

# Blood Money and No Excuses:

## A Literary Preview

Nancy Lamb Horkley

Peter Bacho is a striking voice in the chorus of Asian-American storytellers. His first novel, *Cebu*, published in 1991, was a dark comedy about a young Filipino-American priest from Seattle who must travel to the Philippines for the first time to bury his mother. In *Cebu*, Bacho explored how his character's national identity is challenged by the discovery of his foreign ancestral heritage. With personal insight and humor he addressed the issues that complicate the social life of second-generation Americans. Bacho, who received an American Book Award of the Before Columbus Foundation for *Cebu*, now has a new collection called *Dark Blue Suit and Other Stories* due out from the University of Washington Press this October.

A dedicated Seattle native, Bacho centers his new collection of short fiction and memoir around the lives of Filipino-Americans and the Filipino community in the city he loves. His themes focus on the interpersonal struggles and changing perspectives of his characters. He draws compelling emotional connections between the different generations throughout the stories.

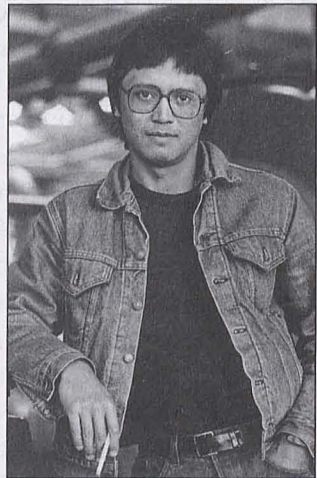
In one short story from the collection, "A Family Gathering," Bacho revisits the Seattle cemetery where his father is buried, where most of the Filipino men and women from his neighborhood are buried, and where he sees the legacy of sacrifice, family honor, and immigrant hope passing on; as Bacho writes, "It's like our old neighborhood, reassembled plot by plot." Bacho recounts his own childhood in a mixed culture. His recollections center on gritty urban streets and his immigrant father's willingness to take back-breaking, dangerous jobs—"blood money," Bacho calls it—in order to give Bacho and his siblings a better life in their new country. It is a common immigrant family story line. But Bacho's perspective as he moves from those who have passed on to those who remain make it unique. It is a story that walks in the past and present.

"A Family Gathering" is about familial relationships, but familial in the sense of a close-knit ethnic community within the larger context of Seattle. He introduces an assortment of uncles,

cousins, and “buddies” of the first generation that made up a big part of his “family.” Bacho also includes Filipino latecomers to the community—those with no use for old men, old neighborhoods, and family names. He is impatient and vaguely disgusted with their short memories and unappreciative ambition. It is a generational conflict that he seems to put himself in the middle of. He writes in a voice of personal searching, however, and not indignation. Bacho willingly accounts for his own failures to make the most of the advantages bought with his father’s blood money. He makes no excuses for his own bad choices, chain smoking, and misguided ambition.

His tribute to these ground breakers is openly emotional, but, thankfully, it avoids sentimentality and glorified heroism. This story is told simply, with unsophisticated expressions of deep loyalty and love for those Filipino men and women who “came to this land so long ago when racism and violence, migrant poverty, tuberculosis, and despair should have killed them, but didn’t.” And despite whatever social statements can be distilled from Bacho’s account, he does not write himself up as a Filipino social activist. He keeps the issues framed as family matters, and this, in turn, strengthens the connections “A Family Gathering” can make with a diverse audience. As a family memoir, this piece is unflinching and personal; as a portrait of Seattle’s multi-generational Filipino community, it is purposeful and open.

In “A Family Gathering” Peter Bacho has preserved a part of the legacy of his childhood and established himself as a writer who is successful in creating literature about generational family issues. Bacho’s experiences as a lawyer, journalist, and university professor in California and Washington bring an uncompromising edge to his writing that is well suited to his themes. He is currently a visiting instructor in the Liberal Studies Program here at the University of Washington, Tacoma. Like his novel *Cebu*, this new collection, *Dark Blue Suit and Other Stories*, offers a true and entertaining view of a culturally rich and complicated community about which little literature has been written. It promises to offer much to look forward to this October.



Peter Bacho, photo by Mary Randlett.