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The Night I Cry and Other Stories, by Enriquez

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THE NIGHT I CRY AND OTHER STORIES. By Antonio R. Enriquez. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1989. 131 pages.

Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) defines a "text of bliss" as that which

. . . imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts . . . , unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (p. 14)

The stories in Antonio R. Enriquez's anthology *The Night I Cry and Other Stories* are "texts of bliss," for they captivate the reader by disquieting her, by challenging deep-seated Amorsoloesque images of idyllic "country life," and by questioning still stubborn notions on the warmth and mutual supportiveness of Filipino family relationships. The stories, set in different regions of the Philippines, are peopled by characters who act on dark impulses or endure various injuries to the soul.

The reader first encounters Chu and his father in the story "Asocena." In the coastal barrio of Labuan in Zamboanga, Chu's dog Leal is killed by dog-eating neighborhood toughs led by Tomas Dayrit. Chu expects his father to deal with the culprits somehow so, though hesitant, the father speaks with Tomas. The brief verbal confrontation ends, however, with the father backing down in the face to get a replacement for Leal, of Tomas's threatening manner. Although Chu's father takes him from a neighbor whose dog has just had puppies, Chu's grief has been compounded by disillusionment.

In "Iguana," the exploration of the father-son relationship is carried a shattering step further. The narration enters into the boy's thoughts of the present and memories of the past, giving the reader access:

I am sitting on the top rung of the kitchen steps with a .22-caliber rifle in my hands. I sit there waiting for the iguana to come out of the bamboo thickets across the river. It is morning, soft and light. (p. 10)

From this eeriness, the boy's thoughts shift like a movie camera to scenes of his mother constantly mocked and humiliated by his father. The ominous link between humiliation in the past and lying in wait for the iguana in the present is strengthened by the suppressed violence in the boy's silent taunting of the iguana: "Leche! Come on, iguana, I'm ready for you now! Leche, if I am not ready for leche y leche y leche!" (p. 14) . . . "Come on out, iguana. You, lechery of your mother. Hen killer. . . Come, iguana. This time I'll kill you. Come now, hen killer." (p. 21)

His mother's humiliations build up in the boy's mind; tension builds up in the story. Then the father emerges from the house, crosses the river and climbs up into the bamboo thickets the boy is watching. The story ends explosively, suspicions about the real identity of the iguana finally confirmed.

In "Pablo-Pedro," set in Labuan in the Marcos era, Pablo Larracochea is a rice farmer who staunchly refuses to join a government rice farmers' coop-

erative, insisting on farming his land his own way. This results in his losing his market, which the government controls through the cooperatives. He and his family are reduced to such poverty that they eat rats to survive. The increasing tensions within the family culminate in the eldest son's leaving home.

"The Night I Cry," the title story, is a long, aching lament. Lito, who is deformed, lives with his mother in the home of his maternal grandmother and his Tio Felipe. Lito's inner torment comes from love for and loyalty to his mother, and his shame because of her casual sex affairs. One night his mother takes her own brother (his Tio Felipe) to her bed, with Lito in the same room:

The bed is silent now, Lito was thinking. And I must not cry. . . . but now I cannot stop myself from crying. . . . I cup my hands over my mouth and to the wind and the mat on the supple bamboo floor I cry, O, mi tio. Mi propio tio. (p. 51)

His mother's indiscretions had been the subject of village gossip, but although Tio Felipe would berate her (out of jealous possessiveness, as it turns out) for being a "puta," Lito's grandmother refused to face or deal with the situation. Tio Felipe dies the morning after, and the old woman finally confronts her daughter, who prepares to run away with still another man. Lito breaks his silence (and, for the moment, his loyalty), and warns his grandmother. The mourners at Tio Felipe's wake chase after the couple, and soon after, Lito watches as his mother is forced to run naked through the barrio by a mob, "sensing only the impulse and passion that drove his mother into the same pregnant passion. . . that had led the barrio men and women to persecute her. . . ." (p. 65)

"Dance a White Horse to Sleep," revolves around the relationships within a Spanish mestizo family as the old, once autocratic patriarch lies dying. Alberto, the dying man's grandson and the narrator, watches how his family and relatives comport themselves during the death watch, with one (a lawyer) talking of how the old man's property is to be divided. When the old man finally dies, Alberto again listens as his relatives discuss funeral expenses, and start moving the old man's things out of his room while keeping articles for themselves.

At the funeral, Alberto impulsively hires a convoy of buses and a white horse to escort his grandfather, using the money one of his aunts kept inside her brass bed posts for emergencies. The horse suddenly runs wild, and the funeral is thrown into confusion. When things quiet down, Alberto walks to the end of the funeral line, enters the first bus and waits.

The sixth story, "The Smell of Ilang-ilang" focuses on a lonely man's difficulties in dealing with his little daughter's illness after his wife has abandoned them both. Flavio Larracochea's sense of loss and failure causes him to shrink so much into himself that he is barely able to get the dispensary staff to attend to his feverish daughter. When Dra. Sofronia Mananquil asks after his wife, Flavio lies, pretending that his family is still whole and

prospering. His deceptions gain solicitude and sympathy but back at home, Flavio recognizes that "all those lies about his wife were an admission that he had completely and finally lost her: lies growing not out of unreality but of the grim truth of his loss!" (p. 105)

"Spots on Their Wings," revolves around a group of engineers assigned to set up a watershed in the Cotabato interior, who find themselves embroiled in the complexities of the Muslim-Christian conflict. The story culminates in torture and murder, sparked by the men's having shouted obscenities at Muslim women bathing naked in a river.

The differences between Muslim and Christian cultures are the most obvious elements of contrast in the story. More subtle are the contrasts woven into the narrative structure and setting. The core of the story is set in the mountains and jungles of inner Cotabato—lush, untamed, dangerous territory. The flashback is framed by the leader, Alberto, narrating the men's experience in the totally secure confines of a modern restaurant in Zamboanga City.

There are as well moments of contrast told in lyrical, sensual language. In a dreamlike scene Alberto and his team cross a meadow in the early morning. Alberto, walking ahead, looks back and sees a captivating sight—a swarm of tiny butterflies surrounding the group, covering them in a waist-high sea of spotted yellow wings (p. 109).

The delicacy of this scene contrasts sharply with one scene on a boatride down a river. At twilight, in a strange, white, cloud-like mass in the distance, a roar arises from the cloud, a ripple runs over its surface, and the cloud becomes the wings of a flock of white *catala* parrots that had been feeding on the leaves of the trees growing along the bank. The parrots fly off, leaving

. . . the denuded trunks and boughs. . . silhouetted against the sky like black skeletons. [Alberto] leaned back then, his mouth completely shut, appalled at the thought that underneath the awesome, white mass of great *catala* parrots certain death awaited the luxuriously green and thickly foliated trees. (p. 110)

There is power in this collection. Enriquez's skill with language and narrative structure; his ability to weave the Chavacano vernacular smoothly and naturally into his English narration (a glossary at the end of the book aids the non-Chavacano-speaking reader); his "seer's eyes" that delve into human souls and unearth the conflicts that torment them—all come together to create stories that disturb in gripping, sensual and sensitive ways. One looks forward to reading more "texts of bliss" by Antonio Enriquez.

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