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Stories with a Thoroughly Philippine Outlook

Miguel A. Bernad

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Review Article

*Stories with a Thoroughly Philippine Outlook**

EDILBERTO TIEMPO and his wife Edith are among the best known (and best liked) persons on the Philippine literary scene. Edith writes poetry. Her husband writes stories and novels. Both have won literary awards. Both are teachers, and for many years they have been the principal figures in the Department of English at Silliman University in Dumaguete. Not the least of their contributions to Philippine culture is the Writers' Workshop that they hold every year in the summer.

Dr. Edilberto Tiempo's preparation has been thorough: a bachelor's degree from Silliman, a master's degree from Iowa, and a doctorate from Denver. He has held a fellowship from both the Rockefeller and the Guggenheim Foundations, and he has taught creative writing to American students at Western Michigan University and at Wartburg College in Iowa.

Much therefore of Dr. Tiempo's time and preparations has been spent in America and with Americans: yet his outlook is thoroughly Filipino. And the best proof of that is the present volume of his collected stories, published by Bookmark.

* A STREAM AT DALTON PASS AND OTHER STORIES. By Edilberto K. Tiempo. Manila: Bookmark, 1970. iv, 288 pp.

I

There is at least one story in this volume which is a masterpiece. It is on page 122, entitled "The Witch". That is a gem of a story, with wonderful local color and with an atmosphere of suspense and terror, tempered by a subtle sympathy and a suggestion of irony.

Not all the stories in this book which deal with the mysterious, the weird or the macabre are handled with the same success. One story ("Mori's Encantadora") begins superbly and ends lamely. Another ("The Snakebone and the Pearls") could have become a masterpiece of terror, but it fails to live up to its initial promise. But "The Witch" is splendidly written. The boy's dread when he first passes by the "witch's" house at dusk, his trusting friendliness when he talks to the kindly old woman at the stream, and the dawning realization that he has been talking to the witch—all this is portrayed vividly and with sympathy. There is sympathy for this unreasoning dread, as well as for the innocent cause of it — the lonely old woman with the young eyes and kindly manner who has to live with an ugly and perhaps ill-deserved reputation.

And all through the story the reader is presented with the sights and sounds and smells of the countryside. One finds such passages as: "She exuded a sweet wood fragrance, of gogo bark and the rind of lemons." It is easy to see that these stories were written by an outdoorsman who loves the countryside. Dr. Tiempo grew up in Leyte; he lives in Negros; his wife, Edith, comes from Nueva Vizcaya in northeastern Luzon; the countryside is in their bones. They have indeed lived in cities, taught at universities, and traveled in many lands. Even in their home in Dumaguete (a comfortable house set in an ample yard) they are surrounded with the amenities of urban life. But their souls do not belong to the cities: they belong elsewhere, among the hills and the fields and the sea.

That is why this book is full of descriptions of trees and birds and fish and deer; of hunting and fishing and bird-trapping; even of spiders and the fabled "sigbin".

II

The first story in this book ("The Heritage") expresses with understated poignancy what might be called (in Unamuno's phrase) a tragic sense of life. A man in middle age has worked his way to financial and social success, only to learn that he has developed gastric ulcers and has less than a year to live. He has come a long way: his childhood had been spent in squalid surroundings, in a fishing hamlet where the nipa shacks had their backs to the sea. He now lives in a more elegant neighborhood (like Roxas Boulevard in Manila, or like that splendid seaside promenade in Dumaguete) where the houses face the sea. But this material success has been bought at a fearful price: "You work seventeen years to build a house facing a seaside boulevard, live in it eight years, and then the doctors say you had less than a year to live."

Realizing how little time he has left, he revisits the old fishing hamlet of his childhood, taking along his only son to show the lad his "heritage". What this "heritage" is has been a cause of disagreement among various readers. When this story was first published in the *Philippines Free Press* (in 1952) one of the judges of that year's short story contest thought that the "heritage" consisted of "the land, the tide and the people that sustained him". Perhaps the "heritage" is something much deeper and much more common. Perhaps it is the ordinary human inheritance of pain, sickness, defeat and the fear of death. These are part of the heritage of fallen humanity, which even a "successful" father, despite his success, must transmit to his son. The father himself is no longer afraid of death because he has faced terror many times before. But he is afraid for his young son. The boy — a pupil in an "exclusive school" — has lived a pampered life, sheltered and surrounded with every material convenience. Can such a soft life prepare a lad for the terrors of manhood or for the terrors of death? So he puts his son through several ordeals. He teaches him to swim, and leaves him floundering in the water. He buries him in the sand. He shows him some disagreeable sights: like that of the old woman in a wretched hovel who tends, cheerfully and unselfishly, to the needs of

her misshapen paralytic son. The father's intention is clear: "I want you to know the terror of the tide, son. Facing death once, you can face it again. And again." He has learned wisdom himself, and tries to teach it to his son. The irony lies in the fact that this lesson, so salutary, so essential, is largely lost on the son. The father playfully buries the boy in the sand and leaves him there for a while, expecting a cry of terror from him. When no cry comes, the father goes back to see how the boy is doing: he finds him snugly asleep in his comfortable bed of sand. How does one transmit one's acquired wisdom and one's hard-won fearlessness, born of past terrors, to a pampered son who sees nothing to fear?

III

The story from which this volume takes its title is a long and episodic tale about a soldier in the American army who takes part in the battle of Dalton Pass in the mountains of northern Luzon. He is a sergeant in American uniform, but he is not an American: he is a Filipino—one of the hundreds of Filipinos who in their youth had gone to America to seek their fortune. This particular Filipino has spent seventeen years in America working in one menial job after another. When the Japanese invade his homeland, he enlists in the American army and goes across the seas to dislodge the Japanese from their entrenched positions, including those at Dalton Pass. During a lull in the battle, he bathes in a clear mountain stream and is drying himself when a sniper's bullet whizzes by. He ducks for cover. The sniper is killed. The danger passes. But it has been a narrow escape. After the war, having turned farmer in Nueva Vizcaya, he revisits the stream at Dalton Pass, and there, while his hunting companions are asleep, he sees a fawn emerge from the tall fern to go to the water. It would be an easy shot: he takes aim, but he does not shoot. His life had been spared here: he must also spare a life. He makes it up to his companions afterwards by shooting a wild boar.

Meantime, hampered by lack of capital, lack of equipment, and perhaps lack of skill, his farm does not prosper.