PERSONAL CHRONICLES: THE UST "PANDEMIC WORKSHOP" 2021[1]

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Prologue

These notes started out as jottings in my notebook as we were conducting the UST National Writers' Workshop in 2021. The sort of thing I do all the time. ("See enough, and write it down," Joan Didion said, in, I think, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*.)

Then I decided to continue writing the notes as FB updates.

13 June 2021

The job of the Director and Coordinator of our annual National Writers' Workshops begins practically as soon as the previous workshop ends. So Nerisa Guevara and Dawn Marfil-Burris, Director and Coordinator respectively, swung into action in June of 2019. By November, all applications for the Workshop Fellowships were in. Nerisa announced that it was time to do a selection. And on December 4, 2019, at a "Special Deliberation Meeting," we met to select 15 Writing Fellows for the UST NWW. By February 2020, all but one had confirmed attendance, and a replacement had been selected for that one. The Workshop dates had to be pushed back to accommodate the UP NWW (April 12-19), and were set for April 19-26. The usual venue

1 The UST National Writers' Workshop is the oldest and most important of the UST Center for Creative Writing's regular programs, dating back to 2000, under Ophie Alcantara Dimalanta, the Center's founding director. Since 2012, the year of the Center's revival, the Workshop has been held every summer, at the Ridgewood Residence Hotel in Baguio. It is run by a Director and a Coordinator who are named at the end of the workshop prior to the one they will be in charge of.

had been settled on—the Ridgewood Residence Hotel. The names of the writing fellows had been posted in the Center's FB page, and the first press release had appeared in the *Manila Bulletin*.

In March 2020, the pandemic struck. By the 16th, Manila was on lockdown. Preparations for the Workshop continued. The lockdown was expected to be lifted on April 15. But on April 15, it was announced that it was to be extended till April 30. And then, it was extended again to May 15. In fact, it was to remain in place—on various "alert levels"—for a long, long time.

The Resident Fellows were unanimous about pushing through with preparations, and about holding the Workshop. Online, if need be. But was an extended online workshop even feasible? The challenges seemed overwhelming. Did all the Writing Fellows have reliable Internet connectivity? Could they commit to going online every day for the duration of the Workshop? What was a practical schedule for the members of the Teaching Panel, most of whom would have to be holding their regular classes during the Workshop?

At our regular monthly meeting on August 27, Ricci Guevara revealed the results of the survey on Internet connectivity, which she and Dawn had conducted. Of the 15 Writing Fellows, one would not be available during the projected new schedule; three were based outside Metro Manila (Catanduanes State University, Central Luzon State University, and West Visayas State University), and had poor Internet connectivity; and one was a medical doctor—a frontliner who went home every day after 6 or 6:30 PM.

By September, it was confirmed: the NWW would be held online, via Zoom, from Nov. 9 to Dec. 2, at 5 PM to 8 PM, from Monday to Thursday. It would be only the second such online writing workshop in the country. (The first was UP's, which was held every day, from Oct. 19-31, at 8:30 AM to 5:30 PM).

Once the workshop got underway, there were other challenges. In Baguio, everyone was more relaxed. Both the Writing Fellows and the members of the Teaching Panel were on leave from their respective jobs and home responsibilities. We could all focus on the sessions. Even more important, we could have fun! As Dawn put it: "This Workshop had to compete with the pressures of both work and home." Some members of the Teaching Panel would go into the Workshop Zoom room directly from their own online classes (to which they had not yet quite adjusted themselves).

Later, Dawn was to muse privately, to me. "First, we lost the bus ride to Baguio. This bus ride would ease you out of your normal life and into workshop mode, and then ease you back into it when you were done. Then we lost the leisurely atmosphere of the Baguio Workshop, that feeling of having all the time in the world to focus on the piece being discussed, and thinking of ways to improve it. Then we discovered that jokes among panelists and between panelists and writing fellows didn't translate well over Zoom. Facial expressions were only as clear as one's computer cameras; voice was dependent on speakers and Internet connections. One got the feeling that one wasn't really connecting effectively. Time management was complicated. There were too many distractions and interruptions. The opportunity to complain about having too much food was also taken away, and that had always been such a fun thing to do! So was eating and drinking with the Writing Fellows, which often became mentoring sessions. And, of course, hanging out with co-panelists, over *merienda*, or dinner, making *tsismis*—sometimes about life and sometimes about work. I particularly missed the sense of accomplishment that was always part of the graduation ceremony at the end. And, I especially missed the free alcohol, courtesy of Lito Zulueta."

Dawn forgot to mention the typhoon that hit Metro Manila, and forced us to cancel workshop sessions for a couple of days. So, actually, the workshop ran until December 4.

Still, we came through. And it was no mean feat. Unfortunately, we couldn't even give Ricci and Dawn the treat that they deserved.

Part 1

14 June 2021

Ok, this is Take 2 for us. We're a bit more confident now than we were at the start of the 2020 NWW.

The initial call for applications went out on Feb. 28, 2021. At the Center's regular monthly meeting (via Zoom) on March 3, the Workshop Coordinator, Paul Castillo reported receiving 88 applications in all. By March 10, the deadline, there were 95 applicants competing for 16 slots, for the short story, poetry, creative nonfiction and play/screenplay. This number was unprecedented.

Deliberations were held on April 23, and took all of 5 hours. Via Zoom, as usual. Refreshments were provided, courtesy of the *Varsitarian*, through Lito Zulueta. Once again, the *Varsi* is also sponsoring the honoraria for our three Guest Panelists, Workshop regulars Jimmy Abad, Jerry Gracio, and Luna Sicat-Cleto.

Our Writing Fellows, Batch 2021, are the following: Vince Raphael Agcaoili, poetry; Andy Lopez, poetry; Immanuel Canicosa, fiction; Alexandra Maria O. Alcasid, fiction; Chuck D. Smith, creative nonfiction; Eunice Joy R. Bacalando, creative nonfiction; Cris Lanzaderas, kuwento; Mubarak M. Tahir, kuwento; KC Daniel Inventor, sanaysay; Roda Tajon, sanaysay; Paul John C. Padilla, tula; Mark Dominick Portes, tula; Sabrina Basilio, dula; and Eluna Cepeda, screenplay. This is the first time we have as many as five Writing Fellows from outside the NCR.

Only soft copies of the manuscripts to be workshopped were distributed this year, though exceptions were made for those members

of the Teaching Panel who require hard copies due to weak eyesight, like myself. However, Writing Fellows received, via courier, a Workshop Kit—containing a Workshop T-shirt, a complimentary copy of one book authored by a member of the Teaching Panel, and a copy of the *Tomás* anniversary issue (in the genre to which the particular Writing Fellow belongs). The Center's request for a corporate Zoom account (accessible to non-Thomasians) was granted by the Vice Rector for Finance, Fr. Roberto L. Luanzon, O.P.

So we're all set.

Part 2

15 June 2021

On Day 1 (yesterday), we took up the poetry of **Vince Raphael Agcaoili** and **Andy Lopez**, with Ralph Galán and Lito Zulueta, respectively, as moderators.

Vince has an M.A. in Lit from the University of Asia & the Pacific, and now works as an Instructor there. It is a dark world that he paints.

We took up the poem "Envoy"

"When I was in my fourth grade, my teacher told me—*Iho,/ mamatay ka na*. I studied death after school/ to make amends with its envoys…"

And "Obituary"

"She lives well in the closet. Thank you,/ she says, because the skeletons we keep are kinder/ than the world I know…"

Andy has a B.A. in Communications from ADMU, and is Communications Director for Makesense, Philippines.

We discussed her poems "In the Holding Room for my Disembodiment Surgery…"

"Now no longer weighed down by: a bad body/ bog body/ borg body/ wretched body/ wrong body/ wrong sex with other wrong bodies I've no excuse not to be happy…"

And "What's the Worst That Could Happen?"

"Call it empathy burnout the self turned world's scarcest material losing our music boxes/ to the sea never making it out of town to the holding room where your lover dies alone..."

One thing became immediately obvious: this is a new generation of writers. Their stories are not our stories. And they are not afraid to tell them.

Day 2 (today) we tackled the short stories of **Immanuel Canicosa** and **Alex Alcasid**, with Chuckberry Pascual and Jose Mojica as moderators.

Imman has a B.A. In Communications from DLSU, and is doing an M.A. in Creative Writing at UP Diliman; he works as a writer and content producer at ESPN5. His story, "Ligaya," is speculative fiction about what happens when a character in a popular telenovela, who has been written as a stereotypical helpless woman, refuses to remain trapped in that role a moment longer, escapes from the page, and actually confronts the telenovela's head writer.

Again we are in a dark world, literally… a warehouse with no lights, dark streets, a dimly-lit, almost-empty building.

Alex has a BS in Animation from iAcademy and works as a copywriter for ADA Asia. And her world is even darker. The story "The Pit Digger," is flash fiction about a nameless protagonist's thoughts as he digs trenches for corpses piled higher than his head.

Today, we will be discussing creative nonfiction. Nonfiction can sometimes be darker and more disturbing than the grimmest fiction, because

the reader is always aware that the plot is something that has actually happened, or is still happening, in the author's life. So, I approach today's sessions with some trepidation: Eunice Joy Bacalando's "Defiance," and Chuck Smith's "Developing Story." I'll be moderating Eunice's session, and Dawn will be moderating Chuck's.

Part 3

16 June 2021

As expected, yesterday's sessions began cautiously. I recall Yeats' words: "I have spread my dreams under your feet/ Tread softly because you tread on my dreams." Writing Fellows **Eunice Joy R. Bacalando** and **Chuck D. Smith** might well have said: "Tread softly because you tread on my wounds." Both had submitted memoirs.

Eunice has a BA in Lit. From DLSU, and is doing an MFA in Creative Writing in the same university. She works as a writer and a researcher. Chuck has a BA in Journalism from UST, and is doing an MFA in Creative Writing at DLSU. He has worked as a journalist, and a PR consultant, and is at present Senior Writer for Philstar Life.

Eunice's "Defiance," deals with grave physical illness, and focuses on the hospital experience from the patient's point of view. Chuck's "Developing Story" deals with prolonged suffering, from different kinds of wounds, both physical and mental.

Both are fine writers. Eunice writes with self-awareness and irony, the narrator's anger and indignation coming through loud and clear, but sometimes interrupted by a wry humor. The fast-paced narrative has rhythm and cadence. The narrator wins the reader's empathy through both her harrowing ordeal, and her refusal to be broken by it. Chuck, too, is self-reflexive; and he is a skilled, sophisticated writer. He tackles his complex,

difficult subject with courage and an admirable restraint, never indulging in sentimentality or self-pity, thus heightening the tension and emotional power of his narrative. And the tale benefits from being told with a certain detachment, which stops short of tranquility.

As the sessions progressed, many issues were raised. In a time of pandemic, is it unseemly to write of one's personal woes? Is it insensitive to express anger and frustration toward health practitioners who are themselves overworked, and at risk? When does the baring of private anguish cease to be a cry for help, and become self-indulgent? How much detail is one allowed to go into when rendering ugliness? Must a narrative of pain be artful? Is it not enough that it be truthful? Is it artful even if it does not end with catharsis?

My own answers to the last 3 questions: If the narrative of pain seeks to be received as literature (as opposed to reportage or scientific treatise), yes it must be artful. No it is not enough to be truthful. And, finally, no, there need not be catharsis. The triumph lies in the telling.

Part 4

17 June 2021

Yesterday we returned to the poets—**Andy Lopez** and **Vince Agcaoili**.

I recall that some time back, my friend Krip Yuson referred to poets as "literature's cavalry." Feigning offense, I demanded, "So what does that make of us prose writers—foot soldiers?"

And, with a grin, Krip said, "You said it; I didn't."

But I have to admit, albeit with reluctance, that I actually agree with him. The poets seem to be playing a higher game. Poetry's methods make it more difficult to comprehend than prose. It is evocative rather than explicit,

oblique rather than direct, reliant on allusion and inference, rather than on straightforward speech. It is also more difficult to write. I know, because I have tried; and failed. I think that to produce poetry and understand it, one uses a different part of the brain. But, regardless, one can respond to it, positively, negatively, or with indifference. It's the same with music. I have no technical knowledge of music. But I enjoy listening to it, and I crave different types of music at different stages of my life, and for different states of mind or moods.

When we discuss poetry in the Workshop, therefore, I am happy to allow the poets to take over, and just to listen and learn.

Ned Parfan appreciated Andy's playing with sound in her "Career Options for Pitch-Perfect Prodigies," and the use of slashes to cut up lines in her "Established Writer Yells at Fanfic," to suggest the constraints that entrap "established writers" into conventional ways of doing things. The consensus about the first poem seemed to be that the persona felt envious of her younger brother who has been discovered to be a musical prodigy at age 6.

To me, the tone in the first poem seemed to suggest awe, rather than envy. As for the second poem, I felt that it was alluding to people like myself, for I have admittedly been dismissive of fan fiction. But I wasn't sure why the "established writer" in the poem was "yelling" and what he was so furious about. My exchange with Andy on our chat box was an eye opener—I finally understand a bit more about the fan fiction phenomenon, its global reach, and the empowerment that it offers its young practitioners.

Ralph Galán singled out the image of light "from a clearing" falling across the "four-pane window" to form "crucifixes" as the objective correlative of Vince's poem "Referent."

Lito Zulueta noted that the epigraph in "Remnants of the Earth," a Filipino street rhyme chanted by children, which contains a series of images

of violence, prefigures (or could be made to prefigure) the violence of the Duterte regime.

Jimmy Abad broke up Vince's second poem into four sections, and picked out references to religion—God, altar, water and blood, bodies escaping their graves... But he reminded both poets of the need to make sure that their images follow an internal logic and integrity, so that readers might arrive at the intended meaning.

Both poems are centered on death and resurrection. That much is clear to me. I must add that I find the act of trying to understand poetry a mental stretching, an attempt to reach the sky. And it results in a kind of exhilaration.🦋

Part 5

20 June 2021 (Sunday)

Once upon a time, I actually tried to write a 1-act play. Correction, I did write a 1-act play. I put a lot of effort into the attempt. And, after it was done, I made plans to show it to one of my illustrious friends from the world of theater: Tony Mabesa, Behn Cervantes, Anton Juan, Nick Pichay, Aureaus Solito... But first, I set it aside for a bit. (Thank God!)

When I returned to the draft, and reread it, I was dismayed. The literature teacher in me had to confront the truth: it was terrible. Since then, I have regarded playwrights with great admiration. And I hold filmmakers in even greater esteem. Film is, of course, the most complex of art forms, embracing several arts, plus technology, and requiring a huge collaborative effort.

Last Friday (June 17) our workshop sessions were reserved for our playwright and our film scriptwriter, **Sabrina Basilio** and **Eluna Cepeda**.

Both their works may be described as progressive. That is, they are departures from the conventional.

Sabrina has a BFA in Creative Writing from ADMU; and has participated in the Women's International Playwrights' Fair in the CCP and Virgin Labfest. She is Communications Director at SULONG, and teaches at Muir Woods Academy.

Given the long tradition of Ateneo's student theatre (I'm referencing National Artist Rolando Tinio's work with the Ateneo Experimental Theater), it is not surprising that she has come up with the ambitious "Antigone Versus the People of the Philippines." Its complexity led to a lively discussion. One of the panelists wasn't convinced that the contemporizing and "Filipinizing" of the great Sophoclean Greek tragedy worked. And another one pointed out that the ending (the degeneration of what was supposed to be a true people's court into a kind of "kangaroo court,") might have undermined the play's main theme. But most of the panelists and the Writing Fellows were satisfied. The play remained true to the spirit of the original, but changed some aspects of it, like not accepting the convention that the main characters should be only persons of high social standing in society; having the chorus present problems relevant to the Philippines of today; giving Creon and Antigone dialogue which was a mixture of English and Filipino, thus producing a contemporary sound.

Eluna graduated from St. Paul University, was granted a scholarship by the Mowelfund Film Institute, and has studied with Jun Lana, Raya Martin, and Raymond Red. Her short films have been exhibited in film festivals both local and international. She has worked as production assistant to Khavn Dela Cruz, and with several TV and film production houses.

Her goal—of "exploring queer cinema and its potentials, by portraying LGBTQ characters who experience pain and rejection, and how

they overcome these just like everybody else"—is in evidence in her script titled "Hanggang Paniwalaan." As was noted by some Writing Fellows and members of the Teaching Panel, the lesbian—unlike the gay man—is absent from even our contemporary films. This work is the writer's contribution to making her visible, and not just visible as a lesbian, but visible as a mother, in a familiar domestic setting. And this is an important step forward.

Sabrina's session and Eluna's session were moderated respectively by Lito Zulueta (who, among other things, is also a member of Manunuri), and Jose Mojica (an award-winning filmmaker and musician). Also a part of the teaching panel were Luna, a gifted playwright (as well as a fictionist and poet); Chuckberry Pascual, a playwright (aside from a writer of fiction, nonfiction, and criticism, and a translator). Ralph served as Philstage Gawad Buhay Awards jury member from 2008 until 2014; and, as an undergraduate, was part of UP Dulaang Laboratoryo, UP Tropa Experimental Theatre Company, and MSU-IIT's Integrated Performing Arts Guild in Iligan City. Jerry Gracio (award-winning scriptwriter for TV and film) was unable to join us due to loss of WiFi in his barangay, but he sent in his comments.

Feeling suddenly nostalgic, Ralph said to me, "I was still a Chemical Engineering major back then, fresh from Philippine Science High School, when I performed in my first play in UP Diliman: Floy Quintos's "Gironiere" with Sir Tony Mabesa directing… You didn't know me yet then.

Why do I feel the need to mention the panelists' credentials for these sessions? Maybe because we lost Bernardo Bernardo (much-awarded actor and director of stage, movies and television, playwright, and filmscript writer), who was part of our faculty, and of the pre-pandemic Workshop, before his sudden passing?

Part 6

June 22, 2021

Yesterday's creative nonfiction—"Korona" by **KC Daniel Inventor** (moderated by Paul Castillo) and "Lebaura, Asin, Ilaw" by **Roda Tajon** (moderated by John Jack Wigley)—took us out of Manila and its environs.

Cris R. Lazandares is from Bocaue, Bulacan. He has an MA Malikhaing Pagsulat from UP Diliman and a B.A. Communication Arts from UP Los Baños; and teaches at the Mataas na Paaralang Rural ng UP Los Baños. **Mubarak M. Tahir** is from farther south—Maguindanao, but he now resides in Davao City. He has a B.A. in Filipino from the Mindanao State University in Marawi City, used to teach at the MSU GSC campus, and is a contributing writer for *Dagmay* (the Davao Writers' Guild Journal) and other publications.

Cris' story, "Pagoda," centers around a widow, whose oldest son is about to leave for Canada, where a younger brother already resides. The familiar tale—of breadwinners seeking greener pastures abroad, leaving behind their young families in the care of old parents—is told from the old parent's point of view. And it unfolds against the backdrop of the Bocaue River Festival, and the memory of the tragic accident of 1993, when the floating pagoda capsized, drowning 300 devotees. There was unanimous praise for the author's handling of language (the Bulakeño Tagalog), the vivid realism of the minutiae of everyday life in a provincial town, the plot's cyclical movement which seemed to mirror entrapment, and the ardor of the faith in the Krus sa Wawa, despite the heavy burden of constantly struggling to keep body and soul together.

But the panelists urged Cris to push the envelope, since he is obviously adept at his craft. Jowie Delos Reyes, who was moderator for the session, wanted Cris to delve deeper into Bocaue and its culture. Chuckberry

suggested a different point of view—that of an outsider, perhaps a researcher who witnesses the events. Luna proposed, among other things, tweaking a single sentence in the story's closing paragraph, thus making the ending more ambiguous. Jerry Gracio looked for a deeper insight. Given the times, a reader looks for more than just a story of people going through some events, he said. He wanted to know: what, then, does it all mean?

My own view is that this is a story in transition. Its narrative style is realist; its pace is slow. But its structure is modernist. Time is fractured; memories are juxtaposed against present events. I agree with Writing Fellow Chuck Smith, that, chronologically, the story's resolution takes place right after the story's opening section. The chronological ending is in the section immediately preceding the last section. This was a bold move. And the story's vision—about the futility of faith—is profoundly ironic. This is what makes it new.

Like the previous story, Mubarak's story is in the realist mode. The protagonist of "May Bisikleta sa Langit" is an 11-year-old boy who, in the midst of extreme poverty and isolation, dreams of owning a bicycle. But the story's simplicity is belied by the issues it raises—child labor, polygamy, class conflict, bullying—and its grimness is relieved by the image of a brotherly bond.

Some panelists felt that the ending—the brothers' getting sick at the same time, and both illnesses being fatal, the two women (their mothers) falling into each other's arms—was too melodramatic. Jack thought that the story of the brothers was engaging, but felt the writer had given his boy protagonist too harsh a fate. It's practically unrelieved suffering, Jack said. Jerry observed that the writer could have just stayed with the bicycle—both the dream bicycle and the real one. This was the true heart of the story. Chuckberry, the session's moderator, recommended that the writer focus on the story's conflict. The seeds for the revision are contained in the story

itself, Chuck pointed out. They are in the child Jameel's imagination, his relationship with his mother, how that impacted on his dealings with his half-brother. And it was not necessary to make anyone die. There are others ways to resolve a conflict than death.

For me, the story has too many loose ends. Who owned the field that Jameel was tending? Were Jameel and his mother so terribly poor because the father had joined the rebels, or because he had another family, or both? What kind of relationship existed between the two women? When was Amir found to have leukemia? (There is no mention of it until the hospital scene.) However, I found the story touching. And, simply by focusing on a culture little known and understood by most readers, this story is a valuable contribution to Philippine literature.

I am pleased that some of our Writing Fellows—and some panelists as well—have been responding to these Chronicles. And though we are not live, and no one else has copies of the pieces we are discussing, other people are following these posts as well.

Part 7

26 June 2021

As I said earlier, when I started these Notes, I was just doing what I always do. My journal travels everywhere with me. And at the end of the day, I retreat to one corner of the room and begin scribbling away. Why did I decide to post them on FB? Did I think it might, in some way, make up for the gap which my colleagues and I all sense. Something's missing. Maybe it's the leisure and the camaraderie which is integral to these Workshops. The writing fellows need to hang out with one another. We, their mentors, need to relax and unwind; go for walks; share a cup of coffee or a round of beers with the Writing Fellows; go listen to music with a bunch of co-panelists. I don't

know how making notes like this helps. Maybe it's just a way of reaching out, an attempt to bridge that gap.

Or maybe, as Chuckberry has suggested, it's a small contribution to literary history. Young writers now seem to think they must go to at least three of the writing workshops (preferably those offered by the major universities with prestigious creative writing programs). These workshops have become *de rigueur*, a means of earning their spurs.

Yesterday was devoted to creative nonfiction: "Korona" by **KC Daniel Inventor** and "Lebadura, Asin, Ilaw" by **Roda Tajon**.

K.C. has an AB/BSE from Philippine Normal University and an MA Malikhaing Pagsulat from UP. He has taught at Adamson University, Our Lady of Fatima University in Valenzuela City and, most recently, at Trenton International College in BGC. Roda has a BA Psychology from the University of Northern Philippines, and an MA Women and Development from UP Diliman. She works as Capacity Building Officer for the Philippines Task Force for Indigenous People's Rights. She is connected with Gantala Press and Kataga. The first session was moderated by Paul Castillo, and the second by Jack Wigley.

Any serious discussion of creative nonfiction inevitably touches on these thorny issues: since creative nonfiction evolved from new journalism or literary reportage, how important is factual accuracy? how much does one reveal and what should we withhold? where does personal freedom end and the other person's privacy begin? when does candor become poor taste? given the nature of memory, are we not all unreliable narrators, particularly when we write of our own lives? But this is what makes nonfiction such an exciting genre.

Everyone agreed that KC's was an excellently written piece. In the story's opening scene, the crown on the winner's head—as she is pronounced

Miss Gay in a barangay "byukon"—dazzles the narrator (who is the First Runner Up). That crown turns out to be the story's central image. And what starts out as a funny/sad essay on gay *byukons* (recalling, for me, John Bengan's short story "Armor" and the Jun Robles Lana/Rodolfo Vera film, *Die Beautiful*), develops into a powerful memoir about the agonizing nightmare of testing positive for HIV in the 80s, when contracting AIDS meant a death sentence.

Reactions from the teaching panel were a good study in how—as Jimmy put it the other day—"As we read, so are we read."

Jack and Jerry felt that here was a missed opportunity to delve further into the complex phenomenon of gay *byukons*. Jowie seemed to be looking for a sense of responsibility on the part of the protagonist, after the relief and elation that he experiences upon getting his negative test results. Being a romantic, I was missing the element of love in the narrative.

For Chuckberry, the memoir's main theme is the body—the body in beauty contests, in the family, in a personal relationship, at work. What ties it all together, he said, is AIDS, which the narrator's father introduces into the discussion; becomes an issue between the narrator and his lover; and seems to bind the narrator to J in his own mind. Chuckberry asked two questions. First, what does the narrative really wish to say about the body? This might have become clearer, had the writer tied up the connection between beauty pageants, the body, and illness. And second, why, in the end, does the narrator feel that J is still the winner, when, in fact, it is the narrator who has prevailed?

Luna also recognized the significance of the body in the narrative—how it can serve as a means of validation when one triumphs in a beauty contest, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as a source of betrayal, when it succumbs to illness and death. She also mentioned the richness of the *korona* as a symbol, how it tarnishes with time, and even transforms, as

the triumphant "title-holder" falls victim to AIDS, into the biblical crown of thorns. (I love this reading!)

Roda's memoir centers around the activist-protagonist's sort-of relationship with someone in a position of power in the community to which they both belong. It is a complex, layered narrative, involving several themes—human rights, religion, physical attraction, gender issues—and how these sometimes clash, causing havoc in personal lives, particularly when the individuals concerned are honest, well-meaning people, seriously committed to a cause.

Several of us felt a hesitancy in the writer, a holding back of something important. Chuckberry suggested that the narrative is about abuse. And that its fragmented structure, as well as the religious epigrams were the author's attempt to create distance between the narrator and the events recalled.

I had a strong sense that the author was deliberately repressing or suppressing something—both about herself and about the other person. His motivations are never explained. Nor are hers, actually. To quote Chuckberry: "*Yung muling pagtanggap kay C ay sinabi na lang bilang 'bakit hindi?'*" He pointed out the contradiction between her fighting for other women's rights, and not for her own.

I admit to having a preference for understatement myself, so I appreciate Roda's predicament. But, as I was cautioned by my mentors, so do I caution younger writers whom I mentor: in restraining emotion, be careful not to efface it.

We are all familiar with Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry as "powerful emotions... recollected in tranquility." It will do to define fiction, nonfiction, and drama as well, I think. But he was referring to the distance

that produces perspective, and enables one to look back with clarity. He did not mean emotion recollected with indifference.

Part 8

28 June 2021

The next reflections I offer with great diffidence—not being a poet myself—and with gratitude toward the members of our Teaching Panel, from whom I learned a great deal yesterday evening.

I don't recall when I first read the poem below. It may have been in my senior year in high school or my Freshman year in college. I liked it. It made poetry seem easy to read, and easy to write. Not at all like the poems I had been studying thus far.

ARS POETICA by Archibald MacLeish

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

*

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

*

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.

Of course I was to learn soon enough that MacLeish's was only one type of poetry. And it was first published around 1926.

Almost one century later, the poem might strike one as hopelessly naive. Given the confounding complexities of the world today—not to mention the chaos in our own country—surely even poetry must engage!

And yet, in workshops like ours, we are reading the works of emerging writers, writers just beginning to learn to shape language to approximate their emotions and ideas. I'm thinking that this might not be a bad way to begin—with images.

It seems to me that the poems of Writing Fellows **John Paul Padilla** and **Mark Dominick Portes** kind of reflected MacLeish's poetics, even if they might never have read him. This was confirmed by what they said when they introduced their poetry at the start of their respective workshop sessions. And it was reinforced by the Teaching Panel's comments.

John Paul—who has a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from Catanduanes State University, and works for DepEd—told us that he had written his poems after Catanduanes had been lashed by five typhoons in a row. He had been much struck by the way the world around him looked.

Mark—who has a BA English Language from Manuel Enverga University Foundation in Quezon, and does freelance work as an illustrator—said that, for his poems, he drew from his experience, and used words (he referred to them apologetically as "jargon") and images from his daily routine as part-owner of a motorcycle spare parts shop.

In his first poem, "Araw ng Mga Patay Matapos ang Unos," John Paul tried to describe what he saw and felt, as he gazed upon the aftermath of each typhoon: the trees shorn of their tops, leaves, fruits, flowers scattered on the ground. Just the bare trunks, with gashes cut by an axe, foothold for the climbing person. In his second poem, "Mga Alitaptap," he tried to recreate his astonishment at the sight of fireflies in the night after a typhoon, his wonderment at how such tiny creatures had survived winds strong enough to tear up sheets of *yero*.

There were some comments from the Writing Fellows about the persona in the first poem being somehow alienated from what he was describing, the perspective, perhaps, of an outsider surveying the scene of devastation; and the poems' being rather static. But the panelists had interesting and varied observations.

Paul Castillo (the session's moderator) said he liked that the persona was not emotional, since this was an Imagist poem. (Aha!) In fact, he cautioned the poet against making his persona too intrusive. The images should speak for themselves, he said.

Ralph didn't read the persona, as alienated or indifferent at all, but as resilient, something one has to be if one lives in a place which can be hit by five successive typhoons. And he read the central image of the fireflies in the second poem as an image of strength belied by fragility. He also pointed to the movement at the end of the first poem, which describes the gashes on the bare trunks of the denuded trees as "*daan-hagdan patungo/ sa unti-unting lumiliwanag nang langit*"; and to the literal and metaphorical "illumination" at the end of the second poem: "*...butil ng liwanag/ ang mga alitaptap sa aming tapat/ sa mga gabing halos walang pinagkaiba/ ang pagpikit at ang pagmulat.*"

Jowie acknowledged that John Paul has a poet's eyes, but urged him to go for, on the one hand, greater specificity—the scene depicted might have been in any town in our much-afflicted islands; and, on the other hand, greater subtlety—something should be left unsaid, for the reader's imagination to take over.

Luna also recognized the influence of Imagism in John Paul's poems, and referred him to the poem "Diliman" by Ruel Aguila, which, she said, captured the essence of Diliman in just a few lines. She reminded him about something he had mentioned in his introduction: "*Nagbabagyo pero nasaan yung mga santo,*" and urged him to focus on that, to guide his vision. She also suggested that he not limit himself to visual images, and experiment also with aural images, as Merlie Alunan does in her poems about the super-typhoon that swept over Leyte.

Ned Parfan (who was moderator for this session) lauded Mark's poems for their "negative capability" (referencing Keats) and the use of the

"second imagination" (referencing Coleridge). He also suggested breaking up the first poem into three short poems, to solve the problem of its length. And, while he agreed with the other panelists about the poems' flaws, he praised the poet for his playing with rhythm and sound ("*Ang tugtog ay ritmo ng tibok at munting mga pagsabog sa dibdib/ dulot ng sunud-sunod na kislap, tapos diklap, ng* spark plug...").

Mark's first poem, "Patay na Oras," paints a picture of a tricycle driver during the dead hours of the day, which he compares to the waiting hours before 3 PM on Good Friday. And his second poem, "Anatomiya ng Arangkada" describes the sounds and movements of a tricycle in motion.

Jerry found the poems on the prolix side. "*Kailangang tapyasin pa.*" He pointed out some mixed metaphors and some infelicities in word choice.

Jowie suggested that the poet widen his field of observation to include other aspects of the tricycle driver's life, and the characteristics of tricycle drivers in different locations, even within the same town.

Luna felt that Mark should be lauded for giving voice to the tricycle driver in our poetry. She noted its uniqueness in its focus on the different sounds made by the machine, as well as on its movement and stasis.

(As a reminder for any of the Writing Fellows who is interested: Imagism was an early 20th-century poetic movement that relied on concrete images drawn in precise, colloquial language rather than traditional poetic diction and meter. Imagist poets were not too concerned about the themes behind the images. The images themselves were the focus. Among the famous American Imagist poets were Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Amy Lowell… What am I thinking? Of course you all must have googled it by now!)

Perhaps the poets in our Teaching Panel might mention more Filipino poets—in both English and Filipino—for the poets among our Writing Fellows who are interested in following this path.

Part 9

June 29, 2021 (Tuesday)

Yesterday's sessions on fiction in Filipino turned out to be among the most exciting yet. For me, and, I'm sure, for the other fictionists in the Teaching Panel. I hope the writing fellows were equally engaged.

We took up "Nonstop Bus" by **Mubarak M. Tahir** (with Jowie Delos Reyes as moderator) and "Relokasyon" by **Cris Lazanderas** (with Chuckberry Pascual as moderator).

The discussion was animated. How important is originality in fiction? Is fiction which sticks to old patterns (the surprise twist at the end, for example) or traditional themes (like the conflict between city and country) necessarily inferior to fiction which breaks new ground, both thematically and technically? How much research is expected of writers when they write stories dealing with illness or genetic defects? Should a writer choose as a subject something that has become a popular culture trope (in both Filpino and Korean telenovelas, for example) like Alzheimer's? When one is a politically committed writer, is there a problem with depicting characters whose lives are pure wretchedness? Must one's stories end on a note of hope?

In the first story, a young call center agent, commutes every weekend from the city to his hometown in the province, in order to be with his grandfather, who has taken care of him since childhood, his mother having abandoned him. The story touches on the differences between life in the capital and life in his little provincial town, and the effects of dislocation on both young and old. It also touches on the theme of memory loss, whose

deeper shadow is erasure of identity. The story's surprise ending—and the misery about to enfold these two simple, good people—is almost unbearable. Luna wondered if perhaps some deep, unrecognized trauma might be the root of such an affliction hitting two members belonging to different generations in the same family. Jerry suggested that maybe the story that wants to be told is a story of forgetting (as defense? as escape?). Fascinating possibilities.

The second story focuses on the cycle of eviction from their homes and relocation to unfamiliar sites, which entraps so many of our *kababayan*, and what meaning the word "choice" has for people like them. As in his first story—"Pagoda"—whatever glimmer of light there might be is totally extinguished, literally and figuratively, by the time the story ends. I suggested to Cris that in the tradition of writing that he seems to belong to, there is the expectation that the fictional world will not be utterly bleak. Cris replied that he was aware of this, and had considered letting in a ray of light. But, ultimately , he decided against it. "*Ito na po yung gusto kong sabihin*," he said.

I understand and admire the story's integrity, and its author's. I also happen to think his decision was the right one, artistically. His protagonist is not without agency. He studied his options, and he made a decision. The thing is: those options were all bad. Cris' story is the author's protest against such a tragedy. The story is doubly interesting to me when I compare it with his earlier story and its ironic ending. I look forward to reading more of this writer's work in the future.

Part 10

30 June 2021 (Wednesday)

Yesterday, it was back to nonfiction writers, Chuck Smith and Eunice Bacalando. I was moderator for Chuck's session, and Jack Wigley was moderator for Eunice's.

Chuck used an unusual strategy for his "In the Movies": the narrative unfolded in a series of what looked like blind items in a newspaper entertainment column. But the items included one about the narrator's mother, who committed suicide at age 18, leaving a 3-month-old baby (the narrator).

The Writing Fellows were unanimous in their praise for the piece. Cris described it as playful in style, without being superficial; and entertaining, without being insensitive. Vince mentioned its performative aspect, which reinforced the significance of the piece's title. Eunice praised the "lightness and nonchalance" of its tone, which belied the gravity of its themes (abandonment, rejection). She also mentioned the disjointed structure, which reflected the narrator's sense of disconnectedness, a detachment which, like its ambiguity, was actually "a strategy for concealment". And Mark focused on Chuck's repeated disclosure of his own unreliability as a narrator, which he felt actually revealed a contradiction at the heart of the story: the desire to be seen, and the attempt to hide. Behind the narrative was the fact of his being adopted, Mark said.

The panel was no less impressed. Paul was much struck by its metafictional quality. Chuckberry pointed to the sophisticated strategy of mocking the voyeurism represented by the blind item, at the same time that it, in a sense, participated in it. Luna singled out the use of comedy (even as it revealed the darkness at the heart of its story), another kind of performativity, to serve the purpose of concealment. Paul and Chuckberry thought the section about the mother deserved a narrative of its own; although Chuckberry cautioned Chuck against the possibility of exploiting the subject yet again in the act of telling her story. Luna, however, did not agree that the section about the mother should be excised.

I agree with Luna. I read Chuck's unusual memoir as a commentary on the seamy side of show business. And the tragic story of the mother is

at its heart. Its inclusion raises the stakes. Limiting itself to the other blind items (about dating and such) would make the piece a bit superficial. I think it was critic Walter Kerr who wrote that in the best comedy, just below the surface of laughter, lie tears. Hidden somewhere in Chuck's comic narrative is this stark question: "If this was my family... what did it say about me?"

Eunice's "Incision" is written in the same clipped, ironic, self-reflexive style of her earlier piece, "Defiance." And it covers basically the same ground—the trauma of illness and hospitalization. But it takes the reader through every agonizing step of the narrator's journey: the blood tests, the scans, the MRIs, the actual surgery, the post-op stage. And what might have been a most depressing experience, is brightened by the narrator's self-mockery, her self-awareness, and her determination to remain IN CONTROL, for all that she might be physically helpless. "For the whole year, I swam in the addicting pools of self-pity. I did not make plans. My plans only lasted until the weekend…"

In her introduction to her work, Eunice said she hoped the panel would help her find ways which might make her narrative "more palatable" for readers. Luna replied that it was already a more balanced piece than "Defiance," and that the narrative about the great vulnerability of women's bodies, even on the operating table ("This is what happened when I left my fate to a room full of men…"), needs to be told.

For my part, I think that there is no need to make this horrific story more "palatable." What I suggested was that the memoir would be even more effective by including more of her dry, deadpan humor. And Dawn Marfil-Burris suggested that—since her narrator had made it her business to read up on her condition so that no one else, whom she knew, knew more about it than she did—she could use the "science" parts as scaffolding to hold her narrative together, instead of breaking it up into what came across as arbitrary divisions.

Two really good stories!

PART 11

1 July (Thursday)

Take 2 for the fictionists in English yesterday, with Imman Canicosa's "Cities as People" and Alex Alcasid's "The Stars Fell."

Having read Imman's earlier story, "Ligaya," we were much struck by the second one's brevity and simplicity. Martin, the protagonist, is a Filipino tourist in Osaka, remembering other journeys, other cities. His ruminations are frequently interrupted by the mental image of the girlfriend he has just lost, and with whom he had last visited this city. The prose is clipped, direct, unadorned. Though the narrator is constantly moving, the story seems static. Nothing really happens. As the story comes to an end, the narrator does reach an epiphany of sorts, about his "aimless wandering," about himself as "someone who wants to remember, and forget."

I think it was Paul who said that it might have been more effective if written using the first person POV—it felt like creative nonfiction, he said. Dawn suggested that—since Imman is obviously an experienced traveler—he might want to convert this into a travel essay or a travel narrative, which I thought was a distinct possibility.

Many of the Writing Fellows noted that the story had a strong *animé* feel to it. Jose Mojica, the session moderator, summed it up thus: "It's like he rendered an *animé* film in language." (I wish I knew more about *animé*. Then I might have contributed something to the discussion.)

What I found intriguing about the story is that the author is just as capable of this type of pared-down prose. "Ligaya" was an altogether different beast, with its parallel structure, shifting point of view, distinct narrative style for each of the opposing points of view, and the combination

of telenovela thriller with social realism. The only thing both stories share is their existentialist attitude.

But I would like to see more of this second side of Imman's. I think he could either give Martin more flesh, and continue telling his story; or convert this into nonfiction, into travel writing in the manner of Andre Aciman's *Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere*, rambling, reflective, meditative, the inner journey as important as—or more important than—the physical journey.

If he chooses the latter option, Imman would do well to note Chuckberry's comments. He said: "*Kung iaangat ito sa* Eat Pray Love *na parang* cultural tourism *at medyo* narcissistic (all these countries are about ME essentially), *ilang tanong ang puwedeng pag-isipan: ano ang sinasabi ng piyesa tungkol sa siyudad; at ano ang sinasabi ng piyesa* particularly *tungkol sa siyudad sa labas ng Pilipinas, bilang isang taong mula sa Pilipinas?* He ended by reminding Imman about what Rizal referred to as the "demon of comparison," when his protagonist Crisostomo Ibarra was in the Botanical Garden in Manila, recalling the Botanical Gardens of Europe, in *Noli Me Tangere*.

You have your work cut out for you, Imman! 😎

Alex's story was, as she revealed in her introduction, written in response to a call from Dean Alfar for contributions to an anthology of "alternative history" as a sub-specie of speculative fiction. The story speculates on what would have happened if America had dropped the two nuclear bombs on Manila and Bataan, instead on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The question raised by, I think, Eunice Bacalando was: what possible justification could America have had to drop nuclear bombs on a country which was, at that time—not just an ally—but its own colony, even assuming that Japan had taken possession of it? And there were comments that the story's ending was hurried, and therefore taxed the credulity. Galvanizing people—even university students—into a mass action, let alone a political movement, is not a simple thing.

I suggested to Alex that flash fiction might not be suited to the project of rewriting history. There just isn't enough maneuvering space in 500 words or even 1,000 words. This agenda is an ambitious one. One need only recall the novelists of the Latin American "Boom" and their BIG novels, to get an idea of what it entails. Having said that, I must add that ambition is good! How else does one strive? How else does one grow?

PART 12

3 July (Saturday)

For this section of these Chronicles—on poetry in Filipino—I have relied heavily on Paul and Jowie, moderators for the day. I took notes, but only sporadically. I think my poor brain was suffering from information overload, after more than 2 weeks of workshop sessions.

"Kumpuni" by Mark Dominick Portes

"Batid ang pagadating ng oras na kailangang magpahinga sa pasada/ ng iyong motor. Lumayo muna sa usok at alikabok ng kalsada./ Kung halos kainin na ng mga sumusugat na kalawang ang bawat bakal/ sa katawan: ang mga turnilyo, tapaludo, ang mababali nang mulye..."

The poem uses the decrepit motorcycle as a metaphor for the tricycle driver's own state of physical exhaustion.

Ralph suggested that the images and metaphors used should be logical and consistent, "*Ang mga detalye ng pa-aayos ng motor ay dapat may kapantay na mga detalye ng pag-aayos sa sarili.*" The conceit (machine = man's body) has to work, not only on the level of the signifier (language) but on the level of the signified. To fix this, the poet needs to focus on the literal level first before moving on to the metaphorical level.

Luna praised Mark's skill with sound and language. She also mentioned that, the beginning of the poem "Kumpuni" establishes the poet's

aesthetic distance. She felt, though, that he needed to clarify the dramatic situation more.

"Bakal sa Bakal" by Mark Dominick Portes

This poem is more complex. Again, it is built around a conceit—the fixing of the motorcycle in the shop, for the preparation of the persona for a coming confrontation.

"Sa pagmamatyag, naroon ka/ sa talyer, iisa ang siklab ng iyong sigarilyo/ at kislap ng mga tumitilansik/ na alipato mula sa winewelding na bakal.../"

It is a long-delayed confrontation between the abused son and the father he resented and feared.

"Sinunod ko lamang ang iyong pangaral:/ kailangang maging matibay/ upang mabuhay—bakal sa bakal—/ ganoon pinatigas ng tubo ang musmos mong buto."

But Jerry cautioned Mark not to waste time on unnecessary details, and to focus on the dramatic situation. And Paul advised him to avoid lines that are too literal, and didactic. He reminded the poet of Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta's emphasis on reining in the language (poetic tension) in moments of intense emotion.

"Helicopter" by Paul Padilla

This short poem is part of a cycle of poems on "bagyo," to which the first two poems by Paul also belong. This one is focused on a crowd of adults and children watching a helicopter about to land.

"At habang natatawa/sa pagkasabik ng mga bata/ patinga-tingala rin ang matantanda—/ waring humihiling/ ng ihuhulog na biyaya."

Luna warned Paul against clichés, such as the tutubi/helicopter metaphor, and suggested that he perhaps explore the helicopter as a symbol of power (only the rich and powerful can afford to ride helicopters, humanitarian aid from the powerful comes via helicopter, etc.)

Jowie felt that, since Paul obviously has mastery of language and technical poetic skills, he might concentrate more on the what rather than the how: **what** he wants to say, rather than on **how** to say it.

Jerry urged him to include more details about "*abaka bilang kabuhayan ng mga tao*." Of people affected by typhoons, only a poet from Catanduanes could do this. "Imagine a field of abaca damaged by a typhoon," Jerry said, "and, on top of it, the corpses of people felled by the same typhoon."

Jerry also advised both poets to no longer think in terms of individual poems, but in terms of poetry collections built around a theme—a subject close to the poet's heart, a subject he knows.

This suggestion was welcomed warmly by the Writing Fellows. Some even suggested that this be made a topic for the Center's next USTinig episode!

PART 13

4 July (Sunday)

We have reached homestretch! Last night, we held our last workshop sessions—sarilaysay (creative nonfiction in Filipino)—with "Kaladkarin" by Roda Tajon and "Si Maria Labó, at Iba Ko Pang Mga Aswang by KC Daniel Inventor.

The "*kaladkarin*" that Roda's narrative refers to is, first, the noun, which means "*taong madaling hilahilain*… Draggable;" and, second, the verb, which means to forcibly drag off. This is a narrative about high school

bullying. Roda vividly evokes the scene: "*Nahihirapan akong maka-angkop sa araw-araw na buhay sa* public school *dahil walang libro, kapos sa gamit at upuan, sobrang init at madilim, at nasa likuran ako dahil sa* sitting arrangement *na* alphabetical. *Idagdag mo pa ang ingay sa labas ng klasrum namin dahil may nagkalase sa* corridor *mula alas-10 ng umaga hanggang sa ma-dismiss kami ng ala-una ng hapon.*"

To this mix is added the classmate identified only as "M," who is the bane of the narrator's existence. This person repeatedly subjects the narrator to both physical and psychological indignities and humiliations. It is suggested that the cause of M's being abusive is that he is himself quite ordinary, where both brains and brawn are concerned. And his only way of affirming himself is by picking on someone weaker, who has no allies in the school, and, moreover, is gay. No one comes to the narrator's rescue, not even his own friends. And everyone else seems to take for granted that pushing around a gay person is acceptable. Nor are the teachers a source of help. In fact they, too, are bullied by the school bullies.

Such bullying has lasting effects on its victims' psyche. As an adult, the narrator seeks professional help, recognizes these leftover emotions for what they are, and finds ways of addressing them. When he finally decides that it is time to erase M from his life forever, he looks for M on Facebook, "unfriends" him, lists "bullying" as the reason for doing so, and puts an end to being "*kaladkarin*."

The writer wins the reader's sympathy for his protagonist. And precisely because he does, several panelists—myself included—found this ending a bit lame. Jowie was particularly vehement about the need for a stronger ending (short of actually suggesting violence). Jack felt that the narrative itself needed to lose some of its grimness, to allow for such a denouement. My suggestion, picking up from Jack, was for Roda to introduce some levity (perhaps dark humor) into the narrative. Not, of course, to

trivialize what had been done, but to communicate the narrator's having achieved a kind of distance from it. Then the final act on FB becomes itself a humorous/ironic comment, proof that he can now look back on it all with a grin and a shrug. As in "Joke's on you, Creep!"

Before the session started, I had messaged Jack to consult him about something in KC's *sarilaysay* which was not quite clear to me. (The author's Filipino is on a level way higher than mine; and several sentences are in Hiligaynon.) After answering my question, Jack added, "*Pero maganda siya*, Jing. I swear!"

I totally agree. Actually, this narrative blew me away!

To begin with, it is thoroughly grounded, carefully recreating the story's physical, cultural, and emotional environment, particularly its gothic legends and folklore. But in this tale, the *aswang* include actual living persons known to the narrator. He is even sent to the house of one such *aswang* to buy her homemade vinegar, and to an *aswang* couple to be healed of some infirmity, and the couple then send him home with half a sack of freshly harvested *kamote* and *uraro*. Details like these add to the extraordinary "familiarity" of the scene, and give it a marvelous realist feel, which is reinforced by the writer's language, his narrative style.

There is a brief interlude during which the narrator reflects on how, as he grew older, he realized that he had never once heard or seen, on radio or TV, any news announcement about children actually being killed by witches. Nor did he ever encounter anything of the sort, in person. So he came to the conclusion that these were merely tales concocted by old people to frighten gullible children, and extract their obedience; and even later, he recognized it as a strategy for excluding persons different from themselves. In short, the demonizing of *aswang* was a power thing.

On the other hand, the narrator HAD known actual terror.

At this point, the narrative segues into the account of his experiences when he was in 5th grade. The molestation by older boys; his realization that because he was gay, he was regarded as a monster by them and others like them; that to them, like the *aswang*, he sucked men of their manhood and infected them with disease (a reference perhaps to AIDS, when it was falsely believed to be a disease of homosexuals). He experienced the horror of his own demonization. And, finally there was the ultimate violent abuse.

Part of this private hell is the victim's inability to articulate it to either himself, or to anyone else. And his inability to escape it. The *aswang*, at least, are able to fly.

But, eventually, the narrator does discover a way. He discovers his own power.

"Nang matuklasan kong nasa papel at panulat pala ang aking gahúm, tulad ng ginawa kong pagtawag sa hangin noon ay tinawag kong muli ang mga salitang dati ay hindi ko nagawang maipagtanggol. Kasabay nito ay ang pagtipon ko rin sa mga alaala at istorya ng mga aswang ng aking pagkabata, na sa pagkakaalam ko ay hindi rin naipagtanggol ang kanilang mga sarili kahit minsan. Sa pamamagitan ng nagsanga naming mga kuwento, bubuohin ko ang malakas na ihip ng aming katotohanan. Katotohanan na ipapanubli ko sa nga makakabasa at makakarinig nito."

Powerful stuff, KC! Saludo!

This is the last of these Chronicles. We have a single interaction left. And then, graduation!