Introduction

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This academic year, the UST Faculty of Arts & Letters accepted its first batch of Creative Writing majors—45 Freshmen. This is a source of elation for us in the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies. The proposal had to wait almost 6 years for approval, the delay partly caused by the implementation of the K-12 Program, which effectively destabilized the educational system, not just on the secondary level, but on the tertiary level.

Everyone agreed that the program was overdue. The Center was established in 1999. The MA Creative Writing Program opened shortly after. Today, the Center has an Assistant Director, 13 Resident Fellows, and 2 Associates. Among them, they cover all the genres.[1]

And now, the program is finally in place. One turns to the other side of the partnership: the students. And the question occurs: what attracted them to the new program?

"They think it will help them write more interesting posts in social media, thereby earning more followers," a cynical friend volunteers. The suggestion earns the expected laughter.

1 The list of the Center's staff complement, and their specializations, follows: Fiction (Chuckberry Pascual, Joselito Delos Reyes and Augusto Antonio Aguila), Poetry (Michael Coroza, Nerisa Guevara, Ralph Galán, Delos Reyes, Ned Parfan and Paul Castillo), Creative Nonfiction, including Literary Journalism (Joselito Zulueta, John Jack Wigley, Dawn Marfil, Nestor Cuartero, Guevara, Galán and Aguila), Playwriting (Chuckberry Pascual), Scriptwriting for Film and Television (Jose Mojica), Literary Research and Literary Criticism (Joyce Arriola, Lulu Reyes, Ailil Alvarez and Galán), Literary Translation (Coroza, Delos Reyes, Pascual and Galán), Writing for Children and Young Adults (Coroza and Marfil).

But I, for one, hope for a more serious—or perhaps a more idealistic—motive. Are there not a few among them who, perhaps, have been reading literature for some time? And, has their reading not awakened in them curiosity, sensitivity, a sense of adventure? Has it not led to a certain openness… a certain largeness…of mind? And have these qualities, in turn, not propelled them to ask questions, to seek explanations or solutions, to the mysteries that puzzle or fascinate or disturb them? And is this, perhaps, what makes them wish to become writers? For is this not what literature—in its explorations and elaborations—tries to do?

The answers to those questions will not be immediately available to us, of course. But, in the meantime, the possibilities can be as expansive as our imaginations will allow. And how our imaginations soar as we embark on this new journey, in the company of our new students!

But even as we indulge our expectations, we note that the idea that creative writing cannot be taught, persists in some quarters. The premise behind the argument is either that writers are born, not made; or that the only way a writer can be made is by reading, and for this activity, a classroom is not needed.

There is undoubtedly some truth to this position. Creative Writing as a formal academic discipline is relatively new. This means that many generations of writers have managed to become writers without the help of an academic degree. And I think there are indeed some writers who may not thrive in academe's structured environment. But today's world has made expertise—or professionalism—an imperative. And expertise or professionalism is generally acquired through tutelage. When the old practices declined—the practice of apprenticeship to an older writer, for instance, and the practice of patronage bestowed by a person of wealth—writers had to acquire their credentials through other means. Today, this takes the form, of either informal instruction (such as workshops offered by individual writers or institutions like the Ayala Museum), or degree programs offered by universities.

In fact, in our own country, for a few gifted young artists (selected through a rigorous system), formal training begins with the Philippine High School for the Arts in Makiling. In the visual arts and the performing arts, no one seems to question the importance of enrolling in a conservatory of music, a theatre department, or a college of fine arts. One wonders

why there should be any doubt regarding the value of formal education in Creative Writing, particularly since Creative Writing deals with ideas and emotions as expressed through language, and is, therefore, the most intellectual of the arts.

Additionally, there is a need to remind ourselves that a university education does far more than just refine technical skills—whether these be computer skills, management skills, nursing skills, or creative writing skills. Far more important are the attitudes and values it inculcates: commitment to the disciplined search for truth, the habit of critical thought and rational discourse, a keen sense of fair play. Today, all of these are endangered by the sudden rise of strongman politics and the carelessness of the pervasive social media.

For artists, not the least artists who work with words, perhaps even more than for other artists, these attitudes and values are an absolute necessity. These will not only help them as artists, but enable them to be of more help to their fellow men. It is they who will go forth "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."

But what about the apprehension of those who, while recognizing the advantage of the supervision of young writers by experienced practitioners, are wary of the effects of the highly structured environment of the university upon a young writer? This is what I call the "cookie cutter argument." It is based on the suspicion that writers produced by academe will be a "homogenized" lot. But can one really speak of a "UP school of writing" or a "DLSU school of writing," or a "UST school of writing," for that matter? The University of the Philippines, for instance, has a large number of poets in its Creative Writing faculty: Gémino H. Abad, J. Neil Garcia, Isabela Banzon, Paolo Manalo, Wendell Capili, Isabelita Reyes, Conchitina Cruz... These poets have very different writing styles, not to mention different politics and preferred themes. Is it likely that students exposed to this variety of perspectives will all write in one particular way when they graduate? And I suspect the same situation obtains in the rest of the so-called "Big Four Universities," though they may not have as many writers working as full-time faculty members.

It seems that many young writers themselves recognize the importance of a formal education. Proof of this might be found in the robust enrollment enjoyed by Creative Writing courses offered by the

major universities, and in the large number of applicants for the Creative Writing workshops held by their creative writing centers.

Several of the contributors to the present issue of *Tomás* are the products of either these courses, or these workshops, or both. Some are now teaching Creative Writing courses, and/or are affiliated with the university creative writing centers. I believe that most, if not all, of them, would grant the beneficial effects of their formal training on their efforts to define and refine their craft. Even international writer Cecilia Manguera Brainard (in an essay which is included here) speaks of how, while she was already writing a column for a newspaper in LA, she continued taking writing classes at UCLA to further hone her craft.

It is with pride and pleasure that I now introduce them and their contributions.

All but one of the poets are established figures in our literary scene, and the only one who is relatively new to it (Paul Castillo) has already won a Palanca gold.

Carlomar Arcangel Daoana 's "Almanac of Black and Other Poems" explores darkness and light, night and day, absence and presence. Commenting on the suite of poems, fellow poet and critic Ralph Semino Galán (who is also this issue's Managing Editor) writes: "The Latin phrase *video sed no credo* ("I see it but I don't believe it") from the title poem perhaps best embodies the tension between faith and doubt, deceit and revelation, sight and sense, that is echoed by the other pieces."

International fictionist and poet R. Zamora Linmark contributes "Five Poems" taken from his first young adult novel, *The Importance of Being Wilde at Heart* (forthcoming). One of the poems, "Daydreams" might be addressed by one of the novel's characters to another. "After a Great Pain" seems to be a rueful response to Emily Dickinson's famous poem on grief. In "Heart" the persona is instructing or cautioning himself or herself. There is a youthful feel about this poems, tender, tentative, yet powerful.

Rita Gadi's "Chosen and Other Poems" are in marked contrast to Linmark's. These are somber, melancholic pieces, about loss and leave-taking, about ageing, about the absence of hope and lack of courage… And yet the collection ends on an upbeat note with "Couplehood," which is about the surprise of "a consummate light/ leaning into the afternoon/ of your life..."

A different kind of sadness surrounds Dinah Roma's "Stellar and Other Poems," ("… the lands shaking us to the core/ steadying us to the loss of everything,/ to track in daily the only rejoice of life,/ where there was once beauty/ intractable now but through song…"), for all that it is shot through with images of light. Starlight in the title poem of the collection, which is dedicated to the dead poet, Bimboy Peñaranda. Moonlight in "We Shall Write Love Poems Again" dedicated to another poet, the Singaporean Gwee Lee Sui. The artificial lights dressing the trees outside a café in "City Illumination." Here, too, the last poem provides a stunning surprise, and a terrifying one, when the reader realizes what "Fire Dance" is actually about.

Even when he deals with the familiar urban aggravation of traffic (as in "Paghihintay,") the consummate LIRA poet Michael M. Coroza, in his suite of poems, "Ágam-Ágam sa Pag-Asám," does so in language evocative of old Tagalog poetry, complete with diacritical marks. Two of the poems in the collection utilize the form of the villanelle—"Ágam-Ágam" and Ligamgam"). And the over-all tone of this suite of poems is one of regret, repression, resignation, ending fittingly with "Inip" and its succinct but lyrical suggestion of death.

Paul Alcoseba Castillo's suite of poems ranges over a number of different themes: desire ("Billboard,") and its denial ("Asetiko"), agrarian unrest ("Guhit"), street prophets ("Ang Sinasabi"). The last poem, "Neo" (for which the poet received the "Makata ng Taon" Award from the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino), is a dirge for Horacio Castillo III, the fraternity neophyte who died at the hands of his "brothers" during the all-too-familiar hazing. Though much younger than Corroza, Castillo, exhibits the clean lines and lyricism which have become the trademark of the LIRA poets, and could well promise the emergence of a major voice in the near future.

Creative Nonfiction is represented by three generations of writers in English.

Filipino-American Cecilia Manguera Brainard, who is better known in Manila for her novels and her short stories, contributes a memoir to this issue. "Class Reunion" uses the salmon run as an unusual metaphor for the lives of Filipinas in America. The difference, though, is that "the salmon will return to the gravelly beds from where they were born, and there they

will spawn, then die. Many of my friends and I, on the other hand, will not return to our original gravelly beds. We will have to improvise as we face this next hurdle in our lives."

Angelo R. Lacuesta's memoir is a quiet, touching little piece about his late father, its tender note rather unexpected, given the author's trademark humor. (Readers will recall, for instance, the tour de force nonfiction collection *A Waiting Room Companion*.) Here, memory turns into ruminations on memory, and how it is altered by technology or the lack of it. "My father would have been 70 years old if he had survived that heart attack in 1997," Lacuesta reflects, "not a very old age, and not a very long period of time to be gone. But come to think of it, 20 years is an entire generation. I am certain that if he had somehow caught a glimpse of the future using some sort of magic camera, everything to him would be nothing short of science fiction, defying even what he had richly imagined, thanks to his love of *Star Wars* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*." The memoir ends with a bemused tone, as the author contemplates his 8-year-old son, his energy, his razor-sharp brain, his bliss in the company of his parents, and how he might, or might not, remember his dad.

AJ Elicaño's is a new voice in our literary scene. And if his contribution to this issue is any indication of things to come, there is cause for celebration. The fraught relationships of fathers and sons is one of the themes of "Screaming Toward Peace," a long, rambling meditation on music, "fanhood," childhood, fathers and sons, depression, suicide, people caring about each other and the redemptive power of music. The piece is framed by the self-inflicted death of two rock stars, who were friends and co-lead singers of the famous Linkin Park—Chris Cornell and Chester Bennington—and lived the kind of troubled life that one has come to associate with rock bands. "When a band resonates with you, it starts being an interest and starts being a language," writes Elicaño, "a way to articulate, if only to yourself, the experiences for which there are no other words. Music becomes the vocabulary of memory…"

The fictionists have contributed three stories in English and two in Filipino.

In Kat del Rosario's "Fruits of Neglect," a young woman seems to be talking to someone about her garden, in particular its *kalabasa* patch. And as she does, her own life story slowly emerges, as does the identity of the

person to whom she is talking. Del Rosario's fiction is as simple, quiet, and understated as her nonfiction. (See, for instance, "Beginning with Words" in *Tomás,* II, 2.) And, like the latter, it is deeply poignant.

"Sundays at the Cardozas" by Larissa Mae Suarez focuses on the suburban home of an upper middle-class family. Everything seems to be as it should be, the pleasant routine of what Kerima Polotan famously referred to as "the sounds of Sunday." Yes, everything is fine. Until it isn't. And the unravelling is not any less devastating for being so underplayed. Suarez's is an exciting new voice in our fiction, as well as in our creative nonfiction. (See "Uneven Development" in *Tomás,* II, 7.)

Augusto Antonio Aguila's "The Monsters" (from a novel in progress) is quite the opposite of the two quiet stories described above. While it also takes place in a city, it plunges the reader into the city's darker side. The action takes place entirely in a "huge vacant lot with wild grass, weeds, and dry bushes, lit only by a lamp post … beside a filthy river which has become a dumping site." The characters are four boys, barely in their teens, who come from middle-class families and all go to school. But this story is about their main preoccupation in life: sex. In short, they're pretty normal. Which is what makes the story's denouement feel like a punch in the gut.

Readers familiar with John Jack Wigley's four essay collections will be surprised, to begin with, by the narrator's voice, which is quite distinct from the one they may be familiar with; and then by the sobriety and subdued misery of this story. No high tragedy here. Just the tiresome monotony of a dead-end job and the slow acceptance that nothing she had ever dreamt of would come to be. Wigley's story augurs well for his forthcoming debut collection of short fiction, and the novel he is working on.

This compact, minimalist story is followed by Luna Sicat Cleto's expansive narrative, "Tatlong Proposisyon ng Puting Hangin," which is at once love story, mystery and myth. While it chronicles the experiences of protagonist Bayang, a music teacher in the Philippine High School for the Arts, it weaves into that story the legend of Mariang Makiling, musical instruments varnished in blood, illicit affairs, abortions, and the massacre of journalists in Maguindanao. Is this fairy tale? Marvelous realism? Historiographic metafiction? Or all of the above? Perhaps it is part national allegory, still unfurling, still unfinished. The protagonist's name—

Bayang—seems a signifier of the country, but sans a defining modifier (magiliw? malaya? progresibo?).

Drama is represented by a one-act play in English, a full-length play in Filipino, and a screenplay for a short film.

Jose Victor Z. Torres' "Triangles," is a highly-focused one-act play with only three characters: Beng, a 35-year-old advertising executive, Allan, her ex-boyfriend, and Marky, her teen-aged son, who might or might not be dead. In the opening scene, Beng is talking with her shrink, whom the audience does not see. The play's blocking is an externalization of the shifting relationships among the three characters, and Beng's attempts to come to terms with what torments her. This work is one of the few contemporary plays in English today. It's what some drama critics might describe as a bit "talky," but it actually lends itself to reading in print. In the last two years, the UST Publishing House has been publishing play collections.[2] Is a collection of Torres' plays a possibility?

The dramatis personae of Lito Casaje's "Chiaroscuro," a Palanca prize-winning full-length play, are as follows: two "Mabini artists," a former artist-turned-"full-time dealer;" a slightly older artist who has been nominated to the post of National Artist; the young wife of one of the Mabini artists, and the nude model of the National Artist nominee. The dialogue consists of conversations among the artists, who have been friends for a long time, regarding the tricky negotiations between artistic integrity and the need to survive. What may strike audiences as a lack in dramatic action might perhaps be precisely the point of this play, namely, that their earlier decisions, and the trajectories their lives took, have resulted in an impotence that can only manifest itself in endless, circular angst-ridden conversations.

Jose Mojica's short film screenplay "Take Me to Amerika" is a campy take on the Pinoy everlasting, determined chase after the American Dream. Characters are deliberately stereotypical: Jessa, the eager young woman who dreams the dream; her sullen, rebellious younger brother; her nerdy sister; the "parlorista" friend. Most of Jessa's family are bullied into collaborating with Jessa in her elaborate strategy to entrap the unwitting American. They behave awkwardly and mispronounce English words.

2 (Rody Vera's *Tatlong Dula*, Nicolas Pichay's *Maxie*, Liza Magtoto's *Bienvenida de Soltera*, and Em Mendez's *Anagnoris: Apat na Dula*)

What distinguishes this screenplay from similar satires on this topic is that it is taking place in a world where relationships rooted in online dating websites have become the norm. This makes the sought-after "porener" more accessible, but the dream no less false.

The Criticism section opens with a short essay by National Artist Virgilio S. Almario, "Ang Pagbabalik ng Panitikan sa Puso ng Sambayanan." Delivered during the opening ceremony of "Performatura: Performance Literature Festival 2017" at the Tanghalang Nicanor Abelardo (CCP Main Theater), it is an important piece, for all its brevity. Almario used the occasion to comment on the event's title. The neologism "performatura" combines the English word "performance" and the Spanish term "literatura." Almario objected to an article which appeared in a daily newspaper, which claimed that literature's being an intellectual enterprise, accounts for its lack of appeal where the general public is concerned. He also disagreed with the festival's efforts to make literature more interesting to the *taumbayan* by "raising" it, from its oral form, to its written form. He pointed out that literature's unpopularity is due, not primarily to its being intellectual, but to the steep price of books, which is simply beyond the means of the masses. He then examined the etymology of some Filipino words that could serve as the equivalent or approximation of the word "performance," and suggested the root word "ganap," and its derivative "kagampan," as perhaps the closest terms to "performance." This word, and the concept behind it, Almario said, are important for all who would undertake performance poetry and performance studies. He added that, although the objective of "Performatura 2017" was laudable, the task remained of bringing back literature to the heart of the people, before true *kaganapan* (fulfillment) could take place.

Chuckberry Pascual's essay *"Nobelistikong Kompulsiyon: Pagbasa sa Moog"* is a psychoanalytic reading of B.S. Medina, Jr.'s Palanca prize-winning novel. The title translates loosely into "fortress" or "fortification." Using Freudian concepts culled from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* Pascual cross references two other Medina novels *Salingdugo* and *Huling Himagsik,* which he reads as having similar thematic concerns: a collaborator father and the consequent destruction of the idealized parental picture, and the intrusion of the nation into the private sphere of the family. Noting the use of the technique of stream of consciousness, and the obsessive recurrence

of certain themes, and even plots, the critic concludes that these novels can be read, not so much as realist novels, but as examples of trauma fiction.

Not too many readers may be familiar with Franco Moretti's "computational criticism." Describing his effect on the field of literary criticism, last year in the *New York Times*, Jennifer Schuesller wrote: "… Few have issued as radical a cry as Franco Moretti, the professor famous for urging his colleagues to stop reading books." Moretti works in a lab, and has claimed that "to grasp the laws of literature," what is required is "distant reading," i.e., "computer-assisted crunching of thousands of texts at a time." [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/arts/franco-moretti-stanford-literary-lab-big-data.html]

In his "The Pulse of the Text: Using Digital Tools for Closer Reading," Ramon Guillermo argues that this strategy requires the availability of "massive digital corpora" not available to many of the world's scholars, and offers instead tools (computer-generated graphs, scatter plots, scan windows, etc.), "examples of techniques which, in combination with traditional 'close reading,' can arguably lead to close(r) readings of texts." Those readers who will find this essay far too technical to be palatable, will nonetheless grant that as a cutting edge piece of literary criticism, it is important, and that its very unfamiliarity makes it exciting. So we close with the most avant garde contribution to this issue.

This, then, is our offering for the last issue of *Tomá*s, Volume II. Our featured writers are a combination of established writers (including one National Artist), and emerging writers, the youngest still in his twenties. This mix is integral to our mandate, which is not just to showcase the work of our most distinguished writers, but to discover and nurture new practitioners. Among our contributors are two international writers. This, too, is in keeping with our objectives, one of which is to establish an international, as well as a national presence. We would have preferred a more even balance of writers in English and writers in Filipino, but in this we were limited to the submissions received.

As we go to press, Augusto Antonio Aguila and Chuckberry J. Pascual have issued a call for submissions to *Tomás* Volume III, Issue No. 1.