

# PLUNDERING PARADISE

*The Struggle for the Environment  
in the Philippines*

ROBIN BROAD

WITH

JOHN CAVANAGH

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For our parents

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## Chapter One

### Generation Lost

*The ultimate aim and measure of . . . real development is the enhancement of the capacities of the poorest, their health and nutrition, their education and skills, their abilities to control their own lives, and their opportunities to earn a fair reward for their labours. This is the kind of development which the majority of people in the poor world seek.*

UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children* 1989 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 36

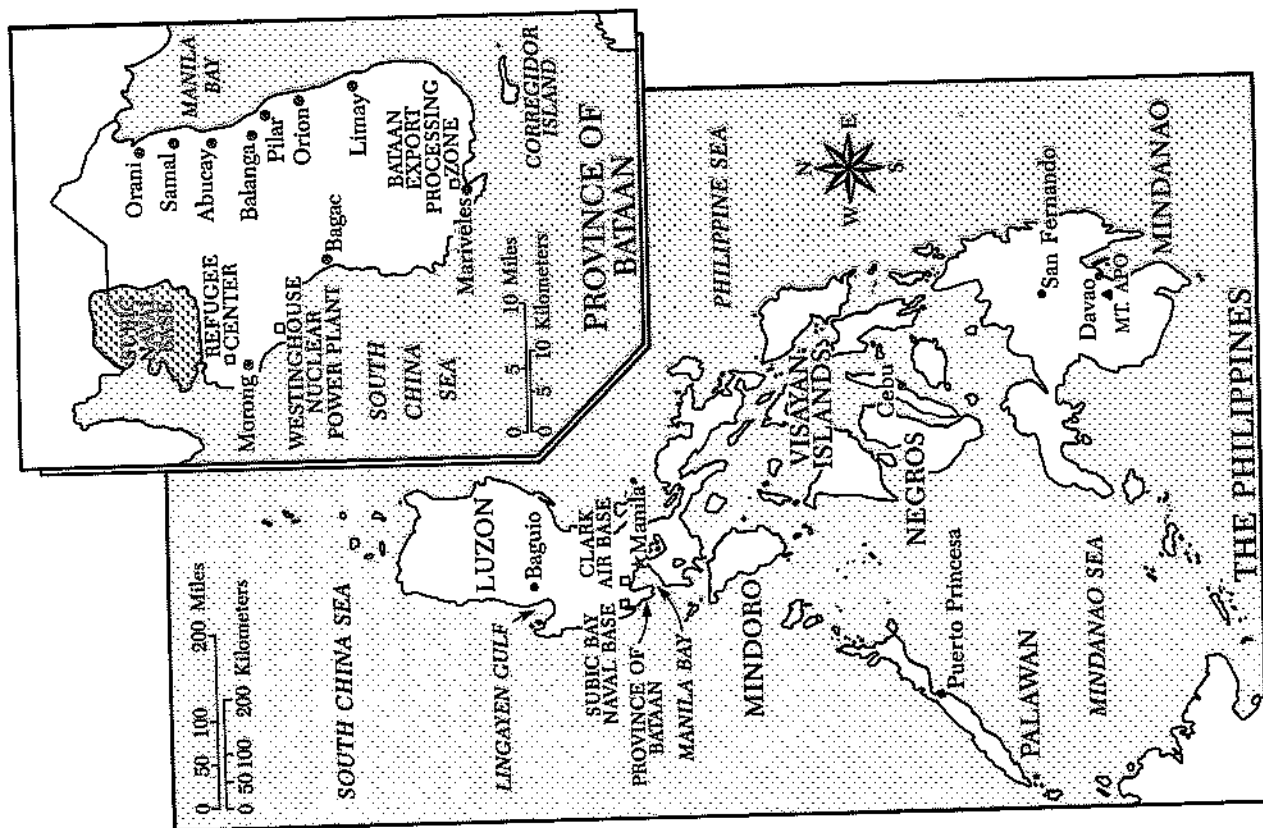
*I am terrified for the future of my children. How can they survive in this kind of situation? What can they look forward to? . . . But in the end, we must keep on hoping and working.*

Dr. Leonor Briones, president of the Freedom from Debt Coalition and professor at the University of the Philippines, personal communication

We travel to the Philippines to learn what has become of one of the world's most bountiful paradises, a country that recently boasted spectacular tropical rainforests and coral reefs teeming with colorful exotic fish. We come to spend time with participants in a new brand of environmentalism that is springing up here as the natural resources are being torn down.

We leave our native United States at a moment when an increasingly vocal and powerful environmental movement is stimulating widespread concern over greenhouse-gas emissions, ozone depletion, toxic wastes, species extinction, and, ultimately, the fate of the planet. We are traveling to a country where another environmental movement—of poorer people whose very existence depends on forests, fisheries, and fertile lands—is on the ascent.

We are entering a country of environmental ruin, a country where the lives of peasants, fishers, and others are being altered drastically by the sudden human devastation of millennia-old environments. And this devastation is also uniting its victims to act in



defense of nature and, ultimately, in defense of their children's future.

Our goal is to learn about these actions and to share the lessons from them with others in the United States. But understanding the actions first requires understanding the people and some of the obstacles they hurdle daily in their efforts to survive.

It is the children of the Philippines we notice immediately as we drive from Manila's Benigno Aquino International Airport into the city. And it is their images that haunt us most when we leave. As we wend our way through the narrow, noisy, fetid streets, we see children everywhere. Children bathe in public faucets. Nude and nearly nude toddlers scamper around. Brothers and sisters little older than the babies chase after their younger siblings, scooping them up and carrying them back to the small shacks that line so many of Manila's streets, shacks built of old wood planks or pieces of cardboard or scraps of indefinable origin.

The children's images haunt us because so many of them are doing what children should not have to do: they are at work. The stoplights at Manila's grimy intersections have become a popular children's workplace. At a minute-long red light, children swarm onto the road. A small boy sells cigarettes by the stick: Philip Morris, Marlboro, and the rougher local brands Champion and Hope. He carries them in a homemade wooden box, almost as big as he, that has other small compartments for the Wrigley's chewing gum and menthol candies he also sells by the piece. He and a handful of other boys laden with candy, cigarettes, or a few of the country's two-dozen-odd newspapers race from vehicle to vehicle to hawk their wares at each window.

Still another boy jumps onto an automobile hood and begins to wipe the soot off the windshield, hoping that if he acts quickly enough the driver will feel obliged to give him a few coins. Some girls stand between the lanes of traffic selling scraps of cloth stitched together into multicolored, pancake-sized circles, used by drivers to wipe sweat from bodies and grime from steering wheels. Three circles can be bought for a peso (just under 5 cents in the late 1980s; around 4 cents in the early 1990s).<sup>1</sup>

Young girls hawk wreaths of fragrant *sampaguita* flowers, to be hung from rearview mirrors in an attempt to camouflage the suffo-

cating fumes of low-grade diesel fuel: three wreaths for 5 pesos. "Please, ma'am, I'm tired," becomes the sad plea late at night as the traffic snarl slows and the price goes down. "Two more safes and I can go home."

The steady workers at the intersection half a block from where we live in Manila slowly become etched into our consciousness. Day in and day out, a girl who cannot be more than nine leads her blind father to the vehicles stopped at the red light. He keeps one hand on her shoulder; the other hand, guided by hers, silently reaches out to the vehicle windows. Just as silently the young girl, her eyes mournfully beseeching, patiently positions and repositions the begging hand from driver to passenger, vehicle to vehicle.

Three scrawny, ragged children who appear to be a family team work on the other side of our street corner. The oldest one, certainly under ten years of age and perhaps no older than seven, is the mastermind of the enterprise. He generally stays on the side of the road. Understanding that there will be more sympathy for the smallest, he pushes his younger brother and an even younger sister, a toddler still, onto the teeming street as the cars stop at the red light. As the light turns green, the two scurry back to him. He puts his arm around them, assessing that red light's pickings and psyching them up for the next one.

The only significant change in the red-light economy occurs at Christmas time. Then the regular inhabitants are joined by migrants from the outlying provinces. Withered, dusty women carry sleeping infants. The woven fabric draped around their waists as *skirts* identifies them as indigenous Filipinos from the north. Each woman cradles an infant who seems never to wake in the noise and tropical heat; each holds out her free hand, hoping for charity. With their sunken cheeks and sagging bodies, the women look as if they have lived far too many years to be the mothers of the children; but they claim they are. Aggressive sales pitches, vital to success at the intersection, are foreign to the Philippine culture. Yet the women somehow muster their courage again and again, at times not merely extending their begging hand but actually poking the people in the vehicles.

One day we go around Manila trying to estimate the number of children who work at the intersections. We soon give up: too many

to count, and too much pollution. Other researchers' estimates of the number of street children vary widely, from a conservative figure of 75,000 in Manila to as many as 1.2 million found nationally.<sup>2</sup> We are haunted by the children because their lives and prospects constitute for us the most damning indictment of the development strategy followed by the Philippines. In brief, the majority of Filipino children have no choice but to spend their childhoods denied most of the pleasures of youth; instead, they must work in employment that is more often than not undignified, demeaning, dangerous, or all three together. An eleven-year-old sugarcane cutter in the central Philippine island of Negros, when asked if he found time to play, put it starkly: "Play is only for rich children."<sup>3</sup>

As these child workers mature into adult workers, they will find few opportunities to shift to more meaningful, less demeaning, and less dangerous work in their own country. And those children who survive childhoods of sacrifice—of disease, hunger, and long hours of work—face another threat that has only recently entered the national consciousness: the plunder of the environment. In other words, not only are they living in a perilous present, they are being robbed of their future.

Whether or not they live on the streets, the majority of Filipino children must enter the labor market, despite an official ban on child labor. As Pratima Kale, UNICEF's representative in the Philippines during much of the 1980s, explains to us: "During the economic crisis [in the mid-1980s] and until now, the labor force has been swollen by women and kids. This is unprecedented in Philippine history." An estimated two-thirds of Philippine children work. Some are our street-corner hawkers and beggars. Some are self-proclaimed car-watchers, who will guard your parked car for a peso or so. Others stitch and embroider. Still others are domestic "helpers," the *katulongs*, *labanderas*, and *yayas*, who clean houses, prepare meals, wash clothes, and care for younger children.

We have also tried to calculate the earnings of the children at our street corner. A day's take varies widely, but it is clear that, be they beggars or sellers of wares, the children earn barely enough to survive. One study contended that children working as vendors and scavengers earn an average of the peso-equivalent of 50 cents daily. Another estimated that the approximately 5-7 million Filipinos between the ages of five and fourteen who work as hired hands on

farms or in factories and sweatshops bring in as little as the peso-equivalent of 5 cents a day. Although such wages are only a fraction of the minimum wage for adults, the contributions of the children in the family can add up to some 30-60 percent of family income.<sup>4</sup>

When these children are at work or on the streets, their education suffers heavily. One government study acknowledged that 240,000 students, out of an average enrollment of 1,000,000 first graders, drop out during the four-year primary education course—in other words, 25 percent do not complete even those crucial first four years of schooling. One-fifth of these drop-outs revert to illiteracy. Another government agency calculated that 40 percent of students drop out before they reach high school.<sup>5</sup>

Outside Manila, intersections with traffic lights are few and traffic is sparse. Yet, wherever we go, we find children at work. Perhaps we should not be surprised. After all, the Philippines is a poor country. As the first sentence in a confidential version of a 1988 World Bank report on Philippine poverty stated: "The Philippines is the only [Southeast Asian] country where the average living standard is declining and the number of people living in poverty is increasing."<sup>6</sup> If you randomly select ten Filipinos, you will find that somewhere between five and seven of them have incomes below the poverty line.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the Philippines is a land of children: five of the ten will be under twenty years of age.<sup>8</sup> This combination of poverty and youth accounts for the number of working children.

We travel north from Manila to Baguio, the so-called summer capital of the Philippines.<sup>9</sup> Baguio's location high in the mountains makes it cool enough to support pine trees and to offer a welcome respite from Manila's stifling heat—although the pine trees are disappearing as the city expands. Those few Manilans who can afford it have second homes in this "City of Pines," to which they retreat during the steamy tropical summers. (It was U.S. colonial officials stationed in Manila who conceived of Baguio; it was Americans who engineered the steep road that winds around the mountain to reach the city; and it was an American who designed the city—although it was Filipinos who built, and whose taxes paid for large parts of, the enterprise.)<sup>10</sup>

In Baguio, we go to Mine's View Park for a stunning view of the majestic Cordillera Mountains, marred only by several barren patches that are the legacy of decades of logging and mining. But as

we join other foreign and Filipino tourists at the park's crowded circular viewing stand, we find it hard to concentrate on the admittedly grand panorama. We, the tourists, gather at the edge of a steep cliff, well protected by guardrails. On the rocky cliff below the guardrails stand a dozen or so of Baguio's young children; safety precautions are meant for tourists only. The sport at Mine's View Park is this: a tourist throws a coin (typically a 25-centavo piece, worth about a penny) over the guardrail, and the youngsters dash across the rocky ledges to catch it in a handmade, mitt-like cardboard container at the end of a long pole. Tourists, both foreign and Filipino, watch as if observing elephants at a zoo catching peanuts thrown by the crowd. The tourists appear to take delight in flinging coins to the most precarious part of the cliff. They cheer as the first child scampers to the spot in time to catch the falling coin.

Various permutations of this scene greet us at tourist spots throughout the country. As we head south from Manila to the island of Mindoro, we come to realize that at least a touch of danger seems to be key in devising employment opportunities that transform children into tourist attractions. To get to Mindoro, you take a bus to the port of Batangas, and then a boat to the tourist town of Puerto Galera. In Batangas, the interval between bus and boat has given rise to another child-intensive service. "Throw coins, Joe?" A young boy tugs at our sleeve. (To many Filipinos, all Westerners are "Joe," a remnant of World War II's G.I. Joe.) The child points to the murky ocean waters beside the pier, the stage for the Batangas version of the Baguio sport. Tourists throw coins into the sea and he and his companions dive for them, holding their breath for impressive stretches of time.

On the other end of the boat ride from Batangas, another type of child labor awaits us. Puerto Galera's beautiful natural harbor once sheltered Spanish galleons from typhoons. Today it is frequented by tourists for its beautiful white sand beaches—one complete with a floating bar. John takes a walk on another of the beaches. A boy of ten or so approaches him, smiles, and sits down on his lap. It is a slightly forward gesture for a Filipino child, yet the little boy is laughing a cute child's laugh and shyly asking where John is from. The two of them chat a bit in Tagalog: How old are you? What's your name? Where do you live? Idle chatter until a chilling realization hits: this youngster is propositioning John. This sweet little boy

is one of as many as 20,000 Filipino youngsters who survive by selling their bodies as child prostitutes.<sup>11</sup>

The prostitution of the "hospitality girls" who work in Manila's tourist district and for decades conducted business in the towns adjacent to the two large U.S. military bases in the Philippines has been well chronicled. (At this writing, the U.S. government has closed one base and announced that all troops will be out of the other by the end of 1992.) Still, we are not quite prepared for the sight of what has been called the "biggest brothel in the world."

Subic Naval Base, a couple of hours' drive northwest of Manila, has long been the main repair facility of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. A local women's center in Olongapo, the town adjacent to Subic, sets up our visit. Tetchie (not her real name), our guide, is a bargirl who, like most of the women in Olongapo's entertainment industry, comes from a poor rural family. She has the night off from the bar; in such "spare" time she volunteers at the women's center, explaining Olongapo to visiting students, social activists, and researchers like ourselves. The first stop on tonight's alternative tour of Olongapo is The Runway, the bar where Tetchie works as a waitress. How the bar got its name becomes obvious once we step inside: a dozen or so Filipinas stand on a low-budget version of a Miss-America-pageant runway at the center of the bar. They sway sadly and self-consciously to the blare of the music, tugging on their skimpy bathing suits in a hopeless attempt to cover themselves.

Like Tetchie, these are among Olongapo's 15,000–17,000 "hospitality girls" (prostitutes)—waitresses, cashiers, go-go dancers, and entertainers—who work in and around more than three hundred bars, massage parlors, and entertainment centers.<sup>12</sup> Some, such as the go-go dancers, receive a minimal wage. Many do not. Most of their earnings are made through their cut of the "bar fine" that customers who are interested in services beyond drinks and dancing pay to the bar owner. The law says hospitality girls must be at least eighteen years of age. Yet, it is not unusual to find girls who admit to being in their mid-teens.

Sometimes they are even younger. Two twenty-ish young men—stereotypic clean-cut U.S. farm boys, blonde crew cuts, blue eyes, freckles—are perched on bar stools in front of us at The Runway. Between them sits a young Filipina with hair that cascades over her chair and falls nearly to the ground. As we watch we realize she is a

mere child—twelve, maybe thirteen. Little attempt has been made to camouflage her youth. She wears rubber thongs, patched shorts, and a T-shirt that is much too big without being stylishly oversized. These are the clothes of a poor rural child. Her body, too, is that of a child; it has scarcely begun to develop curves.

But the two sailors amuse themselves with her there in the bar. One twists her hair into a knot and kisses her aggressively. She recoils in shamed laughter, as if she has never kissed this way before. His friend takes a turn, then the first grabs her again. They continue passing her back and forth until they somehow reach an agreement about whose she will be for the night. The loser walks away, and somewhat later the other two leave as a couple.

Tetchie, in her late twenties, tells us that there are about 3,000 abandoned street children in Olongapo, some of whom are Amerasian—referred to as “souvenir babies.” Many of Olongapo’s abandoned children become child prostitutes. Tetchie reminds us of a well-publicized case: in 1987, a twelve-year-old child prostitute from Olongapo died after an ovary became infected from a broken tip of a vibrator one of her foreign clients had inserted months before.

When people-power toppled Ferdinand Marcos and brought Corason Aquino to power in February of 1986, hope was engendered that life would improve for the children of the Philippines. Aquino had wooed crowds with promises of social justice and an end to corruption in this land of persistent poverty. For many of the 60–70 percent of Filipinos who still live and die in the countryside, it was Aquino’s campaign pledge to land reform that inspired the most optimism. As U.S. government land-reform advisor Roy Prosterman said of the situation: “The Philippines has one of the worst land-tenure problems still found on our planet. Two and one-half million out of the Philippines’ four million agricultural families make their living primarily on land that they do not own, as either tenant farmers or agricultural laborers.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, as a World Bank study on the Philippines concluded: “A fundamental cause of rural poverty is the distribution of land.”<sup>14</sup>

You need only drive an hour and a half north of Manila to understand why public cynicism about Aquino’s commitment to social

reform grew over the course of her six-year term. Here, in the province of Tarlac, is the sprawling, over 6,000-hectare sugar plantation of Corason Aquino’s family, the Cojuangcos’ Hacienda Luisita. In 1987 a vastly watered-down land-reform provision passed the Philippine legislature, a body more than three-quarters of the members of which are peso-millionaires and many are large landowners.<sup>15</sup> The land-reform bill that emerged is biased in favor of landowners, as is reflected in one of its numerous loopholes: the corporate stock-sharing program allows landowners to avoid selling their land by instead distributing corporate stock to their workers over a thirty-year period. As time for implementation of the reform arrived, all eyes turned to Hacienda Luisita. Following the letter of this loophole, the Cojuangcos finessed Hacienda Luisita’s reform so that the 7,000 regular workers would, over the thirty-year period, receive only one-third of the shares. The Cojuangco family would be left with the majority share—and guaranteed control of the estate.

In mid-1989, we visit the plantation’s migrant sugarcane cutters in their living quarters, hot, cramped, cardboard-partitioned pens in huge, open barracks. Children wearing rags and the vacant stares of malnutrition gather around us. The Hacienda Luisita Corporation provides us with a guide to help us understand what we see. Now our guide explains why the children’s pathetic state is not the Cojuangcos’ fault. The approximately 3,000 cane cutters are casual laborers, imported from the poorer parts of the Philippines for four to five months a year to augment the labor of the “regular” workers at the plantation. The plantation contracts and pays for the migrant husband’s labor. The wage, our guide explains, is enough for the husband’s subsistence; the plantation owners should not be blamed if the casual worker breaks the rules by bringing along a wife and kids.

Life for the regular workers is slightly better, for they receive higher wages and more than temporary employment (and, of course, that corporate stock). Even then, however, the wages are barely adequate to support their families. “Nutrition here is still below par,” admits a plantation doctor. The doctor shares with us the results of a nutritional survey that weighed 65 percent of the preschool population of five barrios where the regular workers live.

told you when we were discussing the peace initiatives that when they fail, as we feared they would, and when it becomes necessary to take out the sword of war, that I want a string of honorable military victories. I want this victory."<sup>17</sup>

One of the most visible of Aquino's all-out military campaigns took place in April, 1989, on the central Philippine island of Negros, an island whose sugar haciendas and gross inequalities have made it a microcosm of the yawning gap between rich and poor found throughout the archipelago—and an insurgent stronghold. On one side are the rich of Negros: the sugar *hacenderos*, who drive dazzling white Mercedes-Benzes and have buying habits that put Negros near the top of the country's charts for up-market Electrolux appliance sales. The hospitals of Manila are often deemed not good enough by the rich of Negros; some travel to the United States to give birth. On the other side, 90 percent of the people of Negros fall below the poverty line. Most of them will never see a doctor. Hunger and disease are all-pervasive. A United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) publication reported that, on the average, at least one child dies before the age of five in every sugar-worker's family in Negros; nearly one-third (29 percent) of the families lose two or more children.<sup>18</sup>

"Operation Thunderbolt," the April military assault, made matters even worse for the children and their parents. To avoid the massive bombings and helicopter gunship strafing of fields and villages, some 35,000 civilians were forced to evacuate their homes and settle temporarily in makeshift refugee centers. Although this form of "strategic hamletting" had been practiced regularly during the Marcos years, Operation Thunderbolt under the Aquino administration produced the single largest civilian evacuation in the Philippines since World War II. Measles, pneumonia, and gastroenteritis flourished in the crowded and unsanitary evacuation sites. Of the civilians in the temporary shelters, 280—mostly children—were dead within three months, the majority of them victims of malnutrition and disease. By mid-1990, a team of investigative reporters placed the number of children who had died at Operation Thunderbolt's evacuation centers at 257. Families buried one, two, sometimes three children. One grandmother buried five of her grandchildren. Journalist Malou Mangahas wrote, "The

Over half of these children suffered from serious malnutrition that will stunt the mental development of many, crippling them throughout their lives.

We drive around the cane fields and watch the workers toil. We spot some small figures carrying huge loads of sugarcane under the broiling sun. "Do the children work in the fields?" we ask the plantation official. "Some younger members of the family might be helping," he replies, but they "are not formally on the payroll."

Nearby, the quarters of the Cojuangco family's forty-odd race horses and the eighteen-hole golf course ("only the best," we are told) appear grotesquely plush by comparison. Imelda Marcos's infamous 1,200 pairs of shoes find their counterpart in the 6,000 fighting cocks (cockfighting is a leading legal gambling activity in the Philippine countryside) of Aquino's brother, each cock living under its own tiny roof on the hacienda's grounds. Our guide brightens as we change the conversation from the children's hunger to the cocks' health. "We feed 'em vitamins," he says proudly, "Ben Johnson-style." These contrasting images sum up the priorities of Philippine development—well-fed, muscular fighting cocks and hungry, overworked children.

Corazon Aquino also promised the Philippines peace; she vowed to bring an end to the two-decade civil war with the nation's well-established insurgency. As she insightfully phrased it early in her administration: "The roots of the insurgency are in the economic condition of the people and the social structures that oppress them."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, during a short-lived ceasefire in late 1986 and early 1987, the two sides sat down to discuss paths to peace.

But not all were happy with the peace talks. To demonstrate their dissatisfaction with Aquino's pursuit of such a "soft line," segments of the government military attempted a series of coups against her administration. Six attempts failed to dislodge Aquino, but they succeeded in teaching her a lesson and changing the course of her administration. Among other *de facto* concessions to appease the disgruntled military, the government stepped up its counter-insurgency efforts in the countryside. Aquino rationalized her about-face in a speech to the Philippine Military Academy in early 1987: "The answer to terrorism of the left and the right is not social and economic reform but police and military action. . . . I

children of Negros, they were dying three years ago from malnutrition and disease bred by poverty. Now, they are dying still from malnutrition and disease bred by poverty, but also by war."<sup>19</sup>

The children's deaths, the government claimed, were a "necessary social cost" of war.<sup>20</sup> But, even by the government's own count, Operation Thunderbolt killed more children than insurgents. It was, one evacuee sobs to us as she spoke of the numbness that set in as they saw tiny cardboard coffins lined up day after day, hard to "believe that Cory is on our side."

A UNICEF poster seems custom-made for the children we encounter during our travels in the Philippines. The poster, with a photograph of a wide-eyed young child, asks, "What would you like to be when you grow up?" The answer, in bold letters across the breadth of the poster, is jolting: "Alive." In our travels and conversations with poor Filipinos (who, remember, are the majority of the country's citizens) we ask that poster's question whenever we can.

And a slight variant: What do you hope your children will be when they grow up? With no pretensions of having carried out a scientific survey, we can relate the following: Farmers expect their children to be farmers. Fishers expect their children to fish. And workers hope their children will be able to find jobs. If they allow themselves the luxury of a wish for their progeny, it is hardly what one would term frivolous musing; if they dream, it is typically of schooling for their children and grandchildren.

Sometimes we cannot get a specific answer. "It depends," a woman in a rural town tells us as she adds another twig to the wood fire over which she is cooking rice for her family of five. One of us is holding her four-month-old on our lap. The other is on the dirt floor, playing with her toddler. Neither child wears diapers. (Even cloth diapers, we discover, are a luxury for the majority of Filipinos.) "Depends on what?" we ask. She chuckles. "On *suerte* [good luck] and *malas* [bad luck], of course." She laughs as she adds, "We all believe in *malas* and *suerte*. But if you don't work, you don't get *suerte*."

The problem is that you need *suerte* in order to find a job, the niece of a friend of ours laments. She is in her twenties and has just received her degree as a medical technician. She is smart and energetic and wants to work—and has a skill that presumably she

could use productively in the Philippines. She would, on the surface, appear to be one of the lucky ones, one of those with *suerte*. And yet, she tells us, she is not. The problem is that she wants to stay and work in the Philippines. "I am from this country; my family is here; I want to work here." But she feels as if she is being pushed to leave her homeland in search of employment overseas—or, at least, that she has little choice. Her parents are not rich. In her initial years as a medical technician in the Philippines, her annual salary would be but a third of the amount she needs to repay one year of the debt she incurred for her schooling. And because so few jobs are available, it is next to impossible to get even such a low-paying one without the assistance of someone with influence—"a backer," as they say in the Philippines.

Like our friend's niece, some of today's children have *suerte* enough to be getting training that will enable them to become professionals: doctors and nurses, lawyers and teachers, engineers. Yet, ironically, like her, they are likely to find the jobs open to them so poorly paid or so scarce that many will join the 1.5–2.5 million Filipinos working overseas. The Philippine Nurses Association, for example, estimates that of 150,000 registered Filipino nurses, 90,000 are working overseas. This confers on the Philippines the dubious distinction of being the number one exporter of nurses in the world—and it is the number two exporter of doctors. Medical professionals are being forced out of the country, despite a desperate health crisis in the Philippines in which 30–40 percent of the need for nursing personnel is unmet, and despite the astounding fact that the majority of Filipinos live and die without receiving any kind of professional health care at all.<sup>21</sup>

It is not only the Philippine health-care system that suffers from this export of professional and high-skilled workers. We meet female college students who are majoring in education, not with dreams of one day becoming a teacher but because such a degree will be a useful credential in securing a job in Hong Kong—as a maid. We often hear stories of college-educated teachers who now work in Hong Kong and elsewhere as domestic servants and chambermaids. It is understandable, since they can earn over three times as much cleaning in Hong Kong as they can teaching in the Philippines. Yet, partially as a result of this brain-drain, the Philippine Department of Education, Culture, and Sports noted that it

