

Introduction

Augusto Antonio Aguila

In one of the meetings held at the spacious conference room of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, one of the writing fellows suggested that we come out not with just one issue for 2017, but a five-volume anniversary series which will feature the five genres: poetry, fiction, drama, creative nonfiction, and criticism. At first, we were quite stunned by that suggestion because we knew it was difficult and tedious enough to come out with one. But the surprise turned to enthusiasm when we were given our respective assignments. After the announcement was made online, we received a great number of submissions which were all reviewed by the most seasoned writers in the country. For fiction the submissions were trimmed down to eleven; six are works written in English and five in Filipino. And we are quite proud of this issue's fine harvest.

Chapter 4 of “White Lady/Black Christ: A novel-in-progress” by Charlson Ong provides us with a grim portrayal of the eternal conflict between idealism and pragmatism, hope and hopelessness, and good and evil as a dark-skinned man attempts to find his place and resolves to answer questions concerning his identity in a world that is marred by uncertainty and desperation.

In the story “An Errand,” Angelo R. Lacuesta delves into the seemingly simple yet intriguing tasks or ‘errands’ a driver performs for his rich employer. The story gives us a glimpse of a working class man’s fascination for his boss’ daily activities, business engagements, and illicit affairs. The

most important detail, the blue pill, which appears in the last part of the story, subtly reveals his boss' sordid preoccupations which the main character secretly wishes to be a part of.

"Better Than Sex" by Dada Fres-Felix tackles the age-old story of an old man with diabetes, who wishes to continue having an affair with a much younger woman despite vehement opposition from his children. But this tale has a twist. In his attempt to please her, he takes Viagra, goes to her room, and discovers that she is having sex with another man. While this seems to be the normal trajectory the story would probably take, the writer surprises us with a perfect ending that defies convention.

Francis Paolo Quina's "Economies of Scale" examines the various complexities of love, how relationships begin and eventually crumble, the unending clash between the desire to move on and forget, and the decision to go on and fight for the person one truly loves, and the many uncertainties and unresolved issues that go with putting one's heart on the line.

In the story "Rice Soldier," Rina Garcia Chua reveals how a father's mental breakdown can have such devastating effects on family relationships and how this handicap can actually destroy even the closest of family ties. But Chua ends the story with an affirmation that love can withstand the most difficult circumstances.

"Re-enactment" by Glenn Diaz takes us into the fast-paced and often unpredictable world of journalists, lifestyle editors, and tabloid writers which in this story actually serves as a backdrop for the major character's fruitless expectations and dismal failures as well as his take on man's futile attempts to 're-enact' memory.

This issue's crop of fiction in Filipino is a good mix of the experimental and the traditional. Three stories fall under what is called "metafiction." These are Rijel Reyes' "Mga Alitaptap sa North Avenue," U Eliserio's "Excerpt mula sa Diksiyonaryo-Gabay sa mga gawa ni Berry Manansala," and Edgar Calabia Samar's "Isang Maikling Kasaysayan ng Pagpaslang." While the remaining two stories, Jack Alvarez's "Pag-ibig sa Panahon ng All-out War" and Joselito Delos Reyes' "Field Trip," may be classified as conventional realist fiction, there is nothing commonplace about the topics that both stories deal with.

“Mga Alitaptap sa North Avenue” deals with the necessity of time, and its various implications in the production of fiction: time that is necessary for researching one’s chosen topic (which may or may not include actual fieldwork), and time that is spent while contending with one’s history or histories (time past), which usually impacts the time that is spent on the actual writing of a piece.

Time is also essential in the dilemma explored in “Isang Maikling Kasaysayan ng Pagpaslang,” a story that seems intent on blurring genres, distinctions, and representations. One reviewer referred to its affinity to Thomas Harris’ *Hannibal*, a suspense thriller, to Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*, a meta-detective series of novels, and to Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose*, a postmodern historical detective novel. Since it is also set in the academe, with a writer-professor as protagonist, it is tempting to drop another name into the (already) heady mix: David Lodge, who is famous for his campus novels. But perhaps, all these comparisons may only be a disservice to the originality of Samar’s fiction, and if anything, further proof of how cosmopolitan Filipino fiction has become, with writers of his caliber.

“Excerpt mula sa Diksiyonaryo-Gabay sa mga gawa ni Berry Mansala” seems to be the most oblique of all the stories in this issue by presenting itself as an excerpt from a highly idiosyncratic, obscure, and insular dictionary. It throws into relief the myriad processes involved not just in the production of fiction, but also in the consumption of it, particularly, the act of “making meaning.” By presenting small, self-contained, fractured but nonetheless related narratives, the story challenges the usual expectations of wholeness in fiction, and by referring to its entries as inherently “meaningful,” with actual, prescribed meanings inscribed onto the text, challenges the whole notion of reader-response.

“Pag-ibig sa Panahon ng All-out War,” deploys a familiar trope—a romantic affair set during war—but twists it so queerly, such that one is tempted to read it as an anti-love story. The narrative features a bakla protagonist who meets a lover in the most unexpected manner. The complicated romance that blossoms between them is further highlighted by the violent, ideological war that serves as backdrop.

Seemingly the most innocuous, “Field Trip,” with its main protagonist, Jordan, and his search for a lost bracelet in a town that seems to be

somewhere in between the rural and the urban, echoes the bildung narratives written by Pedro Dandan, Rogelio Sikat, and Genoveva Edroza-Matute. Like the stories of these great realists, “Field Trip” displays an ambiguous relationship with modernity. And like the prose of these writers, Delos Reyes’s writing is full of verve, is infused with a crystal-clear sense of place, and most of all, is able to pack an emotional wallop.