

DEPARTURES

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On the concrete fence fronting the elementary school in my parents' home barrio, one finds names of former barrio residents now living abroad, who have sent money for the school. Among the names etched on the walls are those of my sister Teresita and her husband, my father's brother Federico and his wife, distant aunts, uncles and cousins. Having been himself occupied with other things until his death in 1995, my father found neither the occasion nor the inclination to send his donation, so his name is not included in what might well be the barrio's *wall of fame*.

Barrio *Marozo* is, to a great extent, much like other barrios in rural Philippines. Their primary source of livelihood being agriculture, Marozo farmers never really achieve any considerable degree of wealth by tilling the land. In the 1970's and '80's, things were somewhat better because the market for tobacco was good, and many farmers were able to send their children to college in Manila, Baguio or Vigan, from their sale of *Virginia* tobacco. But before and after that tobacco boom time, life was hard, and barrio residents resorted to other means to get on in life.

These days, it is usual to hear of families depending for their support on one or more members working abroad. In my own neighborhood, and among my own circle of acquaintances and friends, it is exceptional for a family not to have someone working outside the country. Over the past twenty years, this diaspora has reached a magnitude such as would warrant the establishment of national agencies for overseas workers. But in my father's barrio, people started to leave for work overseas very early in this century. Those we know mostly went as farm workers to California, or Hawaii. Years before I was born, my father himself left for Hawaii. The year was 1948. He left behind my mother, and four very young daughters.

My parents, Leonardo and Paciencia, were born both in 1917, in Barrio *Marozo*. My grandparents on both sides were farmers tilling their own land, and it was my parents' common experience that they each lost one parent rather early. My father barely remembers his father, and my mother lost her own mother before she reached her teens. The loss of a parent meant great hardship for a family. My father, the fourth child in a brood of five, was

informally adopted by a pair of spinster aunts, Leodegaria and Ana, who fed, clothed and sheltered him, in exchange for his services as an able-bodied young male. My mother, the youngest child of her father and his first wife, promptly took on the duties of her late mother, keeping house for her father and elder brothers. For both my parents, going to school beyond Grade 4 was out of the question. In those days, there was no elementary school in Barrio *Marozo*, and one had to walk for hours through dirt roads, and in the rainy season, negotiate overflowing rivers, to reach the school in *Sarmingan*. Going to school would have meant being away from housework too long. Besides, in that earlier time, only the truly wealthy went on to high school, or college.

In 1938, shortly after my mother turned twenty, her father decided to marry a second time. As if on cue, she and my father decided to themselves get married. Before the second world war came to the Philippines, my eldest sister Remedios was born. My parents started their lives together as farmers, although there was very little land to till. My mother used to complain that her siblings did not give her her rightful share of the land. But her father kept some of the land for his second family, and this probably reduced everyone's share considerably. My father himself had difficulty getting land from his family. By the time my third sister Virginia was five or six, Aunts Leodegaria and Ana offered to take her into their home and provide for her. My mother wept, but life being what it was, she agreed grudgingly to the arrangement.

The war brought more hardship to my parents' young family. Long after the war, my mother spoke of how little food there was at that time, because the land was hardly tilled. Sometimes, even grain ready for harvest was left in the fields to be eaten by birds and rodents, because it was too dangerous for the men to be out in the fields. Among the stories whispered about were those of Japanese soldiers on patrol, who took male villagers captive. Nonetheless, whenever the opportunity arose, women, children, and sometimes, men, too, went looking for root crops in the hills at the edge of Barrio *Marozo*. My father's elder sisters, Maria and Herminia, both spinsters, decided to move closer to my parents' house. With them was my grandmother Basilisa, a quiet, aloof woman, whose fragile and fair features endowed her silence with an air of arrogance. When, as a young girl, I visited my spinster aunts and my *Apong Isang* in Barrio *Marozo*, my grandmother spoke very

little, and hardly asked about my father, who was always too busy to take the bus trip to *Marozo*. My father's family was never given to excessive displays of affection. When I was growing up, I took no notice of my father's reticence; it was only when I had become an adult, and my father was in semi-retirement, that I realized how much my father was, truly, *Apong Basilisa's* son.

It was during the war that my father's youngest uncle on his father's side, Felipe, managed to sign up for the US Armed Forces. In the 1930's, even before the war, my father's elder brother Emilio had left for Hawaii to work as a farmhand. The few years after the war, my father decided to drive a *calesa*, thinking it would be a better way to feed his growing family. My mother would sometimes speak of how he would be away for days, going as far as Pangasinan transporting cargoes of *tagapulot*, the hardened *muscovado* cakes made from sugar cane. It was probably on one of those trips outside *Marozo* that my father chanced on the prospect of leaving for Hawaii, to work. In 1948, it was no longer easy for a *probinsyano* with his level of education to go to Hawaii, or America. And so, together with a number of other men, my father signed up to a scheme that would bring him to Hawaii. Then, as now, travel papers could be arranged, for a fee.

My father left for Hawaii aboard a steamship, and on an assumed name. He had bought the birth certificate of one who had somehow acquired official travel papers to go to Hawaii. When I was growing up, my parents hardly talked about this aspect of his leaving, a natural thing, considering the "illicit" nature of such affairs. The details became clearer to me much, much later, as I leafed through his old papers in the house he had long left. In an old traveling bag, I discovered papers bearing my father's assumed name -- *Rudolfo T. Alevin* -- and parole papers from the Oahu prison. When I myself was confined in a military camp in 1972, in the early days of Martial Law, I remember my father taking my sudden captivity with a calmness I could not then fully understand.

From the few papers my father kept of his Hawaii stint, it appears he worked as a hospital orderly at the Maluhia Home in Honolulu from April 1948 to January 1951.

Recommendation papers signed by the City and County Physician read:

(He) was slow to learn, but kindly to his patients and had he remained, would have become one of our most reliable employees.

By the end of January 1951, he was in prison, at Oahu, for falsification of travel documents. I can only imagine the terrible loneliness and apprehension he must have felt being in jail, in a foreign land. Thankfully, his jailers were humane; in prison, they gave him the opportunity to attend classes in Beginner's Penmanship, Intermediate English, Intermediate Arithmetic and Beginner's Radio, as attested to by certificates awarded by the Hawaii Department of Education. These certificates he must have treasured quite a bit. Of that unfortunate time, he kept only the few documents he felt were extremely important. The rest, incriminating as they were, were apparently disposed of. My father remained in prison until his release for the purpose of deportation, on June 29, 1951.

When I was about five or six, in the upland city where my parents moved after my father's return to the Philippines, I would look at my father's Hawaii photos, usually taken beside stylish cars. My young mind was impressed by my father's apparent stature in Hawaii. It did not strike me then how incongruous it was, that in a distant place, my father appeared to be prosperous, when at home, there was no wealth to speak of. One of the things my father brought from Hawaii was a *Silvertone* phonograph-cum-radio, a heavy, bulky mass that neighbors sometimes borrowed for wedding receptions and family celebrations. It had several knobs on its front portion, and its top cover was slightly raised open, for phonograph playing. As the music played, one could see the phonograph record go round and round, under the needle. That phonograph made my father quite popular in his new neighborhood. As for myself, I used to listen to soap operas as a child, and I imagined little people living and actually waging their battles inside the contraption.

When my father was preparing to leave for home from Hawaii, he instructed my mother to meet him in Manila, so that they could proceed to Baguio. His brother Emilio had settled in that city, after his return from Hawaii, and so had his Uncle Felipe. My father had no intentions of returning to *Marozo*, because he feared he would be victimized by people who would covet even the little that he had saved. Perhaps, it was also pride; having deserted his roots, purportedly for more suitable places, returning to *Marozo* would have meant accepting defeat. My mother, the loyal and hardy wife, obliged. Single-handedly, she brought children and furniture to Baguio, as my father laid out plans for a new life in the

city. When I look at the contents of the old Baguio house -- a heavy wooden bed with careful carvings on the headboard, an *aparador*, and antique *bauls*, a heavy, bulky picture frame with my mother's portrait, taken in her maidenhood, a turn-of-the century, basin-shaped flat iron with a short hollow handle, all *Marozo* furniture -- I marvel at my mother's energy and determination to transport a life, over difficult roads, on old rickety buses.

In Baguio, my father bought a barbershop and built a shanty in an early settlement of squatters near an elementary school. The barbershop paid for itself, but did not bring enough profit to make my father feel comfortable, or happy. Later, he sold the barbershop to his brother Emilio, and promptly bought three jeepneys, which made him a public transportation operator, and an employer of two drivers. In the meantime, my mother had three more daughters, including myself, and the shanty was slowly improved into a two-storey residence, as members of the squatter settlement set about to work on applications for land rights in what was then a government school reservation. Jeepney fares were then only a few centavos, and the old-style reconditioned jeepneys, seating 10 or 12 people, broke down easily. And so my mother supplemented my father's income by going home to *Marozo* to collect their share of the harvest from the little land they had left to tenants. She took in boarders, and raised pigs in the backyard. Meanwhile, the children were growing, and school fees brought more headaches. To earn money for school, my elder sisters worked during their free time in the beauty parlor set up by Uncle Felipe's wife. Many times, my mother would go to the college offices to talk to the priests and nuns in her broken English, asking for more time to pay the fees. These frequent visits led to a familiarity with some of the priests, who would later set aside for the family flour and powdered milk and even clothes sent from overseas for indigents.

Amidst all these I grew up with some appreciation of my parents' difficulties. My mother was fiercely proud, and determined -- she insisted we go to the Catholic elementary school, even if that meant having to negotiate with nuns quite regularly, about the delay in the payment of fees. Of that time I remember going to school in hand-me-down uniforms, and feeling driven to make it to the honor roll, because there seemed no other way I could attain distinction among my schoolmates.

In first grade, I made friends with a delicate-looking schoolmate whose name was Bess. She lived in our neighborhood, in an American-style vacation house, one of the few charming cottages dotting the little valley before the squatter shanties intruded. Bess would invite me to her house, where we would play with her many toys. Sometimes, her mother, whom I rarely saw, and who looked just as delicate, would offer snacks. In one of my visits, I was clumsy, and a plate of rice-cakes fell to the floor. Bess' mother was visibly irritated. I do not now remember her words, or even whether harsh words were actually spoken, but I fled the house, greatly distressed, resolving in my child's mind never to return to that place which, from that moment, held for me a very deep and early hurt. I never did return. When I would see her again, in the schoolyard, it seemed as if something more than porcelain had been broken, and I could never speak to her again the way I had, before the incident with the rice-cakes. Years later, they were gone, and the neighborhood wags would talk of how Bess' mother was a kept woman, which explained why her father was never really around all the time that they had lived in the neighborhood. The sadness that I felt over the loss of that friendship was hardly diminished by the hurt that remained in my memory. When I think of it now, it seems as if I had brought upon myself that loss, even as my family's relative poverty brought my feeling of self-worth to a delicately low level, so that I would invariably react, often with inordinate sensitivity, to every expression of displeasure from others.

By the 1960's, my father's fortunes were hardly improving. The rest of his Hawaii savings were spent on the purchase of land he did not see, a vast expanse, he was told, in Cagayan. By the time he managed to inspect the lands, money had changed hands, and he discovered that what he had bought was a vast expanse, of swampland. My mother, by then wearied by his entrepreneurial forays, harangued him for throwing away money that would have been better spent for the children. I remember countless evenings when, pretending to sleep, I would listen to their arguments in the next room, my mother blaming my father for his carelessness and gullibility. Through all that, I suspect now, my father continued to dream of a better life, *elsewhere*. Among the few things he did with us, his younger children, the one I remember best was the occasional geography contest he would conduct - he would give the name of a province, and we would try to outdo each other in naming its

capital. When he got tired, he would hand out the obligatory centavos to winners and losers alike. Then he would proceed to strum an old ukelele or turn on the old *Silvertone* radio, and hum a few Spanish ballads. Years later, when the old *Silvertone* finally broke down, my father would buy an early model RCA television set, with a chest-like bulk, and a door whose lock one turned with a key. This provided considerable entertainment even for my mother, who developed a keen admiration for Nora Aunor, thanks to television.

In the mid-60's, my uncle Federico would leave Marozo with his wife, for California. Since the 1930's, his father-in-law had been working in farms there, and so Uncle Federico's wife was finally entitled to immigrate to America, with her husband and all their children. They promptly settled in a rural California town, and worked in farms, just as they had done in Marozo. My Uncle Emilio's only son enlisted in the US Navy, got an assignment to Vietnam, and was killed on his second year in combat. Uncle Emilio wept copiously, and was never the same since that loss, but this death meant a pension for him, as well as for the dead soldier's young wife and only child. For years, relatives and acquaintances would gossip about how the young wife would carry on with various men, avoiding marriage, because marrying would have meant abandoning her pension. Uncle Felipe had also, by then, returned to America; working at various menial jobs in San Francisco, he prepared for the eventual immigration of his family. His wife, much younger than himself, continued to run her beauty parlor. But the loneliness got the better of her, and she bore a child by another man. To Uncle Felipe's credit, he did not allow this act of disloyalty to lead to a break-up in his family. Rather, he sold most of his Baguio property and brought the whole family to California. It would take only four years or so before his only son would get killed in a military camp in Cambodia, shot in the back of the head as he quietly sat in his station as camp sentry.

In 1968 my second eldest sister Teresita went to America on a tourist visa. Before that, she had taught for a few years in various Catholic high schools, including one in the hinterlands. It was my impression then that she was extremely devoted to her teaching and her religious activities, and that although the pay was not much, she was content with what she was doing. Of her, I remember a sternness -- she would confiscate comic books I would borrow from the neighbor, such as *Wakasan* and *Lagim* -- and a gentleness as well.

Most of the picture books of fairy tales I read in my youth were *Manang Teresita's* gifts. One cannot say whether it was my father's dreams, or her own, that brought her to America. By 1968, all three jeepneys were sold, and my father was driving a taxicab owned by another man. By that time, too, I had started high school on a scholarship at the Philippine Science High School, but there were two more siblings who had to be sent to school. My father was getting restless, even as my fourth sister Elizabeth, by then an accountant, filed an application for a work visa, at the US Embassy in Manila. In 1971, as I was myself furtively joining demonstrations in Manila, chanting *Imperyalismo, Ibagsak!*, Elizabeth left for America. My father applied for a work visa, armed as he was with a job offer for farmwork from his brother Federico's employer. That application was turned down, but my father persisted, citing in his appeal the fact that his daughter Teresita was to be married, and he was only going to visit for two months. It was not the first time since Hawaii that he attempted to immigrate to America. Back in 1965 he had written to President Ferdinand Marcos, and in his awkward English, had asked for help so he could immigrate to America. None of these brought results, but he continued to be hopeful, and looked to America for relief from his many frustrations. During summers when I would come home from high school, heated arguments arose over my joining demonstrations in Manila streets, and over my rather naive condemnation of all that was American. My father, citing liberation from the Japanese on account of the Americans, would lecture me on history. By then, the geography contests were far behind me, and my adolescent rebelliousness incited a defiance that must have caused him considerable pain. On my high school graduation, together with a number of other graduates, I wore a placard over the regulation toga. My father cringed, and my mother cried.

It did not come as a shock to my father when, in 1972, after Martial Law was declared, I was taken in for detention on two separate occasions, the period of detention amounting to 14 months in all. He never did visit me, after I was moved to Camp Olivas in Pampanga. It was my mother, by then much older, but still hardy, who visited whenever she could take the three hour trip. She would come with provisions, and stories from home, and when it was time to leave, she would weep quietly. It was a dark, uncertain time, and my mother feared many things, including the possibility that I would never return to school.

But I returned, somewhat subdued. By then, I had discovered the solace that writing could provide, though I was only starting to discover the powers it afforded. And so the seventies passed, myself occupied with studies, and writing, and the various excursions and digressions that youth are given to. In 1977, I graduated with honors, and my parents were greatly relieved when I delivered the valedictory address without the offending placard.

In 1978, Uncle Emilio passed on. My father went to Barrio *Marozo* for the funeral. It was to be his first and last visit to his hometown since he left it in 1948. In 1979 my parents were preparing their papers to finally immigrate to America, by virtue of a petition filed on their behalf by my sister Elizabeth. Still proud and stubborn, I refused to be listed among mature dependents who would eventually follow them to America. However, as it turned out, I found the occasion to visit them sooner than expected. In 1980, I was awarded a scholarship for a master's program in a university on the East Coast. During one summer break, I took a 3-day bus trip from the East Coast to California, and found my parents absorbed in their work, the initial enchantment with America slowly wearing off. My mother worked among machines in the laundry room of a small tourist lodge, and my father was an attendant in an old-age-home. By that time, even my youngest sister had finished college, and so the money my parents earned was finally something they could keep for themselves. On a second visit in 1981, I found my father driving a rather flashy sportscar, a second-hand Ford Cobra.

Even at that time, it struck me that my relatives in California lived a very Filipino existence in America. They did have picture-perfect houses and nice cars, and the workplace was, naturally, American, but outside that, they moved in very Filipino circles. Gossip, even about the Philippines, was kept alive by the telephone, and by parties that they would hold on the slightest pretext. Some of my cousins would eventually marry Americans, but it was these Americans, so easily removed from their families, who would be drawn into the Filipino circle. On one of those visits to California, I took a ride with my mother and her relatives to Stockton, where more of my maternal relatives worked as farmhands. The highlight of that excursion was a collective dip in the river. Later, we would gather river snails and shells, a delicacy only Filipinos ate in that part of California.

Visiting with relatives, one got the feeling that all these was Barrio *Marozo*, somehow transported over rough seas, in planes and ships.

My mother visited the Philippines often, until her death in California in 1985. I returned to the Philippines in 1982, and when two more sisters immigrated to California in 1985, I was left in the old house with my husband. After my mother's death, my father continued to work until he retired sometime in 1990. When I returned to America in 1990 for more graduate studies, husband and lone daughter in tow, my father had grown old and sickly. Yet his yen for life seemed undiminished; he even spoke of looking for a second wife. He had become a US citizen earlier, and seemed comfortable where he was. Since leaving the Philippines in 1979, he returned briefly on two occasions only, and on both visits, he did not travel to *Marozo*. When his mother, my *Apong* Basilisa died in 1981, he sent my mother to represent him in the funeral. On his last visit in 1993, he asked his aging sister Herminia to travel from *Marozo* to see him. In 1995, just as he was preparing to marry a recently-acquired girlfriend, an oldish *Marozo* lady on a tourist visa, my father died. He was 78, and had lived a rather full, if difficult life. I was then finishing graduate work., and barely a month after his death, I returned to the Philippines, to the old house that my father built from his earnings in Hawaii.

I have, since then, visited Barrio *Marozo* often, recently to bury, one after the other, my father's elder sisters Herminia and Maria. In 1996 Uncle Federico, by then probably senile, went on a trip with his wife and some friends to some small California town bordering Mexico, and got lost on his way back to their place of lodging. He was never found, and is now assumed dead. Uncle Felipe's remaining children, including his wife's child by another man, do not speak to each other, due to disputes over property and inheritance. And the lands in *Marozo* have become objects of contention, with cousins and distant relatives variously plotting to sell, give away, partition, or secretly deed to themselves all the land. Still and all, it is likely that with all of us gone from *Marozo*, one way or the other the land will be sold sometime, and all that will remain of this restless, daring family in Barrio *Marozo* will be the names etched on the school's concrete fence. As for my father, his name will not be on those walls; when he left Barrio *Marozo* in 1948, he did not intend to return, but rather, carried with him all that he held precious of that

hometown of his youth, carried all that from place to place -- Hawaii and Baguio and California.

When I consider my father's various departures, one thing I could not understand for a very long time was his stubborn refusal to return to *Marozo*. My mother used to say that he was never homesick, that he rarely wrote home. Like others before and after him, he was driven to leave by destitution, but unlike those who return, or long to return, he left with a finality that I am now only beginning to understand. My mother knew where home was, and would return, again and again, even if the furniture had been transported a long time ago. Like my mother, I leave and return, unable to resist the pull of places, even those that have long ceased to be home. But this was probably because I had never felt cast off as a child, by an aloof and seemingly uncaring parent. My father, though usually reticent, would sometimes hum melodies that brought comfort to a child's soul. And when my father refused to hold out his hand, my mother was there, even if only to weep quietly. If there was anything I would have wanted to change in my father's life, it would be for his mother to have fought for the right to keep him home in childhood, despite the prospect of hunger and privation. Then he might have felt treasured as a child, even if only in the way that he later treasured his old *Silvertone* radio and the broken RCA television set, silent reminders, now, of his dreams, and his family's many journeys in search of a truer, better life.

As for the many others who have left, perhaps it was not an uncaring parent, but merely an inhospitable motherland with deceitful *paisanos* who pass off swamps for riceland, that has driven even the stout-hearted to depart. Like my father, Leonardo, many will not return. They will not be remembered, not even on school walls. In time, they will be forgotten, like lost ships in the open sea.