



***The Axolotl Colony: Stories* by Jaime An Lim. The University of the Philippine Press, Diliman, Quezon City. 2016. 127 pages. 5.5 x8.25 in**

Multi-awarded fictionist, essayist, poet, and mentor – these are the many strings of Jaime An Lim’s overlapping identities. Winning Third Prize in The Don Carlos Palanca Awards in 1973 for his first entry in the competition “The Liberation of Mrs. Fidela Magsilang”, An Lim’s literary career has been prolific since the day he moved to Dumaguete City. Rearing the next generation of Filipino writers, he co-founded the Mindanao Writers Group and the Iligan National Writers Workshop. Currently, he is the recent elected director of the prestigious Silliman University National Writers Workshop.

The author growing up in Cagayan de Oro City, there is a certain taste of home when one reads the collection. In the preface, he shares how, as a child, his frequent visits to the city’s public library opened his love for reading. A love that later brought him to writing. This masterful craft of storytelling grips the readers and brings them to experience the lives of such diverse characters who are faced with fear and dread for the future. In a suite of nine stories, *The Axolotl Colony* explores the nostalgic feel of place, family, and self.

The first in the collection which also takes the title of the book, and one that bagged the first place in The Don Carlos Palanca Awards, “The Axolotl Colony” explores the concept of separation and the slow death of love. It takes on the perspective of Tomas and his struggle to survive after a divorce:

Because people do change, despite themselves, he knew that now, even the ones who love you. Distance can do that, and time and ambition and carelessness. Most of all, carelessness, as they were careless once, taking the tenuous joys of home for granted.

Moving through flashbacks and the present time, he recalls many levels of isolation he has gone through after they, he and his ex-wife Edith, left Dumaguete City to take on their graduate studies at Indiana University in Bloomington. The story descends with a somber tone as Lim quotes on some lines from TS Eliot's *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*, Tomas bears the paralysis of separation and the daunting future that echoes: I grow old . . . I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

"The Homing Mandarin" carries the same sense of separation as it explores the struggles of a Chinese family in the Philippines. The story unfolds the family's past and secrets as the narrator, Mickey, tries to comfort his sister's hope of their father's return. Together, the siblings have come to terms and understand their father's journey to China to die:

Now we could finally lay to rest our dream of his return. It was over: the hope, the uncertainty, and the silent wait by the window for an old man leading his long weary shadow home.

A different unfolding takes on "The Husband" as it recounts the life of Elpidio Flores. A husband who finds comfort in the life of domesticity is stirred in coming to terms with his sexuality. Meanwhile, a father witnesses how death slowly drifts his family apart in "Morning on the Beach". Coping with the recent death of a daughter, the narrator takes his wife and toddler son to the beach. As guilt and pain surface, the story remains to be restorative as the narrator contemplates on how the sea "sharpened one's awareness of things one ordinarily took for granted."

But possessions and personal treasures are not forever lost, some have their own way of coming back. Such is the case in "The Man Who Would Forgive". The parable exhibits the resilient faith of Solomon as he is tested by God's trials. It brings forth life's lesson about forgiveness, redemption, and second chances.

Passion comes into play in a “respectful variation” of one of Philippine literatures’ favorites, Polotan-Tuvera’s “The Virgin”, “The Liberation of Mrs. Fidela Magsilang” follows the plight of the widower Fidela as she literary tries to escape any possibilities of romance with Manolo, a textile peddler. In the end, Fidela, like Miss Mijares, realizes that she cannot go on running forever.

“Outward Journey” dwells into David’s coming-of-age account as he fumbles through adolescence with the help of Rich, his American correspondence. Full with vitally, the story touches the readers with its familiar awkward, painful, and delightful scenes of growing up: first crush, first heartbreak, hormones, and first encounter of death. With a bittersweet ending, David proceeds to the inevitable transition to adulthood.

The last two stories are not even the least in the array of awards, as these are also recipients of the Palanca Awards in the Short Story for Children category. These tales resonate An Lim’s early childhood fascination with folk tales, fairy tales, and legends.

Awarded the Second Prize in 1993 is “The Boy and the Tree of Time”. It tells the story of Benjamine, a 6-year old boy who wants to have all the time to play and run about every weekend (who doesn’t?). In one of his weekend adventures, he discovers a magical tree that controls all the time in the world. In the end, this delightful tale echoes the golden wisdom that everyone needs time to grow.

Yasmin’s encounter with an encanto in a balete tree is at the climax of the story “Encanto”. Originally titled after the main character, it also won the Palanca’s Second Prize in 1990. It is a comforting tale about how the “afflicted, the lost, the abandoned, the homeless, the unwanted, the orphans of the world” are offered their sweet haven inside the enchanting and magical balete tree.

Overall, the pleasure in reading Lim’s stories comes inevitably with the wonderful rendering of the colorful lives of his characters. For no longer do these characters remain on the page as a reader savor each story, they become the lives the writer wants the reader to experience. Whether one is an avid lover of literature or an aspiring writer, one can truly appreciate

not only the craft but also the personal imprints An Lim inks in in his autobiographical collection of stories, *The Axolotl Colony*.

*r Christine Faith Valdez Gumalal*