

Introduction

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Poetry has been the most daunting subject I could have ever aspired to teach. Daunting, because I can't imagine any other subject that requires so much defense before one can even begin to teach it. As if being banished from Plato's republic weren't enough, poets will have to wait at the back of the reading list until students have finished combing through page after page of defenses and dismissals, arguments both for and against this nonetheless enduring, inexhaustible genre.

Is there still a place for it in the 21st century, does it still have a point? Can a poem read privately in the comfort of a coffee shop still count as a "protest" poem? Does it contribute to the cause of environmental consciousness when it ends up being printed on paper anyway, or when it's seen as coal-powered pixels on screen? Can poems claim to be a celebration of independence when they answer to an editorial board? Can a poem heal your pain while commodifying it at the same time? If your poems about typhoon victims and drowned refugees send cash (as honoraria, as prizes) your way, and you spend it on perfume, or a new pair of earrings, should Dante rise from the ashes and write an infernal circle just for you, or would you justify it by waving the flag of artifice? Can it raise awareness on the social injustice of poverty when it's written in the language of the elite? Is it still capable of purifying the language of the tribe when the tribe speaks through captions on selfies?

What are love poems for? Can a poem make him love you back?

Can it oust a president, reprimand misogynists, teach GMRC, protect tarsiers? Does it, at the very least, make your *ninong* and *ninang* proud? Or should we just fold it into an airplane and send it gliding straight into the bin?

Poetry is posturing. It casts two shadows. It makes false claims. It redirects messages. It can result from fanatical freedom, or severe control. It offends authority, has generally no practical use, and may exist only to justify its own existence. It thrives in unfamiliarity, in the deceptively scant word count. But it can reward readers with a mirror into their own cognition, an appreciation of sound, an awareness *in* language. But who am I kidding? I'm still fumbling around these questions myself.

After putting these questions aside (otherwise they'd take over the entire semester), my students would then proceed to read a sampling of famous (to avoid calling them *canonical*) selections, and also a lot of personal favorites. From the temple of traditional forms to the rollicking thunder of Ginsberg's "Howl," from our very own Thomasian poets to Nobel laureates, from the interactive animations of Oni Buchanan to the QR-coded erasures of Collier Nogues, from quote-baiting *hugot* poems to Shakespeare's own timeless take on *walang forever*.

Their reactions to these poems, their discussions, analyses, emphatic nods, laughter, and always surprisingly, tears, on top of the fact that we even have a class on this thing called poetry, make it all very rewarding, if not simply reassuring. Imagine hearing words you've loved for years, in the voices of young people reading them for the first time. I can't think of a better job than this.

And for the first time in its history, *Tomás* dedicates an entire issue to poetry, as part of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies' five-volume, fifth anniversary special. Gathered in this banquet are fourteen poets—old friends, acquaintances, and new discoveries. They are Mark Angeles, Romulo P. Baquiran, Jr., Shane Carreon, Mark Anthony Cayanan, Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr., J. G. Dimaranan, German V. Gervacio, Mookie Katigbak-Lacuesta, Jaime An Lim, Allan Popa, Ronald R. Ramos, Jr., E. San Juan, Jr., Louie Jon A. Sánchez and Arlene Yandug. Their poems respond to a range of stimuli—history, the Noli, the self, violence, forbidden desires, and greed, to name a few—employing an array of forms and registers this discipline offers.

Cayanan's latest project delivers a take on the always uncomfortable scrutiny of the self. The speaker in this series (at least I think there's only one) sketches his images in a manner reminiscent of Wittgenstein's "beetle in the box" problem: "I want you / to understand me in spite of myself." Each poem, a thing of language, becomes a portrait of the same unnamed, and yet they are separate and different from each other. This is owing to (and complicated by) the fact that even the position of the self—who's making portraits of a self—is in flux, an evasive and varying constant. It's like he's in a house of mirrors where there's a different version of himself in front of every mirror, and no two mirrors cast the same kind of reflection.

Dela Peña joins a long line of distinguished writers who have responded to Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*, shining a new light on its pages. The result, a sampling of a sequence titled "From *Tangere*," harnesses the kinetic energy of the novel's characters into narratives of movement. These poems amplify the body's agency in the *Noli* story, from a finger pulling the trigger to tongues training in the foreign sound.

And speaking of sound—Katigbak-Lacuesta's poems, to my ears, always sound dynamic. There's something satisfying about the way she plots her rhymes, both end- and internal, from the macaronic and consonant ("monsieurs who knew her tightest / quivers") to a cascade of assonant and eye rhymes ("book," "loom," "Soon," "floor," "roots"). Not to mention her unabashed use of perfect rhymes ("heft" / "left"). Easy listening, sure, but only because these poems are undoubtedly products of painstaking attention. And what deliberate attention she has for material—her poems here respond to bits of trivia, a Juan Luna painting, and works of fellow poets Marianne Boruch and Carlos Angeles.

The attention in Carreon's poems turns into a blunt yet effective instrument. Unable to slash through frustrations in their relationships, the speakers, in poems of tight restraint, are left to observe quietly, through "the dark / the hollow." But these studies of domestic conditions do not arise from resignation—because while the external world stagnates, it is nonetheless capable of igniting an internal alchemy. Carreon captures the moment right after the fire has been extinguished, and right before another one begins.

The poems in English begin and end with two contributors who confront a persistent and inescapable anxiety among poets, especially those writing against the unspeakable—an anxiety that is both towards and against silence. The deceptively idyllic pieces of Arlene Yandug, on the one hand, surround her lyric chronicles of violence in Mindanao, the way a garden survives the crumbling house it was set around. Jaime An Lim, on the other hand, addresses the distressing news relentlessly coming our way, in “Reading the Times” and “Last Days.”

Several of the poems in Filipino retest the many ways we think about contemporary social concerns. The poems of Angeles, for example, are fables and tableaux depicting scenes from a spectrum of relevant issues, beginning with a poem that overtly plays on the word *ganid*: both the animal and the trespass. A dove, a cat, a wild boar, a cow, worms and other creatures roam in this eccentric bestiary, playing characters in allegorical expositions of poverty, greed and neglect.

Equally interesting are the poems of Sánchez, wherein he sprawls out ruminations on our finite connections in “Mula sa *Kapiling*.” Instead of overtly pointing a finger to the cause of despair, he instead lights a candle of vigilance. But these are futile prayers keeping the inevitable at bay: “Hindi lalagi ang panahong kaytingkad ng lahat.” Nonetheless, one will find in some of these poems an affirmation of beauty, and its capacity to slow down our otherwise fleeting temporal trajectories.

A different kind of vigilance permeates the atmosphere of Ramos’ prose poems. Here, loneliness and distance become palpable, steering the personae to reach out across the barricade of the forbidden, the unrequited, and the impossible. Vigilance becomes second nature: a furtive glance during commute, waiting by the window for an acquaintance on a rainy day, looking over one’s shoulder in the hostile rooms and streets of homophobia. There’s also a lovely little story of someone who pretends to be a lighthouse, a sentinel between land and sea, signaling to a childhood friend who has passed away.

Popa, meanwhile, navigates sea-lore in his new set of poems, casting a net of traditional forms to catch the ways fishermen (and the people who live among them by the sea) paddle across the gamble of life and death, often to chilling effect: “Lumutang-lutang nang walang laman ang bangka natin. / Tatanda ang mga batang naghihintay sa pagbabalik natin.”

And while Popa used the *ambahan*, ghazal, tanaga and other forms to gaze back towards tradition, Dimaranan manipulates typography to take her poems one step farther from poetry's origins in song. How time changes place buzzes continuously in these prose poems and erasures, and the text "changes" with it. Death, dilapidation, termites, and so-called progress ruin the *Bagong Bayan*, and as though wrung under painful interrogation, the changed texts approximate the disorientation, the newness, and the slow, unrelenting disappearance of old signposts.

Tomás journal has been very welcoming towards poetry for children, and in this issue we feature Gervacio's dedications to a young lady named Raya. If there should be a magical element in verse, as Jose Garcia Villa once instructed, it should be found here most of all in poetry for children. Just ask lieutenant grasshopper or the flatulent *kapre*.

San Juan surprises and amuses by bracketing riddles in Filipino as figures of speech. Readers and teachers of poetry would often bring the dimension of the unsaid to bear upon the text, implicating the silences and spaces "between the lines." But here, in these stacks of *bugtong*, the answers to the riddles constitute the unsaid. Not that the poems need these responses, as the form demonstrates—the appropriation is the point in itself.

Last but not the least, the suite of poems by Baquiran is split in two parts written in different styles. The first part consists of two humorous anecdotes on the very Pinoy concept of *tampo*, both ending up with a case of audience participation. One happens in a cramped jeepney, while the other—strangely reminiscent of an obscure biblical law—involves a wife's hand, an angry husband, and mercilessness. And under the shadow of the *hugot* culture, the second part of this suite of poems bravely returns to the lyrical mode of the declaration of love, where the poet makes use of contemporary lingo to sustain the humor. But there are moments like the coda of the poem "Malayo sa iyo'y pagbawal sa asin," when the tenderness takes over: "Lason ka man dito sa pitlag ng dibdib / sisimsimin pa rin hanggang huling tirik."

This special issue on poetry has been a long time coming, for what would UST's culture be without its poetry? I need only to drop a few names here: Dimalanta, Bautista, Lumbera ... but I'm sure the reader has heard all of them before. What's important is this humble journal's indi-

cation that at least for now, poetry is here to stay, and doesn't need us to defend it yet.

On behalf of the *Tomás* Editorial Board, and Joselito D. Delos Reyes, this issue's editor-in-chief who graciously gave me the honor of writing this introduction, welcome. We are privileged to have you as a reader.