

THE POETICS OF PROFOUND PERCEPTION:

Paul Alcoseba Castillo's *Walang Iisang Salita*
(UST Publishing House, 2018)

Ma. Ailil B. Alvarez

The title of Paul A. Castillo's first full-length poetry collection, *Walang Iisang Salita* (UST Publishing House, 2018), loosely translates in English to "Not a Single Word," and it is virtually impossible to sum up the book in precisely just that. A phrase, however, may suffice: the poetics of the unexpected, leading to a profound perception.

It is clear from reading the first few poems that Castillo channels his photographer-self into his poet-persona. He crafts his verses with the careful attention with which a visionary with a lens endows his or her subjects, aware of all the elements and able to imbue as much meaning into a snapshot, weaving them completely into art. This keen sense of heightened awareness is hard to miss.

The poet's tools are secrets, silences, and the gaps between; and Castillo successfully capitalizes on all these. The persona in his poems is almost always the perfect observer: the eagle-eye with which he surveys his composition splices open the silences and transforms the page into his own canvas.

A true testament of the merging of form and content, the shape of some poems invites the reader to pay close attention to the way the lines are printed on the page. The words matter as much as the spaces between them; we look at and listen to the white space between and around the letters. Most interesting is his use of this technique in "Sajid Bulig" (p. 15), where the stanzas are shaped like a wave. This poem visually embodies the kind of heroism befitting the subject, whose tragic end was instrumental in saving the victims of the *Pagoda* tragedy. The poet's choice of visual representation successfully reveals as much of—if not more than—this theme, as do the verses.

In all the other works in his collection, the poet draws the readers' attention to the enjambments, with the suspended breath at the end of each line building up anticipation for the next one. The tone seems perfunctory, a deliberate understating of the depth of emotion, undercutting the current of feeling. But the reader does not necessarily realize it until s/he gets to the last line.

There is also a rawness of emotion here that the poet reveals ironically by making readers realize the insight, even though he (through his persona) is the one who feels it—an unencumbered transference of emotion, from author to reader, as if he were holding up a mirror to the reader after surveying his surroundings, thus enabling the reader to experience the splintered emotion that led to the poetic insight.

In Castillo, it is also palpable how the social is personal: always starting with things around him, and ending with the self. The poet invites and challenges us to look around us, and to see ourselves. Society is the mirror of identity; and the poet, by championing the power of the often-overlooked and glossed over, zooms in on truths we usually miss.

The scenes and issues the poet has chosen offer a cross-section of Philippine society: commuting, street scenes (market, *taong grasa*, cockfighting), showbiz, murder (as in "Billboard" and "Presscon"), quotidian tasks (letter sending in "Panuto"), lovers' spats—it's the little things one notices, but take for granted. It is these that the poet pays attention to. References do not just lend specificity; they reveal who he is and locate his consciousness. The results do not intimidate, rather they entice readers to enter his world. The poetry is light, too, at first glance, but surprisingly dense in emotion and insight.

What is most prominent, however, is his penchant for spiritual imagery. Catholicism is the wellspring of inspiration. Across his various works, his very syntax is rather Biblical: "*paghawi ng dagat*," "*marami ang tinawag*," "*pagpako sa krus*," "*panata*;" issues of guilt, contemplation on the Creator and creation; and questions about not finding God. Paul balances references from the lofty (philosophy, theology, art) to the mundane (everyday tasks we take for granted), often to highlight the insight which the poet arrives at, about the meaning of life and how to live it with a purpose.

His politics are drawn from the articulation of the quotidian, giving subjects deprived of the spotlight their own starring role. The poet provides us glimpses of the quiet and fills in the synapses of moments.

The magic of Castillo's poetry, however, is this: the issue is never really what it seems to be on one's first reading. The truth of the matter eludes the reader at first, but identifying the insight becomes its own reward. Just when the reader feels he has formed a particular impression of the poet, the poet suddenly defies *all* these expectations with the long poem "Rebisyon" (pp. 30-42). This work leads the reader into a labyrinth of meaning that makes it impossible to guess where that poem is going. It surprises at every turn, particularly when it appears that one has it all figured out.

The poet is also plays with his titles, which sometimes have double meanings: for instance, *bilang* ["count"] is also *biláng* ["numbered". This linguistic choices illustrate the multilayered level on which his poems operate: significance is never just one thing, and with Castillo, the surface is never only what one is going to get. Even the titles are surprises. The readers grasps their true significance only after finishing the poem. Then the connection between the head and the body, so to speak, becomes more explicit.

Nor is it sufficient to look only at the way the words are rendered on the page. To really get Castillo, one must also listen to him. His attention to form and detail expands to the musicality of line and cadence. This lyricism or "lyricality" of his verses might well go unnoticed. And this is at the heart of his poetic strategy. To arrive at this revelation, the reader must succumb to the power of the unsaid.

In the end, the title says it all: one word is not enough. One needs to understand the poet's politics, which is contained in his poetics. And this is what each poem offers. This debut collection certainly does not disappoint.

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