

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

Vartan Koumrouyan
To The Jungle House

SHERYLL SHOWED ME THE PUBLIC SCHOOL on the northern road just outside of Puerto Princesa as the van drove past. It is an old building, with a 'passé' look of faded yellow paint, mud-stains on the lower part of the facade near the ground, and lines of moss down the wall from the roof where the water ducts leaked.

It's a one-story building with green window frames in the shade of a big acacia tree inside the fence and a knee-high hedge on the lawn where tricycle drivers and ice cream vendors waited to sell home-made gelato to children at the end of the day before going home.

The city has expanded all the way to Vietville on the North Road, where refugees from Vietnam have settled during the war. The entire compound seemed abandoned or not as busy as it was, judging by the dimness of the mahogany shade of the trees on the existing buildings, thatched cabins and unattended gardens.

There are shops, wholesale warehouses, garages, vulcanizers, sari-sari grocery nipa huts, hotels, car dealers on both sides of the road now, and a dense traffic of tricycles and trucks slowing the flow to a standstill at the intersection of the Adventist Hospital and Santa Lourdes traffic lights. Past the Robinson's Mall, the road speeds up again after the St Jose terminal, and the journey to the north of the island of Palawan begins.

I could see myself on the periphery of the city here in St. José, ensconced in an air conditioned room by the vicinity of the school where my boys could go, in limbo in this urban area, hiding from the hustle and bustle but not completely separated from it, bored by the routine of ordinary things that seem to satisfy everybody but myself, in an environment lacking exuberance and imagination.

Ivan and Vosky would go to school and I would be looking at the wall all day long, thinking what was it that I didn't understand, and everywhere I travelled, people seemed to be content except me.

We hired a van to go to the jungle house with our suitcases and the things we purchased at a hardware store on Rizal Avenue. Two lamps with an integrated solar panel to be fixed on the trees outside, two gallons of paint, varnish for windows and doors, a roll of mosquito screen, different sizes of nails, a new door lock, a sharpening stone for the machete, electric wire and miscellaneous other things neatly arranged in cardboard boxes where Sheryll wrote her name in an elaborate calligraphy as if she was signing an important document.

For provisions, we got pasta, tomato sauce in small nylon sachets, Kimchi pickle, coffee, sugar, cooking oil, tuna and sardine cans. Spray for insects, a mouse trap big enough for the squirrels, a sack of rice and binlod from the rice mill to feed the dogs. The van driver stopped at the Roxas market behind the terminal to buy provisions, and Sheryll remembered we had no vinegar, cucumber, eggplant and edible saltwater kelp, harvested off Roxas coast, she usually prepares with Japanese Kikoman vinegar, onion, calamansi and red chili, as hors d'oeuvre to accompany the fried fish, for dinner tonight.

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

I will be alone in the jungle with Sheryll and the boys. I liked the distance that separated me from the city and every other thought that constituted my understanding of the world heretofore. It gave me the impression that I am practicing my 'dissent' mood, that I was on a new territory, an immaculate land of the very first day of creation minus the memory of wars or the original sin, untouched by Enlightenment; no thank you, unless the contradiction of this word was addressed, mainly the regression of homo economicus to quantity and statistic level.

On an elevated turn of the road outside Roxas, considered to be strategic by the army, marines' barracks and tents were pitched, with a checkpoint to slow down vehicles on the street. There were no military personnel during the day, apart from some activity amidst the tents of someone raking the gravelly path, along bamboo fences and rows of yellow flowers, leading to the Philippines flag on a pole. It was in a dominant position overlooking the line of fire, if there should be a skirmish with the rebels, which happened from time to time. The Hukbalahap, Sheryll said they were. The original communist rebels hiding in the jungle in the northern parts of the island, those who are against private property, not the Abu Sayyaf's Jihadist Militant active in Moro province, who want independence from the government.

We have three dogs, Alpha male Cody with a sober character, Kulit, his subordinate, and a small Pinto dog who usually starts barking first. All of them are smart to differentiate between the ordinary noises of the night, crickets, frogs, owls or a skunk, and a sudden disturbance that does not belong to their ordinary repertoire, like a crack of a twig or scraps on dry leaves, to which their reaction is instant. They raise the alarm and keep barking until I point the flashlight towards the Rambutan tree and I see nothing but a dark void filled with the sound of night crickets, some distant lightnings above the ocean and the moon's glaire on the banana leaves as if they are wet, and think there's no one there, it all looks idyllic like in a dream. Who would want to disturb me at this hour?

I have to get into a routine, exercise and lose weight. Psychology is physiologically rooted, said Nietzsche. Sheryll ordered two cubic meters of sand and gravel and ten cemento bags for the water basin. I have to carry all the way to the house from under the Paltata tree on the path where the tricycle will deliver it from the barrio. Get to work at six when it is still fresh. After nine, it becomes impossible to just walk up the path to the house, and I have to be careful of the red ants, they are everywhere, and the mosquitos and other annoying creeping things like millipedes. For this, I have to daub used motor oil on the stilts and the walls by the stairs in front of the house to repel these insects. One day, we found a snake under the 'kahoy', the timber from the Apitong tree Uncle Ontoy cut with his chainsaw that I stored in the salon, the room behind the house where we hang the laundry. I wonder why the dogs didn't smell it. The kittens were only two weeks old. Sheryll kept them in a carton and gave them diluted power milk 'to grow up faster', she said. Another day, when Juhn, Mike and Dong were digging the well, they said they saw a 'Magtal', a ten feet long snake with a speckled diamond skin slithering under the dry heap of branches on the footpath near the Rambutan tree. Left alone, the tree stumps attract termites and become soft and mushy for scorpions to nest in. Or we could burn it and clear the area quickly. Either way, organic

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

matter fritter and integrates the cycle of nature and comes up again in the form of grass, new saplings, creeping vines or climbing bamboo. The 'platonian form of plant', as Goethe said, the form from which all others derive.

When people in Quintilla grocery store ask Sheryll about me, she tells them I'm busy planting bananas and mango saplings, and apparently this answer satisfies them. I am the kano in the hills. The stranger. They are curious to know if I was not getting bored, and she tells them: 'He loves the jungle'. They believe her because they are credulous as myself, to have come all the way to live in this wilderness. The natives are in the stage of migrating to modernity, and to see someone choosing their lifestyle is endearing to them. They understand the "return to nature" concept, the origin of things, because they've kept a bond with it. They remember the nipa hut where they were born, the cogon grass where they walked, the waterlogged rice fields where they played in the mud and caught catfish.

I also have to prune the mulberries. They are so big, they give the impression the garden was abandoned. The garden is the area inside the barbed wire fence, the 'domesticated' plot surrounding the house. On the other side, it's the land cleared of its jungle attributes, where we plant the pineapple, Narra, banana and the calamansi, and because we never use herbicide to kill wild grass and thorny creeping plants, it is the intermediary mode of tamed land. Cutting some branches of the big Narra tree will facilitate ventilation and open the view to the mountains beyond the valley. This is the Narra we planted six years ago, and it has reached the roof level of the house. Its shade attracts the afternoon breeze like magic. The Narra, like the Ipil, Sheryll tells me, can live for a century. The Narra tree on the road to Taytay with its hollow trunk was probably here when Magellan discovered the archipelago in 1521. It's like the 2000 years old olive tree in Greece, planted during Jesus's lifetime, when Tiberius was the Emperor of Rome.

The natives still have an animist memory of the old days. They are not in a hurry, they don't "push it" to control it. They take their time as if they are in a dialect with the trees, clouds or the storm, as if in communication with the spirits. They don't instantly kill a snake when they come across it, they let it slither away. When a big tree is uprooted by a storm, they talk about it as if it was an event. They don't have a materialistic view on the world, except for the rice fields. They see the breeze moving through the leaves and think that Zeus is whispering, if they happen to know of Zeus, bien entendu. Pissarro and Monet had the same idea when they painted impressions of the breeze in the poplar trees, you might think, as you might feel the breeze by looking at the painting.

We planted these Narra trees on the east side of the house considering the path of the sun, that we would benefit from the shade later, except at noon, when the sun reaches the zenith and beats down on the roof its searing heat, subduing the world, calling the tropical storm. It is a sacrilege to cut its branches. We refrained from injuring it with a machete, shying away from a violent act, so we let it grow as it did, without imposing our will on it.