You Lonely People: Exiles in the Stories of Bienvenido N. Santos

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Scent of Apples: A Collection of Stories (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1979, 178 pages) is Bienvenido N. Santos's first book to be published in the United States, but fifteen of the sixteen stories in this collection have appeared before in two books published in the Philippines: eleven in *You Lovely People* (Bookmark, 1955) and four in *The Day the Dancers Came* (Bookmark, 1967). Thus, all the stories in this new collection are familiar to Filipino readers except the first one, "Immigration Blues," whose significance in the book, apart from its own separate virtue as a story of understated pathos and the very human and selfish motive of marriage for convenience, is that it brings to the present decade the continuing story of Filipinos in America.

The common themes of these stories about Filipinos in America are universal themes of exile, loneliness, and isolation. Into these themes Santos has folded the special flavor of Filipino nostalgia for home, which, for the exiles, meant also the past. When Santos achieves a perfect blending of the universal themes and the indigenous sensibility, the results are such emotionally poignant works as the title story and the prize-winning "The Day the Dancers Came," two stories in which nostalgia accentuates the sense of exile and isolation.

For one reason or another Santos's Filipino expatriates stay on in America even when their dream of success in the land of plenty has finally vanished. Ambo, the narrator in many stories, has attempted to return, only to be disappointed at home, not so much by the yearly typhoon that plagues his home in the Bicol region as by the betrayal of a friend whom he used to help in Washington, D.C. So he seeks another passage, perhaps a final one, back to America. Celestino Fabia can never return to his native shore in the Visayas because, having stayed twenty years on a remote farm in Michigan, no one will remember him. His only link with the Philippines is a faded picture of a Filipina he does not even know. Filemon Acayan can only make a symbolic return by welcoming and attempting to entertain the Bayanihan Dancers in Chicago. When they turn down his offer to drive them around the city and to eat at his apartment, he makes what seems a desperate effort at preserving the last moorings with his country: he attends their show and records their songs and the sounds of their agile, dancing feet doing the *tinikling*. However, when he plays the tape recorder at his apartment for the benefit of his dying friend, another Filipino exile, Filemon presses the

wrong button, and in one clumsy moment erases what he has tried so hard to preserve—his last link with his people and country—thus making his isolation more devastating and complete.

Many more like him never return, even symbolically, and many do not even dream of returning. Lost and confused in strange cities among strange people, they drift aimlessly, and to forget a weariness which is more than physical they play poker or billiards, and drink and seek momentary solace in the faithless arms of women. They have become spiritual drifters, suffering as much ruin as the war-ravaged Philippines. In a sense, they are the people to whom the words of Father Ocampo in "For These Ruins" accurately apply: "We have seen pictures of our blasted cities. But there are ruins other than the eyes can see."

It is the mark of Santos's genius as a fictionist to have portrayed these ruins in story after story, to have given a spiritual and cultural counterpart to the physical ruins suffered by the Philippines during the last war. To be sure, the stories of Santos in this collection are not about the Filipinos in the Philippines who, having suffered the physical effects of war, have also suffered its spiritual effects. The scarred psyche caused by the war remains for other Filipino writers to record, and many have attempted to do so. Having spent the war years in America, Santos could only write about those who have been, literally, far from battlefronts. Yet, it is a further measure of his genius that his stories are no less memorable and true, his characters no less lonely, for that fact.

If the outbreak of the war gave Santos the personal opportunity to travel and lecture extensively in America and enabled him to meet many Filipino expatriates, the consequent occupation of the Philippines by the enemy gave him the artistic fulcrum to elevate reality into art. It fired his imagination so that he began to see the war as one more dimension in the isolation of the expatriates. It became for him as a writer, if not as a man, the ultimate symbol of the *lostness* of his countrymen in America. I say this notwithstanding the fact that in the present book only three stories have something to do with the war, and even here the war is a mere backdrop: because in many stories he has transmuted the physical ruins of his country into the spiritual ruins of his countrymen abroad.

In exploring the many dimensions of the isolation of the expatriates, Santos, however, has not stopped with the war. War, after all, is a historically contained event, and although a people may suffer its consequences long after it is over, the isolation it imposes on its victims comes from the outside and from foreign enemies. Besides, the Filipinos about whom Santos has written were not direct victims of the war. If they suffered from

isolation from their country as a result of the war, their isolation is somehow lessened by their own helplessness and by a great deal of historical inevitability. What is more painful is that isolation for which they were responsible and which to a certain degree they could prevent. In almost all the stories this is the kind of isolation that Santos has tried to explore.

There are at least four sources of this isolation. One is excessive nostalgia for the homeland. Another is betrayal by fellow men, by fellow-Pinoy. The third is the death of a dream of success, ironic in that the dream dies in the land which has caught the imagination of the world, and of Filipinos especially, as the land of promise, the land of opportunity. The characters of Santos, after a brief fling with the ideal, wake up one morning to find that America has turned out to be the land of unfulfilled promises, of lost opportunities. The last source of isolation is the confusion brought about by trying to live in two culturally different worlds.

Two of the best stories in this collection explore the pathos of nostalgia. In "Scent of Apples," Celestino Fabia travels thirty miles from his farm to the city just to listen to a Filipino talk about the Philippines. This certainly is not bad, but his keeping a picture of a Filipina when in fact he is married to an American is something else. It is not fair to his wife, to say the least. His wife happens to be a faithful woman, who saved him from freezing in the snow when he had appendicitis, and who worked as a scrub woman in the hospital to pay the bills. She is worthy of her namesake, the biblical Ruth. He has a good-looking son and an apple orchard which gives him more apples than he can sell. The surplus apples rot in the storeroom, and he gives them to the pigs. His wife, his son, and the apple orchard are abundance enough, but his excessive nostalgia for home, where nobody remembers him, makes him blind to all these blessings. He wastes his abundance, like the apples he gives to the pigs, throwing, so to speak, the proverbial pearls to the swine. Hence, we note in passing, the aptness of the apple-symbol and the title. This story should make the exile rethink his idea of home: not a place where you were born and grew up, but where you are at present, where your love is. But man, especially the exile, is an incorrigible dreamer. How often in the solitude of an exile do the images of home crowd into his lonely mind! And in this lies the pathos of the story.

Another such dreamer is Filemon Acayan in "The Day the Dancers Came." Growing old in a foreign country is sad enough, but if one could accept it as inevitable, if one tried to make the best of the situation, one would suffer less. This seems to be what Acayan is trying to do in Chicago until he hears of the coming of the Filipino dancers. Then he begins to

dream: welcome the dancers, entertain them, show them around the city, invite them to eat Filipino dishes at his apartment, so that when they return to the Philippines they will remember him. But all his efforts at trying to establish a link with his countrymen are frustrated. When he accidentally erases what he has recorded in his "sound mirror" he loses the last link with what he knows as home. In a symbolic way, this underscores the irony and pathos of longing.

"The Door" and "Letter: The Faraway Summer" explore the other source of isolation. Betrayal, especially by a friend, is so crushing that it could burst even the mighty heart of a Caesar. This allusion to Caesar is not uncalled for. Santos himself deliberately, albeit implicitly, alludes to Caesar's "Et tu, Brute." In the story "The Door," Delfin knows that his American wife is unfaithful, but he cannot do anything, does not do anything, because he loves her. She entertains men in their apartment, and when he comes and finds the door locked, he waits on the stairs until her lover comes out. One Christmas evening, Ambo, a friend of Delfin and the narrator of the story, visits him and his two little daughters. Delfin is not at home, and Ambo, while waiting for him, takes time to fix the blinkers of the Christmas tree. The girls lock the door. When Ambo finally leaves the apartment he finds Delfin waiting outside. To Ambo's Christmas greetings Delfin can only ask the stabbing question in the dialect, "Why you also, Ambo?" (*"Bakit ikaw rin ba, Ambo?"* in Tagalog.) It is significant that Delfin expresses his most profound hurt in his mother tongue. The pathos is that Delfin does not know the truth, and it is cold comfort to say that at least Ambo has not actually betrayed his friend, because for Ambo it is as if he has.

In "Letter: The Faraway Summer" betrayal comes in the form of one man's, one Pinoy's, lack of *utang na loob* and the other man's sensitivity to such cold and general reference as "just one of those Pinoys" when friendship demands a warmer reference. In "For These Ruins" betrayal comes from one who does not understand the special value we Filipinos attach to *utang na loob*. Julia Flores, an uneducated Filipina, has a son by an American soldier whose life she has saved in Bataan. She is left by her husband and is driven away with her son from America by her in-laws.

Beginning with "And Beyond, More Walls" and ending with "Lonely in the Autumn Evening," seven stories must be taken as one long story (the stories being merely episodes); Santos here chronicles the aimless lives of Filipinos whose dream of success has come to naught. The focal story is that of Nanoy, a taxi driver, whose death brings the Filipinos to-

gether in communal suffering, and in whose misfortune they see their own. In these stories we see the resiliency, humor, and *bayanihan* spirit of the the Filipinos abroad, three qualities which sustain them and earn for them from their American friends the sobriquet "you lovely people." It is also in these stories that the real name of Ambo, Pablo Icarangal, takes on a larger significance, for it is he who goes around soliciting contributions in order to help defray the funeral expenses of Nanoy. Ambo's act may be seen simply as an expression of basic human sympathy and charity. As Filipinos we see it as a concrete example of the values of *damay* and *bayanihan,* of *awa,* or pity, for someone who has suffered at the hands of fate. In Ambo we see a praise-worthy Filipino who has not lost his soul even in a foreign land.

The other story that deals with frustrated dreams is "The Contender," the story of a former boxer who, doomed to sell pencils because he is going blind, loses in the larger arena of life.

The story that deals with the confusion of trying to live in two culturally different worlds is "Quicker with Arrows." In love with Fay Price (an unfortunate choice of name), Valentin Rustia cannot make up his mind whether he should marry this American cashier in a government cafeteria or a pampered Filipina heiress. As long as there is war and he is in America, he need not make a decision, but the war ends, he has to return to the Philippines and he has to decide. Unfortunately, the decision to marry Fay comes too late and he loses her; and the price for such procrastination, which in Rustia is a result of "cultural stress" (Leonard Casper's phrase in the Introduction to the book), is loneliness and isolation.

Memorable and sad as most of these stories are, they, nevertheless, leave the reader unsatisfied. Even "Scent of Apples" falls short of being great. The reason, I think, is that Santos, consciously or not, leaves his protagonists groping in the darkness of their isolation. He denies them that sudden moment of illumination of their condition, that "epiphany," as James Joyce calls it, that moment when the protagonist, provoked by an image, a sound, or a smell, realizes something about himself, or about the nature of life in general. It need not be a full awakening, an apocalyptic vision, such as we have in the novel or novella. An intimation, a glimpse, a flash, would suffice in a short story, provided that it allows the protagonist to experience a change in perception or attitude; to become, if slightly, a different person, though not necessarily a better one, at the end of the story from what he was at the beginning. A more useful term for this change than Mark Schorer's imprecise "moral evolution" would

be Robert Frost's "momentary stay against confusion." This term suggests more accurately that the moment of illumination need not be, in a short story, as clear, final, and irrevocable as the shout of "Eureka!" or Mr. Kurtz's "the horror! the horror!"

The protagonists of Santos's stories draw us into their world by the force of their isolation and loneliness. Indeed, pathos is the most arresting emotional quality of these stories. Depending on one's aesthetics, it may or may not be enough. However, the stories of Tolstoy, Mann, Conrad, Kipling, Joyce, and Marquez show us that pathos can, artistically, be more poignant and satisfying if the protagonist is made aware of his condition, of some meaning in his experience or other people's. It does not matter if that meaning is not positive or wholesome so long as the protagonist becomes aware of it, and to a certain degree it clarifies an aspect of his experience. Reading the stories of Ivan Ilych, Aschenbach, Arsat, Dravot, Conroy, and Colonel Buendia elevates our sympathetic identification with them from mere pathos to tragic pity. The mature aesthetic experience does not remain in a nether world of feeling because the pain of knowing experienced by the protagonist illuminates both his understanding and ours. In his conscious suffering the protagonist elicits, if not actually demands, respect from the reader, and this respect expunges the temptation of the reader to feel, in his pity, superior to the protagonist. An unconsciously suffering protagonist is looked down upon as somebody to be pitied without necessarily being respected. Shakespeare and the Greek tragedians understood this important psychological point in the aesthetic experience of literary art. If we examine our feeling of pity toward Fabia, Acayan, and Rustia, we will discover that we harbor a certain degree of superiority to them. Not so with Ambo, especially in "Letter: The Faraway Summer," because, even in his inarticulateness, he seems to know.

Santos, a professor of English and Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at Wichita State University, Kansas, is now an American citizen. But like many of his characters, he dreams of returning to the Philippines. He writes in the Preface that he has in fact made several attempts; the last one did not materialize because of the declaration of martial law. Whether he will ever return or not is not too important for Philippine literature. What is important is that he continue to write about the Filipinos wherever they are, in America, in the Bicol region, or in the slums of Sulucan. And whatever in the vast heartland of America stirs him to creative efforts, be it the scent of apples or that of "calamondin fruit and fresh papaya blossoms," be it a wintry landscape or the memory of a tropical skyline dominated by Mayon, the important thing, we need hardly remind him, is to carve in high relief the peculiar character of the Filipino soul.