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Death in a Sawmill and Other Stories

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under the Ministry of Education and Culture. Fr. Nebres' last comment is worth quoting: "If we do not move, I do not think things will move by themselves and when the time comes for us to celebrate the Fifth Centenary of the Archdiocese of Manila, they will then dig up these proceedings and they will say: Look, they were saying the things that we are saying now" (p. 51).

The last paper which was supposed to be on "Manila, A Center of Education," was changed by the speaker assigned, Dr. Antonio T. Piñon, to "What the Church Expects of Catholic Schools," for very good reasons explained by the author himself in his introduction. After presenting a long and well documented paper on what is expected of Catholic schools by the Catholic contact Church, Dr. Piñon questioned an implied conclusion of Bro. Andrew Gonzalez in one of his published addresses that Catholic schools should stop pretending by calling themselves "Catholic" schools when they are not and are no different from secular schools. Unfortunately, Bro. Gonzales was not present at the meeting to answer for himself and it would be presumptuous for this reviewer to answer Dr. Piñon. As far as the audience was concerned, Dr. Piñon's paper left much to be desired. But the reactions to Dr. Piñon's paper by Dr. Antonio Isidro (p. 79) and Prof. Ariston R. Estrada (pp. 79-80), did not address themselves to the main query and challenge of Dr. Piñon.

From the perspective of this reviewer and participant, the main and distinct task and challenge of Catholic education for the eighties remains *the communication of the Christian faith* and education towards *maturity in the faith*. The theme of the Manila Archdiocese's Quadricentennial celebration is "*living and sharing the Christian faith*." It is hoped that in the follow-up of the Conference/Dialogue, the "think-tank" of Catholic educators will try to find ways and means of implementing the goal of communicating more effectively the Christian faith through the Catholic educational system in these rapidly changing times.

Vitaliano R. Gorospe, S.J.

DEATH IN A SAWMILL AND OTHER STORIES. By Rony V. Diaz. Hongkong: Raya Books, 1978. 102 pages.

Three sentences from "Black Sand," one of eleven stories in Rony V. Diaz's slim collection, *Death in a Sawmill and Other Stories*, graphically illustrate the writer's favorite theme.

Here [in the peninsula of San Martin], the sea has harrowed the sand to form a tidal estuary that feeds a patch of swamp where crabs abound. Every morning, this part of the beach is inscribed with delicate markings left by scavenging crabs. One may read in these eloquent hieroglyphs the history of a truceless battle, but the indifferent sea pulses at high tide and

in one heave erases all record and the black beach is once more flat, shining and timeless. (p. 31)

Diaz recreates in his stories this "history of a truceless battle" in the world and shows how man becomes irrevocably involved in it. From the point of view of young initiates in "The Treasure" and "A Voyage by Raft to Easter Island," the author explores the theme of the battle of the generations — how the glorification of the past by an older generation can stifle, or even suffocate, the present that a younger generation tries so very hard to live. In the first story, Diaz narrates how a young boy tries to rid his mind of lies perpetrated by his old grandmother who is lost in her own myths of the past. The youth digs for the buried treasure that his grandmother believes to have been buried by his allegedly illustrious grandfather. The search yields nothing and yet the boy's father insists, "You must believe your grandmother." (p. 19) In the second story, a young journalist-turned-college-instructor hates the dishonesty, moral decadence and mediocrity of his older colleagues. He attempts to resist their corrupting influence upon him but he only succeeds in going to bed with the wife of one of them.

In three other stories, Diaz proceeds to discuss the more primitive variations of the theme of the "truceless battle". In "Black Sand," a rather disturbing but beautifully descriptive story, Diaz paints a clear picture of the battle for survival of the different species. The fishermen of San Martin lay in wait for the turtles, slaughter them efficiently when they come, and make merry while they partake of cooked turtle meat. Then the crabs crawl out of their hiding places to nibble at whatever is left. In "Ballast," and in "Death in a Sawmill," the "battle" is rooted in sex, and in the latter story, it comes to a violent conclusion: Rustico, a worker in a sawmill, murders his wife's lover.

The six remaining stories describe the same "truceless battle" or conflict. In "The Centipede," the conflict is born out of a thirteen-year-old boy's hatred for his cruel sister, and is abetted rather than resolved when the boy unintentionally causes his sister's death by frightening her with a dead centipede. Similarly, in "Two Brothers," the conflict between Simo and his older brother, Litoy, is caused by the latter's selfishness. To save himself from drowning, Litoy leaves Simo in the water while the latter is bleeding from a wound caused by a dynamite blast. Later, Litoy returns to look after Simo but the latter remains too stunned and hurt to forgive his brother's negligence. When Simo reproaches Litoy at the end of the story, it is Diaz' voice one hears, reiterating the need for human compassion. However, human compassion in "A Tide of Lizards" fails to provide even a temporary truce to the battle that comes even between brothers. In this story, a father's love for his young son forces him to conceal through lies the horrors of a terrible war. But he fails: a look at the numerous lizards feeding on the rotten bodies of two Japanese pilots is enough to bring the whole truth before the boy's eyes. "Lumber

Camp," on the other hand, narrates the difficulties a Visayan worker goes through as he is alienated by a group of Tagalog workers who cannot understand him and with whom he cannot communicate. Even language can cause a man to be at odds with another, Diaz asserts.

Then, in the story "The President of the Tribe," Diaz picks up once more the theme of the struggle for power to emphasize the subjugation of the weak by the strong. Mang Aping, the Tagalog *presidente* of a tribe of Mangyans working as lumberjacks for the Abra de Ilog Lumber Company, finds a threat to his power in the person of Agnes MacDougal, a Methodist missionary who worked herself into the hearts of the Mangyans through donations of ointments, antiseptics and purgatives. Mang Aping cannot accept being robbed of his hitherto uncontested leadership, so he rapes the lady missionary.

Don Hernan is another Mang Aping in the last story, "All Others Are of Brass and Iron." As the rich owner of Halcon Lumber Company, he is a person of great power and influence. Eduardo, his only son and *heredero*, comes home after studying in the United States. The son realizes what his father expects of him but he balks at the idea of taking over the management of the sawmills. In a poker game with his father's cronies, Eddie witnesses his father's relentless hold on power. Don Hernan refuses to allow Eddie to return to the loser the money that Eddie has won. Instead, he reminds his son, "You got him down. Keep him down!" (p. 102) Thus, in this story the battle that Diaz speaks of continues.

Despite the fact that his collection is slim and the stories rather short, Diaz' themes are impressive. In terms of winning literary awards, Diaz is impressive, too. Out of his eleven stories, three are Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards winners: "The Centipede" — third prize, 1952-53; "Death in a Sawmill" — first prize, 1953-54; and "The Treasure" — third prize, 1956-57.

When one takes a closer look at Diaz' stories to discover their prize-winning qualities, one invariably finds, first and foremost, what German critic Walter Benjamin describes as the "chaste compactness" of a story. The stories attest to Diaz' commitment to the inviolability of the perfect form that Filipino writers of the fifties believed to be essential to competent writing in English. In other words, like his contemporaries, Diaz is a believer in the beauty and virtues of the well-told story. Hence, his opening lines are as neat and crisp as the opening lines in Hemingway's short stories. ["The peninsula of San Martin assaults the sea like the beak of a hawk." (p. 30) "The sailboat's cargo of copra was being unloaded when the woman came." (p. 35) "At dawn, the two brothers left the town." (p. 43) "You can cleave a rock with it." (p. 67) "When I saw my sister, Delia, beating my dog with a stick, I felt hate heave like a caged, angry beast in my chest." (p. 87)] The development of the stories is just as precise: the plots build up to a relatively exciting climax and then unwind to a quiet denouement, or pause self-consciously in an open ending. Finally, closing lines come succinct and terse as they bring

the stories to a crackling halt. ["Hugging the black sand, they [the crabs] surveyed a seamless universe." (p. 34) "Both [mother and child] were sleeping peacefully." (p. 42) "'They're taking his body away,' the stevedore said." (p. 51) "'Just look at that chain,' he mused." (p. 75) "I held the centipede before her like a hunter displaying the tail of a deer, save that the centipede felt thorny in my hand." (p. 92)]

Besides powerful themes and impeccable form, Diaz has a sprinkling of features that readers of Filipino short stories in English expect to find, like some sex and some *angst* as in "A Voyage by Raft to Easter Island," "Ballast," and "The President of the Tribe," and a masturbation scene that pulls the curtain down on "All Others Are of Brass and Iron." There are side comments about the idealistic rebellion against, and disgust over, a sick status quo as in "Voyage." There are realistic images of boredom, violence and decay in most of the stories. There is psychological analysis or a peep at a bit of psychodrama in "The Centipede." And, of course, no matter how short and haphazard, there is a discussion of, and reference to, the identity-roots syndrome in "Treasure" and "Voyage."

In addition to these, the stories also have neat surprises in store for the patient reader. "Voyage," for instance, contains quite a number of clichés that can easily bore the reader. However, a closer reading of the story shows that, consciously or unconsciously, Diaz has chosen clichés to be the language of the pseudo-intellectuals in the story, which only adds to its realism. "Black Sand," on the other hand, presents an eerie atmosphere through a prose that almost mesmerizes. In "Ballast," the comparison between the technique of guiding a *batel* through strong river currents, and the ways of satisfying the strong passion of a woman can be rather entertaining. "Lumber Camp" has its own positive quality, too. It can be read as a fictionalized version of the language issue.

All in all, Diaz' *Death in a Sawmill and Other Stories* is a fine collection of meticulously written short stories. They reflect Diaz' care and competence as a craftsman. Unfortunately, the stories are a mere handful. One is tempted to hazard the guess that had Diaz devoted more years to his literary career, there would have been more of his fiction to choose from, a wider range of themes in his stories, and a perspective and point-of-view free from the confines of the merely personal.

Beni S. Santos

HALIMUYAK: KATIPUNAN NG MGA PILING TULA NI JOSE CORAZON DE JESUS. Edited by Antonio B. Valeriano. Malolos, Bulacan: Reyvil Bulakeña Publishing Corp. Inc., 1979. xxxviii + 256 pages.

TO RELISH the poetry of a master in one comfortable reading is to penetrate