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## **A Normal Life, by Melvin**

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**A Normal Life.** By Reine Arcache Melvin. Quezon City: Office of Research and Publications, Ateneo de Manila University. 126 pages.

Like oysters that suffer grains of sand that work their way deep into flesh, the characters in *A Normal Life* are cursed with an acute awareness of the dilemmas lodged in them. These problems—how to cope with motherhood or the death of a father, whether to take in a new lover or not, among others—are the source of anguish, of despair “all under the surface,” but the characters manage to emerge from the stories with the pearl of an epiphany, no matter how dark its luster.

For example, in “Now That I am Dead,” “a tension thick as seawater” bears down on Lisa and her family exiled in San Francisco when they hear the news of the assassination attempt on Carlitos, the head of the family. This anxiety increases with his hospital ordeal, eventual death, wake, and burial.

One of the two sources of this seawater tension is political in nature. The death was distressing for the family since it showed them that despite exile, they were not safe from the dictator’s assassins. The mother, in fact, was so affected by the death that she was kept under sedation and was rarely allowed to go the wake.

Another development tinged with the political is the marriage of Marilen—Lisa’s sister—to Miguel, who comes from a family close to the dictator. Miguel even offers to take the family back to Manila and resettle there as “part of his family.”

The other source of strain is internal: Lisa herself. She vehemently disapproves of her sister’s marriage, questioning Miguel pointblank: “Your family’s friend, the dictator, killed my father. And now he’ll take care of us?” Not only that, she cannot shake off her father’s memories: she laments “not for having lost him, but for having him still,” and is disturbed “not because he had died, but because he had not died enough.”

In the end, while stuck in a stalled car in the rain, Lisa feels a “dark hole open inside her,” a space inside where images of everything dear to her rush through: memories of “the lives and loves and losses that went on,” her eureka moment not solving the problems outright, but providing a darkly blinding glimpse into herself: she became what she was looking for, she turned into a ghost who “spent the last year grieving and seeking a phantom.”

This is one of the strengths of the six-story collection: the characters’ ability to navigate through the rough waters of private and public anxieties and reach, though not unshaken and unscathed, the port of insight. For example, in “The Eclipse”—set on a day where a victory rally and a noontime eclipse coincide—Arturo’s search for his wife Teresa leads him to realizations about himself.

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"The Edge of Rupture" narrates details from the early days of a love affair between two people who meet each other—"by accident, like everyone else"—on a boat ride home. "Rupture"'s dark Duras-like denouement is consistent with the other stories: the woman reaches "moments of complete stillness, of passivity that passed for stillness, destroying everything she had known before."

Other noteworthy aspects of Arcache Melvin's collection are her pace, choice of images, and firm grasp of the language. The plots move resolutely and evenly, and the scenes are revealed like cards upturned by a casino dealer's masterful hand: coolly, yet one awaits with bated breath for what happens next.

The images and details are subtly violent and give clues to the wrenching nature of the characters' inner struggles and insights. For example, as a nine-year-old child, the main character in "A Normal Life" is fond of rabbits. However, this liking is cut short when she discovers that chickens had killed her favorite pets. Thus, she never fosters an affinity with animals again—"they died too easily"—and the episode leaves her with an understanding that "power had life on its side, and nothing was as powerful as the ability to destroy."

On the other hand, in "The Birth" Tanya feels distaste in bringing up a child for a husband whom she both longs for and detests. As she spends time with the baby, she recalls stories of "women rubbing opium on their nipples to poison their newborn daughters," or of "babies smothered under pillows, abandoned in the street, thrown into waste bins, wrapped in plastic bags, deposited on doorsteps."

Another notable aspect of *A Normal Life* is Arcache Melvin's language, dark and yet strangely illuminating, like the faint light that sinks into the trenches of the heart. One can also discern tautness and tension in her writing, which was honed by numerous writing and editing positions in publications such as *The International Herald Tribune*—where she currently works as a copy editor—*Pharos*, and *World Executives Digest*. In *A Normal Life*, the passages like breath sharply sucked in and then kept in the lungs, not knowing when to be exhaled.

These qualities are best seen in the erotic and epiphany scenes. For instance, see how Melvin Arcache depicts the last moments of a love scene from "The Edge of Rupture" (which had appeared, and rightfully so, in *Forbidden Fruit*, an anthology of erotic writing): "Just before we came, I knew I had lost him. Isolated by his pleasure, he entered where he could not be reached. When it was over, I turned away from him. My body trembled. I did not want him to see it. He bit the skin over my ears. The pain sent another series of tremors through me. He bit me again. I clutched the skin on his chest to prevent him from touching me. When the trembling stopped, I said: 'Touch me again.'"

Surprising turns of phrase also crop up in dialogues, descriptive lines, and, most especially, in the characters' eureka moments. A food reviewer answers

the question "What do you do?" with "I study how things feel in my mouth." The narrator in "The Eclipse" describes Quiapo Church as "cavernous with prayers and human pain," with numerous flowers that "fill the air with a perfume too intoxicating to breathe." And in "The Birth" Tanya realizes "what perversity it was to long for a man whose presence she hated."

Some dents and blemishes can be found in *A Normal Life*, but they do not take away much from the collection's sheen and impact. For instance, in "Now That I am Dead," the scene where a faith healer who tries to save Carlitos's life through long distance meditation is treated lightly, like a minor moment buried beneath Lisa's distress. The same faith healer, though, appears later in the pivotal party scene to dispense key lines and pieces of advice to Lisa: an appearance which comes off as somewhat contrived.

Also, in "The Eclipse" the reader is a little unprepared for Arturo's attempts at infidelity. Arturo claims to need Teresa to "bring a center of order to his inner world," but a couple of pages later, he wants "another woman's breasts against his skin:" he wants to betray his wife. This turn of events, however eye-opening, is shaky, his motives a little muddled, not strong enough for the reader to sympathize with his marital confusion.

On the whole, Arcache Melvin's collection reveals an intimate portrait of the heartscapes of characters in both inner and outer turmoil. With darkly delectable language, Arcache Melvin tells us stories of characters who are at "the edge of rupture," whose thoughts are "like drunken monkeys, tumbling over each other." However, when their moment of clarity arrives, the drunkenness is washed away with the force of tidal waves clearing out the soul's shoreline: utterly destructive and yet cleansing.

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**Fil-Am: The Filipino American Experience.** Alfred Yuson, Executive Editor; Eric Gamalinda, Associate Editor. Pasig City: Publico, Inc., 1999. 272 pages.

Aside from throwing up visions of tall basketball players, the word conjures up a virtual *balikbayan* box chockfull of images and thoughts: *pensionados*, veterans, green cards, California, and so much more. It is a loaded word, and one which this groundbreaking book, *Fil-Am: The Filipino American Experience*, seeks to unload. Led by two award-winning editors—Manila-based Alfred Yuson and US-based Eric Gamalinda—the writers in *Fil-Am* examine the mosaic of lives and ideas that have sprung from the struggle and stories of Filipinos living in the United States.

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