

MEMORIAL

by Marianne Villanueva

excerpted from *Ginseng and Other Tales From Manila*

The city of Manila abounded with graffiti artists. Conditions were good—there was a dictatorship, a fifty percent rate of inflation, and drought in the provinces.

Some graffiti artists like to work in small spaces, such as in public urinals, library carrels, and even on the pages of library books. Their graffiti consisted mostly of poetic statements.

There were others whose work consisted solely of political slogans. These were the truly daring ones. They wrote, “Down with the dictatorship of _____!” or “Down with the Ministry of _____!” knowing full well that if one were caught writing such things on a wall one was immediately taken to Camp Crame or Camp Aguinaldo and never heard from again.

Lately, there has been a series of headlines in the government-run newspaper that dealt with the executions of leading members of the New People’s Army. Only the names varied. One week it would be: JOCSON KILLED. The next it would be: ONGPIN KILLED. And so forth. Not a week went by without the appearance of at least one _____ KILLED headline.

Certain kinds of graffiti artists were kept busy by this sort of thing. They were known as “memorialists.” Whenever anyone disappeared or was reported missing, or whenever a leader of the New People’s Army had been killed, one would be sure to find a commemorative sketch somewhere, drawn with brightly colored chalk, calling the government to account.

Fernando Fajardo was a memorialist. Before becoming a memorialist, he was a painter, famous in particular for a series of nudes he modeled after his late wife. These were of such quality that the critics began referring to him as “the next Amorsolo.” Well, what happened? First, he turned sixty. Then, like lava, like a force of nature, came the realization that society had not gotten any better; that in fact, in many respects, it was getting worse.

The government was always announcing the start of a new campaign—the “Good Grooming Campaign” of a few years back when all young men who wore their hair below their shirt collars were herded into Camp Crame and threatened with confinement, and the “Campaign for Truth and Beauty,” which coincided with the first University of Life, where regular courses were replaced by courses on the president’s philosophy. And there had even been an “Anti-Vice Campaign,” when secret marshals went around shooting anyone with a tattoo, on the assumption that they were all hardened criminals. But in the streets there were still little children who pressed their gaunt faces right up against the windows of cars when they stopped at intersections, so that the snot from their flattened noses rubbed off on the glass, and one could see the threads of milky-white moisture at the corners of their runny eyes. Boys with green eye make-up and little girls with reddened lips lurked behind the old Baclaran church at night, whispering: “Hey mister, you like me? You want me?”

One warm night, not long after his birthday, Fajardo was walking home from a dinner party at a friend’s house. It was close to the Lenten season—all the doors he passed were decorated with palm-leaf crosses that people had brought with them to mass that morning for blessing by the priests. The moon shone white and full; a breeze blew in from the river, bringing with it the smell of roasted peanuts from some unseen vendor’s cart. He could hear distant voices, shouting and laughter, but they were too far away for him to make out what they were saying. A familiar feeling came over him—a feeling, almost, of grief.

He reminded himself to be careful and keep his eyes down as he walked. The streets were full of potholes, some deep enough for a child to play in, and the pavement had buckled up in many places. There were no functioning street lights either, in this part of the city. Perhaps that was why, even on this warm and fragrant evening, he was the only person out; everyone else was shut up tight in their homes.

At one time, Fajardo remembered, the city had been very beautiful. There had been old houses by the river, houses left over from Spanish times, with tiled roofs and balconies overlooking the water. People liked to sit out on their balconies in the late afternoon, sipping cool drinks made from mango or guayabano. There had been trees along the sidewalks, and gas street lamps that gave the whole area the feeling of a park. But now the water of the river was brown and muddy; people said this was because the government had constructed a glass factory just upstream.

He stopped and gazed at the riverfront. Off to one side, he remembered, there used to be a children’s park, with slides and swings, and just a little further on, around the next corner, there had been a park with benches, where he used to meet his wife when she was still a *colegiala*. A *taho* vendor passing by just then with two heavy tin cans balanced on a bamboo pole across his shoulders, stopped and stared.

“What do you find to look at in the river, *Tatang*?” the man asked. He was a very old man, with sad eyes and a sunken tubercular chest.

“I am remembering a time when the water here was clear, when it was possible to fish,” Fajardo explained.

The man simply stared, and if anyone had asked him he would have stated emphatically that he did not believe there had ever been such a time.

Fajardo walked on. He was getting closer to his home. He thought of the cup of hot chocolate he would prepare in the kitchen, and the warm bed that awaited him afterward. He began to walk quickly. Without realizing it, he had become tired. The party, the long walk, he thoughts that filled his head, all conspired to make him feel heavy, as though there were something pressing on his shoulders. He could feel the little case of chalk in the right breast pocket of his worn coat. It knocked against his chest, as if in entreaty. But he was tired. He had to stop at certain points and wipe the perspiration from the back of his neck.

Was it only the previous night he had begun writing the sentence? It had come to him, with startling clarity, when he was sitting in his evening bath. The words spoke volumes: *YOU ARE NOT ALONE*. He had been writing it everywhere since then: on pillars underneath the overpass, on blank concrete walls, on hollow block structures beneath government postings that said: *Bawal Umihi Dito*. But who was he speaking to? Was he speaking to the people he saw in the market, or to the cawing birds flying over the bay, or to the silently crying beggar children who knocked against the car windows? He did not know.

When he first wrote the words, he felt the wall beneath his fingers seem to come alive, almost to breathe. He had to press his palms flat, let the cold stone assert its reality, to rid himself of the notion that the city was talking to HIM, that he was in turn talking to the city. Now he knew there was a message there somewhere, a message of hope and renewal. But he was not one to analyze. He wrote because he had to.

He continued on his way home. Here and there he encountered a stray corpse. Since most wore tattoos, he assumed they were victims of the Anti-Vice Campaign. There was also the odd unmarked corpse—a journalist, perhaps, or a lawyer—buried surreptitiously among the weeds. It was easy to tell what they were because of their slight builds and pale complexions, as though all their lives had been spent shut up in close, dark rooms. He assumed they had been guilty of a political indiscretion.

Once, however, he found the body of a young girl. She could not have been more than thirteen or fourteen years old. She was half-clothed, and there was a trickle of something that looked like blood but that he later ascertained was mercurochrome, running from her mouth down her throat. From the plaid pattern on her torn skirt he guessed she had been a student at the Assumption Convent.

These were the girls who flitted in groups all over the shopping malls, with braided hair and socks and shiny patent leather shoes. They were a bright spot in the other wise dull and shabby urban landscape. He could hear their high voices around him in the *turotueros* where he liked to eat. He liked to watch them gossiping in the corners, their hands moving expressively through the air.

No matter how jaded the city populace had become, these young girls seemed untouched. Most of them lived privileged lives, being driven around by chauffeurs, learning French from European nuns, getting their houseboys to buy Blue Seal cigarettes for them on the sly.

But this one girl had gone astray. She had gotten mixed up in something terrible. Perhaps she had a brother or a boyfriend who had become “political.” The authorities were ruthless even to those not directly involved.

This corpse moved Fajardo more than the others, and he gave her a name: “Maganda,” which in old Tagalog legends was the name given to the first woman and meant “beautiful.” Actually, when Fajardo found her, she had her teeth knocked out and her nose broken, so it was difficult for anyone to say then that she was beautiful, but despite what had been done to her, he guessed that she must have beautiful.

The walls that once enclosed the young girl’s body were almost completely covered with his sketches. On the far wall, the one parallel to the street, he made a rough drawing of an execution: the falling figure of a man done in black chalk, three parallel lines across his torso representing ropes, three white columns, representing soldiers, in the distance. Next to that he sketched a gigantic face with heavily marked eyebrows, a blur of dark chalk for a mouth, and a crown of laurel leaves. He meant this to be Agatep, the university student who was killed only the previous week, during the government’s latest push into the Sierra Madre. He considered writing a dedication, but eventually decided against it because it would mean certain reprisal. And he wanted to go on making sketches. One simply had to be clever, to use symbols, to state nothing outright. He was proud, in fact, that so far no one had thought fit to erase his drawings, that they had survived the scrutiny of the censors.

Fajardo hurried home. His mind was full. He thought of the party he had just left, and of the people he had seen there—old professors mostly, from the University of the Philippines. He did not really like going to these gatherings. There were inevitably arguments, and he always ended up drinking too much. But he could not do

without the talk; it was for this reason only that he attended such gatherings. People could always be relied upon to say something that amazed him.

One of the people there was an old professor named Avansena. People made fun of him, said his mind was gone. He was a very stubborn old man and stated his opinions very loudly and forcefully, so everyone was forced to listen to him. This evening he had been full of talk of a certain Balweg. Some item he'd read in the paper—the government was pushing deep into the Kalinga-Apayao region, a wild place, where few people from Manila have ever been.

"You cannot imagine it," Avansena said. "I was there years ago, as a young man. The people who live in those valleys move about the mountains like goats. They are short, stocky people. Their feet are hooved. They hardly ever speak."

People did not know whether to laugh. But it was an interesting story; no one tried to stop Avansena from telling it.

"There is a priest there," Avansena had continued. "His name is Balweg. He is a wild man—strong, strong as a *tamaraw*. He is one of the mountain people. He has joined the New People's Army. No bullets can touch him. The soldiers are fleeing from the hills; they don't want to fight a representative of God. They say it is God who directs his bullets. He himself has not even a scratch."

Fajardo had wanted Avansena to continue. But there was a government man there. A friend of Avansena's took him aside and reminded him of the other man's presence. The government man had turned an ugly shade of red. He was angry. But he could not do anything except mutter: "Stupid, senile old man!"

Now Fajardo had reached his gate. The latch made a horrible grating sound that echoed off the courtyard walls, and the old caretaker, *Mang Felipe*, woke grudgingly from his corner and came forward unsteadily, accompanied by his two barking mongrels. Inside, Fajardo exchanged a few words with *Mang Felipe*, then began to climb the stairs leading to his quarters. He could no longer see the moon or smell the river. Soon he was in his bed, fast asleep.

When Fajardo awoke, he saw sunlight streaming in through the window and heard the twitter of birds, sounding impossibly close. He was momentarily confused by the sight of his clothes scattered across the bedroom floor. Then he remembered the walk home through the dark streets, in the warm night, with the soft wind from the Pasig blowing against his back, and his brief conversation with the *taho* vendor.

He did not sleep easily. He had dreamt of people he had not seen for a very long time. He remembered one image in particular, the image of his dead wife, and in this dream she seemed very close, seemed, almost, about to touch him as he lay on the bed. Awake, he thought he could still feel her comforting presence, like an arm around his neck. It seemed to him that he caught just the faintest trace of a sigh in the room, a whisper, as though his wife had spoken and just this minute walked out the door. She seemed to say, "Ay, Fernando," and the tone of her voice was one of sadness and exasperation. Often she had sounded like that, when she was alive.

They had not had any children. "If I had a son," Fajardo thought now, "I would make sure he would not forget us. I would tell him: "Visit our graves on All Saint's Day, and bring food and candles, and hold vigils there with your wife and children. Do not forget us!"

Then he shivered, feeling something cold pressing down. Was that a feather, now brushing his right ear? He put out a hand, but grasped only air.

After a few moments, he rose heavily, walked to the front steps and retrieved the morning paper. It was a thick paper, with very small, almost illegible print. An item on one of the inside pages caught his eye:

The army has launched the largest military offensive against leftist guerillas since rebel activity began in the mountains of the north, a provincial military commander said Saturday. Among the military's targets was a fugitive Roman Catholic priest, wanted dead or alive, with a price on his head.

Soldiers pursuing rebels in the Kalinga area Friday captured a guerilla camp and found documents and ammunition hastily abandoned by retreating rebels. Military sources say among the fleeing rebels was the Rev. Conrado Balweg, a priest from the nearby province of Abra, who joined the rebels in 1979. Balweg is the former parish priest of Luba, a mountain town about 180 miles northwest of Manila. He belongs to the Igorot tribe, whose 700,000 members live on the slopes and valleys of the Cordilleras. The military has offered a reward of 400,000 pesos (\$22,222) for Balweg, dead or alive. The military has set up checkpoints on roads leading to the Cordilleras area and travellers are being searched.

For a long time, Fajardo remained seated at the table. His bowed head scarcely moved. It hung over the page, as though suspended. He seemed to be reading. But he was, in actuality, dreaming.

That night was cool like the previous night, and the box of chalk in his inside coat pocket knocked comfortably against his chest like an old friend. The streets were empty and his footsteps echoed. Rounding a corner, he again saw the *taho* vendor, leaning morosely against a wall. He nodded his head in greeting, and the man simply stared at him with hollow eyes. Fajardo hurried on without speaking.

The vacant lot was undisturbed. In the moonlight, his sketches seemed to breathe, or perhaps it was simply his failing eyesight that lent them a quality of faint movement.

He walked around, examining more closely what he had done. That was when he saw the other words, written in an inconspicuous corner, words that went straight to his heart: *IT HURTS ME, TOO*.

The lettering was small and cramped. In places, where the rough limestone of the wall rose, the letters seemed to fade. The line slanted downward, as though the man or woman writing had gotten tired of supporting his or her arm. The last letter was incomplete, the “o” almost like a “u.” He touched the letters reverently, and felt moisture. He thought, inexplicably, of tears. Yet the chalk was dry.

Some bits of orange chalk were still lying on the ground. He collected them carefully and put them in his pocket. He looked among the weeds, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. He thought of going home. He did not feel safe any longer, knowing someone else had discovered the place. But something made him stop. It was an image that had been on his mind all day. It called to him now, insistently.

After kneeling a long while on the damp ground, he came to a decision. He prepared his chalk. He began to sketch a mountain.

The next night, there was again something new. This time, it was—*THE WILL OF THE DICTATOR*.

Fajardo did not know what to make of it. He became truly frightened, so frightened his knees shook. The letters were large and covered nearly the entire lower half of one wall. Again he debated whether to leave immediately. But his sketch of the mountain called to him. For a long time he stood hesitating. He thought of morning and the sun, and the river glinting, and barges floating. He thought of hot *pandesal*, and steaming mugs of bitter coffee. He felt the cold and the hard ground underneath his feet. Finally, with trembling hands, he took out his box of chalk.

“I must at least finish what I have started,” he told himself.

By this time you are wondering: where does it all end? How many sketches does a man have to make before the censors eventually take notice? It doesn’t matter whether it is one or one hundred and one. What matters is that it all ends inevitably.

Fajardo’s end was no more horrible than others. Ask anyone and they will tell you that he was taken away. Some *taho* vendor—six children to feed at home, wife pregnant again with the seventh and raving—had reported him.

Fajardo was not aware of the forces that had been set in motion by the simple act of reading a four-inch newspaper item. He did not know how a man, bent over a kitchen table with a cup of hot chocolate in his right hand, can seem to swell and grow so that he no longer resembles himself but becomes something Other, something that as yet has no name. He only knew that a very complicated system of reactions were set off by the act of reading. It began with his eyes, which transmitted impulses that electrified his whole body, so that he trembled and could no longer hold his cup, so that he had to fold his arms in front of his chest and hold in whatever was inside him that threatened to spill out and engulf the entire room.

That last night, the night he was arrested, he had just begun a new sketch when the constabulary appeared. He had begun to sketch the figure of a man on a mountain, but he hadn’t been able to finish much more than the jagged shapes of the mountain, and what looked to be the man’s head.

It was clear who he was memorializing. It was that rebel priest, Balweg, the one who was killed just the other week in Benguet province. The police were very proud of that kill. They kept the body, they say. Just to show off.

ARMY KILLS REBEL CLERIC read the front page headline of the newspaper, the morning after Fajardo’s arrest.

For a while, people wondered what happened to Fajardo. The neighbors remembered how he used to stand at the riverfront and mutter crazy things. He always went around with that box of chalk. But he was so old. Surely the old can be humored for their eccentricities. He was always kind, always ready to loan money to a neighbor or a friend. When his apartment remained empty, people started to say, “Was it possible—?” No one liked to think it.

The years went by. Avansena did not forget. He had cataracts in both eyes, he could barely walk, but he did not forget. One day, in he went to the place where Fajardo had made his last sketch. It was very quiet there, and the *talahib* grew quite tall. Who knew what snakes and scorpions were hiding in the tall grass? But the old man went bravely forward. He saw someone had written an epitaph on the wall, an epitaph that broke his heart. It said: WE WILL NEVER FORGET YOU, FERNANDO FAJARDO.