

## BIENVENIDO M. LUMBERA

In the late nineteenth century, Lipa City prospered as a coffee town in the southern Tagalog province of Batangas, Philippines. Landed families, whose wealthy matriarchs called themselves *Doña*, built their town houses there and furnished them with luxuries imported from Spain, France, and Italy. Wealth brought learning and well into the twentieth century, long after the coffee boom had passed and Lipa had reverted to a placid existence under American rule, the town still clung to memories of its famous *ilustrados* of the late Spanish period. As a boy, Bienvenido Lumbera marveled at Lipa's elegant old houses with their wide balconies overlooking the streets, so luxurious compared to his own humbler home just outside town.

Lumbera was born in Lipa on 11 April 1932. He was barely a year old when his father, Timoteo Lumbera (a pitcher with a local baseball team), fell from a fruit tree, broke his back, and died. Carmen Lumbera, his mother, suffered from cancer and died a few years later. By the age of five, young Bienvenido, who was called Beny, was an orphan. He and his older sister were cared for by their paternal grandmother, Eusebia Teru, whose simple wood and plaited palm-leaf house they shared with a succession of boarders—boys from outlying towns and villages who were attending school in Lipa.

Grandmother Eusebia, or Tibing, as she was known, was famous locally for her sharp tongue. She was a stern disciplinarian who, as Lumbera remembers now, “certainly did not spare the rod.” But by taking in lodgers and harvesting fruits and coconuts from some land she owned, she provided well for the children. Her family was slightly better off than many others in the neighborhood. They owned good hardwood furniture and so much chinaware that neighbors came to borrow plates and serving bowls when a big party was at hand. Religious statues under glass domes decorated the parlor and other rooms. Even so, a larger house next door (with indoor plumbing) and the mansions of Lipa reminded young Beny of his family's relatively low economic and social standing.

Lumbera enjoyed his bucolic boyhood surroundings in Batangas. He remembers swimming in the region's “pristine, beautiful” creeks despite the risk involved—for Grandmother Tibing forbade him to do so. He entered school with great reluctance. On the first day, the doughty Eusebia had to drag him off to nearby Padre Valerio Malabanan Elementary School, brandishing a tree branch. In fact,

Lumbera's entire first year in school was miserable. He remembers that his teacher, Mrs. Contreras, sometimes spanked him with a stick for mischief maliciously reported to her by a certain teacher's pet named Angel, Lumbera's first-grade *bête noire*. Beginning in the second grade, however, his precocious acumen in reading established Lumbera himself as the favored pupil. From then on, academically speaking, school presented few difficulties.

But in other ways, Lumbera's elementary school days remained turbulent. Japan invaded the Philippines in late 1941 and Lipa was soon embroiled in the ensuing war. As the Japanese entered Lipa, Beny, his sister, and his grandmother evacuated to a village safely out of harm's way and lodged there for a time with his godparents, Enrique and Amanda Lumbera. After things quieted down, they returned to Lipa and Bienvenido resumed his studies. Everything was more or less the same, except that now certain pages of his school-books were pasted together to obliterate images of the American flag and statements favorable to the United States. The Japanese authorities also distributed new books on the Japanese language. In third grade, Lumbera remembers that they were beautifully illustrated and smelled good. When the Japanese expropriated the school building next door, Grandmother Eusebia sent Lumbera's sister, now a budding teenager, to live with her maternal grandmother and three maiden aunts—safely away from the occupying soldiers.

Lumbera found some things that were strange about Lipa's new masters. With other townsfolk, he laughed at them for mistaking the fancy portable urinals (*orinolats*) that they had looted from local homes for serving bowls. But he also discerned that many of the Japanese men were homesick and longed especially for the company of children. He and his friends experienced the kindness of locally stationed soldiers who shared with them their leftover food daily—filling with rice their basins, which the boys slipped under the wire fence of the military compound at lunch time. Lumbera recalls a Japanese soldier, Watanabe Magozo, who befriended him and shared candies with him in his own quarters. When the boy developed an ulcerous sore on his foot, Magozo took him to his company's medical officer for treatment. Years later, through a Japanese friend, Lumbera learned that Magozo was killed at war's end, not far from Lipa.

Lumbera and his grandmother remained in Lipa until almost the end of the war but, for safety, they moved in with a relative who had established friendly ties with the Japanese administration. When the American forces began bombing the local airfield, however, they fled again to the countryside. In the turbulence of the final power struggle, many victims of Japanese atrocities were left unburied and Lumbera remembers 1944 and 1945 for the foul smell of rotting human flesh. He learned to suck on a slice of ginger to suppress the stench.

When the war ended, Lumbera and his grandmother returned to their home in Lipa. Eusebia, however, soon succumbed to old age and Beny was once again orphaned. For his new guardians, he was asked to choose between his maiden aunts—with whom his sister had stayed—or Enrique and Amanda Lumbera, his godparents. The latter had no children of their own and Bienvenido, who was barely fourteen at the time, says he chose them mainly because “they could send me to school.”

Lumbera finished the sixth grade where he impressed his teacher, Ms. Amelia Kison, with his aptitude for English—so much so that at one point she asked him accusingly, “Did you write this composition?” Lumbera explains that he had taken to larding his school essays with fancy words that he learned from the dictionary and with images borrowed from children’s story books: “I wrote, ‘there was a nightingale singing.’ Heaven knows, I did not even know what a nightingale looked like. But having read about the nightingale in the story books, I thought that it would be a very nice touch.”

For secondary school, Lumbera moved on to the private Mabini Academy, where his love of language blossomed. His third-year English teacher, José Alex Katigbak, took him under his wing and pressed him to read difficult works such as *Ivanhoe*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Pride and Prejudice*. To be challenged in this way pleased him, but these books were frankly over his head. What he really liked were popular novels such as *Rebecca of Sunny Brook Farm* and *The Five Little Peppers*. The latter, about orphaned children, moved him to tears. As his abilities advanced, he came to enjoy the plays of Shakespeare and short stories by authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

English was the medium of instruction at Mabini Academy (and every other high school in the newly independent country), but Tagalog was also required. Although he and his friends broke into the vernacular the moment each class was over, Lumbera found it difficult to memorize the language’s complicated verb conjugations and rebelled against having to study a language he already “knew.” Moreover, Tagalog readings such as *Urbana at Felisa* and *Florante at Laura*, classics of the nineteenth century, struck him as boring and silly. The good literature, he concluded, was in English.

Lumbera graduated third in his class and delivered a florid Class History on commencement day. Determined to become a writer, he applied to enter the University of the Philippines. But his godparents pointed out that the national university’s new campus in Quezon City was too far off the beaten track. It would be difficult for them to visit him when they made their frequent business trips to Divisoria, Manila’s central market. The University of Santo Tomas was located in the heart of old Manila. Just go there, they advised.

Lumbera entered Santo Tomas in 1950 and embarked upon a degree in journalism in the university’s Faculty of Philosophy and

Letters. Here the Western literary tradition reigned. The school offered only a single course in Philippine Literature. Taught by a notoriously self-absorbed professor who prattled on about himself class after class, Lumbera deemed it “a waste of time.” The English language was *de rigueur* everywhere on campus, and Lumbera still remembers the strain of having to speak it all day long: “I would go home to the boarding house in the evening . . . drained of all energy because all the time I was in school I had been concentrating on my grammar and my vocabulary and my diction! Much of the resentment I was later to feel about imposing English on all Filipinos derives from this experience.”

At Santo Tomas, Lumbera met Rolando Tinio and other lifelong friends and engaged actively in student government. He studied Spanish, which was required. But literature was his main preoccupation. Among the faculty, a favorite of the literature majors was Erlinda Francia Rustia, who Lumbera found “witty and charming” and who “made the idea of teaching literature somehow a possible option in the future.” Another influence was Manuel Viray, a poet who taught fiction writing and who used his connections among Manila’s magazine editors to find outlets for student stories and poems. It was Viray, in 1953, who arranged for Lumbera’s poem “Frigid Moon” to appear in the Sunday Magazine of the *Manila Chronicle*, in those days a prestigious venue for creative writing. It was his first published work.

Failing to find a job in the capital after graduating *cum laude* in 1954, Lumbera returned to Lipa and was immediately hired to teach English at his alma mater, Mabini Academy. Despite the difficulty of having to discipline the school’s unruly “tough kids,” he enjoyed his first taste of teaching. But when an editing job for which he had applied earlier at the U.S. naval station in Olongapo came through, he left the academy abruptly at midyear. “I knew,” he says, “I could feel it in my bones, that if I stayed a semester longer I would never leave my hometown. I would grow old as a high school teacher.”

Lumbera’s tenure on the staff of *The Bamboo Telegraph*, a newspaper for civilians that circulated in the orbit of Subic Bay Naval Station, was short-lived. He and two other young staff members (all three of them “snooty kids from Manila,” as Lumbera remembers) aroused the resentment of their local Filipino supervisor. After two months or so, Lumbera was fired along with one of his compatriots. Then, all three walked off the job in solidarity.

Back in Manila, Lumbera enrolled in education classes at Far Eastern University, while waiting for something to open up. What he really wanted to do was go to the United States. “This was the big dream of my generation,” he says. Meanwhile, Rolando Tinio had found work at the Catholic Welfare Office and alerted his friend Bien (Lumbera’s adult nickname) to an opening there. The Catholic Welfare Office published a devotional monthly entitled *Santo Rosario*

*Magazine*, which was full of homilies and miracle stories, not exactly what Lumbera had hoped for as a budding creative writer. But he seized the opportunity. It was a job, after all, and he enjoyed Tinio's daily company. Looking to the future, however, he also applied for a Fulbright grant to study literature at an American university. When Tinio left the Catholic Welfare Office to take up graduate studies at the University of Iowa, Lumbera was left alone to cope with its domineering Dominican boss, Fr. Francisco Muñoz, an angry man given to shouting, "What's wrong with you?" After withstanding Father Muñoz's browbeating for a year, he was finally rescued by good news from the Fulbright Committee.

Lumbera had applied to several North American universities. As a Fulbright scholar, his transportation to the United States would be paid for, but he still needed additional funds to pay for tuition and to supplement the modest allowance his godparents could afford. When Indiana University offered him a fee remission scholarship, that decided it. Thus began, he says, "an entirely new episode in my life."

In Bloomington, Indiana, Lumbera embarked enthusiastically on a second liberal arts education. The range of academic offerings and cultural activities at the new university made Santo Tomas seem parochial by comparison. He reveled in the opportunity to watch plays, attend the opera, listen to jazz. He began a record collection. In the classroom, he was shocked to discover that the scholarly writing skills he had learned in college were not up to par. His first paper at Indiana University earned only a C plus.

Lumbera was a candidate for a master's degree in Comparative Literature. This permitted him to range widely, which was exactly what he wanted to do. But eventually he narrowed his concentration to Spain and the Philippines and, for his M.A. thesis, he embarked on a study of the Spanish playwright Federico Garcia Lorca and his use of folklore. Lumbera delayed finishing his thesis well beyond the usual two-year span for a master's degree and managed, in four years, to complete all the course work necessary for a Ph.D. He then hastily completed his Lorca thesis and returned home, having exhausted the time he was permitted to reside in the United States as a Fulbright scholar. His plan was to write his doctoral dissertation in the Philippines and, two years later, return to Indiana and defend it.

In choosing a subject for his dissertation, Lumbera crossed a difficult intellectual and personal bridge. His original idea was to write about South Asian literature in English. Indian writing appealed to him because, as an English-writing Asian himself, he was interested in how writers who had grown up amid a vernacular-language tradition handled native themes in their acquired language. But when he discussed this idea with Rony Diaz, a Filipino fiction writer and fellow Fulbrighter at Indiana, Diaz expressed astonishment. "Why don't you write about something Filipino?" he asked.

Lumbera was frankly flabbergasted when he discerned the answer to Diaz's question. Filipino literature, he had somehow come to believe, was not "weighty enough for a doctoral student to write about."

Prodded by this vexing realization, Lumbera sought a professor at Indiana who could supervise a dissertation about Filipino literature. He found a sympathetic ear in Horst Frenz, chairman of the Comparative Literature Program. Frenz knew little about the Philippines, but he proposed that Lumbera locate a suitable Filipino scholar to serve as an expert external adviser for the project. When Lumbera recruited Teodoro Agoncillo, a prominent historian based at the University of the Philippines, his Indiana mentors approved his new dissertation topic: "Tradition and Influences in the Development of Tagalog Poetry (1570-1898)."

During his years in Indiana, Lumbera had come to the conclusion that university teaching could provide him a better livelihood than simply writing. When he returned to the Philippines in 1960, he immediately set out to find a teaching job. He was disappointed to find that the dean of Philosophy and Letters at Santo Tomas "was not interested in what I had to offer." But through Rolando Tinio, who had returned from the United States ahead of him and was now teaching at Ateneo de Manila University, he secured a temporary position at Holy Ghost College (now College of the Holy Spirit) teaching English composition, political science, and Rizal studies (which focused on the Philippine national hero, Jose Rizal). Soon, however, an opening at the Ateneo permitted Lumbera to join Tinio in the English Department of the elite Jesuit school.

At the Ateneo, Lumbera honed his lecturing skills and became a popular teacher of literature. With others, he helped establish an Ateneo-based summer program called the Institute of Philippine Literature, a pioneering effort to promote knowledge about national literature among college and high school teachers. Lectures from the Institute, including several by Lumbera, were later published in a book titled *Brown Heritage*.

After three years, Lumbera went on leave to devote himself full-time to his doctoral dissertation. Professor Agoncillo proved a generous mentor who opened his extensive private library to the young scholar. Then, in 1966, Lumbera returned to Indiana where he found a job teaching English in Hanover College, some two hundred miles from Bloomington. Living on the Hanover campus, he managed to find enough leisure time to polish off his thesis, sending each completed chapter to Agoncillo for his final comments and approval. He completed his doctorate on schedule in 1967 and returned to the Philippines.

Lumbera's second stay in the United States coincided with a dramatic period in the American civil rights movement. He remembers vividly an encounter with a black law student that fostered his own politicization. The two men had been chatting about the day's

newspaper headlines, which in those days were full of violent events connected with the civil rights movement. "What do you think of this movement?" the black student asked him. "Would you endorse a move that would escalate the struggle of the blacks for their rights?" Lumbera replied by saying that American blacks had already been given many of their rights. "If you will be more patient," he remembers saying, "the time will come when all your demands will be met." At this, the black student retorted, "When you Filipinos wanted your independence from Spain, did you tell yourselves, 'Well, we're going to wait until the Spaniards finally decide to give us our freedom'?"

This pointed question, says Lumbera, made him realize that "the platitudes I had grown up with were good only for orations. They cannot effectively change society." Thus it was with a heightened political awareness that he returned to the Ateneo.

The school was in ferment. Responding to sentiments abroad in the larger society, some of the Ateneo's privileged young men were now promoting a "Down from the Hill" movement. Their manifesto of that name asserted that the school's elite students should come down from their ivory tower and learn to relate to ordinary Filipinos, including the poor. This kind of thinking appealed to Lumbera. And so did the campaign to Filipinize the Ateneo, which was also in full swing. The Ateneo had been founded by American Jesuits who continued to run it, using American Jesuit colleges as a model. Until Lumbera and his colleagues launched the Philippine Studies Institute a few years back, Ateneo's curriculum barely reflected the fact that it was a Filipino institution.

In the late 1960s, many faculty and students became politicized around this issue. Their controversial demand was that Filipinos, not Americans, should fill the key administrative and teaching posts at the school. An awkward transition was underway. As many American Jesuits took their leave bitterly, others responded positively. Ateneo's dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Fr. Nicholas Kunkel, for example, was sympathetic to new ideas and a great proponent of Filipinization. He drew Lumbera, who had been appointed chairman of the English Department, into conversations about the school's future and Lumbera became thoroughly caught up in the new spirit of change.

At the time, Lumbera says, "Ateneo was the most vibrant school." Political activists and performance groups now visited the campus regularly; students invited radical political thinkers such as José María Sison and feminist Maria Lorena Barros to speak. For their part, Lumbera and Rolando Tinio revised Ateneo's course on "Introduction to the Essay" to include Philippine materials and to be a vehicle for discussing issues relating to Philippine society. Lumbera led an effort to compile a new book of readings for the course, titled *Rediscovery*, in which English and American essays were replaced by essays about the Philippines. In a more dramatic departure, he

and Tinio dropped the English-only requirement in class and actively encouraged students to use Filipino, the Tagalog-based national language.

To make the point, Lumbera began lecturing in Filipino. He found that this was not so easy to do. For years he had been teaching in English, a language he was adept in. "It was very easy for me," he says, "to walk into the classroom even without any preparation—I had everything at my fingertips." Although Tagalog was Lumbera's native tongue and he had studied its literature, he had never used the language regularly for teaching. He now had to prepare for his lectures point by point and stick strictly to the text. It was like walking down a long corridor, he says: "I felt I could not turn at just any corner because I might not be able to get back to the corridor."

As Lumbera brushed up on his Filipino, he was also busy organizing Ateneo's first Philippine Studies Department, of which he became chairman in 1970. The idea was to combine language study with topical courses on Philippine history, anthropology, economics, and so on. He hired Nicanor Tiongson from the University of the Philippines to assist him; Virgilio Almario, a poet, became the department's language teacher. The three of them formed the core of the department, while instructors from other departments offered supplemental classes.

Lumbera's innovative new department was short-lived, the victim of a university reorganization following the declaration of martial law in 1972. One important initiative of its brief existence, however, was the first university-based writers' workshop exclusively for writers using Filipino. Both the University of the Philippines and Silliman University already hosted prestigious English-language writers' workshops. But vernacular-language writing had never been accorded such academic respectability; its practitioners were the second-class citizens of the country's literary scene. The response to Lumbera's Filipino workshop was tremendous, especially from younger writers. He attributes this in part to a rising sense of pride among those who wrote in the national language.

The young Filipino writers that drew together around Lumbera at this time were not only proud, they were also angry. Their anger arose from the perception that Philippine society was in the grip of an unequal and exploitative relationship with the United States—which drove it, for example, to side with the United States in the Vietnam War. Many of them also opposed the feudal social structure of the Philippines and its capitalistic economic system, both of which, acting together, invested political and economic power in the hands of a small ruling elite. These views were widely popular among students, political activists, and intellectuals of the time, who were partisans of what came to be called the national democratic movement. To them, the behavior of the Philippine government under President Ferdinand Marcos (who had won a second term in the highly



questionable election of 1968) seemed to confirm their ideas only too well. In this highly charged atmosphere, a vast number of new organizations emerged, including, at the most extreme, a revived Communist Party of the Philippines led by Jose Maria Sison.

Bienvenido Lumbera shared the strong views articulated by his workshop writers. With some of them, he helped to found an organization dedicated to politically engaged writing: Panulat para sa Kaunlaran ng Sambayanan (Writings for the Progress of the People), or PAKSA. PAKSA's stalwarts were progressive young writers based at the University of the Philippines, Philippine College of Commerce, and Manuel L. Quezon University. In 1970, the group galvanized around the naming by the Institute of National Language of an older, conservative poet as Poet of the Year. In protest, they organized a rally that ended with a symbolic book burning to signify their rejection of the "reactionary" literature of the past. Lumbera found himself in the awkward position of being on the Institute's selection board, where his vote for Virgilio Almario (his Ateneo colleague and choice of the young turks) was outweighed by the other judges. In the wake of the rally, he joined the young writers in study sessions on the ideology of the national democratic movement, expressed in slogans such as "Down with U.S. Imperialism," "Down with Feudalism," and "Down with Bureaucratic Capitalism." In 1971, PAKSA was formally constituted at a national congress and Lumbera was elected chairman of the organization.

In 1971, the political climate in the Philippines became more polarized. President Marcos responded by suspending the writ of habeas corpus in August, signaling to opposition groups like PAKSA that a wave of repression might be in the offing. Then, on 22 September 1972, he declared martial law. Lumbera remembers that day with a chill: "That morning, when I woke up and turned on the radio there was no sound. You just heard static. After a while, we realized that martial law had started." Since PAKSA had openly espoused the national democratic position, Lumbera assumed that he would be targeted for arrest. He immediately abandoned his apartment near the Ateneo for Rolando Tinio's house and from there shifted to a succession of safe houses in and around Greater Manila. For the next year and a half, he lived underground, posing as "Pedro" here and "Uncle" there and putting together a mimeographed anti-martial law magazine of prose and poetry called *Ulos* (Thrust), which circulated quietly among opponents of the dictatorship.

Lumbera was finally caught in January 1974. To the military men who picked him up, he gave the name "Anselmo." When they found out his real name, they were surprised. They had actually intended to capture another professor who, like Lumbera, was middle-aged and balding. Too late, Lumbera discovered that "apparently, they had no intention of arresting me."

But they did not release him. Instead, Marcos's soldiers slapped him in a cell with a group of young activists and subjected him to intensive interrogation. He was not tortured, perhaps because his captors were aware that he was a professor. Instead, they pressured him psychologically to reveal information about the underground—for example, by insinuating that they knew more about the movement than they really did and by subjecting his younger cell mates to torture. When asked to reveal the identity of certain individuals known only to the authorities by their *nom de guerre*, Lumbera admitted to being all of them himself. After a week, he was brought to the office of the Judge Advocate General where he was accused of subversion and made to sign papers. There was no hearing. Afterwards, Lumbera was transferred to Ipil Rehabilitation Center, a prison camp inside Manila's Fort Bonifacio. Like many of those in the camp, he had not been convicted of anything. The Marcos government therefore insisted fastidiously that he was not a prisoner at all, but merely a detainee.

For Lumbera and many of his companions inside Ipil's barbed-wire perimeter, life was exceedingly simple but not onerous. (Marcos used this camp as a showcase for the prying eyes of the International Committee of the Red Cross.) In the barracks, each prisoner had a bunk bed with a piece of cloth strung across the front for privacy. There were daily roll calls and weekly clean-up chores. But most of the time, prisoners were free to pursue individual activities such as gardening, making handicrafts, and organizing cultural programs. Visitors were permitted and, as a consequence, detainees from prosperous circles often received boons from the outside. Rolando Tinio came with picnic lunches, for example, and Lumbera's Ateneo student Doreen Fernandez brought books, magazines, and pastries. Lumbera occupied himself with gardening and learned to do macramé. Aside from a poem or two for the camp's secret newsletter, he wrote almost nothing, feeling that manual work better suited his life in captivity. He was painfully aware that not all prisoners were as lucky or as comfortable as he was. Those from the urban poor had few outside resources to draw on. For them, he says, "It was a hard life."

With Lumbera in the Ipil Rehabilitation Center were several writers and intellectuals who shared his vision of society, including Ricardo Lee, Rogelio Mangahas, Alfredo Saulo, Rigoberto Tiglao, and Romeo Dizon. But most of his fellow prisoners were not professionals at all but struggling members of the country's lower classes. Lumbera and his middle-class friends were therefore confronted with living on a day-to-day basis with the very people that their ideology claimed to serve, "the poor and oppressed." In Ipil, he says, they lived a genuinely democratic existence: "You may be a university professor, but at the detention center you have the same duties as anybody else." This was liberating and Lumbera frankly relished

the harmonious, egalitarian life of the camp—and missed it when he was set free in December 1974.

Lumbera had plenty of friends on the outside who were eager for his release. Among them was Cynthia Nograles, a former graduate student of his from the Ateneo whom he had later seen socially in the company of mutual friends—a typically Filipino way of launching a relationship. More recently, she had been one of Lumbera's regular visitors at Ipil. It was Cynthia who wrote to Marcos's Minister of Defense, Juan Ponce Enrile, asking for Lumbera's release. This led nowhere. But when a friend of hers told her that she could get a private letter to General Fidel Ramos (the friend was a fellow teacher of Mrs. Ramos at Manila's International School), Cynthia tried again. Ramos, who later became president of the Philippines, was then Chief of the Philippine Constabulary and a leading military figure in the Marcos dictatorship. "When I was released," Lumbera remembers, "every officer who had to sign my release papers kept reminding me that it was General Ramos who had ordered my release." A few months later, on 19 March 1975, Bien married Cynthia.

Lumbera's new freedom dazed him. After the easy familiarity of camp life, he was unaccustomed to the anonymity of Manila's city streets. "It was like walking into a strange world," he says. He found himself easily moved to tears by the human misery around him, and by other kinds of degradation. It was the fashion then, for example, for the tonier department stores to employ young women to stand in shop windows and pretend to be mannequins. This nightmarish image of real people acting like robots outraged him, in part because it spoke so eloquently to the nature of Philippine life under martial law.

Through a former student, Yen Makabenta, Lumbera got a job with the Department of Public Information, ironically, a government agency. He became director of research and editor of the magazine *Sagisag*. Meanwhile, Rolando Tinio, now head of Ateneo's Department of Filipino, was orchestrating his return to the Ateneo faculty. Lumbera was already a tenured professor and naturally assumed he would "just slide in." Moreover, his wife Cynthia was hired by the Ateneo at about this time. An old controversy now complicated Lumbera's plans, however.

Before martial law, in the heyday of open politics, Ateneo had hired Dante Simbulan, a avowed leftist, as associate professor. By the terms of his contract, he could not continue at the university beyond three years unless granted tenure. As a member of the Ateneo's Tenure and Promotion Committee, Lumbera was privy to the deliberations concerning Simbulan's tenure case. He noted that Simbulan was the only candidate for tenure whose file contained a dossier about his political activities. Indeed, Simbulan's case was so sensitive that Ateneo's president, Fr. Jose Cruz, sat in on the crucial tenure deliberations.

When Simbulan was voted down, Lumbera violated the sacrosanct confidentiality of the Tenure and Promotion Committee and revealed the existence of Simbulan's political dossier to a student assembly. This outraged his fellow committee members who asked him to resign from the committee. But no further action was taken against him. In 1975, however, when Rolando Tinio proposed bringing Lumbera back to the Ateneo, President Cruz blocked the appointment on the grounds that Lumbera had lost his tenure by disappearing for two years. At this, Tinio tendered his resignation from the university and soon a full-scale pro-Lumbera agitation erupted. To resolve the issue, Ateneo's board of trustees appointed a blue-ribbon panel to decide the case. Lumbera chose former senator and prominent martial law oppositionist Jose Diokno to represent him on the panel. But the committee evidently deadlocked and, as the case lingered on unresolved, Lumbera decided to put the Ateneo behind him and accept a position at the University of the Philippines.

Lumbera felt at home at the UP, as the prestigious national university is popularly known. In the heady years just before martial law, he had lectured there occasionally in the English Department, handling courses on Philippine literature in English. Even more than the Ateneo, UP was in turmoil at the time. Its students were at the forefront of the days' political rallies and demonstrations and were frequently absent for long stretches. Classes were held under the campus's capacious acacia trees and often veered away from the lesson at hand to engage more urgently relevant topics. Lumbera found all this quite compatible with teaching Filipino literature and he was delighted to discover, among his searching students, a few with exceptional intellect and promise. He rejoined the university in 1976 as a lecturer in the Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature, preferring this to the notoriously faction-ridden English Department. In relatively short order he was promoted to professor.

Things were considerably quieter at UP now. Martial law hung like a heavy cloud over the campus. Lumbera settled into a busy life of teaching, offering a wide range of courses and becoming a guiding force in the university's Philippine Studies program. He devoted himself to mentoring its bright graduate students and, in his second year, he helped to establish a doctoral program in the field. By 1979, Lumbera's first two Ph.D. students in Philippine literature from the University of the Philippines completed their degrees: Nicanor Tiongson and Soledad Reyes. At the same time, several of his former students at the Ateneo also completed their doctorates under his direction, among them Doreen Fernandez. As these protégés became rising stars in Philippine cultural and intellectual life, Lumbera's reputation as a teacher and scholar was also enhanced. In 1982, he and Cynthia co-edited an important new textbook with works in both Filipino and English titled *Philippine Literature: A History and Anthology*.

In 1977, the dean of UP's College of Arts and Sciences, Francisco Nemenzo, asked Lumbera to take on the editorship of the *Diliman Review*, a college-sponsored magazine with scholarly articles and faculty-authored poems that circulated mainly among the faculty. Nemenzo wanted something livelier that would appeal to a wider readership, including students. Lumbera's idea was to combine elements of the pre-martial law *Philippines Free Press* and a small journal he admired called *Graphic Weekly* to create an outspoken magazine that addressed the urgent sociopolitical issues of the times. Lumbera's *Diliman Review* was bilingual, with articles in both Filipino and English, and it was openly anti-dictatorship. Oddly, the Marcos authorities left it alone. Lumbera ascribes this to UP's sacrosanct status as the country's leading public university. So even though UP activist students "were getting arrested, picked-up, and mauled," he says, "there was no attempt to interfere with our publication." He also supposes that the magazine's relatively low circulation had something to do with it.

Aside from developing the *Diliman Review* as a forum for dissident points of view, Lumbera was active in anti-dictatorship organizations. Later, when political opposition burst into the open following the assassination in 1983 of Marcos rival Benigno Aquino, he wrote poems and songs for the mass rallies that marked the times. Indeed, all through the final decade of martial law, Lumbera's major political outlet was creative writing.

Lumbera dreamed of being a writer even as a teenager in high school and he published his first poems and short stories while still in college. Even as he moved inexorably into the academic world, he continued to write creatively. For many years, he composed his poems mainly in English, mimicking styles and themes that were fashionable in the West. The artificiality of these early poems makes him cringe today, he says. He wrote his first poem in Filipino while living in the United States. He was asked by the comparative literature department at Indiana University to present a program of Tagalog poetry. Not finding any poems particularly to his liking—everything seemed so old-fashioned—he decided to write them himself. Back in the Philippines, he continued to work on his Tagalog poems and published several during the 1960s, while continuing to publish English-language poems as well.

An example of the latter is Lumbera's famous "A Eulogy of Roaches," written in 1965. This poem illustrates his abandonment of self-consciously artistic or (as he had come to think of it) *bourgeois* themes for topics of social relevance. In the Philippines, he wrote, cockroaches were "the citizens who last." Compared to simple Filipinos, these "friends to dark and filth" were better survivors:

Their annals may be short,  
 but when the simple poor  
 have starved to simple death,  
 roaches still circulate  
 in cupboards of the rich,  
 the strong, the wise, the dead.

As Lumbera threw himself into Philippine Studies in the late 1960s and, along with it, the promotion of Filipino, he also began writing more and more in the national language. (In order to provide students with good examples of “the critical essay in Filipino,” for example, he found he had to write these himself as well.) Among those who encouraged him was Amado V. Hernandez, a grand master of Tagalog verse and a passionate champion of left-wing causes. Like Lumbera, Hernandez had also been a political prisoner (in the early 1950s) and Lumbera admired him deeply. When Hernandez published his valedictory book in 1969, titled *Bayang Malaya* (A Free People), he inscribed a copy to Lumbera with a note encouraging him to write for non-English-reading Filipinos. Hernandez died the following March and, at his funeral, Lumbera made a private pledge to do just that. The turbulent early 1970s yielded a stream of new poems in Filipino and in 1975, at the annual Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, Lumbera received a special award for his collection *Sunog sa Lipa at Iba Pang Tula* (Fire in Lipa and Other Poems).

After reestablishing himself professionally at the University of the Philippines, Lumbera began experimenting with more ambitious creative projects. In 1977, choreographer Alice Reyes asked him to write the libretto for a pop ballet musical (with music by Nonong Pedero) based on legends of the Manuvu hill people of Mindanao. He was intrigued but also concerned lest the outcome be nothing more than an entertaining distraction. He plumbed the script for something relevant and found the image of a caged bird yearning to break free. In his libretto for *Tales of the Manuvu*, he used this image to emphasize “the need for people to rely on themselves instead of relying on fate, or powerful men.” Sometime later, when he learned that a military man had complained about the show’s political content, Lumbera was delighted. “I did not think that anybody saw my message.”

The following year, Lumbera collaborated with composer Lucio San Pedro to write *Ang Palabas Bukas* (The Show Tomorrow), a modern version of the traditional Filipino musical show called *sarsuwela*. He based his libretto on the life of Nora Aunor, a Filipina who started

life as a water vendor in a provincial train station and rose to become a wildly popular singer and film star. Lumbera used Nora Aunor's story, he says, "to comment on the entertainment industry and how it exploits people, how poverty makes people easy victims of those who are powerful." After *Ang Palabas Bukas*, Lumbera spent a year as Asian Scholar in Residence at the University of Hawaii, but he was soon involved in another collaboration with Alice Reyes. Wishing to produce something more broadly Asian, she recruited him to create a script based on the Indian epic *Ramayana*. This became *Rama Hari*, which appeared as a pop ballet in 1980 with music by Ryan Cayabyab.

From 1981 to 1984, Lumbera was officially designated Artist in Residence at the University of the Philippines. Aside from stints as visiting scholar at the Center for East Asian Cultural Studies in Tokyo in 1983 and at the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute at the University of Michigan in 1984, he now devoted himself full-time to creative projects. At the time, the Philippine Educational Theater Association, or PETA, was one of the most daring anti-dictatorship theater companies in the Philippines. At PETA's request, Lumbera fashioned a Brechtian-style musical based on *America Is in the Heart*, Carlos Bulosan's bitter and poignant memoir of life as a Filipino expatriate living in the United States: *Nasa Puso ang Amerika*. Then, with Jim Paredes of the popular singing trio Apo Hiking Society, he wrote the libretto for *Bayani* (Hero), a rock musical based loosely on the life of Jose Rizal, which Doreen Fernandez has described as a musical "with the soul of the sarsuwela and the glitter of Broadway." In it, Lumbera created imaginary conversations between the Philippines' revolutionary founding fathers that plumbed issues of urgent relevance in the waning years of Marcos rule.

By the time *Bayani* was actually performed, Lumbera was in Japan. Invited to teach Filipino at Osaka University of Foreign Studies in Mino, Osaka, he was only too happy to accept. The Philippine economy had plummeted during the martial law years and the Lumberas, getting by on minuscule academic salaries, were frankly struggling. Three daughters had already come to Bien and Cynthia: Laya Maria Isabela in 1976, then Tala Maria Lorena and Sining Maria Rosa, twins born in 1978. And Cynthia was again pregnant. A generous salary in Japanese yen was certainly welcome. Lumbera went to Osaka ahead of the family, with the plan of returning to Manila in early 1986 to assist in the birth of his newest child; then the family would return together to Japan.

As it happened, however, Lumbera's homebound airplane reservations for February 1986 coincided with the tumultuous events in Manila that brought a final, jubilant end to the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. This was an event he had hoped for and helped to foster for many years. But the airports were closed and Lumbera was left to watch the unfolding revolution on Japanese television.

Combined with his frustration at missing the main political event of his generation was his anxiety over the safety of Cynthia and the girls back in Manila. All was well, however, and on 30 June 1985 Cynthia delivered Silay Maria Mendiola, their fourth daughter, alas without the presence of Bien. Lumbera soon retrieved his family and they stayed together in Japan until 1988.

Lumbera's frequent assignments abroad in the early and mid-1980s afforded him the extra time to bring several large projects to fruition. In addition to the literature anthology of 1982, he published a collection of essays in 1984 (*Reevaluation: Essays on Philippine Literature, Cinema, and Popular Culture*) and, in 1985, the book version of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Indiana, *Tagalog Poetry, 1570-1898: Tradition and Influences in Its Development*. Just two years later, he published *Abot-Tanaw: Sulyap at Suri ng Nagbabagong Kultura at Lipunan* (Horizon: Glimpses and Analyses of a Changing Culture and Society). These three books were banner achievements for Lumbera, all the more so because each one of them, in 1985, 1986, and 1987, respectively, won the Philippines' coveted National Book Award.

By this time, Lumbera was well established as an influential public intellectual. Although rooted in the university, his influence had long since spread well beyond the classroom and the small world of the academe. His success in musical theater was just one way that Lumbera managed to impress his ideas upon the public. He was also a prolific critic of drama and film and a commentator on his country's changing culture, whose articles appeared in mass circulation magazines and newspapers. He was an equally prolific lecturer. Importantly, Lumbera did not labor alone but found like-minded compatriots with whom he collaborated in professional and cultural organizations, many of which he helped to found. Indeed, aside from PAKSA, Lumbera was a founding member of five other associations: Philippine Comparative Literature Association, 1969; Pamana ng Panitikan ng Pilipinas (Legacy of Philippine Literature), 1970; Kalipunan para sa mga Literatura ng Pilipinas (KALUPI, Assembly for Literature of the Philippines), 1975; Philippine Studies Association of the Philippines, 1984; and Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (Critics of Philippine Cinema), 1976. Despite his bewildering array of activities, Lumbera remained dedicated to teaching and, indeed, in 1993 was named Outstanding Teacher of the College of Arts and Letters at the University of the Philippines.

Of all the issues Lumbera has engaged over the years as a scholar and public intellectual, the most central has been language. As a writer and student of literature, it is not surprising that his awakening to Philippine nationalism in the 1960s led him first to explore and later to emphasize the primary role of language in forming a national identity. But the link is more personal than that. As a Filipino molded first under the powerful influences of a foreign



culture, Lumbera's own intellectual evolution illustrates the vexing complexities of his country's national identity.

As a youth, Lumbera imbibed without question the value judgment implicit in his own education: English is superior to Tagalog. Therefore, English-language literature is superior to Filipino literature. Even as a mature graduate student at the University of Indiana, he had eschewed Filipino poetry and prose as being somehow below the standards required of World Literature. Besides, like many budding Filipino intellectuals of his generation, Lumbera longed to participate in a universal community of ideas and art, not one confined to his own small country. Rony Diaz's 1959 challenge, "Why don't you write about something Filipino?", which led to his pathbreaking dissertation on traditional Tagalog poetry, marked the beginning of his reeducation. Why is it, he now asked himself, that English ranks so high in my value system and Tagalog/Filipino so low?

He found the answer in history. As part of a strategy to pacify and control the Philippine population in the years following its acquisition of the islands in 1898, the United States vigorously promoted education in English. The results were profound, as Lumbera later wrote: "English opened the floodgates of colonial values through the conduits of textbooks originally intended for American children; books and magazines beamed at an American audience that familiarized Filipinos with the blessings of economic affluence in a capitalist country; phonograph records that infected young Filipinos with the same concerns and priorities as American teenagers; and films that vividly recreated for Filipino audiences life in the U.S., feeding the minds of the young with bogus images of a just and altruistic government and its wondrously happy and contented citizens."

As a new intelligentsia formed within this America-shaped colonial society, it naturally chose to express itself in English, the language of upward mobility and, increasingly, of social prestige. (Among the elite, Spanish lingered as an upper-class marker.) Aspiring young authors from the better schools now rendered their poems and short stories in English and published them in the colony's robust English-language press.

This powerful cultural orientation survived the country's transition to independence and was firmly in place as Lumbera rose through Mabini Academy and the University of Santo Tomas in the late 1940s and 1950s. As Lumbera came to understand, the close economic and political links between the newly independent Philippines and the United States served to reinforce this orientation, as did the famous Fulbright program of which he was such a happy beneficiary. "The Fulbright program," he wrote in 1982, "was supposed to have brought about an exchange of cultural influences, but what actually took place was a one-way cultural traffic which only intensified the Americanization of the Filipino intellectual." Upon returning to the Philippines after his four years as a Fulbright scholar, Lumbera did

indeed teach the cutting-edge New Criticism he had imbibed at Indiana to his students at the Ateneo. One of the assumptions of this approach is that local culture and history are largely irrelevant to understanding literary texts and the human beings who create them: the creative process is “universal.”

When one of Lumbera’s students later excelled at an American university using notes from his Ateneo literature classes, it seemed to confirm that “human behavior analyzed in an Ateneo class did not differ much from human behavior analyzed in New York.” By the late 1960s, however, Lumbera had concluded that this was a colossal misreading of the truth born of the values he had internalized as an American-trained Filipino intellectual. The same instrument for literary analysis “worked” both in Quezon City (site of Ateneo de Manila) and in New York, he now understood, “not because human nature is ‘universal’ but because the cultural assumptions behind the instrument were laid out in New York and taken over by a professor in Quezon City.”

Thus, to Lumbera, the promotion of Philippine studies was much more than broadening the curriculum of Filipino schools, even more than an act of national self-assertion. It was part of a profound re-orientation whereby Filipinos would consciously shed the U.S. colonial legacy and reaffirm *in their culture* that which was originally and authentically Filipino. Virtually all of Lumbera’s endeavors during the past twenty-five years have been dedicated to bringing this about.

Building Filipino as a true national language is the key, he says. It is the key, first of all, because English is not an empty vehicle. For Filipinos to speak, read, and write English is to continue to imbibe the value system and world orientation of the United States. The role of English as a vector for foreign influence is especially strong in the Philippines because of the absence of an esteemed vernacular among the country’s elite. For those at the top of Philippine society (unlike comparable groups in Europe, among whom English is also widely known), the Filipino vernaculars are considered “common,” the language of movies and tabloids, of servants and the masses generally—although everyone uses them casually, often in combination with English, hence the ubiquitous Taglish.

The second reason that building Filipino as a true national language is important, Lumbera stresses, is precisely because so few people in the Philippines actually know English well. The gulf between the vast majority of Filipinos who communicate largely in Filipino and other vernacular languages and the English-knowing elite is deep and wide. In the absence of Filipinization, Lumbera feels that this gap may well be permanent. The privileging of English therefore perpetuates one of the worst features of his country’s socioeconomic structure—the oligarchic domination of the many by the few.

Lumbera's own struggle to learn English, and to learn *in* English, has also convinced him that every child in the Philippines, high or low, would benefit if Filipino became the standard medium of instruction in schools. He notes, for example, that his own young daughter easily comprehends complex problems when they are taught in Filipino. Learning in her own language, rather than struggling with the *medium* in which it is being taught, frees her mind to "soak up" the material at hand. This is precisely why the most difficult technical subjects should be taught in vernacular languages, he says, all the more so in the early years.

Lumbera's campaign to make Filipino the national language began during the halcyon days of the late 1960s. So powerful was the spirit of change at the time that Lumbera confidently predicted that Filipino would replace English as the medium of instruction in schools in fifty years' time. In the decades since then, however, the Philippine government has not definitively committed itself one way or another. Non-Tagalog speakers have opposed the change as an act of cultural imperialism. (Just over 20 percent of Filipinos speak Tagalog as their mother tongue.) And many others have argued that the Philippines would be foolish to give up the advantage accorded to English-speaking Filipinos in the world job market. (This argument infuriates Lumbera. It suggests, he says, that the Philippines is a permanently poor country that will always need to export its workers, as it does now.)

Officially, the language issue remains unresolved. But even as the pros and cons have been debated endlessly, Filipino has been advancing as a popular language, borne to Filipinos in every region through television, movies, tabloid newspapers, and comic books. Lumbera notes happily that as non-Tagalog speakers learn and become comfortable with the language, and as they adapt it to the speech patterns of their own regions, a true national language is in the making—wholly outside of the classroom. He emphasizes that the evolving lingua franca, though rooted in Tagalog, is not the same as formal Tagalog. It is a new linguistic amalgam in which "all regions are equal." In time, he believes, it will triumph.

Lumbera is less confident about some of his other hopes for the Philippines. Even though the Philippine Senate acted in 1992 to remove United States military bases from the country, the influence of the former colonial power remains pervasive—in the economy, for example, and in the media. A colonial mentality persists, Lumbera says, leading many Filipinos automatically to prefer foreign products to local ones and to dream of resettling their hard-pressed families in America. Philippine society, moreover, remains powerfully feudal, with a relatively small class of propertied families dominating over the vast majority of others. Government is in their hands, and they use their official positions to cement business deals

to make themselves even richer. "This is bureaucratic capitalism all over again," he laments.

Other smaller things also get him down. To illustrate his frustration, Lumbera tells this story: "After a prolonged brownout and the lights come back, my children jump up and down in joy! That should have happened only in the time of Edison, when he invented electricity. But we are nearing the end of the twentieth century and people still jump for joy when the lights come on. Lately, one really despairs of the Philippine situation."

Yet Bien Lumbera does not seem despairing. Indeed, the twinkle in his eye and his warm presence belie pessimism. "One thing that I have imbibed from my involvement in the movement," he says, "is a faith that things can change, that things can be changed. So I suppose if one scratches deeper, then one will find a hopeful Lumbera."

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J.R.R.

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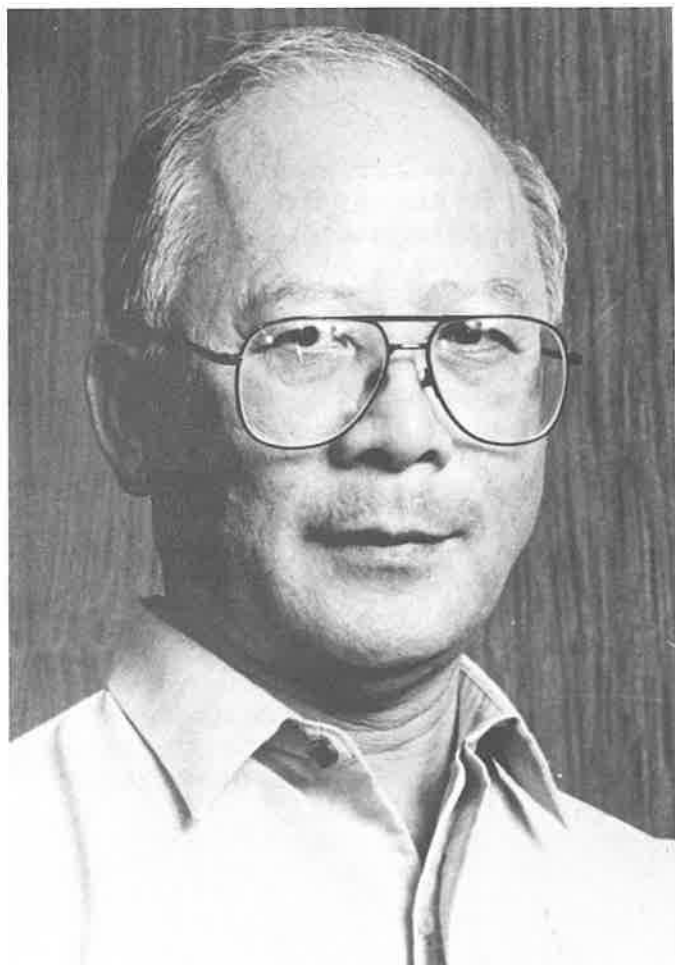
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