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Philippine Short Stories 1957: The Palanca Awards

A Symposium by the Judges

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A SYMPOSIUM BY THE JUDGES

I. The Palanca Memorial Awards

THE Palanca Memorial Awards for literature were founded seven years ago to honor the memory of Mr. Carlos Palanca Sr., late president of the distillery firm of La Tondeña Inc. Awards for short stories were first given in 1951, for one-act plays in 1954. Since then, awards have been offered annually in four separate divisions: short stories in English, short stories in Tagalog, one-act plays in English, one-act plays in Tagalog.

For the short stories, the first prize in each division is a thousand pesos, the second prize five hundred and the third two hundred and fifty pesos. For the plays, the first prize in each division is five hundred pesos. The difference in the amount is due to the difference in contest rules: no stories are accepted for the contest except those already published; but no plays are accepted unless unpublished and unproduced, with La Tondeña shouldering the expense of publication or production.

Since the contest is open to all publications, and since only the best five stories of the year are accepted from each publication, the stories submitted each year for this contest may be considered truly representative of Philippine letters. Whether

or not the best stories are awarded the prizes is a matter of opinion and depends chiefly on the judges.

For the sake of completeness (as this information is not easily available elsewhere) we present here a complete list of the stories in English that have so far received the Palanca awards.¹

1950-1951

- 1st — "Clay" by Juan T. Gatbonton (*FP* 31 January 1951)
- 2nd — "Flowers of May" by Francisco Arcellana (*STM* 20 May 1951)
- 3rd — "The Black Monkey" by Edith L. Tiempo (*ENM* 17 February 1951)

1951-1952

- 1st — "The Virgin" by "Patricia S. Torres" (Kerima Polotan Tuvera) (*FP* 16 February 1952)
- 2nd — "Children of the Ash-Covered Loam" by N. V. M. Gonzalez (*TW* 14 October 1951)
- 3rd — "Even Purple Hearts" by Bienvenido N. Santos (*STM* 6 January 1952)

1952-1953

- 1st — "The Quarrel" by Andres Cristobal Cruz (*LA* 1953)
- 2nd — "Lupo and the River" by N. V. M. Gonzalez (*DR* 1953)
- 3rd — "The Centipede" by Rony V. Diaz (*LA* 1953)

1953-1954

- 1st — "Death in a Sawmill" by Rony V. Diaz (*LA* 1954)
- 2nd — "The Beads" by S. V. Epistola (*LA* 1954)
- 3rd — "The Morning Before Us" by Gilda Cordero Fernando (*PR* October 1953)

1954-1955

- 1st — "Ceremony" by J. C. Tuvera (*TW* 26 June 1955)

¹ The abbreviations are as follows: *FP* (*Philippines Free Press*); *STM* (*Sunday Times Magazine*); *ENM* (*Evening News Magazine*); *TW* (*This Week*); *LA* (*Literary Apprentice*); *DR* (*Diliman Review*); *PR* (*Philippine Review*); *K-G* (*Kislap-Graphic*). I am grateful to Miss Powell and Mrs. Bustamante of the Ace Advertising Agency for furnishing me with this list.

- 2nd — "The Dam" by Edith L. Tiempo (TW 13 March 1955)
3rd — "The Other Woman" by V. R. Samonte (FP 5 February 1955)

1955-1956

- 1st — "The Trap" by Kerima Polotan Tuvera (FP 24 December 1955)
2nd — "The Transfer" by Bienvenido Santos (K-G 3 October 1955)
3rd — "The Lost Ones" by S. V. Epistola (LA vol. xx no. 1, 1956)

1956-1957

- 1st — "High Into Morning" by J. C. Tuvera (TW 16 June 1957)
2nd — "The Treasure" by Rony V. Diaz (Panorama February 1957)
3rd — "Sunburn" by Gilda Cordero Fernando (FP 13 October 1956)

Before we come to this year's contest, a word of appreciation for Mr. Carlos Palanca Jr., his family and his firm may not be out of place. Like the Greek festivals of Athens (which gave us Greek tragedy) or the Augustuses and Maecenases and the Luculli of ancient Rome (who helped to give us Horace and Vergil and Archias and, through the latter, Cicero) or the Italian nobles of the middle ages (who gave us Dante) or the Popes of the Renaissance or the Nobels and the Guggenheims and the Pulitzers of today, there have always been persons or institutions that have made it both socially and financially worthwhile to pursue the difficult craft of letters. In the Philippines there are, to our knowledge, three annual literary awards. One is the "*Concurso Literario Enrique Zóbel de Ayala*" which grants a prize of one thousand pesos annually to the best work in Spanish written by a Filipino. Next come the annual *Free Press* awards for short stories, mentioned several times in our previous articles. The largest (because three prizes are given in four separate divisions) are the Palanca Memorial Awards.

We come now to this year's contest. In the English division for the short story, fifty short stories were submitted by fourteen publications.² The judges were: Dr. Alfredo T. Morales, head of the English department at the University of Philippines, Mr. Adrian Cristóbal, and the editor of this Quarterly as chairman. We now append the statements of the judges.

II. Dr. Morales

IN many more ways than it is possible to tell briefly, the best short stories in English in this year's contest for the Palanca Memorial Awards show an impressive maturity in the development of art in Filipino fiction. One quickly notes the application of a conscious technique with different approaches, in individual styles, and with distinctive accomplishments making each story a unique success. And yet this triumph of craftsmanship serves only to heighten the sense of seriousness which the writers possess about varying problems of life and the truthfulness, the sadness, and the vitality which characterize their interpretation of their material.

The temptation is great to pronounce the best stories as masterpieces. They are not yet masterpieces—although *High Into Morning* is close to being one in my opinion—for a number of restrictions can be made concerning each of them. For those who anxiously watch the growth of the Filipino short story, however, especially when the better older writers have stopped to grow, or have begun to decline, there is assuredly much cause for rejoicing. The real object of gladness is, perhaps, the large number of stories of high quality in this year's contest rather than the supremely satisfying achievement represented by the best three stories.

² The publications are as follows: Five entries apiece: *Philippines Free Press*, *Heights*, *Kislap-Graphic*, *Sunday Times Magazine*, *This Week*, *Transition*. Four entries apiece: *Literary Apprentice*, *Sands and Coral*, *The Knight*. Three entries: *The Varsitarian*. Two entries: *Carillon*. One entry apiece: *Comment*, *Panorama*, *The Dawn*.

Postponing detailed analysis for a later occasion, I am happy to describe the pleasure and understanding I found in the best three stories, given the choice of material the writers made, and the choice of problems they seemed to unfold and resolve.

The selection of experience, of emphasis, and of objective sets the challenge to the writer's art. In meeting this challenge, the writer's task may be too light to be of any consequence in determining his talent and skill. The choice of subject matter is thus a major initial factor in the practice and use of one's art. The treatment of the problem presented by the experience chosen by the writer for his subject may very well be adequate from the point of view of organic unity. But on what level is this unity attained? On how many levels is the significance of the idea or theme explored? How much density is given to the experience? Have the characters come to life? Are their actions justifiably motivated? Are they and their world imaginatively true to life? Is the writer's recreation of experience a successful transmutation of his intellectual and emotional system of values into an imaginatively living and meaningful action for the reader? How rich is this recreated experience; how memorable are its world and its characters? How evocative is the language used to communicate this experience to us?

My fellow judges and I differed, defended our choices, and discussed with each other at length. Besides the three stories we finally voted the best, I had in my review list the following: *Dark Joshua*, *The Cripples*, *The Ancestor*, *People In the War Where Is Mammy's Guardian Angel*, *The Years*, *The Other Shore*, *The Thief*, *Mariner*, *The Bomb*, *The Transmitter*, *A Tale For The Sea*, and *May Day Funeral*.

High Into Morning by J. C. Tavera has a sensitively developed love story between two young people who come to life in their characterization as honest, tender and sad but heroic human beings. From the delicate touches of its shy and partly humorous beginning, to its strong and vivid climax, and to its inevitable, real and sad but neither depressing nor sentimental ending, this love story is told with a compelling psychological

motivation uniting a variety of emotional and intellectual truths. This motivation is not limited to the two young people in love.

Their feeling of need is in a less wholesome way the feeling of the world around them. The physical handicaps, the resultant spiritual uncertainties, and the pervasive and conquering note of mutability which enter into the love story also characterize the environment of native life in a country facing a national emergency and of the artificial and often futile life of foreigners hired to work there but leaving their real selves behind them in their homelands.

This achievement of a meaningful organic unity in *High Into Morning* is paralleled with their own distinctive qualities in *The Treasure* and *Sunburn*. In *The Treasure* by Rony Diaz, it depends on the interpretation of the experience of growth presented by the central incident of the narrator as an aggressive boy testing his grandmother's story of the grandfather hiding gold and losing his life for the revolutionists, and of his sense of having grown away in adulthood from the ways of the old woman and yet retaining a kind of loyalty to the order she represented.

In *Sunburn* by Gilda Cordero Fernando, the serious social and international problem of race prejudice receives an honest and rightly difficult answer showing the complexity of the problem. While building up to the climax in which the lovers are deprived of an apartment during their wedding night by a color conscious landlord, the author has also made a lively case for the probability of this incident, not simply on its being a well-recognized experience in actual life but more subtly because some people bring it on themselves and even on the innocent who deserve to be treated better. The parts of the story are mutually reenforcing in contrasting tones of irony and sympathy.

Sunburn, like the other stories by the same author, is weakened by an ineffective way of ending the story. Unlike it, *High Into Morning* gives an example of Aristotle's catharsis at its best. The emotions which have been aroused are calmed with no loss to the meaning of life they have illumined. This cathar-

sis is produced with a realistic image of a matter-of-fact and ordinary housekeeping task being performed by a roomboy. Under this surface of simple reality lies a lifelong pain and influence gained from experience. Concerning *The Treasure*, its weakness lies to my mind in a treatment which lacked the density needed to bring out more of the implications of the subject.

ALFREDO T. MORALES

III. Mr. Cristobal

THREE distinct imaginations inform the stories of this Palanca year. They are the sentimental, the technical and the popular imaginations. However, I use them merely for the sake of clarity and they can only be understood within a given literary coordinate.

To begin with, the sentimental imagination is not, as one might easily suppose, the imagination of the sentimental; that is, of the Hollywood movie-maker. When Gustave Flaubert wrote his novel *Sentimental Education*, he meant by it the tutelage in life of the human heart. Flaubert's novel, Goethe's *Sorrows of Werther* and Byron's *Childe Harold* are the imposing edifices built by the sentimental imagination. In them are sung the nineteenth century's romantic fallacy. This stays with us for better or for worse, and this imagination we find in Mr. J. C. Tuvera's *High Into Morning*, with this modern difference: the romantic fallacy is rejected rather than affirmed.

The primary action of Luis, Mr. Tuvera's protagonist, is the salvation of innocence and beauty, two things one encounters in love, in a dissolute world; this time, as always, the world of harlots, the subterranean universe of auctioned integrities. The specific, physical universe is not the brothel, but the Propaganda Office, the intellectual extension of the redhouse.

In another time, in another place, this could easily have been done. But with dire consequences as in Flaubert's novel. The hero of the said novel retained his love although he did not

get the woman, but he was given the bitter consequence of witnessing his love wither away against the merciless unmasking of time. On the other hand Irene, Mr. Tuvera's heroine, was more sensible, though no less sensitive, than Luis. It was as if she was afraid that marriage, being the natural consequence of love, would only corrupt the emotion under which it was to be contracted. And so she said, "Please don't love me." And why not? Because Luis and she, Irene, were both after an impossible love. They were Tristram and Isolde in a world which offered no potions; everything in it was real as the half-breed Englishman's cruel and short-sighted remarks, as real as Martin's evening trysts; and then also, as imaginary as the propaganda films that they wrote, although the pain in writing them was mercilessly real.

There are other themes in *High Into Morning*, like the alienation of expatriates. But they are all secondary to the working out of the romantic fallacy. This is the first time in my experience as a reader that I find a clear performance of the sentimental imagination—happily enough. Happily enough because we are approaching a tempo of life in which further consideration of that imagination may no longer be of immediate import.

The "technical" in technical imagination I use with some temerity. For it will be a mistake to reduce the virtuosity of Rony Diaz' *The Treasure* into a Bachian fugue. A fugue is indeed hard to compose, and *The Treasure* seems to be more cerebral than any story I have read. But upon closer examination of the beautifully formed story, we are faced with a basically modern theme, History. Now, by history, I do not mean Nick Joaquin's "intramuros imagination" or the genealogy of La Vidal, but of a consciousness of time as manifested in three tenses and intensified in one. In the incessant intrusion of the narrator in *The Treasure*, we find the inter-action of present and past.

Rony Diaz' favorite is "action is immortal." By the same token, the past is irrevocable; you cannot reconstruct it to full satisfaction simply because you are living in the present; you are at the other side of the mirror... But this is all by

the way. The important thing is the grandmother's rigid position with the past. "You must believe your grandmother," the boy's father said. There is most decidedly a treasure, but it is not in the tree in the yard; it is in the grandmother's memory. If the mission of man is to remember, the nostalgic attachment to the past is romance. For the old woman is chained to the past and she says that the dead revolutionary, the hero of our history, walks around in chains.

The Treasure is a complex story. Like the tree with its many roots—paralleled by the old woman's wizened face—the perceptive reader walks the roads of a self-contained universe, the perfection of unity. And that is why it is, paradoxically, simply told, with none of the embellishments of the picaresque which one tediously finds in so-called historical stories.

Decidedly, it might take some sophistication in literary form to fully perceive the significance of *The Treasure*, something which is not needed in an understanding of the third-prize winner, Mrs. Fernando's *Sunburn*. In this sense and only in this sense is the term popular imagination to be understood. The topical interest of *Sunburn* offsets the dramatic advantage of *People In The War*, another contender for the third prize—and which is by same author.

Immediately discernible is the by-play of racial discrimination, which is not, to be sure, one-sided. The garish Filipino in the tale will be discriminated against anywhere, not because of his nationality but because of his behavior. And yet, we are, abroad, brothers of this flamboyant character. We may be gushing and naive to a lesser degree, as attested to by the color combination of our clothes, but scrape off the exaggerations of the *Sunburn* character and we find an attitude. Therefore, the garish character in the story is the Filipino abroad.

The ending is anti-climatic. We find ourselves wishing that the inscription in the statue of Liberty had been introduced, rather than interjected.

However, on the whole, the story succeeds in fixing our gaze on a problem of immediate moment, and this puts it on

the sparse ground of our colonial literature. Again, the word colonial is a generic term and should not be taken in the Rudyard Kipling sense.

These are the stories. There are many others of significance, in the sense that their subject matter is superior to the three chosen—but it is unfortunate that the stories did not succeed artistically. There are still others who might meet the exacting standards of the art, and if there are those whose merits have not been appreciated, perhaps, it is due to my limitations and not their deficiencies that they have been so overlooked.

ADRIAN CRISTOBAL

IV. *Father Bernad*

IT is remarkable how different men can come to different conclusions over the same set of facts. It should not be surprising therefore if from fifty stories different judges should pick out different ones as the best. This is by way of apology for my minority report.

Of the fifty stories, the one that I would have picked as the best was *The Years* by Gregorio C. Brillantes (FP 8 December 1956). It seems from a stylistic point of view the most polished and from the thematic point of view the most profound. It follows a pattern usual enough in short stories and used very often by Mr. Brillantes, that of the revolving viewpoint. The spotlight is focused, as it were, on each member of a family in turn, finally resting on the most important character—in this case the father. He is a prosperous man in middle age, quite popular, quite in demand, with a fine home in a provincial capital and a fine family and much promise ahead of him. During his wife's birthday party he feels suddenly sick, goes upstairs by himself, and then, all alone by himself in the upper room while the noise of the party is going on below, he suddenly finds himself facing death. This climax is quite unexpected and it is grippingly told. The attack sub-

sides, but the man is a different man. He has just had what the banal writers would call a "significant" experience. He has just seen for himself how all alone a man really is when face to face with the basic question of life, namely the problem of death and what happens after it. He has also seen how short are the years allotted to a man, too short for the great projects he has dreamed up.

It has been objected against this story that the climax comes too unexpectedly. The reader is completely unprepared for it. Although this is ordinarily a defect, it appears to me in this case a virtue. It dramatizes the point of the story: how unexpected death is; how it often comes when no one has the least premonition of its coming.

In second place I would have put *Where Is Mammy's Guardian Angel* by Gilda Cordero Fernando (K-G 5 December 1956). It is remarkable that where the judges differed in almost everything else they agreed in one thing: each of them included a story by Mrs. Fernando among the best three stories. They differed however on which story it should be, for three different publications had submitted one story each by Mrs. Fernando as one of their best five of the year. This fact alone should perhaps make Mrs. Fernando the outstanding short story writer of the year.

Of the three, my preference for *Where Is Mammy's Guardian Angel* was perhaps due to the fact that, being of a very naive disposition, I like simple stories. This is an authentic story, told from the point of view of a child. It deals with three basic human themes, all of them intensely (if we may again borrow the term) "significant." They are: first, the theme of desertion—of wife by husband, of children by mother, with the subsequent irony of this particular child refusing to desert her mother and thus in the end bringing her mother to a renewal of faith and hope and love just before the mother dies; ending finally with the child herself emotionally deserting her father who had first deserted them. This seems elaborate, but this ironic circle of desertions is wrought very simply and presented ingenuously from the viewpoint of a child. The second theme is that of love and fidelity. This child loves;

this child is faithful where everyone else is unfaithful; she shows her love in the most inconsequential ways, which to her are the only ways she could show her devotion to her mother. The third theme is that of innocence and ignorance. The reader is in the know, but the child is not. The child is unselfconscious. She is innocent and she is ignorant, but while retaining innocence, she gradually loses her ignorance; she realizes the truth more than she knows; hence her eventual rejection of her unfaithful father. This is a good story that (like few of the others) merits rereading.

In third place I would have chosen *The Transmitter* (TW 23 June 1957) by "J. C. Enrique," a penname, we are informed, of Teodoro Locsin of the *Free Press*. It tells a story vividly and in my opinion authentically, though this authenticity will need a little explanation. The story is of a disillusioned guerrilla fighter in Japanese-occupied Philippines, who brings a radio transmitter by boat from one island to another at great peril to himself, knowing all the time the uselessness of the task and the hopelessness of the situation. He is not sure of anything. He is not even sure if there is anything he could believe in; not even sure of God.

This mood of disillusionment is vividly portrayed. Now this mood itself is not, in my opinion, historically authentic. I have myself been through the war and I doubt if such a mood of disillusionment, of total agnosticism, was possible in the excitement of the guerrilla underground. The very sap that kept the guerrilla movement alive despite the awful risks involved was the *hope* that the Japanese would be driven away and the country liberated. Such a hope, though on a natural level, seems incompatible with the total absence of hope, both supernatural and natural, that seems to be the mood of the story. Such a mood could only have been experienced after the war and projected back to wartime days. But, though the mood seems historically anachronistic, it is aesthetically authentic because of the vividness of portrayal, which is all that emotional realism calls for. The story, with this mood of disillusionment, probes into a basic human problem: the problem of belief, the need to have something to believe in—on the

natural plane and on the supernatural. It also poses rather sharply the question of integrity: how, despite disillusionment, a man must do his duty; how he must do what he has pledged himself to do, even when he no longer believes in it; how a man must do what he conceives to be his duty, regardless of how unattractive the duty has become.

It has been objected against this story that it is not a story but an essay. It is perhaps a matter of terminology. If it is an essay, it is a good one.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD