots waving in the breeze like little green fingers. The difference now compared to that long ago war when paddies such as these were for sitting ducks can't help but make me realize how things can change with place and time. Now I am unafraid, relaxed and content. I milk this feeling and tell myself that it must all be in my head.

Remembering back to those days when I was young and passing through the other paddies of that war torn place, I try to give some air to that shut-away part of my mind. But before I can indulge this opportunity I hear my young girlfriend call from the back window of our shack, "Chuckie, we eat now. We have good rice, very tasty."

Her voice peaks and dives upon the wind like that of a barn swallow approaching its nest. It lifts me in a way that only an old man who is undeserving can know. It's like those miracles that come to those who have passed so far and still have not been beaten down. But it is something that can not be shared, something that is rooted in those other paddies of long ago.

"OK," I yell, "I am hungry and it is good when we eat. Just wait a little bit and I will be there."

With a last sweeping intake of the paddies and the coconut palms that border their far reaches I tell myself that this is the best of all possible worlds. For now that seems certain, but the years that are spread before me do not vanish at a far point like those spread behind. And I must consider this. What will happen when it ends? But I know that ten million zips couldn't kill me back then. Now all I have to do is to calculate the odds of this situation and play it cool. My ex-wives thought that such and such an action would put them on a steady and known kind of course. Then when things went bad it would be easy for them to know the proper moves.....they thought. But I played it cool then as well and here I am in the high cotton once again.

The girl's name is Mila, a Filipina, and the bamboo shack we live in belongs to her father who lives in another area of Cebu with the rest of her family. They think I am going to take her back to the United States when I go. I try to think so too, because that is the best way to stay cool. But I know it is a lie, that a beauty such as hers can not be held by an old man like me in a land where there is more opportunity and life is not so cheap. Her family thinks that surely I will try to keep these undeserved fruits for that seems to be the way of many of the people that live where I come from. And likely Mila and her people have heard this. There are many old war dogs that come to this country for young wives. So for now Mila and I live together here in the Philippine Visayas as if a new life is around the corner for us all. But there are really no more new lives for this old man crouching on a muddy dike among the mosquitoes. Only in my thoughts can I capture those times when such was true. Times when many better than me were denied that possibility.... forever. I will not tell Mila or any of her family this. That would not be cool. Yes, here it is beautiful, fresh

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and new for now, but not the best of all possible worlds. Only the vision with my clever cover can be that. And if that is what it takes, I know how to do it just fine. My teachers were all so clever as well.

I struggle from my haunches and yell towards the little shack, "I am coming sweet thing, kaon, let's eat."

As I follow the cross work of dikes back toward our shack the noise of the nearby highway grows louder as passenger jeepneys, motor scooters, and other vehicles pass by. Then comes the rhythmic clip clop of a horse pulling a passenger cart or tartanilla. When it draws closer I recognize the driver, a young man who lives with his girl and a couple of kids on the ground under another stilted shack just down the road. Not long ago when I was passing by there with my bottle of rum he invited me into his shade. We sat on old bottle crates and for a while shared my rum. He gave me a crab that he had caught at the tidal flats just beyond the marshes that border the sea there. Dressed in rags, his girl and a couple of kids stood off at a far corner post and silently watched us. It isn't every day that a rum swilling white man drops by, and they were probably wary. Or maybe they were just poor. I have seen the same hollow eyes and blank faces on some Appalachians where I grew up. The girl and kids remained there until I left, gathered around that corner post as if it were a living totem. Later I threw away the gift crab I knew to come from where a sewer empties into the sea.

As I am coming over the small concrete wall that separates our place from the rice paddies the tartanilla draws even and the young driver throws his hand up. I return his gesture and pause to watch his skinny horse pull him and his passenger on down the road. The steady clip clop pace keeps the reins lightly resting in his hands and not snapping at the horse's rump. I can smell the freshly cooked rice and yell my arrival as I top the steps to the front door.

"That smells good, I think that you are an expert rice cooker."

Mila replies with a knowing smile, "Chuckie, I like to do for you, and I do good, yes?"

She is framed by the back window and the rice paddies beyond as I cross the bamboo slatted floor and take her in my arms. Lifting her to the sill of the window, I nuzzle my body between her legs. "Oh baby, like nobody I have ever known, you are good to me."

She looks dead on me with her sparkling brown eyes. "Is that why you will take me to America, Chuckie? Are the girls there not as good to their men?"

"Many of them are not," I say, "and it seems that those are always the ones that I end up with."

"Maybe you do things that make them mad, and that is why they are not good to you," she says.

"Could be. You know we can't always make others happy. Sometimes things just seem to get out of control and we are not prepared for it. We do and say things that are wrong."

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Mila seems to consider this for a moment then slides from the window and starts placing the food on the nipa mat that is spread on the floor. The aroma of hot steaming rice and fish soup drifts up to the thatched ceiling and the far corners of our little shack as we settle down to eat. Nearby, our neighbors along the road send up their sounds of clinking spoons and bowls to mix with our own. I must try to keep it this simple.

That night as we lie on our sleeping mat in the dark, except for the burning glow of lion tiger mosquito coils, I reach for Mila and for the first time ever she hesitates.

“Chuckie, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, I guess so. I just hope it’s not about where we are going to live when we get to America.”

“No it’s not that. It’s just some of the people that my family knows say you will not take me to America. That you’re only using me to take care of you while you’re here. Then you’ll leave and forget all about us. They say unless we are married I have no protection from such a thing.”

“Whoa, wait a minute, do you feel like you need protection from me? Haven’t I always treated you good?”

“Yes, but I have a cousin it happened to and she told my father that she’s not the only one that it’s happened to. Do you think we could get married, Chuckie? You know, just so everybody would quit talking about it.”

Knowing that this is something that I am not prepared for, and that I will have to do some figuring about this, I put an end to this conversation.

“I think maybe we can, but it will take some time and planning. There’s nothing we can do right now about it so why don’t you bring that beautiful little body a little closer my way.”

Mila slips her hand over my stomach, “accidentally” rubbing her forearm along my erection.

“Ok, Chuckie. We will have fun and I will continue to be good to you but we have plans to make someday soon.”

After that night things take on a different light when it comes to me and Mila. Mila doesn’t mention it that much but her father and the rest of her family seem to take it as a commitment. They make a show of giving little gifts that are intended for our later life together in America.

I pretend that our travel to the United States is just a matter of time. Time to get married, get the visa for a spouse and the other paperwork that is necessary for such a trip. I act as if there is no hurry while I avoid the wedding announcement and start planning my departure from the Philippines. I know it is time to ditch this whole scene and head out when one day Mila’s father stops by for a visit, bringing plans for our wedding.

Jose Albelgas is a retired seaman, having worked the boiler rooms of many different inter-island ferries during his career. A straightforward and kind man, Jose is going to help things along and make an honest woman of his daughter by ushering us as quickly as possible to the altar. It seems the only reason he has allowed, and even helped our living together

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is because he has great respect for Americans and their history. When he was a boy during the second world war and the occupation by the Japanese he witnessed the return of the Americans to liberate the Islands. Ever since he has felt anger toward the Japanese and imbued in his family the same attitude along with an abiding respect and affection for Americans. Having recognized this in him and his family pretty quickly, I was not one to pass up opportunities to live higher up on the war reputation of the generation that preceded me. I pretty much had my pick of his two beautiful daughters and although we haven't really won a war since then, back in the states where I am from, we are now somehow considered heroes. It was easy to take this fairly current event and spread it over my existence to certify my right to the pickings from these people who come from a lesser God. In this respect Mila is my trophy, however brief such an award might be. And when Jose arrives that day at the little shack between the highway and the rice paddies it is my cue to cut them loose.

Sitting in the back window that overlooks the patchwork of paddies, smoking some of the weakest weed in Asia while Mila cleans up after the morning meal, I hear the jeepney stop in front of our place.

"Maayo" sounds the voice of Jose as he approaches the front door.

Mila quickly dumps the tray of bowls into the pump basket and breathlessly says, "Put some clothes on and throw that marijuana out the window, Papa's here."

While quickly pulling on some shorts I say, "Cool it Mila, Jose knows I smoke. As long as I take good care of you he doesn't care, even pretends to smoke sometimes with me. But he never inhales, just being sociable I guess."

"That's right, but there is a side to Papa that you don't know. Don't be too confident."

Mila crosses the room and opens the door to the bright tropical light and the figure of Jose, a dark form against the sunlight. He is tall for a Filipino, with short cropped hair and dressed in his favorite peasant shirt and trousers. And shod in ordinary sandals made from the same material as the millions of others seen throughout the Islands. Jose, once he left his maritime uniform behind, was never inclined to dress any other way. Before either Mila or I can say anything Jose zips into the house, lowers himself to the floor mat and says, "I have wonderful news. My younger brother, Mila's uncle, a priest in Negros Occidental, will be traveling to Cebu next week and he said that he would be honored to join you together in Holy Matrimony. How lucky can we get? Pretty good huh?"

I feel my stomach knot up to the extent that I almost double over before I catch myself and slowly sink to the floor facing Jose.

Jose, while observing my reaction, not missing a thing, smiles a little and says, "You I will help during this important time Chuck. The family will take care of everything. Nothing for you to worry about."

"That's very kind of you", I say, "but I am thinking, not so soon. I haven't even transferred any money from the US to my bank account here to pay for the wedding."

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I have no bank account but it is all I can think of to say to try and delay what is happening. I see Mila frown and wonder if she knows I am lying. I can't remember if we have talked about my money or not. I am starting to think that I might have to make a hasty retreat from this situation before it gets completely out of hand.

The sunlight slants through the window of our shack and strikes the side of Jose's face in such a way that, with half of it cast in shadow and the other half in light, it morphs into a likeness of the face of a dead Viet Cong I had carried out of the bush long ago in those other rice paddies. Suddenly confused and no longer able to control what is happening before me I say nothing and let whatever will happen, happen. Jose carries on about how I have nothing to worry about and how it is all going to be taken care of while I just silently sit there and Mila smiles. After all the talk we have some coffee and a peanut butter sandwich. Then Jose leaves with a final flourish of, "Never mind, I will take care of it."

That night while Mila sleeps I gather some things that I have previously stowed away, along with my remaining money, and sneak out the door, around back past the toilet, and over the cement wall into the rice paddies. Under a large moon with my mind full of the shapes reflecting off the paddies, sometimes paired with shapes from those other paddies, I cross the fields to the main highway that lies beyond.

As I leave the doctor's office I am dazed, what some people no doubt would call shock. I can remember feeling like this only a few times in my life, usually after the loss of a loved one. But it has been so long since those days that it practically feels new. Maybe this is just the way a body protects one from those things that it is too weak to experience at the moment. It gives time to come around to those inevitable thoughts that are bound to follow.

Ever since I returned to Seattle from the Philippines a little more than a year ago I have been feeling unwell. At first I thought it was just because of the way that I had left that country. That it was actually just a mind-body thing where the specks of guilt that I sometimes feel cause some sort of general malaise and that I will get over it soon enough. But the symptoms of fatigue, joint pain, and most recently, a slew of infections that I had never had before force me to see the doctor to try to get rid of this downright depressing situation. And now after several visits I have found out what is wrong with me. As my daze seems to clear some I run over in my mind the conversations with my doctor and the doctor that he had referred me to.

Doctor Neal is an elderly man, a little older than me I suspect and he is a bit brisk and to the point when it comes to his demeanor and interpersonal interactions. In other words, he is not what many would call a doctor with a great bedside manner. I recall sitting there in the small examining room when he quickly entered carrying what I assumed was my file.

"Not feeling too bad today I take it," he says, "your labs are not all that bad and after some consultation with a doctor I want you to follow-up with I think I can tell you what is most likely bothering you. But I

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want you to see the specialist immediately to confirm what he and I both suspect is the problem. Then we can be more sure and start a regimen of treatment.”

I can feel the tightness in my throat as it seems to increase to the point that I have to clear my throat before I can speak.

“What kind of specialist, what’s wrong with me?”

Doctor Neal immediately looks uncomfortable, something that he seldom allows himself to be and this further increases my apprehension.

“Well I am not certain, you understand, but I think that you may have leukemia.”

“You mean cancer, I have cancer, something to do with my blood?”

“Yes, but don’t panic. Doctor Smithers, that’s the oncologist I want you to see, is a very good doctor and he has had some remarkable results treating patients like you. Presently he has a clinical trial that I think you might qualify for but you really need to discuss this all with him.”

By this time I am entering that unworldly limbo, numb feeling, yet the fear and anxiety are as real as the air I am breathing.

“When can I see this Doctor Smithers,” I say.

“As a matter of fact, you can see him right now. He’s not doing office visits right now but he is in and I called him. Since you are a potential candidate for his trials he can see you now. Here is his card, he’s on the next floor and he’s waiting for you now.”

As I enter the office Dr. Smithers is sitting behind his desk with several files scattered out before him. It is a regular office with a large desk and a few chairs no different than most run of the mill offices. There is nothing to indicate that it is part of a medical practice and he is dressed only in casual clothes. There is no white jacket.

“Please have a seat, Chuck,” he says and indicates a padded chair in front of and a little to the side of his desk.

After I am seated he picks up and opens one of the files in front of him.

“Well Chuck, I know that Dr. Neal was a little vague with you. That’s because he has only my recommendations to go by. But I have done the full work up of your blood as well as the confirming tests and there is no doubt that you have leukemia.....but there is also no doubt that you can fit into my clinical trial and may benefit from it.”

Then he fixes his eyes on mine and in their reflection I can’t help but feel Bob Dylan’s lyric, ‘now you don’t talk so loud, now you don’t seem so proud.’

Fully overwhelmed by all that is taking place I manage to say, “I have no idea of what you are talking about. Am I going to die? Can you cure me? What do I have to do, what do you have to do? Medicare is all I have to get by with.”

Dr. Smithers explains that the patients in his clinical trial only have to pay a small appointment fee and that the bulk of the expenses are covered

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by the drug company whose drug is used with the experimental therapy. He explains that by volunteering for the trial and allowing the data from my treatment to be used as a measure of the therapy's success I can gain access to the treatment at minimal expense. It seems that the trial is based upon three basic groups of patients. One group is the experimental group which will receive the new drug and a bone marrow transplant from an immediate member of their family, preferably from one of their children since this group has so far had significantly better outcomes. It is this group and the use of their children that has instigated the study. The second group receives the new drug but no bone marrow transplant or chemotherapy. This group has a slightly improved rate of response but it is not high enough to be significant. And the third group receives only the standard chemotherapy and its rate of response so far has been comparable to the second group. Then at the completion of the 24 week trial all patients are evaluated and their treatment from then on will follow according to their prognosis. Those showing no signs of improvement are discontinued from the study and put on a maintenance schedule with the hope for some sort of spontaneous recovery. Just another way of saying that a miracle is needed for their survival.

"It sounds like the only ones that have a chance are the ones with children who can donate bone marrow," I say.

Dr. Smithers folds his hands into a tepee under his chin and looks to the ceiling.

"Yes, but some surprising things can occur during these trials so we encourage all our subjects to have a positive attitude."

"Which group would I be in?"

"Well since it seems that you have no children or immediate family it could not be group one. Actually that is the group where our need for subjects is greatest. While our results with that group are very encouraging, our sample size is still lacking. I think you would best fit into the second group where you would receive the new drug but no other therapy. I might add that if we could achieve remission in your case and, since the drug does not kill off sperm, if you were to have a child, we could switch you to group one with a running start. Group three has no such possibility but some of the subjects have attained remission."

Dr. Smithers gets up from his desk and walks to the window overlooking one of the city parks below. He seems to search the grounds for some known element as he says, "I would like to see you back in this office in one week if you would like to proceed. Think about it carefully. I have prepared a packet of material to help you with your decision. If you decide to join this study there is an appointment schedule and instructions in the packet."

Outside on the street I sink down onto the bench at the bus stop with a heaviness that I rarely have felt. Of course I will take the trial. There is no decision here. No option. Only the placing of one foot in front of the other as I move through the fog that has suddenly and overwhelmingly enveloped my world.

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The loud blast of an air horn brings me out of my trance to see the number sixty bus stopped in front of me with its door open. As I get on and tag my card the driver says, "I thought you might be deaf. I ask you twice before I hit the horn."

"Deaf would be a blessing," I mumble as I pass him toward the empty back of the bus.

Depression sets in pretty fast and for the next couple of days it's about all I can do to make and eat a couple of sandwiches and trudge the short distance to the post office and back. Thoughts of where I scattered my mother's ashes, far away in West Virginia, beset me. All those things we tell ourselves that we will think about later seem to be sitting in my lap. Could it be that I will have to hire someone to put me away when the time comes. Maybe one of the veterans groups would do it. But I do have a little saved and no one to leave it too. The thought of the American military and its culture, bedecked in military garb while chanting verses of a Greater God with greater firepower, does not bring me any relief. There's got to be a better way. A better way that, ultimately, I will never have to conclude was a success anyway. One foot in front of the other.

I notice the Philippine stamps on the letter immediately upon opening my post office box and, although there is no return name, I recognize Mila's writing. I had completely forgotten about that part of my life but now it seems to blaze up in front of me. I did what I thought I had to do then, but now there is a big tug of remorse about it all. When I open the envelope I find that it only contains a photograph. I pull the picture from the envelope and notice first the writing on the back. Written in large block English letters, it says, "EAT YOUR HEART OUT." Turning it over I can see that it is a picture of Mila holding a baby. The child is white.

At its zenith, the sun is hot and the rice stalks are high in the paddies behind Jose's native shack. Inside, where there is some semblance of shade under the grass roof, Mila's cousin and her Australian husband are seated on one side of the floor mat while she and Jose are seated across from them on the other side. There is a large bowl of steaming rice accompanied by a hot pot of fish soup and slices of steamed bitter melon in the center of the mat. Sweating freely, they eat the rice and bitter melon from the communal bowl with their fingers and occasionally dip portions of soup from the pot with small cups. The smiles on sweaty faces might seem incongruent in any other place but here they brighten the shadowed interior of the bamboo shack. And their conversation between bites of food and sips of soup is light and happy. The coos and little noises and gibberish of a baby child can be heard coming from the small nipa basket in the corner. The child is a boy, the son of Mila's cousin and her Aussie mate. It is easy to tell that the kid is a Filipino mestizo because his skin is so light that he could almost pass for white. The Aussie, who is almost the same age as Jose, suddenly leans forward, extends his arm across the food, and puts his hand on Jose's shoulder.

"Say mate, did you find the proper place to honor the picture of my son and your daughter, Mila?"

Mila and Jose exchange a long look and when they finally both break into a wide smile the Aussie must ask again.

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"Well man, come on mate, is there a secret going on here, did you ... or did you stick it in a book somewhere and forget about it?"

Jose chews and swallows the last of his bitter melon and says, "No doubt amigo, no doubt. It is in the perfect place and will never be forgotten."

His voice is laced with an irony that creates a silence among them. Then slowly he takes his cup and in turn fills everyone else's cup with more soup as they watch, somewhat amused. Lastly, with his cup raised, Jose makes a toast.

"To all those foreigners, like you my amigo, who help the Filipino people and love their Filipina wives, God's speed and prosperity.....and to all those foreigners who use us while pretending to help, may they get their account called before them by God's speed as well."

Later as they all sit out back and watch the rice being winnowed on the paddy dikes by small brown men, the sun sinks behind the coconut trees. And pakikisama, or the ability to get along and respect each other, rules the approaching darkness.

The Mueller Report Yesteryear -- Why It Fell Flat In America

In 1940's Germany a crowd of people watch the sickly sweet smelling smoke spiral to the sky as another group of 'immigrants' disembark from the box cars at the train station. Near the end of the platform a well dressed man turns to his wife and in answer to her question says, "Of course we know what is being done here. Nothing so unprecedented could ever be hidden from the country."

"I suppose, you are right Fritz,' his wife replies. "It's just something that I am not used to. Though I suppose it is for the best."

"Of course it is my dear."

"But Fritz, why is there such talk about, 'If we only knew the truth we would put an end to it.'"

"Well darling, it's what we must say to keep our standing in civilization. Otherwise we might be perceived as bad apples. In a word, scum, or more simply, bad people."

"Uh huh."

"Sure, why do you think it's so confusing when this problem is termed a political act or most anything else that it is not. We all know that there is no such thing as whatever it may be called but we must keep these trains running on time and the butter and bullets flowing. We really don't need them anyway, we already have plenty. And we MUST protect it."

"Uh huh."

"Oh well, we are the best people, it appears so far, and the Schutzstaffel is giving our boy the evening off. Come along dearest, we must buy some Kartoffelkloesse and Schnapps for the Fuhrer's speech of the union."