Introduction

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When I learned in one of our planning sessions that *Tomas*, the official literary journal of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies (CCWLS), would simultaneously come out with five issues for its fifth year of revival (one for fiction, one for poetry, one for drama, one for criticism, and one for creative nonfiction), and that I would be the editor of the issue on nonfiction, I knew in my heart that this was going to be a daunting task, albeit a special one.

This special issue features works by international writers Robin Hemley and Cecilia Manguerra Brainard. In it also are the works of some of the country's best writers of any genre (nonfiction included): Jose "Butch" Dalisay, Jr., Alfred "Krip" Yuson, Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, Rolando Tolentino, J. Neil Garcia, Eugene Evasco, Kristian Cordero, Allan Popa, Susan Lara, Ferdinand Jarin, and Mayette Bayuga. Moreover, it features literary outputs of the emerging voices in Philippine literature: Ned Parfan, Sooey Valencia, Larissa Mae Suarez, Rhea Gulin, and Mark Anthony Salvador. This issue certainly showcases the exciting blend of expressions of both established and emergent authors. Some of them are known to have been writing in the nonfiction genre for quite a while. Others are writing in nonfiction for the first time. Nevertheless, this has been a bountiful harvest.

This issue begins with works written in English. It starts with Robin Hemley's "The Travel Writer in the 21st Century," an essay that takes on travel writing in an era of diminishing borders where people like Mohammed

Ali could be a "citizen of several countries without ever moving once." For Hemley, a self-declared "polygamist of place," travel writing is ultimately tied up with the idea of national identity. It is not merely writing about the "best hotels in Maldives." He asks the travel writer to think about "what is the nation from which we travel and what is the nation to which we travel?" He asks who are the travelers of the 21st century and how will they write about their travels. Much of the writing he seeks moves inward as much as the body moves outward. It is a form of mediation for Hemley, a way for him to "confront the complexities" that surround his identity. He begins the confrontation with a narrative of himself–an American, married to a Filipina, rushing through an airport in Hong Kong after leaving Russia, on his way to work in Singapore, and sitting next to a man who asked him, "You patriot?" This leads him to the "contradictory spaces of the world"—the place where he travels to and from.

In "Letters from Another Life," Butch Dalisay unearths two letters "written in WordPerfect 5.0—but not emailed…printed out by dot matrix, then signed and stuffed into an envelope for mailing"—the ancient art of the snail mail. One, addressed to Gina Apostol, talks of weddings, US debuts, Ph.D. life, submitting manuscripts in floppy disks, and expresses wonder at his computer that was "IBM-compatible, which has enough memory (30 megabytes) to store 15,000 pages of text." The second, addressed to Ramon Bautista (the writer, not the comedian), was a response to his comments on a story that Dalisay had sent. It is also a discussion of their opposing positions as writers with their own resistances, Dalisay to "exoticism" and Bautista to "Americanization," without the tactless wailing and trolling that ends the "unfriending" that plagues much of friendships today. Both Apostol and Bautista are Dalisay's friends and his letters to them are important records of a bygone era that show how people maintained connections "to real, pre-Facebook friends."

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo ponders on the question of literary influences—something she rarely encounters in "'Literary Influences' and the Like." She suggests that they should "not be limited to writers or works of literature. More interesting might be other people or particular circumstances or forces that led the writer to the literary life." She lists her mother, her Tita Pacita, teachers, and friends from St. Paul College, Q.C., and UST, and the "little band of women" from the UST faculty as

the people who eventually inspired her to be the writer that she is today. However, it doesn't just stop there. Her writing continues to evolve over the years, until the onset of Facebook—an avenue that gives her direct access to her readers, fulfilling her idea of writing as a conversation. Hidalgo also offers a glimpse into her life as a writer of fiction and nonfiction and how her writing had to find spaces in between her lives as a woman, daughter, wife, mother, and academic.

In "Antarctica," Ned Parfan gives a glimpse of himself as a child fascinated with Childcraft Encyclopedia despite not knowing how to read yet. He tells of the stories his father made up from the pictures in the encyclopedia before moving on to the atlases and globes that lead him to make up his own stories. The vast empty spaces tempered by borders fascinated him. He says he "became bewitched by them, following the blue line of the Yangtze down to the sea, tracing the rugged white lines of northern Canada." But out of all the shapes in the map, it was Antarctica—the "shapeshifter"—that remained beyond his reach. So he decides to make his own Antarcticas on scratch papers. These Antarcticas later expanded into whole worlds which he populated with people and their stories—a habit he never grew out of.

Two writers pay tribute to one of the bastions of Philippine Literature, National Artist Francisco Arcellana: poet and critic J. Neil Garcia and fictionist and workshop director Susan Lara. These were written and read during the centennial celebration of the celebrated writer in 2016.

J. Neil Garcia writes two poems in memory of Arcellana's words. The first poem was born from an unexpected encounter with Arcellana. Garcia narrates how, after he had delivered a discourse on gender performativity in drag shows and the melancholia that besets all gender as they are "haunted by a consecutive loss: what it might have otherwise been… all other possibilities it could have identified as, as well as loved," Arcellana told him, "It's a greater thing to love than be loved." Thus, "For Franz" was written. The second poem was Garcia's response to a quote from Arcellana—"Words are not necessary to love"—a truth Garcia found himself uncomfortable with. So he writes "With Words," a poem that staunchly defends that "writers, poets, can and do love earnestly if not especially, with their words." Both poems are a fitting tribute to a man whose words begat other words.

In "Remembering Franz Arcellana," Susan Lara speaks of her memories of Arcellana as her first teacher in creative writing and as her panelist for the UP National Writers' Workshop. His kindness, even in the face of what Lara admits was an "unremarkable" story she had submitted, remains with her until today. She narrates how she had gone to him, discouraged and dejected as a writer, and how he had responded with such intensity as he asked her, "What if you die tomorrow?" This became his gift to her-the idea of writing as a duty, "the duty to honor a gift."

In a chapter from her recently defended thesis, "Written in These Scars," Sooey Valencia, who suffers from mild cerebral palsy, speaks of the time she hopped on the train she thought was the last. At age twenty-two, she dreaded that her body was "dying down, dwindling" and the pain it came with is something Valencia describes as "musical—the thudding flat feet, the snap and pop of tight joints, the sudden spasms of overlapping toes, the vibrating ache of weakening muscles, the unbearable weight of burdened knees." This told her it was time to begin therapy again, shedding off the younger version of herself who skipped therapy in the hopes of wanting to be "a normal child." This time, she was ready. Subjected to the scrutiny of the doctor poking and prodding her legs to determine if therapy wasn't too late, Valencia hears the doctor declare that there is still some strength left in her muscle. It is with this strength that she latches on to her last hope, "the last train and I am getting on board."

Palanca Awardee for fiction Larissa Mae Suarez ventures into writing nonfiction for the first time. In "Uneven Development," she narrates her journey as a writer and coming to terms with the art she has been gifted with. From hiding books in the gaps between the shelves of the library of St. Paul, to a scared new student at the Philippine High School for the Arts, Suarez recalls her early days as she grappled with creative writing—the least populated major in PSHA. Surrounded by classmates who were singers, musicians, dancers and actors, she "began, vaguely, to feel like an impostor. Writing simply did not evoke the sense of awe and grandeur that the other art fields did." Finding a waterfall, a hidden one, cured her of that feeling and eventually led her to life as an editor in UP's student publication, *Philippine Collegian*.

In "The Piano Lessons," fictionist Cecilia Manguerra Brainard recalls a time of peace, love, and music in her early life. It begins with a

patio swing, a mother who plays the piano, a father who plays the guitar, and the end of World War II. As a way to put the horrors of 1945 behind them, Brainard's parents decided it was time that she and her sister learn how to play the piano. Long drives with her father in the afternoon in downtown Cebu for the lessons, practices, recitals, and home concerts pepper Brainard's memories—all happy ones. She decides to keep them there, in the period which she calls "Before-my-father-died." She doesn't speak much of the After period, but instead goes back to the beginning of the romance between her father and her mother. With this, she sets her memories in a loop, like a music box that plays only the best part of a song, leaving the rest to hang in heavy silence.

Creative nonfiction in English closes with Alfred "Krip" Yuson's "Evolving Genres of the Written Word." In this work, Yuson states that in a "world that's said to have gone upside down, the primary victim is the primary virtue that is truth." With the proliferation of fake news, alternative facts, false binaries, and creative interpretation in Philippine media, fiction comes under fire when Sass Sasot likens it to fake news. Yuson takes a step back and observes that the narrative techniques of filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino, Akira Kurosawa, and a novelist, Julio Cortazar, are not far off from those used by "disruptive presidents." But Yuson draws the line between them by saying that "You can spin but not tell a lie," with the difference between the two only visible to the educated. It is unfortunate then that the Philippines currently suffers from anti-intellectualism and smart-shaming. And this is perhaps because "truth has a stronger affinity with intelligence. That may be why it has increasingly come under siege."

Nonfiction written in Filipino has also been munificent. Palanca Awardee Mayette Bayuga weaves a narrative titled *"Hatinggabi sa Kumbento,"* a poignant account about her early experiences as a young novice who had to witness, as part of the religious' initiation and immersion projects, the squalor and grime of poverty in a faraway village in the south. This story provides an interesting facet in the persona of the writer who most people know as a writer of erotica and daring stories. When she begins the narrative with "*Kasama ako sa mga lumabas, sa mga umalis na hindi na maaaring bumalik,*" the reader is captured and held in the clutches of the story, never to go back again.

The memory of place becomes a mnemonic device for nonfiction

writers to metaphorically search for and piece together their past and transform it into narratives. This is akin to what Cirilo Bautista said about how the works of writers are predetermined by their environment, "We are where we are." Kristian Sendon Cordero, poet and critic, and one of the emerging voices of regional literature, uses this literary trope in his narrative, *"Ang Mahal na Birhen ng mga Bagyo."* This story uses the backdrop of Bicol to recreate the memory of a boy growing up in a locale besieged by typhoons, old superstitions, and religious devotion to the Lady of Peñafrancia. The boy, in the story, learns punishment for the first time in the games that he plays.

Allan Popa, who has recently published a collection of poems in English, tries his hand at nonfiction in Filipino with *"Sa Tuktok ng Puno ang Nais Ko."* This is a moving narrative structured around the author's memory of a sickly child who loves to climb his favorite *duhat* tree because it gives him a sense of purpose, and poignant memories about the untimely death of a childhood friend. Death and coming-of-age are two significant themes of memoirs and Popa offers up both in his memoir.

A fresh voice in the Philippine literary scene is Rhea Gulin, a former fellow of the UST National Writers Workshop. Her personal narrative, aptly titled "En Route." When she was younger, she used trees as a device to measure distances. Later, she measured fractured and disparate reminiscences by remembering transportation fares, miles, even the capacity of the mind to recollect as well as forget. One reviewer comments that *"May nagsasanib na rubdob at restraint ang pagsasalaysay ng espasyo at pagitan mula sa iba't ibang baul ng alaala, samantalang may malay sa mga realidad na panlipunan tulad ng pangingibang-bayan, sistema ng paggawa at edukasyon, at gamit ng teknolohiya at social media, samantalang may pinong paghawak sa salimuot ng damdamin ng pagkatiwalag at lungkot."*

"Ikaanim na Bahay" by Mark Anthony Salvador, another new voice, is an absorbing memoir about the pains and pangs of living in and moving out of many houses. This piece depicts the emotional and psychological effects on a young boy as he grapples both with the sting of physical dislocations and the pain of emotional maturity. Reminiscent of V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, one reviewer praised it thus: *"nailunan ng sanaysay sa personal na karanasan ng pagpapalipat-lipat ng bahay ang kondisyong ekonomiko ng buhay, ang pagbabago ng panahon, ang pananatili ng kahirapan."*

Palanca and National Book Award recipient Ferdinand Pisigan Jarin's *"Papa"* is a rhapsodic memoir of a boy who grew up fatherless but ultimately finds comfort in the men in his extended family who act on behalf of his unknown father. In this funny but heartbreaking narrative piece, Jarin attempts to recreate the landmarks of his early boyhood. The void that the unknown father left has become the persona's site for moving forward.

An award-winning writer of children's stories, Eugene Evasco writes a memorable travel essay titled *"Mga Pagsasanay sa Paggalugad sa Siyudad: Lakbay-Sanaysay ng Isang Manunulat para sa Bata,"* which highlights the writer's sojourn in different places in the world as well as places of the heart. As a review notes: *"Nakapagbahagi ang manunulat ng mga karanasan niya sa ibang bansa tulad ng Singapore, UK, at (pahapyaw sa) France, España, at Italy, samantalang isinasangkot ang panitikang pambata."* This is a welcome contribution to the Philippine literary landscape which has only recently given literature for children the attention it deserves.

This issue closes with distinguished critic and academic administrator Roland Tolentino whose off-beat nonfiction narrative simply titled *"A.,"* is about an unlikely connubial relationship between a man and a fancy dancer. It takes the reader into the liminal regions and spaces of forbidden and transitory love. Told in a non-linear fashion, Tolentino writes, *"Pinatuloy ko siya sa panahong walang gustong tumuloy at panandalian lamang mamalagi."* He also defines love and courtship, the homosexual kind, in terms of power play. He adds, *"Ito ay isang laro na kailangang kalkulado mo ang iyong sarili, kontrolado mo ang laro, pati na ang iyong pinipintuho."*

Joyce Carol Oates once said that "there are two primary influences in a writer's life: those influences that come so early in childhood, they seem to soak into the very marrow of our bones and to condition our interpretation of the universe thereafter; and those that come a little later, when we are old enough to exercise some control of our environment and our response to it, and have begun to be aware not only of the emotional power but the strategies of art." In the genre of nonfiction, both influences are on display. And *Tomas* special creative nonfiction issue is a testament to this.

And now, to indulge in the abundant harvest.