

# INTRODUCTION

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It wasn't a year for metaphors. When the world began to burn in January of 2020, the blaze that spread across the Amazon and Australia was literal fire. As the world struggled to put it out, it seemed to have sunk deeper into the earth, rumbled beneath our feet and finally erupted in the form of ash, gas, and lava from the crater of a little volcano island that had been peacefully placid in the middle of Taal Lake since 1977. It was only January 12.

Then a different kind of fire had begun to spread—the kind that burns the lungs and takes away all taste, all smell, and everything else it wants to take. A woman who had arrived from Wuhan, China was the Philippines' first case of the coronavirus. It was announced a day short from the end of the first month of the year.

A few days into February, the Philippines reported the first coronavirus death outside of Wuhan, China; and by March, we had retreated into our homes as our country went into lockdown. We were used to hunkering down for a day or two, because we are a typhoon-battered country, and maybe we thought, well, this might last only a week or two, so we should be okay. But the weeks stretched into months, and even though the lockdowns changed names—from “enhanced community quarantine” to “general community quarantine,” and modified versions of the two, our realities had begun to break down.

Work and school, if we still had them, had invaded our homes; and we were left feeling as if we were being driven out of our own houses, and minds—but we couldn't go out. We also couldn't lose our minds, despite being in danger of losing everything else, as our country and the rest of the world stood still. Because even standing still has its costs—closed borders,

bankrupt businesses, empty grocery shelves, cancelled plans, human emotion reduced to a digital screen, and for many, daily life reduced to a gamble between the loss of livelihood and the loss of life. By July, a total number of 2,022 Filipinos had lost this gamble, succumbing to the coronavirus.

At some point between the 2 positive cases in January and the 491,258 thousand in December, we all had reached our existential thresholds and had asked ourselves, “what is the point?” 2020 had worn us down to the bare necessities of life, and we had asked ourselves what the point was of everything that had nothing to do with food, shelter, or face masks. Finding no answer, some of us slipped into either ennui, or... escape.

But most of us chose to plod on, and navigate the new near-apocalyptic world we now live in. Which is why this issue of *Tomas* exists. A journal for literature and literary commentary will not save us from a global pandemic; but now, more than ever, we need stories that will remind us about how to be human.

We begin our issue with literary commentary/literary criticism, specifically, with an essay, first delivered as a speech by National Artist for Literature, Virgilio S. Almario, at the 2019 Philippine PEN International Congress. In “Indigenous Languages: Literary Freedom and the Opportunity to Exist,” he brings to light the plight of our indigenous languages and literatures; and argues for the pressing need for more opportunities for publication and translation since they are part of our “intangible cultural heritage.”

The spotlight remains on language in Gemino H. Abad’s *A Poetics of the Literary Work*. Here, Abad speaks of the role of language as the place where the imagined “ideals of love, beauty, and goodness,” come into being. With imagination, language, and the literary work in a perfect triumvirate, Gemino Abad says, the poet is in a position to enrich, or even transform, the destiny of his country.

In keeping with the idea of the transformative power of literature, Ruth Clare G. Torres embarks on an interesting study that demonstrates how Filipino writers have defied popular, mostly Western, standards of detective fiction/crime fiction. Her focus is how Filipino writers of detective fiction have characterized the Filipino detective, using F.H. Batacan’s *Smaller and Smaller Circles*, Charlson Ong’s *Blue Angel*, *White Shadow*, Nick Joaquin’s *Cave and Shadows*, and Maria Fres-Felix’s *Crimetime*. Her analysis reveals how the traditional and modern conventions have been deconstructed, in order to

carve out a uniquely Filipino version of detective fiction, and in the process, describe a uniquely Filipino take on crime solving. This piece is probably the first study of its kind, detective fiction in English being a relatively new genre in the country. It is to be hoped that Torres will expand this essay into a full-length book, to include, for instance, Mabek Kawsek's *Good Dog*, which was launched in 2019 to glowing reviews.

We come next to poetry.

Ralph Fonte, with his suite of poems: "Under *Terra Incognita*," takes the reader to different landforms across the globe, as he investigates the crevices and spaces between earth and heaven, beliefs and people. For the persona, getting lost in the forest or city, real or imagined, is actually a way to find and understand love, peace, or even God. It does not matter if it be Manila or Spain. What matters for the persona is how the geography of the land, and of the mind, changes with time.

Joey A. Tabula's short collection of poems, "Confidential: HIV/AIDS" focuses on the intimate relation between an attending doctor and his/her patient, and how the dynamics between them plays with the secret of the latter's illness. Like, how it must be kept even from the dutiful mother, or how it was transmitted by a lover who will not be named during their conversations. And how, even after the passing of the patient, what was impersonal becomes personal, and then had to return to being impersonal.

The travel poems in John Iremil Teodoro's "Limang Tulang Cambodia" contain, not only descriptions of famous landmarks, but also the images of flowers from the Indochina peninsula. Here the persona addresses a faraway beloved by imbuing his longing and despair with the beauty of nature. But, unlike the magnificence of the structures that the persona has seen, and the temporal nature of flowers, the collection holds on to the belief that "may mga bagay na panghabangpanahon," whether these be love or the memory of it.

Ralph Semino Galan's suite of poems, "Of Love and Other Attritions: Five Contemporary Mindanao Poems in Translation," might be read as a response to Virgilio Almario's call for greater attention paid to indigenous languages. Galan's translations are a study on presence and absence where love can exist even without memory, and poverty can house beauty and peace in the same space as horror, hunger, and injustice.

Eugene Gloria's collection of poems reimagines the Philippines's national hero, Jose Rizal, as a man within and out of his time in *Rizal Walks Along the Foxgloves*. Gloria places Jose Rizal among flowers, as he struggles with loneliness and distrust, and then transports him elsewhere, to a different plane of existence, where both he and his ghost are scrutinized. Gloria rounds up his vision of Jose Rizal in the suite's last piece, as a man whose "art cannot be slowed down even at the threat of a bullet aimed at his heart."

In *Reversing the Foolish Man and Other Poems*, Joel H. Vega explores the direction of the movement of forces beyond our control. Regret and despair move in reverse when children become collateral damage in a man's war on drugs. Meanwhile, love, anger, and death are locked in a spiral dance, that stretches both northward and southward. Vega ends his collection with an image of affection and desire as a wary dance between the sun and earth while other celestial forces bear witness.

Danton Remoto's "Suite of Five Poems" tethers memory to places. He turns the colors of Boracay at sunset and nightfall into unhealable wounds, and the remembered intensity of past lovers. Remoto makes death and mourning seep into both the silence of an island of white sand and the din of a city traffic jam; and plants the idea of home in bright red fire trees, recalled at the edge of winter in a foreign land.

Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr.'s "From Tangere" works both in and out of the universe of Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*, as a meditation on sounds and images. The morning symphony of birds in a garden masks a sinister quietness. A gunshot rings out as a life is negotiated, then celebrated. Dawn descends into sunset on the day of the hero's execution. Dela Peña's words thrill the senses, most especially in *The Chase on the Lake*, where their appearance on the page reflect the persona chasing one image after another, and in the "Epilogue," where the light of a few words casts a long shadow of lines.

Mark Anthony Cayanan's "Poems from Ecstasy Facsimile" teases the reader with fragmentary glimpses of a kind of euphoria that doesn't feel quite right. It is found in the young body and how it suffered for someone else's brief ecstasy. It is also found in images of domestic bliss and satisfied hungers, where validation and absolution are held for ransom, and devotion and gratitude are weighed against the gift of a body that does not feel much like the persona's own.

This issue's creative nonfiction section is an interesting assortment of essays and memoirs.

Mina Deocareza's essay, *'Nak ng PI*, offers an insider's view on what it was like to be raised by a private investigator. "Nak ng PI" is a fresh take on the dynamics between a mother and a daughter. The author reveals how she felt when her security and privacy were willfully violated, under the guise of protectiveness, by the very person whom she respected and admired so much her own mother.

Chuckberry J. Pascual's *Buhok* is a meditation on a person's "crowning glory," and the other purposes it serves, aside from facial aesthetics, something that the persona learned at an early age. It also touches on the difference between a salon and a barber shop, and how hair can be used as a tool to discriminate against certain people. But Pascual brings the CNF piece to a more personal level when he relates the matter of his own hair growth, or the lack thereof, to his experience of loss. He debunks the idea that hair is just hair, be it a buzz cut, long, or unkempt, and will never be a fitting measure for losing someone. Pascual's tone is stealthily sad, i.e., the sadness is subtly hidden beneath his humor and candor.

Joselito D. Delos Reyes' essay, *Kuwadro Kara: Apat Na Mukhang Muntik Ko Nang Hindi Mamukhaan*, is an engaging take on the people he met, during four different instances. Whether it's a relative at a family gathering or a cobbler sought for his skills, each presents an image of what it is like to be living in these times. Delos Reyes narrates how even a small object, taken for granted on a daily basis, can cause ripples which impact on our socio-economic standing as individuals, and our geo-political standing as a community.

In "Pumayat, Yumaman, Umibig: Hindi Ako Relihiyoso Pero Espiritwal Akong Tao," U.Z. Elisrio offers a guide to living a better life—in terms of health, wealth, and spirituality. Drawing on his personal experience – the pleasure of eating rice and meat, wearing the same dilapidated shoes, creating new routines – the persona reflects on a life well-lived. Or perhaps, on a life worth living as a writer still in search of a way to make his mark, that might perhaps earn him immortality?

Jenny Ortuoste's chronicle of the Manila Jockey Club's history in "Down the Stretch: Memories of San Lazaro Hippodrome" is set against the backdrop of the waning days of the Spanish Occupation and the arrival of the Americans, right down to the Second World War. Stories of famous racehorses and their jockeys, descriptions of the rich architectural detail of

the hippodrome, tales of old-timers about how to cheat at the races and what snacks were available then, etc bring on a longing for the revival of this vintage pastime, even as it moves farther and further down the southern parts of Metro Manila, and away from the consciousness of city-dwellers who were once its lifeblood.

“An Edge Between” by Popi Laudico is an unusual memoir, which begins with her baby mouth and a tooth, and how they lead to a childhood filled with quietness. This quietness pervades the essay, even as it takes us to bazaars, introduces us to yellow Labradors, to love for a much younger man, and to dancing the tango with a Columbian in Japan. Laudico takes us deeper into her psyche as her narratives grow longer. Her memoir ends with a magical dive in Donsol, with a majestic creature of the deep, and later, the drive back to Manila, to the Chainsmokers and Coldplay’s “Something Just Like This” on repeat.

Anna Felicia C. Sanchez’ “An Unreliable Guide to Climbing Mountains (Or, It’s All Uphill From Here)” is a second-person-point-of-view narrative of a mother coaching herself through motherhood—a difficult enough experience, made even more challenging with a daughter who has special needs. Sanchez bravely peels off the trite image of a martyred mother and bares a more human woman—unprepared, exhausted, and even sometimes selfish. She finds the right kind of love, her own kind of love, in mistakes made, whether they be as big as the choice of therapists, or as small as the correct footwear for climbing mountains.

R. Benedito Ferrão’s instructive and interesting “Everyday: The Exquisite Intricate” is adapted from a talk he delivered at the 25th Iligan National Writers Workshop in 2018. In it, Ferrão lauds the strengths of the genre of creative nonfiction, focusing on its power to harness the simplicity of everyday life and its ability to elevate it to a universally recognized kind of beauty. He also tackles the line between fiction and nonfiction, imagination and fact, and their relationship to the overarching demand of truth.

Our fiction section opens with Marren Adan’s flash fiction pieces: “Ortigas Excursions”. This little collection includes the realistic, the fantastic, and the pseudo-historical, all of which unfold in one business district, the Ortigas area, where BPOs remain ubiquitous. The experiences contained in these excursions can be an intimidating and frightening new look on what it is like to be a person between jobs, taking a quick lunch before running back to his/her cubicle in a call center, or just passing by the nearby mall

before heading home. In fact, one could say that these stories border on the Kafkaesque.

Stefani Alvarez' "Mumunting Alipato Ang Mga Bituin Sa Langit" revolves around taking risks, not only in terms of gambling away money in some small town lottery, but in bridging gaps between strangers stuck in a public hospital ward. The friendship formed may be considered unlikely in such a place, where no one can be trusted yet everything is in the open. These include wounds, illnesses, and even private lives, something that we may have heard about or witnessed, first-hand. But the pay-off in Alvarez' story may all be worth it, for the characters involved.

In *Nang Walang Nakakarinig*, George Deoso tackles how music and sports can possibly complement or contradict each other. Told from the secondperson point of view, this narrative about learning to play the violin is paralleled by a revelation of the persona's reluctance to watch a friend's basketball games. It is storytelling as confession. And what it reveals is the point of the story. In a way, it could be described as a preparation for the performance that is required by the bond between two people.

The short story section is capped by Maria Amparo Warren's *The Walker*, a chilling tale of two rambunctious and competitive brothers who live near an abandoned, haunted house on a mountainside. The ghosts of World War II that hound the boys and their grandfather, a former Japanese soldier, allow the narrator to explore themes of war and peace, love and forgiveness. .

We come finally to the drama.

In the first of the two plays in this issue, Rolin Cadallo Obina's "Mga Bata sa Selda 43", two siblings regain consciousness but do not seem to know where they are, or what they have done to deserve being placed inside this "room." The play and its theme do not coincide with the news surrounding the current administration's reputation, in the last 4 years of involving minors in the war on drugs. But they reflect the turmoil of Martial Law, by identifying the similarities that political prisoners of the late dictator share with today's unwilling victims.

Told from the perspective of three women, Jose Socrates Delos Reyes' one-act play, *Ang Mga Naiwan*, is a series of interviews conducted by student reporters, which reveal the coping mechanisms of two mothers and a wife after losing their children and husband. Soc's work is clearly born of the current regime, and a commentary on the effects of extrajudicial killings on the Filipino family.

We end this issue with Ma. Ailil B. Alvarez' review titled "An Archipelago of Desire a review of Alfred Yuson's *Islands of Words & Other Poems*. Alvarez discusses Yuson's remarkable handling of "the myriad forms of exodus... of differences in language as the lifeblood of a culture... and conflicts between convention and innovation." She extols the lyricism of Yuson's poetry, likening it to "a modernist, abstract painting because of the visual as well as acoustic appeal of his verses." Further, she hails Yuson as a connoisseur of sound, a "master of alliteration, of sibilance, of assonance," while at the same time, pointing out how his images take concrete form in the way his words themselves appear on the page.

This tribute is fit ending for this issue of our journal, which has been put together as our way of expressing solidarity with fellow writers, and with the rest of the country, during this cruel time. Through it we assert the necessity of literature and the other arts, and the importance of the role they play in our lives, in allowing us to keep on creating beauty as a hedge against hopelessness and despair.