Beyond Lumpia, Pansit, and Seven Manangs Wild

*Stories from the Heart of Filipino Americans*
Beyond Lumpia, Pansit, and Seven Manangs Wild

STORIES FROM THE HEART
OF FILIPINO AMERICANS

Edited by
EVANGELINE CANONIZADO BUELL
EDWIN LOZADA
ELEANOR HIPOL LUIS
EVELYN LULUQUISEN
TONY ROBLES
MYRNA ZIALCITA

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Evangeline Canonizado Buell

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DEDICATION TO HELEN C. TORIBIO
Evangeline Canonizado Buell

We honor Helen Cabulejo Toribio, the late editor of the FANHS Anthology of Filipino American Writers, *Seven Card Stud with 7 Manangs Wild*. Helen was a professor of Filipino American History at San Francisco State University and City College of San Francisco, a community activist, and a leader.

Helen, one of the founders of the Filipino American National Historical Society-East Bay, was truly the majestic flower in the FANHS Literary Garden. She caressed and inspired the writers to bloom and flower with prose and poetry. She left us a great and important legacy and was a beacon of light to the new budding Filipino American writers.

Helen’s inspiration continues to encourage us and many of her students to continue writing and documenting our stories, the Filipino American experiences, because if “we do not tell our own story, then others will tell it for us, as they interpret it, and we will risk losing the essence and truth about the Filipino American experience. That history could fade from memory and one day our children’s children could be asking, Who were our ancestors? What were they like? What did they do?” And there could be no one to answer and nowhere to look. I quote Helen Toribio, “May we have many more stories to write and share.”
DEDICATION TO BILL SORRO AND AL ROBLES
TONY ROBLES

Bill Sorro and Al Robles, sons of Manilatown, sons of the *manongs* and sons of the I-Hotel. Bill and Al, whose poems are written in *lechon* skin, whose lives are danced in barrio fiesta songs, whose feet moved across the carabao mud of the I-Hotel, collecting the stories and songs and tears of the first generation of *manongs* and *manangs* in this country. They looked into the eyes of the *manongs* and *manangs* and saw life clearly, as a salmon sees, as it travels its way home, cutting across the water of memory. Bill and Al, whose dedication to the community and our stories and our art and our youth and elders were always with us—and still are. It was Al who said,

*a*ko *ay Pilipino—from across the 7000 islands & seas
*i* am the *blood-earth* patis *flowing thru the mountain
*soil-veins of my people*

And Bill Sorro who said, “We were trying to change the world, and quite frankly, you know, most of us still are. We still feel the same wonderful anger towards the system. And I really feel that it is important, particularly for young people, to be pissed off but to channel it, channel it with your love.”

We dedicate this book, this work of love to you Bill Sorro and Al Robles, whose love for food and music and poetry and unending dedication and love for the Filipino community gave us the best of our community. As Al once wrote,

*Our struggle is the best*
*Part of our poetry*
*And our poetry is the best*
*Part of our struggle*

Bill Sorro and Al Robles, *presente!*
We pay tribute to Fred Cordova, founder and leader of the Filipino American National Historical Society, also responsible for why the United States celebrates October as Filipino American History Month.

This book could not have been possible if it had not been for him and his wife, Dorothy Laigo Cordova, who paved the way for Filipinos in America to document our history. Both Dorothy and Fred, Filipino American historians, established this prestigious community-based organization on November 26, 1982 “to promote understanding, education, enlightenment, appreciation, and enrichment through gathering, identification, preservation, and dissemination of the history and culture of Filipino Americans in the United States.”

Fred headed and maintained the archives at the headquarters of FANHS National in Seattle, Washington. He was the inspiration and mentor in helping Filipinos in America to be proud to be Filipino, and proud of our culture, history, and heritage. Fred led us in ethnic spirit and solidarity. He enriched the lives of Filipinos in America, Filipinos all over the world, and the community at large. He is a Filipino American historical gem.

We quote Fred Cordova:

“Everybody doesn’t have to be a hero; everybody doesn’t have to be famous. Each person who’s Filipino American, to me, is very, very important as a story. Our stories are really in our people. It’s not so much in what the achievements are...as much as what is the story itself.”

Fred Cordova
(1931 – 2013)
www.fanhs-national.org
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INTRODUCTION

Beyond Lumpia, Pansit, and Seven Manangs Wild features many stories about our second, third, and fourth generation Filipinos, their experiences on how they identify or not as Filipinos in America. The narratives reflect the nature of living influenced by multiple cultures and some reveal the pride felt by the authors in their Filipino heritage through their stories and poetry, as in Tess Crescini’s “Birth of the Ancient in New Times.” Many Filipino Americans in the U.S. maintain strong bonds with family and friends in the Philippines. For some, their parents and grandparents serve as the sole bridge to the islands. There are also those who still cling to the Philippine culture, but have a strong allegiance to the U.S., especially the older second generation (70s to 80s) who may visit the islands but not return to live.

Food is an integral part of the culture. In “My Life as a Lumpia,” Jessica Jamero tells how the simple act of rolling lumpia awakens cultural pride. Pete Yamamoto’s poem, “Beef Stew, Maybe Tripe,” shows how the Filipino culture of food unites us. Instead of always giving in to American hamburgers and hot dogs, the act of longing and savoring adobo, lumpia, and pansit helps us resist complete assimilation and through our senses helps us retain elements of our unique identity. Through our writing, we combat amnesia and what destiny would otherwise hold for us, the casting of our personal stories and histories to oblivion.

Editors
Evangelina Canonizado Buell, Eleanor Hipol Luis, Edwin Lozada, Evelyn Luluquisen, Tony Robles, Myrna Ziálcita
Identity and Assimilation
Melanie opened her eyes, but she didn’t want to get out of bed. What was there to do today? Since being out of a job four weeks ago, she had cleaned their entire house, including brushing away the cobwebs collecting at the corners of the ceilings. She had scrubbed the toilets clean. She had vacuumed the carpet and bleached the bath tubs. She had dusted every piece of furniture, every lamp and tiny decoration in the house.

Well, there was always Ginger, the pit bull/retriever mix they’d rescued from the shelter a couple of months ago. Ginger needed her.

But first she stayed in bed and prayed the Rosary, like she had in the last eighteen months. She had promised to pray the Rosary until she and her husband, Carl, received their green cards. Her mother had told her to keep doing it because Mama Mary was going to intercede for her.

Melanie wasn’t sure she believed it, after waiting not just the last year and a half, but really the last seven years for the green card. She was an occupational therapist, and was first sponsored by an employer in New York for an EB3 visa. Almost five years passed before Melanie and Carl decided to move to the West Coast. Another employer had promised to file for an EB2 visa for them, which was processed much faster than the EB3. Usually it took less than a year. Now it has been eighteen months.

And Melanie cannot work. Her employment authorization card had expired a month ago, and she was waiting for the new one. Although she had called Immigration to follow up on both the EAD and the EB2 visa, all the answers she’d received were “you have to wait fifteen days for a response,” “you
have to wait twenty-one days for a response.” They’ve gone to the local USCIS office and filed service requests. They’ve written letters and emails. The last letter she’d received from USCIS stated that her petition was an EB3, not an EB2. She photocopied her documents clearly reflecting the EB2 petition and enclosed a letter and sent it all to USCIS.

All she can do now is wait.

That was the hardest task. Waiting with no knowledge of what could happen. What was she going to do if she still couldn’t work? Her savings were dwindling. In another month she didn’t know how she was going to pay for the rent, water, electricity, cable, cell phone, credit card bills, car insurance and car payments.

And the worst thought was: what if they got denied the visa altogether? What would they do? Where would they go?

Melanie’s head hurt from all the obsessing. And the itchy area on the right side of her torso had progressively become redder and larger the last few days. She got out of bed and examined herself in the bathroom mirror. She was distressed to see small boils forming on the red area. When she touched it, she felt as if someone had slit her skin with a blade.

She wanted to go the doctor, but she didn’t have health insurance since she wasn’t working.

She thought about her home in Cebu. Her parents lived there with their dozen dogs. Their house, close to the beach, was her mother’s ancestral home. When her grandparents were still alive and lived there, she and her cousins spent summer vacations there—running in the yard, sliding down the ramp using large banana leaves, playing hide and seek in the dark rooms, and swimming in the ocean for entire days.

She missed the life in the Philippines. It never got as lonely as it was in America, because there was always someone stopping by the house, whether it was her parents’ friends or vendors selling kutsinta or banana cue. It was
easy to text her friends and meet them at the mall for a movie or to window shop.

In America there was no one. You can’t stop by your neighbor’s house unannounced; you had to call and schedule first. Melanie’s friends were working and had children; she didn’t want to bother them.

So there was nothing to do but clean and cook and watch TV. And wait.

Sometimes she wondered if it would be better to just give up. Grab a knife from the kitchen and bleed herself dry. Make the agonizing frustration go away. But she’d see their dog out in the yard, lying on her bed, sleeping under the heat of the sun. She liked to watch Ginger sleep. Her little legs twitched and sometimes she opened an eye in response to a strange noise, then she’d go back to sleep. It always made Melanie smile.

Melanie got a call from Carl as she parked the car at Costco. She wanted to buy some chicken breasts to cook for dinner.

“Check USCIS. They just approved your EAD. They’re producing your card now.”

She couldn’t believe it.

It was one hurdle conquered, and for that she was grateful. At least now she could go back to work and pay the bills as they waited for the final hurdle: the green card.

On her way home, she stopped three cars down from the traffic light. She saw an older man wearing a checkered flannel shirt standing at the corner. He was holding up a homemade sign that said “Homeless vet. Please spare $1.” It was a common sight in her area.

Since receiving the news about the EAD, she felt impelled to give this man something. She reached into her bag and retrieved a five-dollar bill from her wallet. She waved the bill so he could see she wanted to give it to him. He jogged the few steps over.

“Good luck to you. I know how it is. I’ve been out of a job myself,”
she said.

He took the money and looked at it. “Wow, thanks.”

He looked so happy.

“I applied for disability and unemployment a month ago...” he started saying, but then the light changed to green and she had to go.

“Good luck!” she said again before driving away.

She thought about the way he looked when he saw the five-dollar bill, and she cried.