



The Bread of Salt

and Other Stories



N. V. M. Gonzalez

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N. V. M. GONZALEZ

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For Narita

Contents

Preface

ix

A Warm Hand

3

Children of the Ash-Covered Loam

15

The Morning Star

32

The Blue Skull and the Dark Palms

42

Where's My Baby Now?

55

Come and Go

66

The Sea Beyond

78

The Whispering Woman

88

The Bread of Salt

96

vii

CONTENTS

On the Ferry

107

The Wireless Tower

117

The Lives of Great Men

127

The Popcorn Man

136

Crossing Over

151

The Tomato Game

159

In the Twilight

166

The Gecko and the Mermaid

170

A Shelter of Bamboo and Sand

180

The Long Harvest

191

Glossary

199

Preface

MORE THAN TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AND MANY dreams ago, I arrived in Santa Barbara, California, to begin what would become a long sojourn in America. A family friend, an Irish American Jesuit, had read in *Time* magazine about the lifestyle of Californians; but he was confident I would know what was best. He would have been alarmed had he realized that I was not unlike my narrator in "Crossing Over," who arrives with a pinstripe woolen suit, a gift from an uncle in the merchant marine, for his first winter in America. He makes it to Oakland. Then, amidst imagined hazards, he finds his way to the Southern Pacific train station, in San Francisco, on Townsend and Third. My situation was the same, except that as a hedge against the future I had brought along several short stories, two novels, and various scraps of writing.

This was of course quixotic, considering that my writings were peopled with subsistence farmers in their barefoot dignity and fishermen daring the seas in their frail outriggers. My inventory included, too, those whom Nabokov calls "puppets of memory," the companions of my childhood and youth—schoolteachers and their pupils, maidservants and their mistresses or masters, college dropouts, small-town merchants—the underclass who constitute the majority in all societies.

Some of them were in my first book of short stories, *Seven Hills Away* (1947), and I am certain that my coming to America on a writing fellowship two years later was their handiwork. So how can I not be grateful to each and every

PREFACE

one of them? And grateful, for good measure, to Mindoro, the scene of their labors, that "poor island with a wondrous name," as the *Philippines Free Press* once said.

A discalced Franciscan must have put me to it. He wrote of Mindoro ever so long ago as an island "shaped like the heart and located in the centre of the archipelago called Filipinas." The other islands bear to it the same relation, he said, "as the various parts of the body do to the heart." Clearly, here was my metaphor.

But what a struggle lay ahead. My idols of the forties, almost every one, had held a proud and writerly disregard for formal education. That, thought I, was precisely the way to go. Having won, with *Seven Hills Away*, a fellowship year in America, I would forgo pursuing a diploma; I would design instead a study program of my own.

At Stanford, where I began my American year, my classmates were reading Henry James. For my part, I toiled away to re-create Mindoro. It took exactly twenty-two drafts of "A Warm Hand" before I managed to set the maid Elay upon the deck of the *batel* "Ligaya," the wind upon her face. Forthwith, I introduced her to Katherine Anne Porter, herself an autodidact, who was on the teaching staff that academic quarter. It was she who urged me to send Elay's story to *Sewanee Review*. I could not have been more confident of the future.

Not till many years later would I meet again, one evening in San Francisco, my Stanford professor Wallace Stegner. The Wheatland Foundation had organized that summer a conference on world literature, and over seventy writers had come from all over. Professor and Mrs. Stegner had been invited to the inaugural dinner and, to me, this gave the event a grand design attributable to none other than the Fates.

At his avuncular best, and with the warmth and sincerity that have sent many of us hurrying back to the workbench,

PREFACE

Mr. Stegner asked me about the novel I had been working on while at the Stanford Writing Center. That was forty years ago! So he did remember! I have written two others, said I, rather in self-defense, adding quickly that I would soon go back to that early project.

Maybe the time had come to be heard. We were too close, though, to events in Europe, and the conference turned out to be somewhat Eurocentric. Sadly missing, in particular, was any interest in Southeast Asia. When asked if he were acquainted with writing from the Philippines, an East German poet replied, curiously enough, that he did not feel compelled anyhow to read literature except for pleasure. "You have to seduce us," he said, which drew murmurs of delight from the audience. From my seat in the next-to-the-last row, I said: "Ah, but one must see the lady first in order to be seduced."

A week later I was sent a copy of a London *Economist* article on the conference—coming full circle, I thought, since the correspondent had been my student at California State University, Hayward. The article carried, not unwittingly perhaps, the title "Alas, Alack. . . ."

I did receive a not indelicate reward for one small seduction. From a Chinese anthology editor came a mooncake about the size of a dinner plate for translation rights to "The Blue Skull and the Dark Palms." Soviet editors did even better later on; they brought out ten stories, together with the novel *A Season of Grace*. Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, the Malaysian publishing house, followed with the same novel in translation.

Small triumphs, at the most; but something has happened. Frank O'Connor has been proved right. An audience out there has found the "submerged population" about whom he spoke. This is the stuff of short stories, although there

PREFACE

may appear various aspects of it “from writer to writer, from generation to generation”—and from country to country, I must hasten to add. In the Philippines, colonization made us into a truly submerged people. We are not mere fictions.

To write fictions about us would seem superfluous and irrelevant, were it not for the fact that Art intervenes even as we attempt to give form to our judgment. With English, which America brought to the country initially as a tool for colonial administration, came a tradition and a culture ready to hand.

The language has been with us for nine decades now. While these have been years of grieving over fancied or real losses in the native culture, these have also been years of opportune expression through a borrowed language. An alien language does not fail if it is employed in honest service to the scene, in evocation of the landscape, and in celebration of the people one has known from birth.

This prospect, though, acquired its own dimension; it revealed, even, its own history. The imagined and the factual had to be blocked off, one from the other, the fictional from the workaday: this was the discipline to observe. To gird off “A Shelter of Bamboo and Sand” and thereby to express the ineffable, a soldier in the Philippine American war, a black man, crosses over to the Filipino side at San Miguel de Mayumo. So as not to be taken for the enemy, he rolls up his shirt sleeve and bares his arm there in the dark. Here, I thought, is the first of the three wars of my deigesis, the world to which all my stories can relate—should a reader care to relate them to history.

Many discrete items—the Longfellow poem and the magazine covers in “The Lives of Great Men”; the twilight hours in “The Gecko and the Mermaid”; the boy’s sun-baked head of hair smelling like a basket of dried anchovies, after a morn-

PREFACE

ing spent in the sun, in "The Long Harvest"—these, singly and together, may seem to come in the order of found objects from some beach front awash with random experience. But this is no perversity; rather, only a further aspect of the grammar of our lives.

For there is a conspiracy these days against the creative act: Time mounts it upon our best intentions, flouting even our sincerest hopes. No method can accommodate the future. Those ubiquitous rolls of the Filipino breakfast table, the *pan de sal*, make this case for us. When I wrote "The Bread of Salt," the *pan de sal* was usually the size of one's fist. Until then, no emblem gave me more confidence or a greater joy. Today, it brings on a subdued sadness, for these rolls have shrunk to the miserable size of a chicken's egg. Who can say whether, in a year or two, the *pan de sal* won't be just a wee bit larger than a quail's egg. Is the meaning thereby degraded?

Contingencies such as these do not seem to work on the writer's behalf in the fictions we construct. Maybe that is just as well, since fiction has an autonomy of its own. Still, we must ask whether Time's capacity for betrayal has urged the boy Roberto Cruz, in "The Wireless Tower," to seek his own sort of truth, and whether it has indeed designed a career for Professor Leynes, in "The Popcorn Man," provost at a College of the Doomed, whose alumni are scattered far and wide.

I must confess to an admiration for the Professor. Maybe only to his kind do the Fates vouchsafe a vision of one's country. He and Nonong Padua in "The Long Harvest," if a generation apart, are possibly alike, although for Nonong the chipmunks and crested bluejays at Padelford do suggest a victory of sorts. And this is heartening: we should not list metonymy among the unemployed.

A new situation is upon us, after all. Owing to economic turmoil and political upheavals, Filipinos have be-

PREFACE

come a diaspora of unprecedented proportions. Understandably, America has become the destination of choice. Still, there is probably no place in the world that Filipinos have not strayed into and wandered about, yielding to a restlessness and a seeking that has long been on record.

In an 1883 article in *Harper's Weekly*, Lafcadio Hearn describes how "Manila men" did themselves proud, building a Visayan village in the bayou country of Louisiana. Are voyages and journeys all that Fortune can offer us? I find, going by my own kind of reckoning, that "The Sea Beyond" gives us a young wife's beginning, and "Come and Go" gives us a wanderer's pause. For arrivals and departures, consider the old man in "The Tomato Game," and Mrs. Bilbao in "Where's My Baby Now?" As for Mr. Malto's landlady in "The Whispering Woman," she is quick to note, in the quiet of a Buenavista evening, how taps is sounded "all the way from across town." To sum it up, our sailor in "The Morning Star" falls back on an utterance that consists of but one syllable: "Ha!" His seems as close to optimism and hope as the language allows. But he belongs to the story; we can hardly claim such sage imperturbability for ourselves.

There is in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* an entry well worth looking up: *kaingin*, the Tagalog word for "swidden." Mindoro is, even to this day, *kaingin* country. The dictionary quotes Wallace Stegner: "some lonely farmer hewing out a — in the jungle."

"Kaingin" happens also to be the title I gave a poem, one of my earliest, published in the *Philippine Magazine*. More than anybody else in the country in the thirties and forties, its editor, A. V. H. Hartendorp, held highest hopes for a Filipino literature in English. He was among the few who felt proud over the occasional attention paid our writing by the late Edward J. O'Brien, an outstanding critic of

PREFACE

the American and British short story. O'Brien's notice, while by no means considerable, came without hype or the carrot of patronage, and it helped an entire generation of Filipino writers to aspire.

In April, I shall be in the kaingin,

the poem began, unsure of its language and uncertain in its direction. By happenstance it took me to the right stop, and in more ways than I had intended:

I shall scamper from one log
 to another;
In the worsening heat
Some palm tree I shall seek;
I shall pick my steps upon the ash-covered
 ground,
Then make my way
To the edge of the clearing,
To a murmuring stream.
There I shall wash
The ashes from my feet.

The poem found its way to Washington, D.C. How, I never learned. And why? To prove something, perhaps. In any event, a generous editor stuck it onto a corner of a page in a Department of Education publication.

There followed a solid block of time. The ash-covered loam of the forest clearing joined a park bench in Seattle, in "The Long Harvest," to serve as its frame. And at the center of these years, an eighteen-year-old graduate from the Philippine Normal School took a brief posting in Romblon, a copra-trading town, followed by a transfer to Mindoro, for work as a school district supervisor and weekend home-

PREFACE

steadier. It was a move not unlike one from a provincial capital to the sticks; and as a search for Fortune, it was as challenging. For thirteen more years, Father pursued this divided life, abandoning school service altogether as he glimpsed great prospects in copra and hemp. To his first-born, he would leave, and not untrusting, the world beyond the clearing.

I began to write straight out of high school, innocently turning to the English-language weeklies as an alternative to job-seeking in Manila, where everyone went to escape the poverty of the provinces. My first writings appeared in the early 1930s. All the while, Father's efforts at planting coconut and abaca, raising cattle, even cutting and selling lumber came to naught. He had worked, while a schoolboy, in the household of one of the Thomasites and, without his knowing it, had become one of the intermediaries of the new order and dispensation. As an unintended premium, his son could recite Longfellow at the drop of a hat. Then came the Depression, and with it just the appropriate sharpness of the blade to whittle aspirations to manageable size.

It is perhaps possible to assign "Kaingin" as Father's first harvest, along with those stories in *Philippine Magazine* that, in 1947, were collected to become *Seven Hills Away*. Father was their first reader. How avidly he followed Tarang's progress from draft to draft until, two years later, there emerged "Children of the Ash-Covered Loam." Tarang's stubbing of his big toe upon a tree stump could have been Father's own primal experience, his own seeing anew of some other kaingin being restored to the forest, to "the dark womb of the land at this time of night."

This really had never occurred to me till now. Indeed, till now, despite my passing six and seventy, I had not understood that there had been played out, in Father's very ex-

PREFACE

perience, literally and incontrovertibly, the interaction of Filipino and American cultures. When historians talk about Manifest Destiny, about "special relationships" and all that, it is also of him that they must speak. And it is this that I had failed to see; it may well be that he took this lived history as a given, leaving us the task of making some sense out of it.

It is simply difficult to say where dreams begin. But in our title story, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Sire de Maletroit's Door* left our class "enthralled," our breaths "trembling." A memorial, however modest, is in order, something worthy of those years. For a start, at the very least, stories can provide the gift of remembering.

Alan Swallow published my first book of short stories, *Seven Hills Away*, in 1947; twelve tales of the Philippines, he called them. Though none of the twelve are in this collection, for reasons of space and thematic unity, I have included some from the *Selected Stories* that he brought out in 1964. The present collection may be considered a retrospective, not only of my work but also of the kindnesses of the pioneers who have made it possible—the University of the Philippines Press, Benipayo, Bookmark, and New Day Publishers—whose generous offices will long be remembered. It is to these, and to other enterprising presses in the Philippines, that many a Filipino writer is indebted for saving his material from the scrap heap of old magazines and periodicals and for allowing it the dignity of bookcovers.

The interest and support of the University of Washington Press over the last few years must not go unacknowledged. I note it with boundless gratefulness. When it became known that I had been ill, the editor's letters that reached me in Diliman, in the Philippines, or in Hayward, were not only queries about my progress in putting together these stories

PREFACE

but also about my health. When a letter failed to find me at one address, there was always a thoughtful friend around who knew where to find me. How does one properly express one's gratitude for such concern and encouragement? Indeed, in preparing the manuscript for this collection, I came away wondering over the world's kindness to my work. Perhaps only by writing still more can I begin to pay that back.

I have included here, meanwhile, four stories that are not to be found in any collection. In tone and subject matter, they might suggest coming full circle—in the learning of one's craft, in finding a language, and, finally, in discovering a country of one's own.

Los Angeles
California

Eight of these stories first appeared in the volume *Children of the Ash-Covered Loam* (Manila: Benipayo, 1954); six were published in *Look, Stranger, on this Island Now* (Manila: Benipayo, 1963). All the preceding, plus seven others (including "The Lives of Great Men," first published in the *Philippines Free Press*, October 30, 1964; and "The Tomato Game" first published in *Asia Philippines Leader*, June 16, 1972), appeared in *Mindoro and Beyond: Twenty-One Stories* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1979), and were copyrighted 1979 by N. V. M. Gonzalez. Four from the first volume appeared in *Selected Stories* (Denver, Colorado: Alan Swallow, 1964) and were copyrighted 1964 by N. V. M. Gonzalez. "In the Twilight" first appeared in *Mindoro and Beyond*. "Crossing Over," from the *Philippines Daily Express*, "This Week

PREFACE

Magazine," July 18, 1982; "A Shelter of Bamboo and Sand," from *National Midweek Magazine*, December 7, 1982; "The Gecko and the Mermaid," from *Amerasia Journal*, IV:2 (1988); and "The Long Harvest," from *National Midweek Magazine*, May 23, 1990, appear here in a collection for the first time.

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