

Instructions and Lessons to Keep

JOSE F. LACABA

Translated by David Michael M. San Juan



Center for Southeast
Asian Studies
**University of Wisconsin-
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Translator's Introduction

David Michael M. San Juan

This is an English translation of a poem (“Tagubilin at Habilin”) published online in 2007 by Filipino poet, screenwriter, journalist, and Martial Law torture survivor Jose “Pete” F. Lacaba.¹ It was regularly read by progressive singer-actress Armida Siguion-Reyna in protest rallies against the Macapagal-Arroyo regime then.² The simplicity and gravitas of Pete Lacaba’s “instructions and lessons to keep” resonated then and now among Filipinos, especially that the pandemic’s on-and-off lockdowns, job displacements, and soaring inflation rates have only made life worse for many citizens. In the land of at least 48,712 COVID-19 deaths and thousands of extrajudicial killings now under International Criminal Court investigation, the poem’s exhortation for its reader to live and fight on is certainly relevant.³ The poem literally asks the

¹ Ferdinand Marcos’ declaration of Martial Law in the Philippines paved the way for outright dictatorial rule, under which thousands of suspected dissenters were arrested, tortured, forcibly disappeared, or killed. Lacaba narrates his own experiences of that time in the online article “The Way It Was: Martial Law and Torture Under the Marcos Regime,” available at <https://www.spot.ph/newsfeatures/the-latest-news-features/65375/the-way-it-was-pete-lacaba-martial-law-a401-20160224-lfrm2>

² Macapagal-Arroyo was hounded by corruption and electoral rigging scandals. See Carlos Conde’s (<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/29/world/asia/29iht-phils.1.10571127.html>) and Seth Mydans’ (<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/06/world/asia/filipinos-find-it-easy-to-deride-but-not-depose-disliked-arroyo.html>) New York Times reports.

³ COVID-19 deaths as of 30 November 2021. The ICC investigation covers killings under Duterte’s “war on drugs” campaign. An Amnesty International report exposed how such “war” disproportionately targets the poor (<https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/if-you-are-poor-you-are-killed-extrajudicial-executions-in-the-philippines-war-on-drugs/>). See ICC website for the full update on the investigation: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=PR1610>

reader to live, to survive these perilous times, and intermixes typical life advice with a vigorous socio-political call to action against apathy and despair. In a Southeast Asia (and a world) plagued by income and wealth inequalities, rising authoritarianism, civil strife, and to a certain extent, even hunger and poverty that threaten to weaken many poor people's will to live, Lacaba's ode to personal and collective survival would certainly be comforting at the very least, and inspiring, at the very most. Here's a gritty and grounded "Desiderata" (Max Ehrmann, 1927) for our times.⁴

⁴ A copy of Ehrmann's inspirational and prayer-like poem is available at <https://www.desiderata.com/desiderata.html>. Lacaba acknowledged "Desiderata" as among the inspirations behind the poem "Tagubilin at Habilin" (<http://kapetesapatalim.blogspot.com/2008/02/tagubilin-at-habilin.html>).

Instructions and Lessons to Keep⁵

Jose F. Lacaba

Live on, my friend!
Live on!
That's my first and last instruction:
Live on!

In my age, I can give a lot of advice.
I am rich in life's lessons.

Wash your hands before eating.
Wash your hands after eating.
But do not wash your hands to escape blame.
Do not wash your hands when people are being oppressed
and you have the power to help them.

When on the bus, give your seat to the elderly and those
who have a baby.
Give thanks to those who do good.
Learn from the experiences of the seasoned ones.

But don't get yourself tied down by outdated mindsets.

Don't force yourself to sleep when sleep evades you.
Don't waste your time on those who don't remember good
deeds done unto them.
Don't quarrel with the stupid ones, or else some may take
you for a fool.
Don't whisper in silence in times when shouting is needed.

⁵ Originally published in Filipino as "Tagubilin at Habilin," *Bulatlat*, Vol. VII, no. 14 May 13-19, 2007, available online at: <https://www.bulatlat.com/2007/05/12/tagubilin-at-habilin-2/>.

Don't put your trust in rumors.
Don't dilly-dally under a feast of hanging prizes.
Don't be slow to act.

Sing when you're alone in the bathroom.
Sing when you're with friends.
Sing when you're sad.
Sing when you're happy.

Just be forewarned.
Don't sing "My Way" in a videoke bar for you might get shot.
Don't light a cigarette in a gasoline store.
Go slow on steep paths.
Go slow on rocky roads.

And most of all, I repeat:

Live on, my friend!
Live on!
That's my first and last instruction:
Live on!

Many things in life are disappointing.
Live on.
The world has a lot of problems which seem to have no solutions.
Live on.

In times of poverty, in the face of defeat,
You may feel like you would prefer to just die.
You want to slit your pulse when broken-hearted.

You want to drink poison when you got nothing to eat.

You want to strangle yourself when your burden seems unbearable.

You want to blow your head into smithereens when many things bother your mind.

Don't let yourself lose. Do not surrender.

You have heard what's been told in a song:

"Wake up and arise from slavery,

Wake up from deep slumber."

Wake up when love beckons.

Rise up when the poor voice out a call for action.

Others say: "Brave is a man who fearlessly fights."

I say, instead: the truly brave ones are those who fight even if they are afraid.

Fight when you have been dragged into the mud.

Rise up when you are being trampled upon.

Fearlessly fight for your principles

Even if you're not sure to win right away.

Live on, my friend!

Live on!

That's my first and last instruction:

Live on!

About the Author and Translator

Jose F. "Pete" Lacaba is a Filipino poet, screenwriter, and journalist. "Prometheus Unbound" (1973) – which contains a not-so-subtle anti-dictatorship message, with the first letter of every line spelling out "Marcos: Hitler, diktador, tuta!" ("Marcos: Hitler: dictator, lapdog!") – is his most well-known English poem. Meanwhile, his Filipino poems are staple readings in high school and college literature textbooks in the Philippines, because of their simple yet pithy verses that talk about ordinary folks' experiences. As scriptwriter, he wrote scripts for socially relevant and critically acclaimed films such as "Orapronobis" (1989) and "Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim" (1984).

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