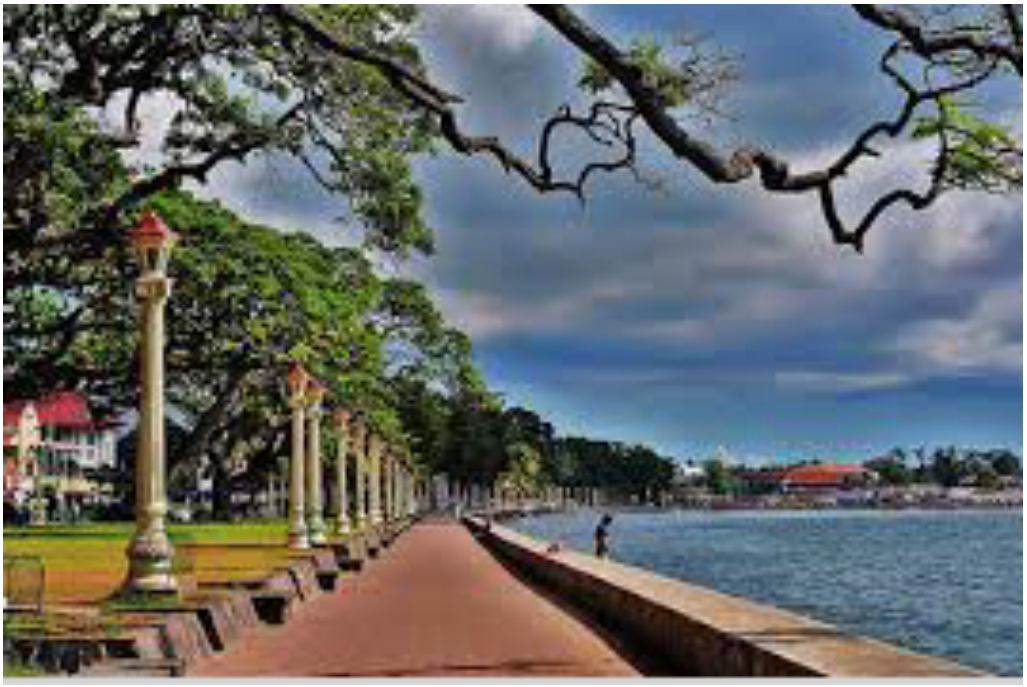
Tertulias at San Jose

And a Family Album

By Marjorie Evasco



Jose Rizal Boulevard, Dumaguete City

It all started in 1977 when the four of us took a course in drama and made Dr. Ed Tiempo's class a veritable playground for the mind and spirit. Perhaps it was the disparity of our backgrounds and the instinctive curiosity that we shared that first drew us together. Perhaps it was also that peculiar atmosphere that Dumaguete is famous for among the writers who come to attend the summer writing workshops, which made our friendship special.

Grace Monte de Ramos, Fanny Llego, and I took to each other when we found out that we didn't care much about appearances and posturings, not because we were rebels, but because we wanted to do things our way at our own pace. Our common impulse was

toward meaningful action or insight. At its best, this attitude was expressed in creativity; at its worst, it came out as harmless eccentricities that the more sober residents of this southern university town tolerated.

But Dumaguete being Silliman, and the literature and creative writing students being known for a bit of strangeness in what they thought, did, or said, we lived that school year in a terrific atmosphere of good-natured acceptance and encouragement. The Tiempos were our “rock and refuge”— they who grew gracefully to a more serene life without ever losing the teacher’s understanding for the strange and funny things that their creative writing students did out of instinct, intuition, or the need to survive.

Dr. Edith Tiempo, for instance, had laughed from the belly when we recounted to her how we finally convinced Anthony Tan one night to test his telepathic powers with a paper cutout telephone. And she never batted an eyelash when she knew that we had all taken to sleeping together during weekends in Fanny’s bachelor apartment, with Tony safely tucked alone in the only other bed, while the three of us on the bigger bed talked away the night or listened up till dawn to the tape recorder playing original piano compositions made by Fanny’s boyfriend in Australia.

The graduate school was then run by Dr. Ed Tiempo, and that year he had to use all his persuasive powers and authority to convince us to enroll under a professor

notorious for his expertise on bibliographic entries and the library system, as well as for his long-winded discussions of literature. Later we associated him with the euphemism "the voice that launched a thousand sleeps." Under this professor it was difficult to make a paper without the usual "inad." and "awk." marks in red, so that we took to calling him "Dr. Inad." It was even more difficult to get an A because grammar rules, more than insight, seemed to be the all-important considerations in his literature courses. One day, when we were supposed to discuss Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage,* the four of us decided to declare a holiday and told the *tartanilla* driver to reverse route towards the beach. We ended up at South Sea sipping tea, engaged in an exciting discussion about the symbolism in Melville's Captain Ahab and Moby Dick. The next day, we saw our awkward professor goose-stepping with the city fiesta parade band and hollering when he saw us: "The next time you have a conspiracy, include me in it!" It turned out that the only one left in our class that day was our American classmate James Manners. We began to like our professor only after he lent Grace the sole library copy of Virginia Woolf's **A Room of One's Own,** and later gave Grace and Tony flat A's.

In 1978, the day the Year of the Snake ended, Grace and I were on our way to Hibbard Hall where Fanny and Tony were writing drafts for their final papers. The coming Year of the Horse was Fanny's year and we had agreed on having a special feast for our unknown Chinese ancestors. We had this theory that Fanny, who comes from Pangasinan, must be a descendant of one of the many wives of Limahong, and that Tony, who is from Siasi, Sulu, is a relative of one of the merchant relatives of the poet Han Shan.

I particularly remember the smell and feel of grass that late afternoon because the university gardener had just mowed the lawn in front of Hibbard and the earth was fragrant with crushed grass and herbs. We took off our sandals to get the good prickly feel on our soles, the way one instinctively caresses a stubbly chin with a day-old beard. We lay down on our backs in the middle of the lawn and feasted on a magnificent sight. The sun had set behind the Negros mountains but the sky was cloud and the clouds were formed like a halo of scales above us, all flecked with orange and gold. It was graceful

synchronicity at work and we sensed the subtle intelligence that made the clouds look like a coiled snake on this very last day of the snake year. Grace and I couldn't help applauding and shouting: "Good show! Have another one next year!"

Our *tertulia* that new year consisted of a bottle of gin and lime juice, smoked Australian ham, a single long-stemmed rose in a white vase, old photographs from Tony's childhood, and an album of Dr. Faurot's pictures of China that he wanted Fanny to render into pen and ink sketches. We delighted over Tony Tan's annotations of his childhood pictures taken in Siasi. There was a picture of their big, unpainted wooden house, which had ducks strutting in the yard while Tony and his brothers posed in front of the open second-storey window. Tony said that while the house was theirs, the ducks were not, but that he still had a grand time collecting duck's eggs every morning because the ducks happened to like laying eggs in Tony's yard instead of at their neighbor's. We also got around to Dr. Faurot's snapshots and it was an endless source of wonder when we saw how well he blended with the culture of the Mandarins. When Fanny volunteered an explanation that Dr. Faurot must have been a Mandarin scholar in a past lifetime, we all felt the hair on our arms stand on ends. It was a physical sensation that affirmed the idea was not improbable.

This delicate "suspension of disbelief" held the night together and we did, felt, or said nothing that was self-consciously outrageous or out of groove. When we offered the last toast to the rose and gave it a shot of gin, it was more than inebriation that made Grace comment that the rose suddenly perked up.

During our *tertulias*, it was the spirit that mattered. Whether we had *tuba,* beer, brandy, vodka, gin, rum, martini, vermouth or champagne, depending on how poor or rich we were, no one got too drunk to become boring or obnoxious. Even our friends who could drink as if they had truly sworn allegiance to the bottle were always capable of stimulating conversation. And the random topics, though often profound, were always dealt with by a communal sensibility that perceived the irony and inherent humor of life situations. Butch Macansantos and Cesar Aquino were masters of irony

and the classic phrases that inevitably became part of Dumaguete's workshop oral tradition. On several workshops these became the magic words that either broke the ice during the first meeting between aspiring young writers who were prepared to tear each other's manuscript apart, or elicited uninhibited guffaws when applied without malice as substitutes to the workshop's most successful verses, thus keeping the young poets from letting their first successes overwhelm their health sense of self-criticism and modesty.

Only Cesar and Butch knew the origins of the phrase "Why Not Nixon?" which must be uttered with a stiff upper lip, the lower lip slightly jutting out; only they could elaborate on the deeper meaning of that provocative exclamation "*Ara Putchingkay!*" And only Butch could belabor the telling of his favorite Maranao jokes, collected after a teaching stint at MSU, and end them all with the eloquence of a linguistically unintelligible word that, according to him, in literature English refers to the phrase "Ah, the same!" In a particularly hot debate between Ed and Edith over a short story one workshop, Edith ended the argument by saying with absolute authority as a Maranao in Butch's jokes would say it: *Adizm!*

Cuernos de Negros

It was this spirit that I wished to share with the rest of my family who were then still in Tacloban City. Little did I know that within this great flux of dreams and realities,

my unspoken wish to settle in Dumaguete even for just a while would become a reality. I had cut short my graduate studies after a year in order to continue with my job in Tacloban. And after attending the Silliman and UP national writers workshop, I found myself traveling to India to attend an Afro-Asian writers and translators conference on a fellowship that was supposed to tie me down with government media work for a year after that. But 1979 turned out differently, and between the demands of reality and the dream, it was the latter that found fulfillment. The family relocated to Negros Oriental and, for once, I was happily jobless.

The first time I saw the house-without-a-number on San Jose Extension the day after I arrived. I had received news in New Delhi that it was a house in the outskirts of Dumaguete that I would "absolutely love" because it wasn't a small apartment but a big split-level house with a garden where several fruit trees were growing, a covered verandah, a wide clear glass window from which one looked out to the garden, and families of *Maya* building nests on the eaves. The house stood just as it had been described. But I wasn't told it could be reached only through a circuitous narrow path enclosed by tall bamboo fences on both sides, the path meandering through a clatter of put-together houses with dangerously low roof beams. We were part of a typical rural neighborhood complete with a tube store, a mahjong den, a snack shop run by a Chinese, a scattering of fattening pigs that wallowed in the mid or dust, depending on the season, and a canal that run alongside our blue wooden gate so that we had to place two sturdy logs across it to keep our tipsy friends from falling into the muck. And yet we all liked it and thought it was the ideal fulcrum of what must be earth to poets and heaven to mortals, which we were all trying to be, the best and most creative way we knew how. Eventually Juaniyo Arcellana, who stayed at San Jose with us when he was getting to know and love Grace, called it "the Oasis." The name stuck and sounded true in all its different nuances and applications.

We held the first *tertulia* at San Jose when the house was bare except for the Kashmiri prayer rug on which we sat. But we were all together, conscious of starting anew with life and friendship. And before we could go on with new experiences, we

spent the night slowly away, retelling the shared memories which started in Dr. Ed's class, all at once fulfilling the need to establish that sense of continuity that must be identical to the ancient tribal need to recount tales and keep the crucial memories alive. It was the only way to start a life in Dumaguete. For what other reaffirmation of friendship would be stronger than recalling that one evening Tony first showed us the manuscript of his new story, *"Sweet Grapes, Sour Grapes"* and how we laughed and cried over it at the same time? Or what could evoke our deep trust in each other better than remembering how we interrupted each other's routines just to share a new poem, a well-wrought idea, or a beautiful line from a book?

The house at San Jose slowly took form according to the sum total of all the friends who came, stayed, or went away. It was somehow big enough to accommodate summer workshop fellows who had drunk a little too much and way past the dorm's medieval curfew of 9:00 p.m. for the women and 10:00 p.m. for the men. It was also far away and secluded enough for Fanny to hibernate in when she wanted to stop her world from spinning. Always, there was that air of warmth and intimacy which allowed the family and everyone who came, to be left or to go away feeling unaccountably blessed.

The first summer writers workshop I attended after I resumed graduate studies in 1980 brought to our midst Augusta de Almeidda, Tony Hernandez, and Charlie Cortes. Augusta or Chiqui, as I called her, was my Roomate at the UP Molave Hall during the 1978 national writers workshop we attended as fellows. She had taken up the yogic discipline after that workshop, so when she came to Dumaguete, she asked to take her vegetarian meals at San Jose. Like many of the writers who came from Manila, she found solace in Dumaguete's graceful pace and the unbelievably low cost of living that allowed residents to feel rich with so little.

Tony Hernandez's sense of humor belied his serious and complicated work with computers. He submitted fiction written along the traditional style of the well-constructed plot with a single unique effect. Dr. Ed Tiempo's criticism was severe and when he mentioned that Tony's story had won over his own in the previous year's

FOCUS awards, Tony gave a respectful silence in deference to the humility and grace of the man who had devoted his whole life to writing and teaching others how to write well. We remember Tony fondly for this and because that summer his gift of humor brought everyone back to earth laughing.

Charlie proved to be his opposite. Quiet, very reserved and speaking only in well-thought out sentences, Charlie nevertheless gave his share in the *tertulias* at San Jose. He played the guitar sensuously and one of the female writers remarked that Charlie plucked the strings with his slender fingers as if he were caressing a woman. Charlie was very vulnerable then and when his dream journal accidentally fell into the hands of an unscrupulous girl who wrote erotic poems, we suffered with him because we understood the violence of the intrusion. Charlie, like many others, came every so often to Dumaguete to be renewed, to seek refuge, or to launch new adventures.

Writer's Camp Lookout
Valencia, Negros Oriental

Thus it was that in Dumaguete, among the writers, there were two kinds: those who stayed and made Dumaguete their home, and those who came for the summer workshops and left, only to come back the next summer. That last night at the ball field, which the 1980 workshop fellows occupied while retelling hilarious incidents or overworked *putchingkay* jokes gathered during the workshop, I suddenly knew the distinction between leaving and being left behind. Seated or lying on the mats under the

summer evening sky filled with stars, we were all acutely aware of imminent departures because of the presence of knapsacks, traveling bags and tattered manuscripts, which were used as pillows. We were all waiting for the bus that was to take all of them overland to the southern tip of Cebu on their last leg home. During such moments the jokes sounded brave and even the goodbyes and promises to write each other were more deeply felt and meant. At three o'clock dawn, the bus left, leaving us alone on a deserted street. Butch quietly asked if he could come back to sleep at San Jose Extension. And he stayed to nurse a sadness that lasted for days.

Departures were not always so easy to understand and their effects could not be taken in all at once. When Grace left with Juaniyo for Manila, and Fanny followed a few months after, we felt the house at San Jose grow smaller and we would find the kids referring to the room that they often slept in as "Tita Fanny's room," or "Tita Grace's room," or "the room of Tito Juaniyo." In their absence, their own spaces became even more palpable: Fanny's sad ballerina oil painting above the piano, Grace's **Great Critics** on the bookshelf, and Juaniyo's Jackson Browne tapes beside the cassette player. But we knew they'd somehow come back while we were still there, for they were among the few for whom coming home to Dumaguete was as important as breathing air.

This rarefied air finds its source in the atmosphere that fosters creativity and in the community that nurtures it. The Tiempos' country home in Amigo Subdivision was a gathering place not only during the summer workshops but also all throughout the school year. It seemed that there, even the most ordinary events, as long as these were suffused with humor or insight, were exciting things to be shared. The name of the place was also apt because here, friendship and conversation flowed effortlessly. No one went home after a class handled by Mom Edith without feeling a sense of belonging with the entirety of mango trees in bloom, grass and marigolds, splashing carp and lotus, and the subtle perfume of *ilang-ilang* and jasmine in the breeze. There was also the usual *merienda* in the afternoon classes when the discussion of a poem or a critic's idea flowed without break from the garden to the dining room.

Another gathering place was Dr. Albert Faurot's End House on Langheim Road. Here, the young writers put their best selves forward, for Dr. Faurot was the campus's "Renaissance Man," an epicure in his tastes and relationships. It was unthinkable to be crass or vulgar at End House. One nonresident workshop fellow who didn't know this was said to have been properly chastised when Dr. Faurot closed his grand piano when the girl started playing chopsticks. But Dr. Faurot had a soft spot for artists and we felt privileged when he welcomed us to his studio and gave in to our requests to use it for a poetry recital, an afternoon visit to listen to his classical records, see his new acquisition of painting, or borrow his books. The poetry recitals held there by the Lunhaw group of writers were memorable because every time, the good professor gave something to enhance the occasion. The reading to celebrate the mid-autumn moon festival on the day of the fullest moon of the year was complete with Chinese paper lanterns, silk painted scrolls, jasmine tea, and his harpsichord renditions of Chinese folk songs from the border. The last reading entitled "Women Voices," which featured women poets all over the world from Enheduanna, the Sumerian moon priestess, to Ntozaki Shange, avant-garde black poet of New York, was dedicated to Rowena Tiempo Torrevillas on her birthday. Dr. Faurot made us use his antique T'ang teapot on that special day. Fanny, who was specially close to the Maestro, made possible one unprecedented visit at End House when we brought over a gallon of red Spanish wine to share with Dr. Faurot. He was very relaxed on that occasion and chose Dave Brubeck and Claude Bolling's jazz suites instead of playing on the stereo his favorite Mozart and Bach compositions.

The other place to go to was Camp Lookout, nestled in the mountains of Valencia, from where one could see the city of Dumaguete, the silhouettes of Cebu and Siquijor, the fabled land of the occult. One clear day after the workshop lunch at the mountain cottage, we were silently gazing at Siquijor which seemed to be floating on a bed of clouds. Rowena heightened our visual illusion when she commented, "Look at those clouds pretending to be an island!" Camp Lookout was second home to Lemuel and Rowena. And they were often there in their mountain cottage set against the towering Cuernos de Negros, the rain forest, the mountainfolks' gardens of asters, Michaelmas daisies and chrysanthemums. During those nights they stayed at Eyrie Nest, I would see

from my west windows at San Jose the bright glow of their gas lamp shining like a low-lying star. One September, when I couldn't go to Camp Lookout to weather inner doldrums, Rowena and I talked on the phone and she suddenly asked if I wanted to joing them. I couldn't, but later that night I wrote a poem dedicated to a mountain priestess tending her ritual fires. Part of the poem says: "Perhaps I shall never know/ What made you speak of mountains/ Like some blue monastery./ But on nights, passing the west windows/ I shall stop awhile to seek out/ The Light shining from there/ And hear my other soul praying."

Summer 1982 on this mountain, lying under the stars with Susan Lara and talking about things past, I was telling her why this mountain resort was named Camp Lookout. It was not only a place where one could have a panoramic view. It Walay sapayan also a place where people inevitably changed after close contact with the simpler, more primal lifestyle of the mountainfolk. Susan had been coming back to Dumaguete every summer after 1979, and it was during her third visit that we brought our friendship to this level of sharing. That night, before she went down the mountain ahead of all of us in order to go back to her job in Manila, I wrote her a note that capsulized what I learned from her when she said that Dumaguete had claimed a very important part of her to which she must come back every summer in order to feel whole again. It was a note that also thanked her for her putting me in touch with worlds I had said goodbye to, because recounting them with her that night had brought back the need for me to search out the heavens for ancient directions. Somehow, I felt that at Camp Lookout, I was better able to fix my points of comings and goings because I understood the essential communion with lost selves that takes place in moments of reflection.

Some people now more about communion than most people. Among the are Monett Raymundo and Laurie Jeanne Hutchison, who came back from the United States to start a family in Dumaguete. They opened another cozy place near Silliman Beach where we could go and just be ourselves. Laurie, an American marine biologist, practically grew up in Dumaguete and could thus speak Cebuano without the expected

nasal twang. When she'd go marketing, Monett would quietly explain to the surprised vendors that Laurie was actually an albino witch from Siquijor.

The *tertulias* at San Jose flowed over to what Laurie called their "love pad." And here we had music and talk about the sea and forests. One the night of the first full moon of 1983, we decided to test our sea legs by having a *tertulia* on their boat, the *Naiad.* But a thunderstorm foiled our attempts at seeing the moonrise and whipped the boat with medium-sized swells dangerous enough for the more landlocked, earthbound creatures among us. Laurie was a perfect host and while she passed around the buttered hot *pan de sal*, peanuts and beer, she was singing softly in her soprano voice as if we were on terra firma.

While there were those who came back, there were also those who went far away without the promise to return. Fariborz and his sister Faizeh, for instance, left for Canada — their next stop on their long exile from Iran. We did not go to the wharf to see them off, but stayed at home remembering the littlest details abut the good times we shared with the Safaies. Fariborz, a peace-loving Baha'i once wrote an ironic poem about violent acts committed in the name of religion. But he had his less serious side which enabled him to appreciate the *tertulias* and the rides home with Fanny and Tony behind him on his motorbike. He would tease Fanny to embarrassment about being in a potentially incriminating position. Fari was very protective of lovely Faizeh, especially when Cesar, the great Sawi, was around. But for one weekend, Fari was in Cebu and we succeeded in bringing Faizeh out for dancing. That night, Cesar danced and slipped in the middle of the circle we made on the dance floor. And as usual, he fell hopelessly in love again. I can still picture him throwing kisses at the moon, exclaiming," Ah, Beauty like the Moon!" (to which the irreverent among us retorted: "*Utot ni Ramon.")* We ended up at dawn at the boulevard singing old love songs to the wind, with Cesar giving paeans to the White Goddess, who is the use of his broken and hapless dreams.

For Dr. Ed Tiempo, however, it did not seem too late for Cesar to find his one great love. And we heartily agreed because during the dinner the Tiempos gave a week

before we left for good our home in San Jose, Cesar had arrived carrying a large bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums for Mom Edith. The poetry of his gesture made all of us fall in love with Cesar, and newlywed Grace declared that it was one of the gentlest things she had ever witnessed.

Cesar and I witnessed another gentle and heartwarming occasion when we agreed to be sponsors of Juaniyo and Grace's wedding. It was a very intimate Easter Sunday celebration at the Monte de Ramos beach house in Siaton, some forty kilometers away from Dumaguete. We piled into Monett's old reliable station wagon, which was filled with the aroma of the *lechon* occupying the backseat with Tony. Juaniyo and Grace did the wedding preparations all by themselves because they believed that marriage was a very personal commitment. The wedding was "simple and painless" (in their own language), starting with Cesar's reading from the Old Testament the song of love from the book of Songs; followed by a song of hope by Laurie who played her own guitar accompaniment, the guitar propped against her eight-month, big belly; and finally a song of faith with my reading of the gospel of Matthew about the lilies of the valley and the birds of the field. The new couple got from all of us two gifts: a Mandaya fetility tapestry and a marriage survival kit, which included the most practical items like a little salt, rice, sugar, sardines, to the more esoteric like a bunch of keys with a note saying, "Since we forgot which doors these keys are for, you could make it the mission of your lives together to find out."

After the wedding, the family buckled down to the unwelcome task of packing our things for our transfer to Manila. Life always has a way of rounding itself again and we knew that after five years in Dumaguete, we were moving on. Everyone came to help us pack: Fanny, Tony, Juaniyo and Grace, Monett and Laurie, Cesar, Lina, and Seth Florentino. As we carefully gathered the books, the paintings and posters, the records and tapes, the wineglasses, china and silverware, the hammock, the tea and incense, and the many gifts of spirit from many *tertulias,* we all knew that we were also gathering memories and storing them against loss. And on the last *tertulia* over a bottle of wine, a

single burning candle and three lighted joss sticks, my daughter Mayann, who has an uncanny gift for remembering, wistfully said, “It is just like the first time we came here!”

We left Juaniyo and Grace, Fanny, Laurie and Monett to close the house for us and look after the cats. That early morning, as I closed the blue wooden gate, I saw that the guavas, chicos and balimbing fruits were ripening under the summer sun, while the Maya were refurbishing their nests by the eaves. Things were still the same and yet I knew that we were all moving on to a transition and the I Ching oracle we shared was “crossing the great water,” with Tony going to Iligan, Juaniyo and Grace to Los Baños, and Fanny deliberating between Basay and Manila.

When I come back to Dumaguete again, I might still see old friends and the old gathering places. But I would never be able to recapture the magic of the *tertulias* of San Jose. For it had been more than a house for us. It was truly home. And the persons who lived with us, no matter how short a time, were more than friends. They were family, in the deepest sense of the word

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