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*Will You Happen, Past the Silence, Through the Dark?:
Remembering Leonard Casper*

Linda Ty-Casper
PALH Books, 2022. 346 pages.
Bughaw, 2023. 326 pages.

Linda Ty-Casper, Casper's widow, begins her preface: "This book is the memoir that Len did not get to write." Actually, I doubt whether he had the slightest urge to do so. He was self-effacing, devoid of any display of ego, as evidenced by his inscription to a gift copy of his book *Green Circuits of the Sun* (Giraffe Books, 2002) to an aspiring critic of Philippine literature a generation younger: "co-laborer in the same vineyard."

The outgoingness, even camaraderie, that the inscription conveys Casper lived as well as enunciated. As Ty-Casper's preface's third paragraph reveals, "Len was part of the Filipino community of Greater Boston . . . part of the Iskwelahang Filipino where he took part in caroling (he sang bass) and festivals." His remarkable ability to assimilate culturally while retaining his own sense of self explains why he was the foremost critic of Philippine literature, even though he was an American by birth and upbringing, not a Filipino. How deeply this assimilation ran can be gauged by his article "Elitism: The Hazards of Being a Vernacular Writer."¹ In fact, when once typecast as a "representative of his country," Casper replied, "I'm not an American, I'm Len Casper" (188). He had the ability to achieve cultural fusion, not confusion, never succumbing to the malady that befell British Army Officer T. E. Lawrence, which

¹ Published in *Philippine Studies* 17, no. 2 (1969): 283-96.

Lawrence's autobiography *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Jonathan Cape, 1935) so excruciatingly details.

Americanism was reflected in his World War II military service. He did not have to serve at all, being declared physically unfit for the army (category 4F). He still tried to enlist in the Merchant Marine but was also turned down for that because of his pierced eardrum. He persisted, however, and was accepted for the army in 1943. In less than two years, serving in an artillery battery in Eastern Europe, he earned two Bronze Stars (15–16). He thought he had “no special skills,” so “[he] was prepared to be a mailman the rest of my life” (15). His commitment to service continued throughout his life. With the royalties from his book *The Wounded Diamond* (Bookmark, 1964), he established the annual Reconnaissance Award, to be given “for the best criticism, by a Filipino, of a work of Philippine Literature” (127).

As interesting and admirable as Casper's life was, the value of *Will You Happen* goes well beyond biography and thus avoids the limitation of many biographies, memoirs, and autobiographies: extolling the virtues and achievements of their respective subject persons but offering readers little else. Instead, here there is a full complement of information sections about publications, interactions with literary and other luminaries, letters to and from Ty-Casper and other renowned authors, and a virtual Homeric catalogue of visitors to the Casper house at 54 Simpson Drive in Framingham, Massachusetts, and responses to Casper's death in 2018.

Although Casper's creative writing constitutes only a tributary to literature, the brief account of his contributions to the *Southwest Review* (20–24) is a welcome segment of his memoir. Much more consequential is the section about his interactions with American novelist Robert Penn Warren (26–43), in particular the snippets of letters the two wrote to each other. Immediately following a helpful bibliography of Casper's published books (44–45) is critical commentary about each book (45–78). Chapters 8–9 are devoted to letter excerpts, first from Casper's University

of Wisconsin professors and second from virtually every living Filipino published writer. Chapter 10 is occupied by Casper's letters to Ty-Casper, sometimes intensely personal but also containing ruminative descriptive passages, as does one on page 189, running from "A north wind grates the quiet pond . . ." to ". . . midday relaxes like a sprinkled fishnet, through which all things come and go, pass and gather." Chapters 12-23 are composed of more letters to Ty-Casper and near the end to both Ty-Casper and his elder daughter Gretchen. The end cap of the book consists of responses to the announcement of Casper's death. The only sour note in *Will You Happen* is sounded here:

Dick Malay. Sitting in his class in UP earl [sic] was a visceral pleasure, though he sent me out once for chatting with a seatmate as he was lecturing. That ethical breach and penalty from an American Jewish professor added verve and color to my college days. (323)

Ty-Casper did not perceive at the time of writing the book that Malay's comments drip with trenchant sarcasm, which apparently he thought were quite clever. They aren't. His disrespectful behavior in class was bad enough (probably going well beyond innocent side chat), and in Malay's case cannot be solely written off as undergraduate immaturity.

He went on to become the leader of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Communism is inherently atheistic, based on the Karl Marx dictum "religion is the opium of the people," from the first section of the introduction to the unpaginated *A Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843). Casper was a devout Catholic. In this context, the gratuitous "American Jewish," meant to be contemptuous double denigration, casting Casper as not only a carpetbagger but on top of that a Jewish one, hijacks the normally neutral descriptor "Jewish" to employ as an anti-Semitic slur and the normally objective descriptor "American" as a chauvinistic slight. The process redounds only on Malay.

Ironically, the Malay excrescence does have a salutary side effect. It shows what happens when reasoned judgment is supplanted by the stultifying tunnel vision of prejudice, instilled by an authoritarian dogma. Instead of this, we should be, to paraphrase Casper in *Green Circuits of the Sun*, imprisoned by no ism (164). The remarkably inclusive embrace of Leonard Casper is clearly articulated in the pellucid prose of Ty-Casper in *Will You Happen*. This book is a very valuable contribution to both Philippine literature and American literature.

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