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A Literary Yearender

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The year 1994 was rather lean for Philippine poetry. Unlike the immediate post-EDSA years during which publishers (Kalikasan, Anvil, De La Salle University, Sipat) came out with poetry books one after the other, the year ended with hardly ten new books of poems.

Anvil Publishing, twice winner of the Manila Critics Circle National Book Award as Publisher of the Year, led the list with four books. Ricardo M. de Ungria's *Nudes* was launched last February at Club Dredd. Mr. De Ungria began writing the poems for this collection while on an International Writer's Fellowship at Hawthornden Castle in Scotland, and on a travel grant from the British Council. This collection of 38 poems was brought to a close at the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, Italy, on a Rockefeller Foundation grant.

We should be thankful for these grants because this book—the poet's fourth—is arguably his best. The book “deals with forms of attention and loss, afflictions and closures in love . . .”

Listen to the lovely poem “Grail”: “Light falls through the window/ away from us./ Outside, things crawl/ on the earth./ Duty, hope, trust.

“To keep time's pace slow/ in grinding us/ down, and beauty small/ as our world/ and edible.

“Then to unkeep you before you go,/ unlearn the last/ words of your body, unpool/ the glow of shared nights/ from its fading coal.

“Such work after love:/ desolate, relieved, wasting./ But for now, this fullness/ of hands, as if to drink,/ gathered by your breasts.”

From those lyrics of love and Eros we go to the flaming protest poems of Gelacio Guillermo, finally collected in *Azucarera: Mga Tula sa Pilipino at Ingles*, published by Sipat. Although he now writes in Filipino, I think Mr. Guillermo remains as one of our best poets in English. His poems are not only well thought out, but more important, deeply felt meditations on the contradictions that sunder our society.

What can be more common than our lowly *pan de sal*, for which the poet crafted these lines?

A shorter version of this review was first published in the December 1994 weekend issues of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

"This is the bread of the morning. What sob of hunger/ Is it made of? Dipped in the dark sadness of coffee,/ It melts itself into a food and feeds the day/ With its means of living, without sound, without promise.

"And the day never knows how to rejoice in itself/ As it glides along streets untrimmed of their sorrows./ These are the odors of tears, bleaching the bodies/ With the colors of their clothes, rags of a shapeless sky.

"The floors of houses seek nothing but the dark,/ The silence of mats spreading their designs of vague/ Prefigurings. These heavy inhalations are the weight/ Of oppression, this writhing is the peace of sleep."

De La Salle University Press also came up with two poetry books.

The first is by Rio Alma (Virgilio Almario), a major voice in Philippine poetry. In *Muli sa Kandungan ng Lupa*, Rio returns full circle to the elemental poetry of his earlier books. As the poet Marne Kilates notes: "The land as the ultimate metaphor is a logical necessity of the peregrination and pilgrimage in Rio Alma's poetry . . . The pilgrim as poet is also chronicler and cartographer, magus and surveyor. But magus most of all . . ."

You can almost smell the land and feel its textures in the poem "Sa Ilalim ng Araw." Listen: "Laging may ganitong pagluluntian/ Pagkatapos ng ulan./ Tumatanghal ang kapuluan/ Nang panatag, marubdob, at dalisay/ Sa wisik ng silahis/ At busilak na halik ng simoy/ Naghihintay ng unang pangahas na mithi/ Malayang nakalugay/ Para sa hinog na binhi ng pag-ibig.

"Ngayon, walang dahong/ Nag-iisa't nakapag-iisa./ Bawat dahon ay kalangkap ng iba/ Tungo sa isang anyo at ganap na kaganapan/ Sang-ayon sa pagtuklas/ At pagbaybay ng pandama't ulirat./ Tulad ng mga buto't bato/ Sa Tabon at Calatagan,/ Mga supling tayo ng araw/ Pagkatapos ng bawat pansariling paglalakbay./ Mga supling tayong sasanib/ Sa luntiang sinapupunan ng mga tinig/ Upang hindi na muling makaalis."

Lourdes Gatmaitan Bañez has also collected the works of R. Zulueta da Costa in the other DLSU book. Finally, we will see Mr. da Costa's works in all their breadth and entirety—and thus forget his appellation as only a "one-poem poet," with his Commonwealth Award-winning "Like the Molave"

The *Sunday Inquirer's* Poetry Editor, Constantino Tejero, also gathered the poems written from 1982 to 1992 in *The Book of Martyrs*. After the Marcos regime, some poets began mining the veins of our history and current events for their poems, in the tradition of the late Alfredo Navarro Salanga whose posthumous book, *Turtle Voices in Uncertain Weather* published by the Cultural Center of the Philippines, is still available in the market.

Mr. Tejero is one of the young poets who have followed this trail. One of his poems is "The Wedding of Crisostomo Ibarra," which alludes to Jose Rizal's seminal novel, *Noli Me Tangere*.

The following is an excerpt from this example of intertextuality. "They have come to the wedding, even the skeleton/ Of the father arising from the melancholy mire/ Side by side with things past, things present, and things forgotten.

"The bride is alone, her slender body quivers like a lyre/ Amidst the laces that cover the rotting faces,/ For it is whispered among the fierce glitter of jewels/ Of a choice for the groom between two lives, two deaths. She sees/ History marching under her bridal window, the duel/ Of fire and sword, the dying, falling, and uprising, on the brink/ Horses wrestle with men—and now, on this eve of love,/ Her handsome groom has gone out for a moment sadly murmuring/ Of dangerous things, things of the future, things to be avenged . . ."

I have long admired the work of Myrna Pefia-Reyes but could only read them in pieces scattered in old magazines and anthologies. Now they are here, bound in one beautiful volume—*The River Singing Stone*—with the beautiful painting by Brian Afuang on the cover.

As Edith L. Tiempo notes in her introduction, "Memory is the net and restrained sensibility the drawstring that contains this lore of many years." The book begins with memories of the Second World War and ends with poems about exile. During the book launching last November 30 at the National Commission on Culture and the Arts building in Intramuros, Ms. Reyes' twin sister read an unbearably moving elegy for their father. Called "Across the Date Line," the poems' haunting refrain goes, "Father died tomorrow."

But since it is rather long, I will quote another memory piece called "Breaking Through," which we teach at the Ateneo.

"Haltingly, I undo the knots/ around your parcel that came this morning./ A small box should require little labor,/ but you've always been thorough,/ tying things right and well./ The twine lengthens,/ curls beside the box./ I see your fingers pull,/ snapping the knots into place/ (once your belt slapped sharply against my skin)./ You hoped the package would hold its shape/ across 10,000 miles of ocean.

"It's not a bride's superstition/ that leaves the scissors in the drawer./ Unraveling what you've done with love/ I practice more than patience/ a kind of thoroughness/ I couldn't see before./ I shall not let it pass./ My father, this undoing is/ what binds us."

Another voice pungent with the pain of exile is Maria Luisa B. Aguilar-Cariño in her poems in *Encanto*. As Dr. Gémino H. Abad notes in his introduction, "The secrets [in this book] are not simply personal—family, self, the coves of sex, the body's round map and fevers; they also occlude country, the land, our people's history, the things we cherish or reject . . ."

These are excerpts from "To American Friends Who Have Lived in Laoag, for Tom and Carol Montgomery-Fate."

"What can I tell you/ when you say the song/ played in your bathroom/ moves you to tears, brings back/ the faces of men and women/ at ease with laughter and sorrow,/ the children, the wounded,/ the hardy, those who would walk/ without shoes three days and nights/ into the village for matches, oil, kerosene, simple/ medicine? To a young/ revolutionary full/ of words, an elder tells/ how he has eaten more rice/ in his lifetime.

Even I,/ how am I to speak/ for them, to open my hands/ and say here,/ here are lives?

"I am learning to read stories/ etched into spaces so small/ you would think nothing/ could grow there./ An orchard of poems/ in this room./ There are no mountains here/ but I still know how to turn/ my face to the wind and tell/ when rain will come."

Unlike poetry, short fiction was especially strong last year.

Finally, the stories of N.V.M. Gonzalez had been collected and published abroad in *The Bread of Salt and Other Stories*, from the imprint of the University of Washington Press (1993). This is the same hospitable press that put out a bestselling edition of expatriate Pinoy Carlos Bulosan's landmark novel, *America is in the Heart*.

Thanks to a reprint edition from the University of the Philippines Press (1994), we can now savor the textures and tones of this most subtle of Filipino fictionists. His stories have characters from Mindoro, which a reviewer in the *Philippines Free Press* in the 1950s once called "that island with a wondrous name."

In his Preface, Mr. Gonzalez said: "My writings were peopled with subsistence farmers in their barefoot dignity and fishermen daring 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."

In the last two decades, some quarters reviled him for fiction that is not "socially or politically relevant." But like Chekhov, Gonzalez's fiction breathes with the pain of poverty and inner conflict; it is there, done so skillfully, so casually, and so well. And note: some of these so-called critics cannot string together a decent English sentence even if their very lives depend on it.

To them, Mr. Gonzalez has a rebuke: "The [English] 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."

Another old hand whose stories had been collected is Simplicio P. Bisa. De La Salle University Press had put between covers Mr. Bisa's stories in *Umaga sa Dapithapon at Iba Pang Akda*.

New Day, that house which kept the flame of publishing burning during the darkest days of the Marcos dictatorship, seems to have flickered in 1994. But still, they managed to publish the posthumous collections of T.D. Agcaoili (two volumes) and Leoncio P. Deriada's *The Week of the Whales and Other Stories*.

Once more, Anvil Publishing produced the most number of titles. They began putting out short novels by the country's best writers in Filipino. *Sila at ang Gabi* by the formidable Lualhati Bautista is a bestseller, proving once again that there is a market for well-written, provocative fiction in our language. The other short novel is Fanny A. Garcia's *Apartment 3-A Mariposa St.*, which probes the lives and losses of three women—Judith, Rosalyn, and Celeste.

Moreover, Fanny A. Garcia's prizewinning stories have been collected in *Sandaang Damit at iba pang Maikling Kuwento*. They are all here, from "Arrivederci," which details the plight of the Filipina overseas contract workers in Italy to "Pina, Pina Saan Ka Pupunta," which was first published in the *Observer* in 1981. Bravely, confidently, this story sticks a knife into the unjust relationship between the Philippines and the U.S. in the form of an American who impregnates a Filipina from the slums. The prose never blinks, especially in the sex scenes. The story steers clear of melodrama, where the woman is always the suffering victim.

Tony Perez also continues his Cubao books with *Eros, Thanatos* (Cacho). His next is a book of short stories called *Cubao Midnight Express*. There is also the back-to-back collection of two young writers: Eli R. Guieb's *Pintada* and Roland B. Tolentino's *Ali*Bang*Bang*. Both are members of the young writers' group *Katha*.

In his Preface, Guieb gives us the context for his fiction.

"*Lahat ng tao, at lahat ng bagay, sa isang tiyak na yugto o sa kabuuang kontinuum ng nagbabagong historikal na kaganapan sa isang naliligalig na lipunan, ay kabilang sa isang kolektib. Sa alam niya at sa hindi, sa ayaw niya at sa gusto, ang indibidwal ay kolektibong kabuuan ng kanyang panahon. . . Maging ang kanyang mga kwento, hayag man o hindi, isinasatinig man ang mga ito o itinatago na lamang sa kasuluksulukan ng kanyang isip, ay bunga ng kolektibong kamalayan. . .*"

Structurally, Tolentino is the more daring writer. He knows his Critical Theory, and incorporates his learning into his fiction. Snippets from news items, a song written in 1896, quotes from Jose Rizal and Sharon Cuneta, letters from family and friends, crowd this book. On these pages you can also find rewritings of canonical lit, *Asperges* and *Vidi Aquam* from the Roman Missal, handbills from the Victory Christian Fellowship, "Lovingly Yours, Helen," and a recipe for *palabok*.

The audacious title story, "Ali*Bang*Bang," has six versions. In the fifth version, the reader—who in recent theories has been tasked with completing the gaps in the text—is invited to fill in the blanks. The sixth version is just that—completely blank, with the reader invited to create his or her version of the story.

Anvil also reprinted the best stories from Gilda Cordero-Fernando's *The Butcher, The Baker, The Candlestick Maker* (Benipayo Press, 1962) and *A Wilderness of Sweets* (Philippines International, 1973). Appropriately called *Story Collection*, the cover design by Ibarra Crisostomo shows a "colorized" photo-

copy of a photo of the young and beautiful writer sitting on her four-poster, leafing through a manuscript. She had then become a publisher of her famous GCF Books.

My favorites in this book are the sharply satirical "The Visitation of the Gods" and the poignant stories of the war, "A Wilderness of Sweets" and "People in the War." The last is a story within a story; a love story framed by the war. Again, life asserts itself bravely against death.

In the last scene, the so-called liberation of Manila by the Americans, the Japanese have gone berserk, running their bayonets through the bodies of any Filipino. The family is hiding in a bombed-out shelter, and suddenly Eden's (note the name) baby begins to cry. Leave, the father says, but before she could the Japanese soldiers return. Lina, Eden's sister, has an idea: she gets a pillow, puts it on top of the baby, then sits on it.

Afterward:

We slept from exhaustion. The crunching footsteps had disappeared. The moon rose bright and clear, like the promise of another time, and we could find our way out. A group pushing a wooden cart full of pots and pans and mats and bundles was coming towards us. The Americans are here, the father of the group we met said. They have gone over Santa Cruz bridge. Papa counted the heads. Boni was gone, Mr. Solomon was gone. We couldn't find Eden. We looked back to where we had come from and through the twisted steel buttresses of the ravished homes, we could see a lonely figure poking amid the debris.

"She has probably gone back to bury the child," Mother said.

"Let's go ahead then," Father said. "She'll catch up with us."

E. San Juan's fiction written in the 1960s are also collected in *Smile of the Medusa*. Anvil's Contemporary Philippine Fiction Series only has two titles. The first is *Where Only the Moon Rages*, nine tales by Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, with the calm and lovely watercolor of June Dalisay on the cover. This book comes right after the success of *Tales for a Rainy Night* (DLSU Press), which won the National Book Award from the Manila Critics Circle.

The other book from Anvil is *The Black Men and Other Stories* by Timothy R. Montes. This young man (below 30) has won awards from the Palanca and the *Philippine Graphic*. Mr. Montes has many beautiful stories to tell—if he could only condense those long, unwieldy sentences and prune down the clichés in his stories.

The novel is in a sad state. *Sparrows Don't Sing in the Philippines* by Paulino Lim Jr. (New Day) was the only novel published last year. Linda Ty-Casper's new novel is still in the Ateneo de Manila University Press. Tony Perez will be writing a vampire novel in Filipino. Eric Gamalinda has finished his fourth novel in Los Angeles; he has moved to New York and is writing his fifth. Ninotchka Rosca is preparing her third book of short stories. Jessica Hagedorn

is writing a screenplay and a second novel after her anthology of Asian-American short fiction, *Charlie Chan is Dead* (Penguin Books), which was reviewed in *Time* magazine.

The past year also showed a very good harvest for the essay in all its forms: literary, journalistic, personal, even the biographical.

The grand old lady of Tagalog fiction, Genoveva Edroza Matute, published her memoirs in *Mga Gunita* (Bookmark). Together with her husband Epifanio G. Matute, the satirical writer of the "*Mga Kuwentong Kutsero*" series, Mrs. Matute is an important voice in Philippine literature. Tender and lyrical these memories are, as prefigured in these lines: "*bahagharing/ iba't ibang kulay/ ang mga gunitang/ nagsasalimbayan/ matapos ang ulan.*"

The Ties that Bind: a Guide to Family, Business and other Interests in the Ninth House of Representatives by Eric Gutierrez has become one of the year's most controversial books. Published by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism and the Institute for Popular Democracy, this investigative tome affirms what we have suspected all along.

Its findings: "Two out of three members of the House have parents, children, siblings or spouses in public office; 116 representatives own agricultural land, 17 have interests in logging companies, 14 in mining, 45 in real estate and 18 in construction firms; 139 members — more than two-thirds of the House — held political office before 1972, the year martial law was declared." It's a who's who, then, of the creatures who have blighted our lives.

Anvil also launched the books of three women writers at Fort Santiago last March. Rina Jimenez-David has compiled her columns in *Woman at Large*, while Criselda Yabes wrestled with the ghosts of her Paris sojourn in her second book, *A Journey of Scars*.

Meanwhile, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo returns to the ruminative essay in *The Path of the Heart*. University of Santo Tomas Dean and poet Ophelia Dimalanta notes that everywhere Dr. Pantoja-Hidalgo "goes, her Filipino-ness always surfaces, in pain, pathos or pride. For this much-travelled lady with the facile pen, the incisive mind, the vigorous imagination and the impeccable language, there is nothing like having one's country to come back to."

Anvil also published two biographies. The first is Nick Joaquin's *La Orosa: The Dance-Drama that is Leonor Goquingco*. The second is Bienvenido N. Santos's *Postscript to a Saintly Life*, the sequel to his prizewinning *Memory's Fictions* (New Day).

Virgilio S. Almario, Ma. Elena Paterno, Ramon C. Sunico, and Rene O. Villanueva also joined forces for the landmark book *Bumasa at Lumaya: A Sourcebook on Children's Literature in the Philippines*.

The next two books are interesting. In *My Daughter Cecile*, Rosario B. Licad records, with sometimes unsettling frankness, the rise to world fame of her daughter, who won the much-coveted Leventritt Gold Medal at age 20. The *Chicago Times* wrote a rapturous review of Cecile, part of which said: "She is

extraordinary . . . one of the great flaming talents that comes along one or two times in every generation . . ."

Counterpoint to that is Edilberto N. Alegre's *Pinoy na Pinoy: Essays on National Culture*. His two earlier books—*Inumang Pinoy* and *Pinoy Forever*—have won the National Book Award given by the Manila Critics Circle. In his latest work, he focuses on the national culture.

Here, Mr. Alegre has an essay called "The Irrelevance of Cecile Licad." He illustrates his point through Francisco Buencamino's *Mayon* and *Larawan*, which Ms. Licad played for an encore. These pieces, he said, were "arranged to fit the structure of Western classical music. [Buencamino] was Westernizing what was Pinoy."

And then he draws his sharpest point. "In the present context of historical flow, which is not so much anti-U.S. as pro-Pinoy, performers like Licad are like the remaining Pinoy writers in English—they are waning into irrelevance. . . . Relevance now is making us see who we Pinoys are, and not what we are to the blue-eyed foreigners. Licad is relevant to the concert network in the U.S. and Europe and to the CCP. She is what the U.P. and the Ateneo departments of English were in the 50s."

Mr. Alegre seems clear on where he is coming from and arguably, he has a point. But as some writers ask, "But why does he still insist on writing in English?"

And speaking of English, Dr. Doreen G. Fernandez—who used to be a professor at Ateneo's English Department but is now chair of the Department of Communication—has just published *Tikim: Essays on Philippine Food and Culture*. She is acknowledged as the country's foremost writer on food and culinary culture. Enthusiastic, evocative and, yes, delicious, these essays bring us home.

And just before the year ended, GCF Books came up with *Ladies' Lunch & Other Ways to Wholeness* by Gilda Cordero-Fernando and Mariel N. Francisco, with drawings by the late E. Aguilar Cruz. This is the healing book of the year. Lovely in design and writing, everybody—man, woman and child—can dip into this book and come up with treasures enough to keep the day, or even a whole lifetime, going.

"Ladies' lunches (sometimes as long as four hours!), the authors claim, save women's lives because they provide catharsis, women-bonding, networking, self-help, ritual and celebration. They also lead to personal growth and wholeness."

Thus, 1994 seems a strong year for prose but not for poetry which, from a publishing point of view, has always been the least bankable among the genres. Be that as it may, we must applaud the young and brave band of Philippine publishers who, along with our indefatigable writers, are producing books that contain our many words of heartbreak, and of hope.