

Noelle Q. de Jesus, *Blood: Collected Stories*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015. 239 pp. ISBN 978-981-09-6488-7.

Noelle Q. de Jesus, the author of *Blood*, has lived and published worldwide, across cultures and continents – in the Philippines, Malaysia and USA – but this is her first collection of short stories, and a riveting read. She is currently based in Singapore.

The stories of this collection are of varied lengths; each of the following five stories – “Merienda,” “A Happy Marriage,” “Passport,” “Milk and Sweat,” “First Love” – is just two pages long, while the opening story, “A Small Consolation,” is 24 pages and “Polar Vortex,” another story in the book, is 21 pages long. This variation of length, of course, involves the issue of technical and stylistic strategy; for me this was one of the reasons for which this anthology of as many as twenty-five stories never felt a boring read. Longer stories are deliberately interspersed with the shorter ones, and the resultant mental jerks excite the reader. Indeed, Noelle Jesus’s skills as short story writer are at full play in those very short stories, which may also be called flash or sudden fiction. She starts each of these narratives like a puzzle and then very deftly she solves it. In the limited span of strictly two pages she has been able almost always to make sufficient exposition of setting, plot and characters, and they contain criteria and qualities that successful short stories are supposed to have. As I was reading these shorter stories I was surprised every time to see how she could achieve all these in such a limited canvas. She would begin the story very dramatically, at once capturing the reader’s attention, creating thrilling tension and arousing tremendous curiosity; then, in the next few lines and paragraphs she would gradually but speedily, and with immense ease and exceptional grip, unfold the characters and events.

The first two-page story of the book “Merienda” is interestingly placed, just after the opening and the longest one. The story starts thus, “The chef wanted to name the daughter they might have Merienda [Filipino for ‘afternoon snack’]” (33). And then we know the development of romantic relation, between a chef and a model, that revolves around food, “He fed her and she fed him, and then, lips and chins and fingers, still sticky, they consumed each other” (34). Gradually “[h]er stomach ballooned large and round as did her thighs and arms... he could no longer make love to her” and then he left her for “a petite singer, someone who looked the way she once looked In the story we do not even know the names of protagonists or of places but that does not come in our way towards understanding the plot. Thus, for her shortest stories, Noelle Jesus deserves unreserved accolades.

In fact, I find it very easy to list the gifts the collection showers on its readers. One obvious example is its title story itself; it is a good decision that the

collection finishes with it, with such an unusually moving piece. I do not think I have encountered any such topic and such treatment of it in my own experience of stories. The story is narrated from the perspective of an eleven-year-old-girl, and the “blood” refers to the blood of her first period. Her family lives in America; her mother, a very simple Filipina, is steeped in traditional cultural protocol, taboos and superstitions. Though she loves McDonald’s, she is yet to assimilate herself to the “foreign” ways. She always refers to things as “her” or “him”: “Your first blood, Anna. Now he will be your guest, visiting you every month” (226), she tells her daughter on her first period. Her beliefs and ideas sometimes make her children amused, at other times irritated and even angry when she insists on following those. The eldest girl of seventeen seems to be in a constant rebellion against her mother, while the other young boy just ignores her. This sensitive girl of eleven, however, understands her mother’s distress, her tender devotion to her husband and children who, in their turn, do not care for her. Though the thought of smearing her first period-blood on her face (the mother believes this blood to be sacred and “the secret to being beautiful”) was repulsive, she nevertheless did it just after she saw her mother in a very distressed state following another bitter bout of quarrel between her and the elder daughter. In the story, Anne’s rubbing of period-blood on her face was entirely to imagine her mother’s pangs and defeat, and this gesture of love and empathy from a little girl for her suffering mother is moving.

The opening story, “A Small Consolation,” foregrounds a diasporic professional woman’s vulnerability and anxieties, particularly when it comes to performing her femininity often interpreted as an equivalent to the lust for maternity. This family narrative also brings into fore differences of perspective among generations, changing values and ways (the aged Filipina reflects that she conceived her first baby on her wedding night, but “[t]hings are different now” [10], and that “[t]imes have changed. Maybe you’re no longer meant to love just one person” [32]), modern individualism versus the old idea of collective living, racism (there are hints at state’s racist child-adoption policy) and so on. We also have insights into respective perspectives of the other’s culture. For American Ken, Philippines is exotic but impossible: “Although Manila had been fascinating, and even exciting, he knew very well that he could not live there – not with the heat and the traffic and all the household helpers that made him nervous” (15). On the other hand, Therese’s Filipino mother believes (in “Equivalents,” Cara, a young Filipina, also had this prejudice) that Americans do not bathe and they smell. I am genuinely impressed by the author’s characterisation of Consuelo, the old Filipina and her *Totoy*, the baby boy Therese finds on the floor of an elevator in her office building; they are given a significant weight, and in fact, the story ends with generous dissemination of love and kindness for everyone from this old woman.

Another commendable feature of *Blood* is its crisp and compact prose marked by exceptional brevity and precision. Noelle Jesus is very choosy and chiselled in her language, and her images and metaphors are striking: “He had fallen for Therese as surely as a pebble sinking in a pond” (21), for example. I am also struck by her honest/candid and delicious narration of body and sex, masturbation, extra-marital flings, alternative sexuality and so on, and admirably the details are artistically integrated to the plots. In “Third Life,” with the just-discovered knowledge of his sexuality, a creative youth is thrilled “like a newborn baby with a brand new life ahead of him” (129). In the ironically titled “A Happy Marriage,” a young man’s “heated whispers” add excitement and meaning to a housewife’s otherwise boring family rituals. In reverse, “The Dress” describes how a “happy dress from a happier time” makes a woman understand extramarital love as “a drug with the high of infatuation” and how she learns to value “countless moments mundane and magical” she shares with her family (160-61). In the end of “Polar Vortex,” the exchange of kisses between a young girl and an old man, is “separate and apart from the rest of what’s called lovemaking” (215); it is only that two individuals who are going through tough times are comforted by each other’s company.

And then one would be startled by this very straightforward opening of “Overcoming”: “If Lorna were to be honest, and the truth is, few Filipinas ever were, she would discover that what she really wanted – in fact, what she needed – was sex. She needed intercourse, straight up, naked, furious, and fast” (153). Lorna is a beautiful young Filipina who wants to believe that she wishes “true love” which is “as sacred as God” and not about “physical expressions of affection.” The narrator observes, “The heart of a Filipina in her late twenties at the dawn of the 21st century is a complex vessel: one filled with chaotic paradoxes, layered with emotional rationalizations” (153). The story becomes a satire on people’s constant denial of sexual desires while being obsessed with it, especially in duplicitous and repressive Eastern societies where talks of sex are still a taboo. Some other stories – “The Dress,” “First Love,” “Déjà vu” – explore in tender, ironic detail the riven and fissured terrain of relationships, whether the long invisibilised marital love, the kitsch of first love or old friendships rekindled with surprising amour someplace else.

Noelle Jesus’ characters are from diverse affiliations and backgrounds in terms of gender, generation, ethnicity, nationality and so on (apart from people with transnational hyphenations, one encounters Filipinos, Germans, Americans, Singaporeans, and in “Off the Drop,” a Maldivian). Naturally, therefore, her stories are set across diverse countries, cultures and climates, and details of those abound in her narratives. I found it particularly amazing when the cityscape of New York is compared and juxtaposed to a nostalgic delicacy back “home” in “A Small Consolation”: “The city was a giant sugar bowl, hills and peaks of powdered white crystals twinkling, brilliant enough to light the

night. Snow reminded Consuelo of sweet *polvoron* [local Filipino delicacy made from powdered milk] that melted in her mouth, dissolving from a powdery mess into sweet creamy nothingness” (10).

In various stories the author uses words from her native tongue, Tagalog; there are few words from Mandarin, Malay and Hokkein as well, all integrated into English in such a way that at one point the reader gets accustomed to them. Still we find a Glossary of words other than English at the end of the book, which is worth appreciating. The use of Tagalog words as well as local cultural icons and elements add, for international readership, a distinct ethnic flavour to her narratives, a factor which one may argue, originates from a market-driven anxiety. For some, this would be a case of commodifying native materials or becoming part of “armchair tourism,” thus conforming to the hegemonic politics of publishing establishments in the West. However, I do not find descriptions in her stories which may be identified as mere creative elaborations of pre-existing white stereotypes or fetishised symbols of Eastern culture, or where local cultural items enter just to add exotic ethnic flavour and to cater to the taste of Western readers. The local cultural details rather appear as integral part of the narratives.

Noelle Jesus’ stories are narrated from different points of view: from male and female, young and old, anasporic and diasporic, and from children too (“Wind Calls” is told by a nine-year-old girl who hates naptime, and the restrictions her elders impose on her); and there are both first person and third person omniscient narrators. The stories exude unmistakable empathy and tenderness and remarkable poignancy and grace while they deal with themes of unfulfilled longings, happiness and boredom, loyalty and betrayal, loneliness and confusions, disease and death, naïve dreams and shattered presents, or while they explore anxieties of displacements from home and language, questions of identity and belonging, old assumptions of gender and sexuality and contemporary global experiences of individuals. Peoples and places are vividly portrayed in her stories and rendered with a wonderful combination of humour, warmth and insight. She would take everyday mundane affairs and infuse a sense of excitement and significance into them with her playful yet careful craft.

In her longer stories, she finds opportunities to display her skills in evoking human conditions and natural atmospheres, and in offering detailed representations of local cultural icons, food and delicacies (Mother makes a sweet pudding of coconut milk for Anne’s “special day” in “Blood”), customs and rituals, family and kinship (“In the End” centres round a social occasion in Manila – “a dead man’s wake”). We also have the portrayal of cosmopolitanism, globalisation and inevitable cultural mixes and interfaces: in “A Small Consolation,” Therese is not “particularly Filipino” to the old lady because of her new ways and attitude. In more than one story, we have couples from different civilisations (Cora and Franz in “Klein,” Therese and Ken in “A Small

Consolation” etc.). Some stories, though, suggest how a deep and genuine relation becomes tragically impossible across race and nationality. In “The Wash,” Filipino Julia and American Hallie are aware of “their special fiberglass barrier” and know that “if they ever progress to a more intimate level, they would encounter a wall” (166), while in “Cold” a blonde boy who got an F from his Filipino tutor yelled “Fuck you” to her.

Noelle Jesus’ stories also deal with nostalgia and homesickness (“Klein,” “Cold”), hectic life in urban modernity, separation and divorce (“A Small Consolation,” “Polar Vortex”), pregnancy and abortion (“Babies,” “The Wash”), a mother’s pleasure in feeding her baby breast-milk (“Milk and Sweat”) and so on. These stories testify to the writer’s contemporary consciousness and her fine literary sensibility; her ability to dig into the subtle nuances and idiosyncrasies of human situations and relations; and above all, an uncanny grip over the story form combined with clarity of vision.

Diasporic women are a focal point of the collection, just as the disparity between material luxury or affluence and the relative poverty of life back home is brought to light in stories like “The Wash” or “Blood.” In their emotionally vulnerable moments, diasporic women suffer from “going-home-syndrome” which is not a sincere desire for return. In “A Small Consolation” Therese longs for “the constant bustle of people in small houses with large dining tables, long hours at meal times, and the biting tang of a slice of green mango smeared in fermented shrimp paste” (14) but she is practically focused on her New York career. Again, in “Cold,” although Katrina’s “heart” and “skin” both face difficulties to adapt to the “cold” ways of the mid-western university town in America, “[s]lowly she stops shivering.... She breathes to warm her skin, and waits for her heart to make the proper adjustments” (43). In “Klein,” Cora is mad about attending the concert of Filipino music band (a slice of home for her) in Germany, but ultimately finds assurance in the family she has grown there comprising beautiful children and “a large man” who “takes Cora with a gentleness that belies his size” (71).

No doubt her collection showcases contemporary stories, and her narrators and characters hail from different races and cultures; the figures at the fringe of society, however, are rarely found in her stories. She is interested more in individual predicaments, especially in trials faced by women, and intricacies of human relationships rather than serious engagements with larger socio-political issues. Her stories frequently involve middle and upper-middle-class issues, and her characters are mostly from those strata of society. Her tales are mostly individual histories and family sagas, and not very socially or politically conscious vignettes. They rarely engage with instances of injustice, marginalisation and discrimination. One story gives the hint though, that in diaspora there are not only students and educated professionals, but also lower, working class people. “Passport” uses first person narration of a mother who

came to America as a domestic help with fake documents and later steals the passport of another wealthy migrant from a mailbox so that her children may come. The mother suffers from no real prick of conscience as she believes that her crime will cause “just a small, fleeting inconvenience” for the wealthy who “have all means”: “There is an ocean of difference between you and me; we each live on separate planets that orbit the sun” (132).

I would not compare Noelle Jesus with any past or contemporary fiction writers, as, while I was reading one story after another from this collection, I really did not find any conscious thematic and stylistic imitation or any obvious influence of any particular storyteller on her; I would rather identify her as a unique, refreshingly simple and unpretentious voice of the canon of Asian Englishes. And I would also unhesitatingly describe her collection as an important addition to the fast-growing fund of creative accomplishments by the Asian writers who write in English.

Finally, to say a few words about the printing and production, the book, I must say, is beautifully produced, with almost a flawless proof reading; the paper seems, if not exceptional, then of good quality. Also, the book has a spectacular yet suggestive cover adorned with black and white photograph of a girl in traditional attires, and a thick vertical lining in red. The getup, binding and print, the font-size and line-spacing are also reader-friendly. I congratulate the volume’s publisher, Ethos Books of Singapore, on their being able to do an excellent job that has made reading the stories an even more pleasant experience. Of course, the small typos – in page 78 “to *makes* [make?],” “can *stay*” [say?] anything, or in page 175 “barrier *whirr* [?] shut” – can easily be removed in the next edition. The volume, I trust, will be loved by anyone who loves to read short stories in English.

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