

AN ARCHIPELAGO OF DESIRE: Alfred Yuson's Islands of Words & Other Poems

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Ma. Ailil B. Alvarez

Only in a poet's imagination can loneliness be ferried out into the sea, where it builds on a need to be abated and its desire finds solace in an archipelago of syllables architected to depict the spectral hues of human experience. These and more are promised by Alfred A. Yuson's poems in his 2015 collection, *Islands of Words & Other Poems* (Manila: UST Publishing House).

The title clues readers in on how the book is structured: the first part is composed of poems on a variety of topics, while a long narrative poem in the guise of a poem cycle occupies the second half of the book.

In Yuson's poems, ideas always find a comfortable fit in form. In "Contours, liquid" (p. 48), for instance, the lines are short, mimicking the very movement of fluid, of every slide and drop, as well as the quick pulsating rhythms of lovemaking.

His poems can, on the other hand, also look like they are lyrical renditions of a modernist, abstract painting because of the visual as well as acoustic appeal of his verses. In the opening poems aptly titled "Conversation 1" and "Conversation 2" (pp. 3-6), the stanzas on the page visually look like black and white boxes on a checkerboard, indicating the alternating and contrasting insights of a man and a woman. Moreover, the images he chooses, when juxtaposed, create tension in the enjambments. As in the first stanza of "Self-flagellation":

A poem of over a hundred
years ago
speaks to us
from a future
illuminated by progress
of streetlamps, the dogs
of a century still raising
one foreleg in the cause
of correct direction. (p. 49)

But it is clear that the poet's primary interest is in wielding language as a weapon. This is true in "Broken, gilded words" (pp. 55-6) where his discovery of Japanese terms for things "both ordinary and strange," in "our world / or in theirs" (thereby creating a locus of externality in the treatment of the connection), such as *tsundoku*, "the mania / of acquiring books only / to leave them unread in piles / all over intimate areas," and *kintsugi*, the craft of "mending / a broken ceramic piece / by rejoining the shards / with no less than gold." He leaves the reader with this insight, sonorous as it is profound: "that any piece of art becomes / even better when flawed — / with any marring effect / as a spirit line for escape."

Master of alliteration, of sibilance, of assonance: lines such as the following from "Performance Artist" prove his prowess as a craftsman of language, as someone who knows how to play with the tools he is given:

Scissors shearing her lush hair
or disembowelling a teddy bear.

Why, it's a performance lady
getting a rise from viewers' comforts.
She's in a zone between zigzag and zymurgy,
afflicting the calm and collected
stances of staid or curious watchers.
Woe woe to their ways of semblance
to lives conflicted as in the stop and go,
cum distilled pauses, of the everyday. (p. 31)

In “Random kindness, acts of,” the associative power of imagery are used to the full when words loop and connect in couplets like links on a chain:

When the letter left her fervid hand
the poinsettia started turning red.

How distance amplified the words
of poignance, caused colors to weep

the way bright ships turned ghostly dim
upon sailing farther into season’s horizon. (p. 53)

The poet delights in giving his images the unexpected twist. In “Prodigy” (pp. 41-2), a chess game is used as a metaphor for what seems to be the Anxiety of Influence, of overthrowing tradition and favoring the young. A parallel father-and-son dynamic is touched on in “Ink,” where the speaker himself cringes at the sight of his son’s first foray into tattooing, asking “Why couldn’t he just have vandalized / the neighbor’s walls, rather / than break the rhythm of his skin?” and leading him to conclude,

Time ruins happy places all the time.
Change reigns each time our wives
grunt and give birth to the next decades
of wasted tradition (p. 43)

The other poems reveal his varied interests: food and cooking (which, in “Blood Moon and Beef Bourguignon,” were used as metaphors for a deteriorating relationship [p. 46]), sports (in “Being One,” he focuses on “the way Nadal grunts, almost / with venom” [p. 8]), politics (“Being a Hero” and “Ready to Reply in the Proper Forum,” “What Else But Such” [pp. 16-9, 57-8, 29-30]), tributes to his friends, and significant cultural events, like Pope Francis’ Philippine visit (in “Kinds of Happiness” [pp. 27-8]). Some of his poems offer a sliver of spirituality, such as “The Long Poem to Faith” (pp. 11-3). But in all of them is the trademark Yuson style of underplaying humor, sometimes couched in subtle erotic subtexts, as his preferred mode of language play.

As to the collection’s title poem, “Islands of Words,” this is Yuson turning to the mythical, ordaining his own brand of mythopoesis. It recalls a time of tribal imagination of folkloric proportions. It imagines the customs

and lifeways of a tribe that exists in the realm of myth: it articulates their fears, depicts their battles and explorations, sings their incantations, personifies the wood made into boats. Centered around the sea, the work is suggestive of life and of truth—so much so that when the people in the poem learn there is another name for it, it shattered everything they believed in, and so forced, they bid farewell to beauty.

The poet also varies verse length and stanza forms in this poem, to depict different personae. He also writes of songs and dances and rituals and priestesses—the exotic-sounding landscape is ripe with possibilities for tension, and conflict—which, as Tim Tomlinson wrote in his introduction, is the “engine of narrative” (p. ix). What is remarkable is how Yuson, in all things, touches on the myriad forms of exodus, of the pains of leaving and starting over, of differences in language as the lifeblood of a culture, of change and conversion, and conflicts between convention and innovation—the cycle could easily be taken as an allegory of a myriad situations that touch on domains both personal and political.

The persona delights the reader in poetic descriptions of action, speech, and character—a beautiful, fluid lyricism. It is as if the long poem is interested in telling a story as much as it is invested in becoming a poem. Rich in the employment of other sound devices in English, it is clear that every line bears the stamp of the poet, where he does precisely what he does well:

Hiss. Crackle, sparkle. We dance till the dry branches
are consumed, and the glow intermittent on our faces
and ankles dies out with the magic, till old and young
together we are happy in exhaustion, our feet stomping
with reduced fury on our sacred ground, till the chief
pounds the gong with dreamweave cloth sheathing
his wooden fist, till the priestess points to the sparks
and the stars, and the children pray with her for marvels. (p. 67)

Tomlinson also quotes Merlie Alunan in saying that “poetry isn’t about words, poetry is about the silence after the explosion that the words lead to.” At the end of the poem cycle, that is indeed what the reader immerses him or herself in, thinking about “heroic acts / of bitterly, happily, slaying one another” (p. 107).