

philippine studies

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

Story, by Brion

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Philippine Studies vol. 48, no. 1 (2000): 133–134

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Book Reviews

Story. By Rofel G. Brion. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1997.

Contemporary theories on life writing have consistently found themselves forced to widen the possibilities of defining of what constitutes auto/biography and the forms in which the writing of a life and consciousness may take. Rofel Brion's *Story*—a blend of personal essay and poetry, literary criticism and memory—adds another dimension to standard poetry collections as well as to more traditional forms of inscribing the self.

The collection begins with a long essay that discusses Brion's engagement with language and words, with stories and verse, with the impressions that formed his consciousness as well as his struggle with creativity. The question on the use of English or Filipino, for instance, becomes central to his creative process, and the choice of a particular language for a specific form of expression in the later poems becomes as significant as the thought-pattern of the poem itself. The question of "story" occupies centerstage in this collection—the photograph on the book's cover already focusing our attention on the main concern of the collection.

Moreover, Brion writes his story—through varied poems that center on themes such as separation, longing, and growing up—he writes himself. More importantly, he locates himself within a tradition of Filipino poets that include national artist Rolando S. Tinio, Jose Lacaba, Ramon Sunico, and Benilda Santos, linked by the search for total expression in language and form. "I am proud to be one of the very many who tell our stories in poems," he asserts, adding that the poems "give glimpses of much longer, unwritten, and, now, almost forgotten narratives."

Having discussed his complex involvement with language, Brion seems to take joy in the vast possibilities for motion in the blending of language and manipulation of emotion to show of the diverse influences in his life and writing. The poems are divided into four sections called "Home," "Other

Places," "Other People," "Retreat." The opening section of the book, the introductory essay is called "A Short Story," and the concluding section is another essay titled "Grandma Isn't Home and Neither is Her Poem," a meditation on the inception and development of one of his most tender stories of family relationships. Many of the poems are presented in both their Filipino and English versions, a comparison which helps us understand Brion's earlier explanation of the difficulties in choosing the language to write in and the problematic task of translation.

The poems in the first section highlight his process of imaginative growth—from games and philosophical musings on stars, to the reality of separation from friends, and the mundaneness that adulthood brings. Apart from highlighting the individual process of self-awareness, one perceives in Brion's poems a profound tension between home and away, the pain of separation and the longing to be with people or recapture experiences one loses through travel or time. The poems titled "Inay" and "Itay" are sensitive portrayals of his vision of his parents. The latter poem, in particular, shows the shift in position, as the narrator finds himself taking the role of caregiver to his father, "And I poured water over your head / as you quickly wiped your eyes." There are continual attempts to bring together discrete experiences. In this respect, several poems stand out as subtle expressions of that loss. In "White," he reads about snow at Christmas and reflects, "Here, on Christmas morning, / the raindrops looked like very tiny balls of snow— / you must have a special / name for them there." In "Fall," the persona communicates with the narratee who tells him about her experience of fall, with this conclusion, "These days rain falls suddenly here, / Flooding streets, jamming traffic, / Keeping me in my room, giving me time / To dream that, for me, it is fall as well."

A central part of the poet's search for himself involves travel. The poem "Home" talks about his only wool jacket: "I keep it ready / Whenever I chance upon / A free ride to somewhere colder." Many of the poems in the second section have place-names as titles, leading the speaker to find Filipinos wherever he goes and, more importantly, see himself through the eyes of others. Interestingly, "Amsterdam," "Salzburg," "Pamplona," "Madrid," and "Brugges" are written in Pilipino, illustrating the heightened attachment of the poet to his native tongue in alien lands. The need for the journey links many of the poems, as does the dichotomy home/away, a sense of longing, the profound experience and understanding of solitude, and community with nature. And running through all the poems is the creative imperative: "I have no camera, / No tape recorder, / Nothing but this."

The quality of Brion's poems varies, yet most become memorable because of the poet's restraint. The oceans of stories and feeling that lie behind the poems become among the most fascinating aspects of the collection. One wishes at times that Brion would have chosen to write the story rather than being simply "interested in words only because they allow me to capture

whatever it is I want to hold, that I want others to hold, too." As such, he allows us only a glimpse of some of the deeper feelings and dynamic thought behind many of the short verses.

Nonetheless, the central story of the collection is ultimately revealed to be cyclical, the concluding essay retaking many of the earlier themes—memory and loss—and projecting it toward a future. To encounter *Story* is to experience a poet's journey outward and back into himself and into his past and the people in it—an exercise in self-definition that involves a negotiation with language and creative expression.

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Voices/Mga Tinig. Edited by Teresita Ang-See, Caroline Hau, and Joaquin Sy. Manila: Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran, 1997.

In their Preface to the revised edition of *Philippine Literature: A History and Anthology*, Lumbera and Lumbera noted that "the declining prestige of New Criticism, whose rigorous aesthetic norms had previously functioned as a Procrustean bed on which Filipino authors and their works were measured, has opened a gap in the critical evaluation of literary works. The gap has allowed the entry of hitherto marginalized authors, genres and themes into the mainstream of Philippine critical discourse."

Thus began the opening of spaces for writings from the borders. Women writers gathered their works together and published them in *Filipina 1* (1984), *Filipina 2* (1985), and *Ani*, March 1998 issue. Later, they would write about their bodies and the many lineaments of desire in *Forbidden Fruit: Women Write the Erotic* (1994). Along with them came the landmark anthologies of the gay and lesbian movement: *Ladlad, An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing* (1994), *Ladlad 2* (1996), and *Tibok: Heartbeat of the Filipino Lesbian* (1998). All these anthologies explored new topics and themes in two languages—English and Filipino—with audacity and bravado.

Now comes another anthology that further enlarges our definition of a national literature. It is written not in two, but in three languages, and it puts on the spotlight a minority generally absent in our literary discourse. Teresita Ang-See, Caroline Hau, and Joaquin Sy worked together in editing *Voices/Mga Tinig: The Best of Tulay*, a fortnightly Chinese-Filipino Digest published by World News Publication, Inc. and Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran, Inc.

In her perceptive Introduction, Miss Hau quotes Charlson Ong's definition of Chinese-Filipino literature as those "written by Filipinos primarily for Filipinos." That definition is bold, subversive even, for in one stroke it embraces those writings that used to occupy the margins of pages, if not the margins