

Daryll Delgado. *After the Body Displaces Water*. Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2012. 136 pp.

Daryll Delgado's first collection of short stories, *After the Body Displaces Water*, shows a breadth of styles, techniques, and subjects. At the same time, this collection is cohesive, woven together by a distinct voice, that of a confident storyteller. It is also a voice that seems to confide in the readers, taking them on a ride that is intermittently casual, nostalgic, heartbreaking, and in rare moments, whimsical. Sometimes, this voice also has a tinge of vulnerability.

Delgado is at her best when her stories appear to linger on insignificant moments or stay at the periphery. They may come in the form of conversations or letters. The opening piece "Conversation" is just that, a conversation between a man and a woman as they take a short walk together. It hinges on images of handholding, bottles, and a lamppost, yet several stories emerge from between the lines—that the man and woman are married, that their work involves words, and that they do not yet have a child. In that short walk from one end of the street to another, in that short conversation which may not even make perfect sense, the reader sees only a glimpse of their lives, but such a rich and potent glimpse as to shape a story.

"Dearest Amelia" is another story that seems to touch on the mundane but actually packs a punch, most of all because of the ethical note that rings toward the end. As the title suggests, it is a letter written to a friend who lives in another part of the world. The story is in a casual and conversational tone and is peppered with humor, yet it is also poetic and deliberate. In the course of saying hello, reminiscing, and sharing recent stories, the characters reveal their personalities, and what seems like any other letter turns out to be something more.

Another story in the collection is in the form of a letter. "Unreliable Narrators" is a finely crafted story, ingenious and witty, and is involved with such themes as politics, physics, mental disability, romance, writing, and the academe. The title not only refers to a technique in fiction but also to the technique used in the story itself. The letter writer makes use of footnotes and "reputable" academic sources, but given that the letter writer is staying in a facility for the mentally challenged, the reader is forced to question the veracity of what is said.

Given such stories about writing and the process of writing, it is not surprising to find in the collection a story devoted to the art of writing itself. "The Other Daughter," like the other stories in the book, approaches the

subject obliquely. A writer's written work literally comes alive as a flesh-and-blood human. The "daughter," named Anna, grows up, but apart from her "mother," she has no life. Delgado literalizes truisms about writing—for example, that authors breathe life into characters or that characters become real in the author's imagination. This is where the magic lies: how Delgado is able to create a believable story from that premise.

Delgado's collection is truly a showcase of the writer as magician, and Delgado herself conjures stories by pushing the form beyond its boundaries. In a sense, this collection is a meditation on the form of the short story. "The Mechanics of Loss" seems to be an essay on the question of what a short story is, yet it leaves the reader with an unmistakable sense that it is itself a short story. As the title indicates, it unpacks how an individual becomes undone. It is written in the second-person point of view, addressing the reader as "you." There is no specific character, setting, or even plot, but the "story" emerges after a second or third reading. "You" could initially refer to the reader as the character, but the character appears to be the narrator, too, who must have experienced such loss as to be able to map out the times and circumstances where one feels loss.

Another bit of sleight of hand is the trio of short pieces each entitled "Preludes." They start in exactly the same way, but each one focuses on one of the three main characters and reveals its own perspective on the same events. The stories are not interchangeable; rather, they form a continuum so that the first story constitutes the beginning, the second the middle, and the third the end. At the same time, each story can stand alone.

The rest of the stories in the collection—"In Remission," "Summer with Scouts, Pirates, and Pregnant Rats," "Nights at the Round Table," "Open Angle," and "After the Body Displaces Water—A Manual for Divers"—cut across different subjects, but certain elements recur like a refrain—getting pregnant (or the difficulty of it), an investigative bent, and missing persons. These stories are built—and ably built—around unifying conceits. "Open Angle," for instance, plays with the concept of vision, light, and absence. "After the Body Displaces Water—A Manual for Divers" uses vivid imagery of fish, swimming, and diving to tell a poignant story of displaced lives.

Hidden in each story is a pain that cries out for relief. Delgado's stories may be likened to the character of the old man in "Dearest Amelia" whose life nobody got to know when he was still living. That quality explains why absence recurs in the stories: there are characters who are dead or who go missing, and characters who are alive yet whose lives can easily get lost in the fabric of everyday life. It is their stories that beg to be told, and these stories teach us to listen.

Anyone who is looking for a promising voice in contemporary Philippine fiction and who does not mind diving deep will find satisfaction in this collection.

Cris Barbra Pe  
Department of Literature  
De La Salle University  
cris.pe@dlsu.edu.ph

Edgar Calabia Samar. *Halos Isang Buhay: Ang Manananggal sa Pagsusulat ng Nobela*. Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2012. 200 pages.

In the wake of his *Sa Kasunod ng 909* (2012), Edgar Calabia Samar decided to bring his energies to bear on a different sort of enterprise guided by the following questions: Over the course of developing the novel, who were his sources and influences? On what history had he sought to draw as he wrote? More generally, how and why does he write novels in the face of the challenges posed by the realities that he lives through and with at present? The result of his efforts was this book, which was conferred in 2013 with the Isagani R. Cruz Prize for Best Book of Literary Criticism or Literary History in a Philippine Language by the National Book Development Board and the Manila Critics Circle.

The difficult task that Samar sets for himself in *Halos Isang Buhay* is that of identifying, and ultimately, producing his past and precursors, with the aim of discovering what the art of the novel means to him—*Sa Kasunod* most immediately, of course, but the rest of his distinguished oeuvre so far and the texts he has yet to write are also implicated—and propounding that specific vision. Samar acknowledges that the peril of such a venture is that it could deteriorate into a protracted exercise in self-aggrandizement, but he also makes a case for the merits of his engaging in the criticism of his own work—an undertaking, after all, that no other critic, however keen, can accomplish: he avers that by becoming at once the subject and the object of thoughtful examination, he militates against his falling into lockstep with tradition and resists or surmounts the blandishments of a broader culture of passivity and indifference, where people are heedless of the struggle for emancipation—issues that resonate across the book.