

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Ginseng and Other Tales, by Villanueva

Review Author: Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 41, no. 2 (1993): 258–259

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Ginseng And Other Tales From Manila. By Marianne Villanueva. Corvallis, Oregon. Calyx Books. 1991. 106 pages.

Marianne Villanueva says that although she has lived in the United States for more than ten years, she is a Filipina still. "My childhood friends, my family, my teachers—their suffering touches me, and they too deserve a voice." (p. x) Half of the eleven stories in this collection are social or political—tales of the follies of Imelda, of the "Marcos greed", abuses by the military and salvagings (political assassinations), child prostitutes and beggars. But the other half are stories of people she has known, people who were close to her. "All the time that I was writing, it seemed to me that these people's lives were very sad, that they contained elements which troubled me, and that by writing about them I was really exorcising something from my past—my past in a country that was still suffering from what people called a 'colonial mentality,' a country where the 'macho' ethic still rules, a polarized country where the gap between the rich and the poor grows larger every year." (p. x)

Among the sociopolitical stories, my favorite is "The Special Research Project" which first appeared in a special number of *Philippine Studies* (1985, vol. 33, no. 3) devoted to young writers. It tells the tale of a dictator hungry for fame and money through the eyes of a secret ghost writer ("The Project grew out of a dictator's obsession with history." [p. 83]) and the allegorical destruction of the National Archives. ("No one thought to tell President Gomez about the ignominious end of his Special Research Project. He sat alone, neglected in his Palace, listening to the strange sounds of destruction from across the river. . . . If he listened carefully, he might hear the hard scabble of the rats' claws along the marble floors, or the cooing of the birds nesting in the window eaves. But that was all. As far as everyone was concerned, he had long ago ceased to rule." [p. 91])

One of the reviewers of *Ginseng* says that "Equally good is Marianne Villanueva's short story, "Siko," an original and eerie tale of murder, intrigue and sinister spirits. Villanueva conjures up a haunting image." "Memorial" is a chronicle of the rebel Fernando Fajardo, which ends with a piece of graffiti on a wall that can still move the hearts of all Filipinos who remember Ninoy Aquino—"We will never forget you, Fernando Fajardo" (p. 37). "The Insult" takes a piece of contemporary history, an actual event that Villanueva has embroidered into a condemnation of the dictatorial regime and the "crony class" of Marcos's supporters. Although not as obviously political, "Overseas" is a social commentary on the problems and troubles of Filipino overseas workers and the impact of their emigration on the families that remain at home. It is the story of a "young barrio girl as she puzzles through the poverty of her life, unwittingly abandoned by a beloved brother gone to work overseas" (pp. v-vi).

In the sociopolitical stories in this volume, Villanueva has cut to the heart of people who must suffer because of totalitarian dictatorship and poverty.

Although political and social, her stories are still stories—portraits of real people who suffer and hope, who cry in helplessness before both totalitarianism and its consequent greed. There is in all of them a tinge of melancholy sadness.

The other half of the stories in *Ginseng* are "People Stories." Makoto Ueda of the Asian Languages Department of Stanford University says: "When I travel through the fascinating world of fiction created by Marianne Villanueva, I am reminded of what Sherwood Anderson said about characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*—It was the truth that made the people grotesque." The title story, "Ginseng" is the best of these "People Stories." It is a haunting tale of a young man's father and his Chinese mistress, Mamang, whose father sold tea—oolong, ginseng and jasmine in a little Chinese shop. "After awhile the smell of the tea came to seem very pleasant to him, and he looked forward to passing that shop every day on his way to the office. . . . It was after smelling the tea that Mamang began to look different to him. He began to notice her glistening, blue-black hair and her tiny feet and hands. . . . He saw that though she said nothing she would sometimes stop, touch her cheek, and smile. My father found all this enchanting. . . . After awhile Mamang's stomach began to swell. When it became clear that she was pregnant, everyone said 'Ah,' and shook their heads knowingly" (p. 42). There is the sad story of the little girl, Wito, in "Lizard" who watches her mother suffer and grows to understand the travails of life and the pain that we inflict on one another. The same perceptive persona occurs in "Grandmother." "My grandmother says, what did my mother have to get married for? She had a good job as a cook with a rich family in Manila. But she came home one year for vacation, met my father and then had me" (p. 25). "Opportunity" is a tale of hopes and dreams in the "land of opportunity." "'It's all perfectly legal,' Tony would say in that sarcastic voice of his. The official would turn red. 'Yes, of course,' he would say. To her he would add, 'Welcome to America.'" The last of the People Stories, "God's Will," is a sad little story of a father growing old. "I hear my father again. His room is on the other side of this wall, his bed pressed up against it, so that I can tell from the creaking of the bed springs when he is having a bad night. My wife, Teresa, and I lie awake in the darkness, listening. Neither of us speaks. No matter how tired we are we always wake at the slightest sound. Tonight my father is weeping" (p. 73).

The Coda to Villanueva's collection is the final story "Island." It is a journey story, a journey back home, and it has special autobiographical reverberations, I am sure, for Villanueva herself, and for all those Filipinos who have left the Philippines for abroad. "'You're making things up,' Cecilia's husband told her. 'I don't believe things were ever that idyllic there. You were probably bored most of the time.' Not true! Not true! In Bacolod she was a different person—heavier and dark, her back and arms patterned with the outlines of her swim suit. She did not cry when she skinned her knees climbing the mango trees. She did not run from thunder that sounded

so close here. She did not flinch when the houseboys brought her lizards tethered on strings" (p. 97).

The Introduction to *Ginseng* by Virginia Cerenio is a fitting complement to these magnificent Filipino stoiries. In a page and a half, Cerenio has deftly outlined all the artistic elements of Villanueva's writing. "I shook my head in admiration for her craft as a story teller, and in wonder for her ability to carefully weave a story and characters that capture the Filipino sensibility between reality and myth, between the tangibility of the New West and the intangible beliefs of the Filipino. . . . Her writing straddles the netherworld between early Filipino history, Philippine folktales/myth, present day newspaper headlines, and chismis, that fine art of Filipino gossip. . . . Marianne's stories are tales of survival and those talismans that have made these Filipino characters survivors and, perhaps, even everyday heroes in a world of tragedy. Villanueva's strength is her ability to carefully draw mood and setting, . . . her narrative skill and the use of characterization to bring the reader into the Filipino's point of view, and her subtle use of plot to capture the reader until the tale's end. With this collection, Villanueva steps on to the level of writers like NVM Gonzalez, Bienvenido Santos and Linda Ty-Casper. And the frightening and exhilarating discovery is that these stories are just the first touchstone to what promises to be a literary career of many more intriguing tales to come" (pp. xi-xiii).

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.
Department of English
Ateneo de Manila University

Dutch Filipiniana: An Annotated Bibliography of Dutch Publications on the Philippines. By Otto Van Den Muijzenberg. Leiden: KITLV Press, 1992.

The bibliography's primary aim is to give access to articles and books on the history, sociology and anthropology of the Philippines written by Dutch authors. Most of these have been published in the Netherlands or the Netherlands Indies, now Indonesia. Many appeared in the Dutch language. Due to the language barrier, few of these findings were ever integrated into the international (i.e. English language) scholarship. The idea behind the bibliography is to inform scholars about the literature available within the parameters mentioned above.

The annotated bibliography here produced has a long history. Leo van der Velden, the first exchange student from the University of Amsterdam at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, started with a systematic search of data for a bibliography. By 1982, he had located and briefly annotated