When my brother Berto was thirteen he ran away from home and went to Manila. We did not hear from him until eight years later, and he was by that time working in a little town in California. He wrote a letter in English, but we could not read it. Father carried it in his pocket all summer, hoping the priest in our village would read it for him.

The summer ended gloriously and our work on the farm was done. We gathered firewood and cut grass on the hillsides for our animals. The heavy rains came when we were patching up the walls of our house. Father and I wore palm overcoats and worked in the mud, rubbing vinegar on our foreheads and throwing it around us to keep the lightning away. The rains ceased suddenly, but the muddy water came down from the mountains and flooded the river.

We made a bamboo raft and floated slowly along the water. Father sat in the center of the raft and took the letter from his pocket. He looked at it for a long time, as though he were committing it to memory. When we reached the village church it was midnight, but there were many people in the yard. We tied our raft to the riverbank and dried our clothes on the grass.

A woman came and told us that the priest had died of overeating at a wedding. Father took our clothes off the grass and we put them on. We untied our raft and rowed against the slow currents back to our house. Father was compelled to carry the letter for another year, waiting for the time when my brother Nicasio would come home from school. He was the only one in our family who could read and write.

When the students returned from the cities, Father and I went to town with a sack of peanuts. We stood under the arbor tree in the station and watched every bus that stopped. He heated a pile of dry sand with burning stones and roasted peanuts. At night we sat in the coffee shop and talked with the loafers and gamblers. Then the last students arrived, but my brother Nicasio was not with them. We gave up waiting and went back to the village.

When summer came again we plowed the land and planted corn. Then we were informed that my brother Nicasio had gone to America. Father was greatly disappointed. He took the letter of my brother Berto from his pocket and locked it in a small box. We put our minds on our work and after two years the letter was forgotten.

Toward the end of my ninth year, a tubercular young man appeared in our village. He wanted to start a school for the children and the men were enthusiastic. The drummer went around the village and announced the good news. The farmers gathered in a vacant lot not far from the cemetery and started building a schoolhouse. They shouted at one another with joy and laughed aloud. The wind carried their laughter through the village.

I saw them at night lifting the grass roof on their shoulders. I ran across the fields and stood by the well, watching them place the rafters on the long bamboo posts. The men were stripped to the waist and their cotton trousers were rolled up to their thighs. The women came with their earthen jars and hauled drinking water, pausing in the clear moonlight to watch the men with secret joy.

Then the schoolhouse was finished. I heard the bell ring joyfully in the village. I ran to the window and saw boys and girls going to school. I saw Father on our carabao, riding off toward our house. I took my straw hat off the wall and rushed to the gate.

Father bent down and reached for my hands. I sat behind him on the bare back of the animal. The children shouted and slapped their bellies. When we reached the school yard the carabao stopped without warning. Father fell to the ground and rolled into the well, screaming aloud when he touched the water. I grabbed the animal's tail and hung on to it till it rolled on its back in the dust.

I rushed to the well and lowered the wooden bucket. I tied the rope to the post and shouted for help. Father climbed slowly up the rope to the mouth of the well. The bigger boys came down and helped me pull Father out. He stood in the sun and shook the water off his body. He told me to go into the schoolhouse with the other children.

We waited for the teacher to come. Father followed me inside and sat...
on a bench behind me. When the teacher arrived we stood as one person and waited for him to be seated. Father came to my bench and sat quietly for a long time. The teacher started talking in our dialect, but he talked so fast we could hardly understand him.

When he distributed some little Spanish books, Father got up and asked what language we would learn. The teacher told us that it was Spanish. Father asked him if he knew English. He said he knew only Spanish and our dialect. Father took my hand and we went out of the schoolhouse. We rode the carabao back to our house.

Father was disappointed. He had been carrying my brother's letter for almost three years now. It was still unread. The suspense was hurting him and me, too. It was the only letter he had received in all the years that I had known him, except some letters that came from the government once a year asking him to pay his taxes.

When the rains ceased, a strong typhoon came from the north and swept away the schoolhouse. The teacher gave up teaching and married a village girl. Then he took up farming and after two years his wife gave birth to twins. The men in the village never built a schoolhouse again.

I grew up suddenly and the desire to see other places grew. It moved me like a flood. It was impossible to walk a kilometer away from our house without wanting to run away to the city. I tried to run away a few times, but whenever I reached the town, the farm always called me back. I could not leave Father because he was getting old.

Then our farm was taken away from us. I decided to go to town for a while and live with Mother and my two little sisters. Father remained in the village. He came to town once with a sack of wild tomatoes and bananas. But the village called him back again.

I left my town and traveled to other places. I went to Baguio in the northern part of the Philippines and worked in the marketplace posing naked for American tourists who seemed to enjoy the shameless nudity of the natives. An American woman, who claimed that she had come from Texas, took me to Manila.

She was a romantic painter. When we arrived in the capital she rented a nice large house where the sun was always shining. There were no children of my age. There were men and women who never smiled. They spoke through their noses. The painter from Texas asked me to undress every morning; she worked industriously. I had never dreamed of making a living by exposing my body to a stranger. That experience made me roar with laughter for many years.

One time, while I was still in the woman's house, I remembered the wide ditch near our house in the village where the young girls used to take a bath in the nude. A cousin of mine stole the girls' clothes and then screamed behind some bushes. The girls ran about with their hands between their legs. I thought of this incident when I felt shy, hiding my body with my hands from the woman painter. When I had saved a little money I took a boat for America.

I forgot my village for a while. When I went to a hospital and lay in bed for two years, I started to read books with hunger. My reading was started by a nurse who thought I had come from China. I lied to her without thinking of it, but I told a good lie. I had no opportunity to learn when I was outside in the world but the security and warmth of the hospital gave it to me. I languished in bed for two years with great pleasure. I was no longer afraid to live in a strange world and among strange peoples.

Then at the end of the first year, I remembered the letter of my brother Berto. I crept out of bed and went to the bathroom. I wrote a letter to Father asking him to send the letter to me for translation. I wanted to translate it, so that it would be easy for him to find a man in our village to read it to him.

The letter arrived six months later. I translated it into our dialect and sent it back with the original. I was now better. The doctors told me that I could go out of the hospital. I used to stand by the window for hours asking myself why I had forgotten to laugh in America. I was afraid to go out into the world. I had been confined too long, I had forgotten what it was like on the outside.

I had been brought to the convalescent ward when the Civil War in Spain started some three years before. Now, after the peasants' and workers' government was crushed, I was physically ready to go out into the world and start a new life. There was some indignation against fascism in all civilized lands. To most of us, however, it was the end of a great cause.

I stood at the gate of the hospital, hesitating. Finally, I closed my
eyes and walked into the city. I wandered all over Los Angeles for some time, looking for my brothers. They had been separated from me since childhood. We had had, separately and together, a bitter fight for existence. I had heard that my brother Nicasio was in Santa Barbara, where he was attending college. Berro, who never stayed in one place for more than three months at a time, was rumored to be in Bakersfield waiting for the grape season.

I packed my suitcase and took a bus to Santa Barbara. I did not find my brother there. I went to Bakersfield and wandered in the streets asking for my brother. I went to Chinatown and stood in line for the free chop-suey that was served in the gambling houses to the loafers and gamblers. I could not find my brother in either town. I went to the vineyards looking for him. I was convinced that he was not in that valley. I took a bus for Seattle.

The hiring halls were full of men waiting to be shipped to the canneries in Alaska. I went to the dance halls and poolrooms. But I could not find my brothers. I took the last boat to Alaska and worked there for three months. I wanted to save money so that I could have something to spend when I returned to the mainland.

When I came back to the West Coast, I took a bus to Portland. Beyond Tacoma, near the district where Indians used to force the hop pickers into marriage, I looked out the window and saw my brother Berro in a beer tavern. I knew it was my brother although I had not seen him for many years. There was something in the way he had turned his head toward the bus that made me think I was right. I stopped at the next town and took another bus back to Tacoma. But he was already gone.

I took another bus and went to California. I stopped in Delano. The grape season was in full swing. There were many workers in town. I stood in the poolrooms and watched the players. I went to a beer place and sat in a booth. I ordered several bottles and thought long and hard of my life in America.

Toward midnight a man in a big overcoat came in and sat beside me. I asked him to drink beer with me without looking at his face. We started drinking together and then, suddenly, I saw a familiar face in the dirty mirror on the wall. I almost screamed. He was my brother Nicasio—but he had grown old and emaciated. We went outside and walked to my hotel.

The landlord met me with a letter from the Philippines. In my room I found that my letter to Father, when I was in the hospital, and the translation of my brother Berro’s letter to him, had been returned to me. It was the strangest thing that had ever happened. I had never lived in Delano before. I had never given my forwarding address to anybody. The letter was addressed to me at a hotel I have never seen before.

It was now ten years since my brother Berro had written the letter to Father. It was eighteen years since he had run away from home. I stood in the center of my room and opened it. The note attached to it said that Father had died some years before. It was signed by the postmaster of my town.

I bent down and read the letter—the letter that had driven me away from my village and had sent me half-way around the world—read it the very day a letter came from the government telling that my brother Berro was already serving in the Navy—and the same day that my brother Nicasio was waiting to be inducted into the Army. I held the letter in my hand, and suddenly, I started to laugh—crying with tears at the mystery and wonder of it all.

"Dear Father [my brother wrote]:
America is a great country. Tall buildings. Wide good land. The people walking. But I feel sad. I am writing you this hour of my sentimental.

Your son—Berro."
It was not Consorcio's fault. My cousin was an illiterate peasant from the vast plains of Luzon. When he came off the boat in San Francisco, he could neither read nor write English or Ilocano, our dialect. I met him when he arrived, and right away he had bright ideas in his head.

"Cousin, I want to be American," he told me.

"Good," I said. "That is the right thing to do. But you have plenty of time. You are planning to live permanently in the United States, are you not?"

"Sure, cousin," he said. "But I want to be American right away. On the boat I say, 'Consorcio stoody Engleesh right away.' Good ideeyas, eh, cousin?"

"It is," I said. "But the first thing for you to do is look for a job."

"Sure, cousin. You have joob for me?"

I did. I took him to a countryman of ours who owned a small restaurant on Kearny Street. He had not done any dishwashing in the Philippines, so he broke a few dishes before he realized that the dishes were not coconut shells that he could flagrantly throw around the place, the way he used to do in his village where coconut shells were plates and carved trunks of trees were platters and his fingers were spoons. He had never seen bread and butter before, so he lost some weight before he realized that he had to eat these basic things like the rest of us, and be an American, which was his own idea in the first place. He had never slept in a bed with a mattress before, so he had to suffer from severe cold before he realized that he had to sleep inside the bed, under the blankets, but not on top of the spread, which was what he had done during his first two weeks in America. And of course he had never worn shoes before, so he had to suffer a few blisters on both feet before he realized that he had to walk lightfooted, easy, and even graceful, but not the way he used to do it in his village, which was like wrestling with a carabao or goat.

All these natural things he had to learn during his first two weeks. But he talked about his Americanization with great confidence.

"You see, cousin," he told me, "I have earned mony quick. I poor the hoot dashes in the sink, wash-wash, day come, day out, week gone—mony! Simple?"

"Fine," I said.

"You know what I done with mony?"

"No."

"I spent all."

"On what?"

"Books. Come see my room."

I went with him to his small room at the back of the restaurant where he was working, near the washrooms. And sure enough, he had lined the four walls of his room with big books. I looked at the titles. He had a cheap edition of the classics, books on science, law and mathematics. He even had some brochures on political and governmental matters. All were books that a student or even a professor would take time to read.

I turned to my cousin. He was smiling with pride.

"Well, I hope these big books will make you an American faster," I told him.

"Sure, cousin. How long I wait?"

"Five years."

"Five years?" There was genuine surprise in his dark peasant face.

"Too long. I do not wait. I make faster—one year."

"It is the law," I assured him.

"No good law. One year enough for Consorcio. He make good American citizen."

"There is nothing you can do about it."

"I change law."

"Go ahead."

"You see, cousin."

But he was puzzled. So I left him. I left San Francisco. When I saw him a year later, he was no longer washing dishes. But he still had the pardonable naiveté of a peasant from the plains of Luzon.

"Where are you working now?" I asked him.

“Where?”

“Come, cousin, I show you.”

It was a small shop, a three-man affair. Consorcio was the handyboy in the place scrubbing the floor, washing the pots and pans; and he was also the messenger. The owner was the baker, while his wife was the saleswoman. My cousin lived at the back of the building, near the washrooms. He had a cot in a corner of the dark room. But the books were gone.

“What happened to your books?” I asked him.

He looked sad. Then he said, “I sold, cousin.”

“Why?”

“I cannot read. I cannot understand. Words too big and too long.”

“You should begin with the simple grammar books.”

“Those cannot read also. What to do now, cousin?”

“You still want to be an American citizen?”

“Sure.”

“Go to night school.”

“Is a place like that?”

“Yes.”

“No use, cousin, no money.”

“The school is free.” I told him. “It is for foreign-born people. For adults, so they could study American history.”

“Free? I go now.”

“The school opens only at night.”

“I work night.”

“Well, work in the daytime. Look for another job. You still want to be an American, don’t you?”

“Sure, but I like boss-man. What to do?”

“Tell him the truth.”

“You help me?”

I did. We went to the boss-man. I explained the matter as truthfully as I could and he understood Consorcio’s problems. But he asked me to find someone to take the place of my cousin’s place, which I did too, so we shook hands around and departed in the best of humor. I helped Consorcio register at the night school, [and] looked for another job for him as a janitor in an apartment building. Then I left him, wishing him the best of luck.

I worked in Alaska the next two years. When I returned to the mainland, I made it my duty to pass through San Francisco. But my cousin had left his janitor job and the night school. I could not find his new address, and it seemed that no one knew him well enough in the Filipino community.

I did not think much of his disappearance because we are a wandering people due to the nature of our lowly occupations, which take us from place to place, following the seasons. When I received a box of grapes from a friend, I knew he was working in the grape fields in either Fresno or Delano, depending on the freight mark. When I received a box of asparagus, I knew he was working in Stockton. But when it was a crate of lettuce, he was working in Santa Maria or Salinas, depending on the freight mark again. And in the summertime when I received a large barrel of salmon, I knew he was working the salmon canneries in Alaska. There were no letters, no post cards—nothing. But these surprising boxes, crates and barrels that arrived periodically were the best letters in the world. What they contained were lovingly distributed among my city friends. Similarly, when I was in one of my own wanderings, which were done in cities and large towns, I sent my friend or friends unsealed envelopes bursting with the colored pictures of actresses and other beautiful women. I addressed these gifts to poolrooms and restaurants in towns where my friends had lived or worked for a season, because they were bound to go to any of these havens of the homeless wanderer. However, when another curious wanderer opened the envelopes and pilfered the pictures, it was not a crime. The enjoyment which was originally intended for my friends was his and his friends. That is the law of the nomad: finders keepers.

But Consorcio had not yet learned the unwritten law of the nomad. I did not expect him to send me boxes, crates, and barrels from faraway Alaska. So I did not know where I could locate him.

I wandered in and out of Los Angeles the next two years. At the beginning of the third year, when I was talking to the sleeping birds in Pershing Square, I felt a light hand on my shoulders. I was not usually
curious about hands, but it was well after midnight and the cops were
wandering in and out of the place. So I turned around—and found
Consortio.

I found a new Consortio. He had aged and the peasant naiveté was
gone from his face. In his eyes was now a hidden fear. His hands danced
and flew when he was talking, and even when he was not talking, as
though he were slapping the wind with both hands or clapping with one
hand. Have you ever heard the noise of one hand clapping?

That was Consortio, after five years in America. He was either
slapping the wind with both hands or clapping with one hand. So I
guided him out of the dark park to a lighted place, where we had coffee
until the city awoke to give us another day of hope. Of course, I sat in
silence for a long time because it was the fear of deep silence. And
Consortio sat for a long time too, because by now he had learned to hide
in the deep silence that was flung like a mourning cloak across the face
of the land. When we talked our sentences were short and punctuated
by long silences. So we conversed somewhat like this:

“Been wandering everywhere.”
“No job.”
“Nothing anywhere.”
“Where have you been all three years?”
Silence.
“No finished school?”
Silence.
“Not American citizen yet?”
“You should have told me.”
“Told you what?”
“Filipinos can’t become American citizens.”
“Well, I could have told you. But I wanted you to learn.”
“At least I speak better English now.”
“This is a country of great opportunity.”
Silence.
“No work?”
“No work.”
“How long?”
“I have forgotten.”

“Better times will come.”
“You have a wonderful dream, cousin,” he told me and left. He left
Los Angeles for a long time. Then two years later, I received a crate of
oranges from him. The freight mark was San Jose. Now I knew he was
working and had learned the unwritten law of the wanderers on this
troubled earth. So as I ate the oranges, I recalled his last statement: You
have a wonderful dream, cousin . . .

I had a wonderful dream. But I dreamed it for both of us, for many of
us who wandered in silence.

Then the boxes and crates became more frequent. Then a barrel of
salmon came from Alaska. And finally, the letters came. My cousin
Consortio, the one-time illiterate peasant from the vast plains of Luzon,
had indeed become an American without knowing it. His letters were
full of wondering and pondering about many things in America. How he
realized his naiveté when he had landed in San Francisco. But he
realized also that he could not ask too much in a strange land. And it was
this realization that liberated him from his peasant prison, his heritage,
and eventually led him to a kind of work to which he dedicated his time
and life until the end.

I was in Oregon when I received a newspaper from Consortio,
postmarked Pismo Beach. It was the first issue of his publication for
agricultural workers in California. It was in English. From then on, I
received all issues of his publication. For five years it existed defending
the workers and upholding the rights and liberties of all Americans,
native or foreign born, so that, as he began to understand the nature of
American society, he became more belligerent in his editorials and had
to go to jail a few times for his ideas about freedom and peace.

Yes, indeed Consortio: you have become an American, a real
American. And this land that we have known too well is not yet
denuded by the rapacity of men. Rolling like a beautiful woman in an
overflowing abundance of fecundity and murmurous with her eternal
mystery, there she lies before us like a great mother. To her we always
return from our prodigal wanderings and searchings for an anchorage in
the sea of life; from her we always draw our sustenance and noble
thoughts, to add to her glorious history.

But the war came. And war ended Consortio’s newspaper work and
his crusade for a better America. And it ended his life also. When he was brought back from overseas, he knew he would not last long. But he talked the way he had written his editorials, measured sentences that rang like music, great poetry, and soft, soft. He would not shed a tear; but his heart must have been crying, seeing eternal darkness coming toward him, deep, deep in the night of perpetual sleep. Yes he would not shed a tear; but he must have been crying, seeing that there was so much to do with so little time left. There was in his voice a kindness for me—unhappy, perhaps, that he could not impart what he had learned from his wanderings on this earth; unhappy, also, because he knew that it would take all the people to unmake the unhappiness which had caught up with us. And now, fifteen years after his arrival in San Francisco, he was dying.

And he died. But at least he received his most cherished dream: American citizenship. He did realize later that he had become an American before he received his papers, when he began to think and write lovingly about our America. He gave up many things, and finally his own life, to realize his dream.

But Consorcio is not truly dead. He lives again in my undying love for the American earth. And soon, when I see the last winter coming to the last leaf, I will be warm with the thought that another wanderer shall inherit the wonderful dream which my cousin and I had dreamed and tried to realize in America.
As Long as the Grass Shall Grow

In the middle of that year when we were picking peas on the hillside, I noticed the school children playing with their teacher in the sun. It was my first time to see her, a young woman of about twenty-five with brown hair and a white dress spotted with blue. The blue sky seemed to absorb the white color of her dress, but from where I stood she appeared all clothed with light blue. The blueness of the sea at the back of the schoolhouse also enhanced the blue dots of her dress. But my eyes were familiar with the bright colors on the hillside, the yellowing leaves of the peas, the sprouting green blades of the summer grass, the royal white crowns of the edelweiss, and the tall gray mountains in the distance, and the silent blue sea below the clear sky.

I had arrived in America, the new land, three months before and had come to this farming town to join friends who had years ago left the Philippines. I had come in time to pick the summer peas. I had been working for over a month now with a crew of young Filipino immigrants who followed the crops and the seasons. At night when our work was done, and we had all eaten and scrubbed the dirt off our bodies, I joined them in dress suit and went to town to shoot pool at a familiar place. I observed that the older men went to the back of the poolroom and played cards all night long. In the morning they went to the field sleepily and talked about their losses and winnings all day. They seemed a bunch of contented workers, but they were actually restless and had no plans for the future.

Then I saw the children. They reminded me of a vanished time. I used to stop at my work and watch them singing and running and screaming in the sun. One dark-haired boy in particular, about eight, brought back acute memories of a childhood friend who died a violent death when I was ten. We had gone to the fields across the river that afternoon to fly our kites because it was summertime and the breeze was just strong enough to carry our playthings to high altitudes.
Suddenly, in the midst of our sport, a ferocious carabao broke loose from its peg and came plunging wildly after us, trapping my friend and goring him to death. That night when I went to see him, and realized that he was truly dead, I ran out of the house and hid in the back yard where the moonlight was like a silver column in the guava trees. I stood sobbing under a guava, smelling the sweetness of the papaya blossoms in the air. Then suddenly nightingales burst into a glorious song, I stopped crying and listened to them. Gradually I became vaguely comforted and could accept the fact that my friend would not come back to life again. I gathered an armful of papaya blossoms and went back into the house and spread them over the coffin. I returned to the guava grove and listened to the nightingales sing all night long.

So this dark-haired boy in a land far away, stirred a curiosity for the unknown in me that had been dimmed by time. I walked to the schoolhouse one morning and stood by the fence. The children ran to me, as if they knew me. I can't now remember my exact feeling when they reached out their little hands to me. But I know that I suddenly started gathering the red and yellow poppies growing abundantly on the hillside. Then the teacher came out on the porch and called the children back to their classes.

I returned to my work, watching the schoolhouse. In the early afternoon when the children had gone home, I saw the teacher walking toward the hill. She came to me.

"Were you the boy that was at the schoolhouse this morning?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"How old are you?"

I told her. She looked for a moment toward my companions, who had all stopped working to listen to her.

"You are too young to be working," she said finally, "how far have you gone in school?"

I was ashamed to admit it, but I said: "Third grade, ma'am."

"Would you like to do some reading under me?"

"I'd love to, ma'am," I said softly. I looked at my companions from the corners of my eyes because they would ridicule me if they knew that I wanted some education. I never saw any reading material at our bunkhouse except the semi-nude pictures of women in movie magazines. "I'd love to study some, ma'am," I said. "But I can read only a few words."

"Well, I'll teach you," she said. "What time do you go home?"

"Six o'clock ma'am," I said.

She said, "I'll be at your bunkhouse at eight. That will give you two hours for dinner and a bath. Tell your friends to be ready, too."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I will tell them. Some of them went to high school in the Islands, but most of us stopped in the primary grades."

"I'll teach those who are willing," she said. "So be ready at eight sharp."

I watched her walk slowly down the hill. When she reached the highway at the foot of the hill, I waved my hand at her. She waved back and walked on. She drove away in her car, and when she was gone, I went on working quietly. But my companions taunted me. Some of them even implied certain dark things that made me stop picking peas and look at them with a challenge in my eyes. When they finally stopped shouting at me, I resumed my work thinking of some books I would like to read.

The teacher came at the appointed time. She had put on a pair of corduroy pants and an unpressed blue shirt. It was my first time to see a woman dressed like man. I stole glances at her every time she turned her face away. She brought a story book about ancient times which she read slowly to me. But I was disappointed because my companions did not want to study with me. I noticed that five stayed home and played poker; the others went to town to shoot pool. There was one in the kitchen who kept playing his guitar, stopping only now and then to listen to what we were reading. About ten o'clock in the evening the teacher closed the book and prepared to go. I took her to the door and looked outside where the moon was shining brightly. The grass on the hill was beautiful, and the calm sea farther away was like a polished mirror, and the tall mountains in the horizon were like castles.

"Shall I walk you to the road, ma'am?" I asked.

"Thank you," she said. "I love to walk in the moonlight."

When she was at the gate, I ran after her.

"What is your name, ma'am?" I asked.
“Helen O’Reilly,” she said. “Goodnight.”

I watched her walk away. She stopped under the tall eucalyptus trees on the highway and looked around the wide silence. After a while she lighted a cigarette and climbed into her car.

Miss O’Reilly came to our bunkhouse every evening after that night. She read stories of long ago, and pages from the history of many nations. My companions slowly joined our course and in two weeks only three of the whole crew stayed away. She took a great interest in her work. After a while she started talking about herself and the town where she had come from and about her people. She was born in a little town somewhere in the Northwest. She had come from a poor family and supported herself through college. Before she graduated the depression came. When she was offered a teaching job in a rural community in California, she accepted it, thinking that she could go on with her studies when she had saved enough money.

Miss O’Reilly was a good teacher. We started giving her peas and flowers that we picked on the hillside when we were working. Once we thought of buying her a dress, but one of the older men said that was improper. So we put the money in a large envelope and gave it to her when she came one evening. She did not want to accept it, but we said that it was a token of our gratitude. She took it then, and when she came again she showed us a gabardine suit that she had bought with it.

We were all very happy then. On the hillside, when we were picking peas, we sometimes stopped and considered the possibility of giving her a party at our bunkhouse. But one evening she came to tell us that some organization in town had questioned her coming to our bunkhouse. She told us to go to the schoolhouse when our work was done and study there like regular pupils.

I could not understand why any organization would forbid her to work where she pleased. I was too newly arrived from the islands, too sheltered within my group of fellow Filipinos to have learned the taboos of the mainland, to have seen the American doors shut against us. But I went to the schoolhouse every night with my companions and started writing short sentences on the blackboard. I stood there and looked out of the window. I saw the silent sea and the wide clear sky. Suddenly I wrote a poem about what I saw outside in the night. Miss O’Reilly started laughing because my lines were all wrong and many of the words were misspelled and incorrectly used.

“Now, now,” Miss O’Reilly said behind my back, “it’s too soon for you to write poetry. We will come to that later.”

I blushed.

“What made you do it?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Miss O’Reilly,” I said.

“Did you ever read poetry before?”

“No, Miss O’Reilly,” I said. “I didn’t even know it was poetry.”

She looked at me with some doubt. Then she went to her table and started reading from the Bible. It was the Song of Solomon. I liked the rich language, the beautiful imagery, and the depth of the old man’s passion for the girl and the vineyard.

“This is the best poetry in the world,” Miss O’Reilly said when she finished the chapter. “I would like you to remember it. There was a time when men loved deeply and were not afraid to love.”

I was touched by the songs. I thought of the pea vines on the hillside and the silent blue sea not far away. And I said to myself: Some day I will come back in memory to this place and time and write about you, Miss O’Reilly. How gratifying it will be to come back to you with a book in my hands about all that we are feeling here tonight!

Miss O’Reilly shoved the Bible into my pocket that night. I read it over and over. I read all the school books also. I was beginning to think that when I could save enough money I would live in another town and go to school. But we still had the peas to pick, after that the tomatoes on the other side of the hill.

Then Miss O’Reilly told us she was forbidden by the school board to use the building at night. The directive was for us, of course. Miss O’Reilly did not tell us that, but some of my companions knew what it was all about. When she invited us to go to her boarding house, only a few of us went.

“Come one by one in the dark,” she advised us. “And go up the steps very quietly.”

“All right, Miss O’Reilly,” I said.

So we went to her room at night where we read softly. She told us that there was a sick old woman in the house. One night a man knocked
on the door and asked Miss O'Reilly to step out in the hallway for a moment. When Miss O'Reilly came back to the room, I saw that she was perturbed. She looked at us in a maternal way and then toward the hallway with a forgiving look. We resumed our reading, and at our departure Miss O'Reilly told us not to mind anything.

I went again the following night. But I was alone. My companions dropped out. Miss O'Reilly seemed about to tell me something, but she let it drop. I forgot about her uneasiness as we read to each other, but when I left and she accompanied me to the door, she turned suddenly and ran to her room. I thought she had forgotten to give me something, but when her lights went out I went on my way.

I had gone two blocks away when four men approached me in the dark street. Two of them grabbed me and pushed me into a car. Then they drove me for several blocks, turned to a field of carrots, and stopped under a high water tank. They got out of the car and started beating me.

I tried to defend myself, but they were so many. When I had a chance, however, I started to run away, but a man jumped into the car and drove after me. I fell down when the car struck me. They all came and started beating me again. I could not fight back any more. I rolled on my stomach when they kicked me. Once, when I was losing consciousness, I felt the hard heel of a shoe on the back of my head. Then everything plunged into darkness.

When I regained my senses, it was past midnight. The sky was clear as day. I did not know where I was for a moment. I saw the full moon hanging languidly for a moment. I opened my swollen eyes a little and the golden light of several stars appeared in the depth of the sky. Slowly I realized what had happened. And then, when I understood it all, tears rolled down my cheeks and fell on the cool carrot leaves underneath my head.

It was the final warning. When I reached our bunkhouse, my companions were crowded into the kitchen reading a roughly written message that had been thrown into the place that night. The men who had beaten me had driven to the bunkhouse when they were through with me.

One of the older men, who had known darker times in this land, took me by the arm and secreted me in the outer house, saying, "I could have told you these things before, but I saw that you were truly interested in educating yourself. I admired your courage and ambition. May I shake your hand?"

I said, taking his, "Thank you."

"Some men are good, but others are bad," he said. "But all evil is not confined in one race of people, nor all goodness in another. There is evil in every race, but there is also goodness in every other. And yet all the goodness belongs to the whole human race."

Then I knew why Miss O'Reilly had come to our bunkhouse and taught us. But I did not go to her boarding house for a week. I was afraid. When my bruises were well enough, I went to town, but Miss O'Reilly's room was closed and dark. I thought she had gone to a movie; I waited almost all night.

But she did not appear that night. Nor any other night. Then I knew that she had moved to another house, because during the day I saw her in the schoolyard. Sometimes she stopped and waved her hand toward us. I waved mine, too. And that went on for days. And then she disappeared.

I often wondered what had happened to her. Another teacher took her place. But the new teacher did not even notice us. So at night and on our days off we went to town in separate groups looking for our teacher. But we did not find her. We finished picking the peas and we transferred to the other side of the hill to harvest the tomatoes. Now and then we stopped to look toward the schoolhouse, but Miss O'Reilly did not come back. Then one day in June the schoolhouse closed its door and we watched the children slowly walk home. It was the end of another school year, but it was only the beginning of my first year in the new land.

One day, toward the end of the tomato season, Miss O'Reilly appeared. She looked a little thinner. I noticed a scar on her left wrist.

"I was in the hospital for a while," she greeted us, "I have been ill."

"You should have let us know," I said. "We would have sent you some flowers from the hill."

"That is nice of you," she said to me. "But now I am leaving. Going to the big city."
"Will you come back some day, Miss O'Reilly?" I asked.
"I hope so," she said. "But when you come to the big city, try to look for me. I think I'll be there for a long time."
"Are you going to teach in another school?"
"I don't know," she said. "But I will try to find an assignment. Yes, there must be a vacancy somewhere." And then, kindly, she put her hand on my head saying, "I will go on teaching people like you to understand things as long as the grass shall grow."

It was like a song. I did not know what she meant, but the words followed me down the years. That night we gave Miss O'Reilly a party at our bunkhouse. We roasted a pig in the open air. The men tuned up their musical instruments and played all night long. The moon was up in the sky and the sea was silent as ever. The tall mountains were still there; above them stars were shedding light to the world below. The grass on the hill was beginning to catch the morning dew. And then we took Miss O'Reilly to her car and bade her goodbye.

I wanted to cry. Tenderly she put her hand on my head.
"Remember," she said, "when you come to the city, try to look for me. And now, goodnight to all."

And she drove away. I never saw her again.

I went away from that town not long afterward and worked in many big cities. I would work for a long time in one place, but when the leaves of the trees started to fall, I would pack up my suitcase and go to another city. The years passed by very swiftly.

One morning I found I had been away from home for twenty years. But where is home? I saw the grass of another spring growing on the hills and in the fields. And the thought came to me that I had had Miss O'Reilly with me all the time, there in the broad fields and verdant hills of America, my home.

I first saw death when I was a small boy in the little village where I was born. It was a cool summer night and the sky was as clear as day and the ripening rice fields were golden in the moonlight. I remember that I was looking out the window and listening to the sweet mating calls of wild birds in the tall trees nearby when I heard my mother scream from the dark corner of the room where she had been lying for several days because she was big with child. I ran to her to see what was going on, but my grandmother darted from somewhere in the faint candlelight and held me close to the warm folds of her cotton skirt.

My mother was writhing and kicking frantically at the old woman who was attending her, but when the child was finally delivered and cleaned I saw that my mother was frothing at the mouth and slowly becoming still. She opened her eyes and tried to look for me in the semi-darkness, as though she had something important to tell me. Then she closed her eyes and lay very still.

My grandmother took me to the field at the back of our house and we sat silently under the bending stalks of rice for hours and once, when I looked up to push away the heavy grain that was tickling my neck, I saw the fleeting shadow of a small bird across the sky followed by a big bat. The small bird disappeared in the periphery of moonlight and darkness, shrieking fiercely when the bat caught up with it somewhere there beyond the range of my vision. Then I thought of my mother who had just died and my little brother who was born to take her place, but my thoughts of him created a terror inside me, and when my grandmother urged me to go back to the house, I burst into tears and clutched desperately at two huge stalks of rice so that she could not pull me away. My father came to the field then and carried me gently in his arms, and I clung tightly to him as though he alone could assuage my grief and protect me from all the world.

I could not understand why my mother had to die. I could not
understand why my brother had to live. I was fearful of the motives of the living and the meaning of their presence on the earth. And I felt that my little brother, because he had brought upon my life a terrorizing grief, would be a stranger to me forever and ever. It was my first encounter with death; so great was its impress on my thinking that for years I could not forget my mother’s pitiful cries as she lay dying.

My second encounter with death happened when I was ten years old. My father and I were plowing in the month of May. It was raining hard that day and our only working carabao was tired and balked at moving. This animal and I grew up together like brothers; he was my constant companion in the fields and on the hillsides at the edge of our village when the rice was growing.

My father, who was a kind and gentle man, started beating him with sudden fury. I remember that there was a frightening thunderclap somewhere in the world, and I looked up suddenly toward the eastern sky and saw a wide arc of vanishing rainbow. It was then that my father started beating our carabao mercilessly. The animal jumped from the mud and ran furiously across the field, leaving the wooden plow stuck into the trunk of a large dead tree. My father unsheathed his sharp bolo and raced after him, the thin blade of the steel weapon gleaming in the slanting rain. At the edge of a deep pit where we burned felled trees and huge roots, the carabao stopped and looked back; but sensing the anger of my father, he plunged headlong into the pit. I could not move for a moment, then I started running madly toward the pit.

My father climbed down the hole and looked at the carabao with tears in his eyes. I did not know if they were tears of madness or of repressed fury. But when I had climbed down after him, I saw big beads of sweat rolling down his forehead, mingling with his tears and soaking his already wet ragged farmer’s clothes. The carabao had broken all his legs and he was trembling and twisting in the bottom of the pit. When my father raised the bolo in his hands to strike at the animal, I turned away and pressed my face in the soft embankment. Then I heard his hacking at the animal, grunting and cursing in the heavy rain.

When I looked again the animal’s head was completely severed from the body, and warm blood was flowing from the trunk and making a red pool under our feet. I wanted to strike my father, but instead, fearing and loving him I climbed out of the pit quickly and ran through the blinding rain to our house.

Twice now I had witnessed violent deaths. I came across death again some years afterward on a boat when, on my way to America, I befriended a fellow passenger of my age named Marco.

He was an uneducated peasant boy from the northern part of our island who wanted to earn a little money in the new land and return to his village. It seemed there was a girl waiting for him when he came back, and although she was also poor and uneducated Marco found happiness in her small brown face and simple ways. He showed me a faded picture of her and ten dollars he had saved up to have it enlarged when we arrived in the new land.

Marco had a way of throwing back his head and laughing loudly, the way peasants do in that part of the island. But he was quick and sensitive; anger would suddenly appear in his dark face, then fear, and then laughter again; and sometimes all these emotions would simultaneously appear in his eyes, his mouth, his whole face. Yet he was sincere and honest in whatever he did or said to me.

I got seasick the moment we left Manila, and Marco started hiding oranges and apples in his suitcase for me. Fruits were the only things I could eat, so in the dead of the night when the other passengers were stirring in their bunks and peering through the dark to see what was going on, I sat up. Suddenly there was a scream and someone shouted for the light. I ran to the corner and clicked the switch and when the room was flooded with light, I saw Marco lying on the floor and bleeding from several knife wounds on his body. I knelt beside him, but for a moment only, because he held my hands tightly and died. I looked at the people around me and then asked them to help me carry the body to a more comfortable place. When the steward came down to make an inventory of Marco’s suitcase, the ten dollars was gone. We shipped back the suitcase, but I kept the picture of the girl.

I arrived in America when thousands of people were waiting in line for a piece of bread. I kept on moving from town to town, from one filthy job to another, and then many years were gone. I even lost the girl’s picture and for a while forgot Marco and my village.

I met Crispin in Seattle in the coldest winter of my life. He had just
arrived in the city from somewhere in the east and he had no place to stay. I took him to my room and for days we slept together, eating what we could buy with the few cents that we begged in gambling houses from night to night. Crispin had drifted most of his life and he could tell me about other cities. He was very gentle and there was something luminous about him, like the strange light that flashes in my mind when I sometimes think of the hills of home. He had been educated and he recited poetry with a sad voice that made me cry. He always spoke of goodness and beauty in the world.

It was a new experience and the years of loneliness and fear were shadowed by the grace of his hands and the deep melancholy of his eyes. But the gambling houses were closed toward the end of that winter and we could not beg any more from the gamblers because they were also starving. Crispin and I used to walk in the snow for hours looking for nothing, waiting for the cold night to fall, hoping for the warm sun to come out of the dark sky. And then one night when we had not eaten for five days, I got out of bed and ate several pages of an old newspaper by soaking them in a can of water from the faucet in our room. Choking tears came out of my eyes, but the deep pain in my head burst wide open and blood came out of my nose. I finally went to sleep from utter exhaustion, but when I woke up again, Crispin was dead.

Yes, it was true. He was dead. He had not even contemplated death. Men like Crispin who had poetry in their souls come silently into the world and live quietly down the years, and yet when they are gone no moon in the sky is lucid enough to compare with the light they shed when they are among the living.

After nearly a decade of wandering and rootlessness, I lost another good friend who had guided me in times of helplessness. I was in California in a small agricultural community. I lived in a big bunkhouse of thirty farm workers with Leroy, who was a stranger to me in many ways because he was always talking about unions and unity. But he had a way of explaining the meanings of words in utter simplicity, like “work” which he translated into “power,” and “power” into “security.” I was drawn to him because I felt that he had lived in many places where the courage of men was tested with the cruelest weapons conceivable.

One evening I was eating with the others when several men came into our bunkhouse and grabbed Leroy from the table and dragged him outside. He had been just about to swallow a ball of rice when the men burst into the place and struck Leroy viciously on the neck with thick leather thongs. He fell on the floor and coughed up the ball of rice. Before Leroy realized what was happening to him, a big man came toward him from the darkness with a rope in his left hand and a shining shotgun in the other. He tied the rope around Leroy’s neck while the other men pointed their guns at us, and when they had taken him outside, where he began screaming like a pig about to be butchered, two men stayed at the door with their aimed guns. There was some scuffling outside, then silence, and then the two men slowly withdrew with their guns, and there was a whispering sound of running feet on the newly cut grass in the yard and then the smooth purring of cars speeding away toward the highway and then there was silence again.

We rushed outside all at once, stumbling against each other. And there hanging on a tall eucalyptus tree, naked and shining in the pale light of the April moon, Leroy was swinging like a toy balloon. We cut him down and put him on the grass, but he died the moment we reached him. His genitals were cut and there was a deep knife wound in his chest. His left eye was gone and his tongue was sliced into tiny shreds. There was a wide gash across his belly and his entrails plopped out and spread on the cool grass.

That is how they killed Leroy. When I saw his cruelly tortured body, I thought of my father and the decapitated carabao and the warm blood flowing under our bare feet. And I knew that all my life I would remember Leroy and all the things he taught me about living.
ON BECOMING
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