

INTRODUCTION

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The idea for this book came from Ned Parfan.

We had realized that 2022 was the 10th anniversary year of our revival as the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies (CCWLS). Ten years is a milestone. It is also a time for revisiting our goals, a time for assessment, a time for taking stock. How far have we come? Have we come far enough, or have we fallen short? What—if anything—should we have done differently? What new directions do we wish to explore?

The general feeling was: while, of course, we may have stumbled a couple of times, for the most part, we had stayed the course. So, a small celebration might be justified. But, given that health protocols were still in place in the university, a party was not an option.

Ned Parfan, who had also come up with the idea for our 5th anniversary year celebration—the 5-issue anniversary edition of our literary journal, *Tomás*, to come out on the 5th day of the 5th month in the 5th year—once again came up with something new. Why not a book? An anthology to showcase new work by the Resident Fellows of the CCWLS. Each new work, or excerpt thereof, would be accompanied by a short introductory essay explaining the author's artistic process or his/her poetics – which readers who are writers just starting out on their careers might find useful, Jowie De Los Reyes added. The anthology would be edited by the Center's director, who would also write an Introduction, which would include a short history of the Center's 10-year story. And so it came to be.

The idea for the book's title came from Jenny Ortuoste. The "Center" is, of course, our Center, and "will hold" is our promise to hold steady, to stay the course, despite setbacks, the most ominous of which was the deadly pandemic. Since we were short of time and since there was no budget allotted for this project, we decided to make the anthology a special issue of *Tomás*.

I've been looking forward to writing this Introduction, not just because of my confidence in the quality of the works submitted, but because the authors—the CCWLS' Resident Fellows—are an interesting bunch to write about.

The most senior among the Fellows has just turned 60; the youngest is in his 20s. Like many artists, they are eccentrics. Some are super-extroverted, and others are almost reclusive. A couple are competitive workaholics, and more than a couple are laid-back bohemians. All are collectors of books, but one has so many that he has had to move some of them into the office to make room for himself in his home. One has practically memorized the Bible "from Genesis to the Apocalypse." Another is an ardent follower of astrology. And a third has been visited by creatures of lower mythology. Almost all can sing and dance. Three have been in theater. Two play the guitar. One makes films. Two are so steeped in pop culture, both local and foreign, that when you mention the title of a film they can tell you the names of the actors who played the main roles, the awards it won, and when. But their closest friend is interested only in Shakespearean drama. And there is this Resident Fellow who, I am convinced, is a "one of." She has two degrees from the University of the Philippines (UP) and one from the Ateneo. But before she turned to teaching she was a "gonzo journalist." She was also the country's first apprentice jockey, married a professional jockey, got her marriage annulled, is a single parent, a cancer survivor, and won the Palanca gold on her first try. Fortunately, all these folks are tolerant of each other, perhaps because they

also all have a sharp sense of humor. And, even more important, they pull together as a team!

We open this Special Anniversary Issue with the poets—"the Cavalry," as Krip Yuson calls them (and with whom, I must admit I agree, albeit somewhat grudgingly).

There is, first, **Paul Alcoseba Castillo**, the youngest of the Center's poets, with his "Ang Pagtula sa mga Larawan, Ang Paglarawan sa mga Tula." Paul has incorporated the introductory essay required by our project with the project excerpt, which is a lyrical and philosophical meditation on photography and poetry written from the point of view of a poet/photographer under the quarantine imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Paul credits the Australian photographer Aaron Chapman for the initial idea behind his own project. Chapman's subjects were simple, mundane objects and familiar places, and the photographs were accompanied by short prose captions. It occurred to Paul that he could do the same thing, but instead of prose captions, he would use poems. Ironically, it was the pandemic which opened this door for Paul. Trapped by the lockdown and its many permutations, he became the poet/photographer.

Joel M. Toledo joined the Center only this year, but I have known him from the time when he was an undergraduate student in one of my classes in UP. In those days, he was writing prose. Like Paul, Joel combines his introductory essay with his work-in-progress, which, of course, is a poetry collection. His describes the whole as a "little rumination" on the writing of poetry. It also touches on the reading of poetry. And his point is: "the idea of reading the lines before reading between the lines." In his writing about how he wrote the poem "Muon," which is part of his forthcoming book *Planet Nine*, he describes his poetic intentions and the ways in which he crafted his lines to achieve those intentions. This returns us "to care for craft, a mindfulness

of poetic devices, and a high regard for the oft-underestimated need for claims and images to feed off one another.” This consummate craftsmanship accounts for the precision and elegance of Joel’s own work.

Besides being, like the rest of the Center’s Resident Fellows, both a teacher and a professional writer, **Ned Parfan** is also an administrator. And as deputy director of the UST Publishing House, marketing is part of his job. The wonder of it is that he finds time and space to accommodate poetry. This may account for the nostalgia with which he looks back on the time which he describes, in his introductory essay, “as the happiest days of my life.” His “Shadowboxing in Polyester” is a lyric sequence. And it is a kind of tribute—a “humble homage” is his term for it—to his mentors and fellow-writers who were UST undergraduates with him when he was “a curious and awkward *promdi* determined to learn more about this darned thing called poetry, and surrounded by brilliant friends and eccentric mentors whom I’m still trying to subconsciously impress to this day.” There are certainly no traces of any awkwardness in “Tyger Tyger in the burning bush/Motion-sensor punctuation unclear...” Or in “The skull a cathedral of cantilever and slope/choreographed to spin around the year 1997...” This, surely, is most sophisticated poetizing. I might add that Ned is also a breeder of gumamelas. To date he has already produced more than 30 hybrids

Poet/performance artist **Nerisa del Carmen Guevara**’s contribution to our book is a lyrical poem that is a performance. The poem is titled “Island.” It is divided into stanzas like many poems are, but it is also cut up into sections marked by QR codes. The reader who clicks on them is taken to other pages, or places, which become part of the poem. The “island” of the poem is a picture (or possibly a painting) that “sits on the edge of the page of a brochure/ on the table...” It is also the first step the reader takes when he/she embarks on the magical adventure that is the poem, the latest creation of this woman whose every gesture is transformed into art. Ricci cooks using

vegetables and herbs which she grows herself, brews tea, bakes, and gives some of her concoctions, some of her tea, and exquisite teapots and tea cups as gifts to persons she cherishes.

Fiction is represented, first, by **Augusto Antonio A. Aguila**.

Tots has been a teacher from the moment he began to earn his keep. And he has been connected with a number of schools on different levels. Which perhaps explains why his work-in-progress is a collection of stories set in a college or university. The stories are designed “to give voice to the silenced and oppressed, shed light on matters that often plague academe, examine the dynamics that define the different types of relations that exist in learning institutions,” says Tots in his introductory essay. His chosen method is satire, and in the story he has selected for this anthology, the satire is pretty savage. Another story, which he mentions, the one about the person who “becomes famous (or infamous) for playing the maracas to entertain his audience whenever he delivers a lecture at international conferences” must be even more devastating. But in comparison with some of the stories in his earlier collections, *The Heart of Need* and *Carnival of Hate*, the world of this book does not seem as dark. I recall that, in my Introduction to the latter book, I said that this writer “is able to face the monster without flinching... determined to stare it down.” There is a monster in this new story too, but it is comic/pathetic rather than terrifying. Tots is a collector of books and a compulsive reader who favors the dire and the depressing in fiction. He also has an enormous collection of CDs—pop, jazz, rock, alternative, New Age... you name it!

Our second fictionist, **Jose P. Mojica**, is the youngest of the Center’s Resident Fellows. In his introductory essay, Jose references Arnold van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* (1909), a seminal work on how we move through life, marking key turning points, and Victor Turner’s *Betwixt and Between: the*

Liminal Period in Rites of Passage (1967), which built on Gennep's book. "The term 'liminality' is used today to describe physical and non-physical spaces," Jose writes. And it is in those spaces that he sets his stories. He is interested in examining how liminality affects character. A staircase figures prominently in the story included in our anthology: "Music at the Hospital." It is probably being also a filmmaker that draws Jose to spaces like stairways, hallways, bridges, etc., and enables him to see in them metaphoric possibilities and potential for drama. This is a quiet little story whose music, like the "faint violin melody coming" from the newborn baby in his protagonist's arms, belies the impact of what is actually happening to the protagonist. Jose also composes music and plays guitar and keyboard.

Our book's largest section is the Creative Nonfiction/Sanaysay Section.

Mark Anthony Angeles may well be our most versatile Resident Fellow. He is a writer of short stories, poems, and essays, a literary scholar (e.g., a study on the *dagli*), a translator (e.g., Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* into Filipino), a columnist, an editor... and bilingual to boot. When we first discussed plans for our project, and I went around the table asking everyone about their current writing projects, Mark announced, sheepishly, that what he was working on at present was not a literary project at all but a creative writing textbook. And I said: That's fine. We professional writers write many things. In his "Teteksbuk-Teksbuk": O, "Mag-Textbook Ay Di Biro," Mark describes the process of how he somehow became part of the country's enormous textbook industry. The essay is both extremely informative and disarmingly humorous. I must add that I did not expect it to end as it did. But spoilers are not allowed, so we'll leave it at that.

John Jack G. Wigley's work-in-progress is a collection of travel pieces set in 15 different countries. His introductory essay is almost an overview of contemporary Philippine nonfiction, from Jimmy Abad to Jessica Zafra.

And in the title of his essay, “Liwaliw: Mga Lakbay-Sanaysay at Lakbay-Alaala” he tips his hat to my distinction between “travel essays” and “travel memoirs” (in some of my later travel writings). Jack’s “Arriba, Viva Mexico!” is a splendid example of his brand of travel writing. The persona has such disarming candor and self-deprecating humor that the reader is immediately won over and readily accompanies him from adventure to adventure to misadventure. The persona is charmed by things Mexican (the colorful pink, blue, and orange buildings, such a happy contrast to the dull greys and white on the other side of the border); with Mexican music, dances, food; and with the Mexican people, whom he finds to be as cheerful, noisy, and open about their emotions as Pinoys are, and whose history of colonization by Spaniards he strongly empathizes with. The narrative’s ending is a remarkable *tour de force* and one which I didn’t expect. Jack manages to turn a really distressing situation into a hilarious one while sustaining its narrative pace and the narrative voice of his optimistic, enthusiastic, slightly naïve narrator.

Joselito D. De Los Reyes’ provocative essay, “Nakakatawa Dapat Si Rizal,” is both a lesson in how humor works in fiction—in effect, a description of his own poetics—and a humorous essay on Jose Rizal’s humor as manifested in his *Noli Me Tangere*. The essay opens with an example of Jowie’s trademark jokes—his giving up on his dream of becoming Rizal because it was obviously impossible, in the absence of a brother who could pay for a trip to Spain; and deciding instead to become Piolo Pascual, “at mukhang natupad ko naman ito kahit papaano.” There are other instances of his comedic perspective in the essay, such as the predilection of teachers in high school for giving their pupils lists of difficult words to use in sentences, and the bias teachers, both in high school and in college, have for “*pagtatanghal*,” during which students have to act out scenes from Rizal’s novels, with hilarious results wholly unintended by both students and teachers. But the substance of Jowie’s essay is a serious matter. He takes off

from Virgilio Almario's *Rizal: Nobelista*, which claims that there is abundant humor in Rizal's novels (Almario's lecture notes the numerous "siste" or "chiste" in the two novels). Jowie makes a strong case for the need to teach Rizal's novels from this perspective in order to humanize the National Hero even more, if one hopes to prevent the further diminution in the number of his readers today.

Dawn Marfil Burris' essay is a departure from the mold—a literal departure since it is not about literature but about ceramic pottery. She takes us through her first "Pottery Night," her awkward attempts to work the wheel, and her attempts to "center." Her husband Ben, who suffers from anxiety and agoraphobia, has no trouble at all and successfully produces a plate. "Something unfurls in him when he works with his hands," writes Dawn. She, on the other hand, produces an assortment of little figures, including an owl and a pussycat. And, instead of sending them into the kiln, she wraps up her greenware (raw clay newly formed by hand or the turning of the wheel) in plastic and puts them on her shelf. In the middle of this memory is another one from further back, about another pottery workshop in Sagada, a magical place "where broken hearts go." She writes about learning to "wedge and shape the clay into a ball" and to do "slab work." And, while ruminating on bisque firing, glaze firing, and "surviving the fire without any lingering cracks," and the differences between this art and the art she is more familiar with (writing, of course), Dawn gets an epiphany: "Clay may be more forgiving than language, but in the end, clay has a god and its name is fire." The whole process, then—the making of pottery—is a metaphor for her life so far. This is a tale of searching and finding, a tale about love, surrender, and marriage. Quite simply, creative nonfiction at its best.

"My creative process stems from my poetics in that it must be honest and genuine to the way I live my life. As someone with children to raise and a household to run on my own, most of my time is spent working at things that

have remunerative compensation—teaching, churning out content for the internet, editing documents and psychological case studies. I have very little leisure to write literary or creative works. It happens when it happens.” That is **Jenny Ortuoste** speaking in the essay which introduces her contribution, which is an excerpt from her work-in-progress *Kulturang Karera: the Culture and Communication of Horseracing*. The said work was her Ph.D. dissertation. And her present project is to convert “an academic work into something that will be of interest to others who are not as geeky or nerdy” as she is, and that will “allow me to share as accurately and faithfully as possible the vibrancy and sheer excitement of the world I lived in for over 20 years.” I think it would be no exaggeration to say that Jenny Ortuoste is unique in today’s literary landscape. She comes from a background of writing sports articles and sports broadcasting. “Gonzo journalism” is how she describes her writing style, which is straightforward and tough, but influenced by the likes of Stephen King (who is perhaps best known for his horror fiction) and Jack Kerouac, who “writes the way jazz sounds.”

My own contribution to our anthology belongs to this section. I think both the introductory essay (“The Journal or Diary Excerpt as Literature”) and the excerpt itself (“Re-entry and Renewal: Pages from My Journal”) have self-explanatory titles, so I shall say nothing more about them.

Both Chuckberry Pascual and Ralph Semino Galán have been involved in translation projects of late.

Chuckberry J. Pascual first worked on his translation into Filipino of the award-winning first novel by Miguel Syjuco, *Ilustrado*. This was a project which Miguel (whose nickname, coincidentally is also Chuck) endorsed wholeheartedly since he had been hoping from the start that a Filipino translation would come out before the numerous translations into other languages. Then, Chuck went to work on two of my short story

collections, *Ballad of a Lost Season* and *Where Only the Moon Rages*, which he translated as *Kundiman ng Panahong Naiwan* and *Sa Bayan ng Nagngangalit na Buwan*. All three books were published by the UST Publishing House. He followed these up with his translation of my *Catch a Falling Star*, whose English title he decided to retain. This was published by Lampara Books. His present project is my *Tales for a Rainy Night*, which he has translated as *Mga Kuwentong Bayan sa Gabing Maulan*. And the tale he has elected to translate is “The Birthday Gift,” rendered as “Ang Regalo.” In my view, the distinctive quality of Chuck’s work as a translator is his efforts not just to render the work into another language but to situate it in the context of the original writer’s body of work and in the context of Philippine literature in English. The essay accompanying his contribution to this anthology is a fine example of this. He mentions that this book is my first collection of modern fairy tales and that it marked my shift to a non-realist mode which I was to sustain for many years and which he believes anticipated the later growth of speculative fiction. On top of all that, Chuck continues to write fiction (crime and horror, including zombies) and cultural criticism.

Ralph Semino Galán is best known for his poetry and criticism in English. He has also written poems in Filipino. But lately, he has turned to translation, first translating poems from Filipino into English and vice versa. For now, he is focusing on translating poems from Cebuano into English. His current project is translating poetry in Cebuano by poets from Mindanao into English. Ralph’s occupation, or preoccupation, with translating literatures from the regions in order to make them accessible to the rest of the country and, eventually, to the rest of the world, has become an advocacy. He is passionate about this advocacy. And from his introductory essay, it would seem that this passion has its roots in his feeling that the language which was his birthright was somehow stolen from him. He grew up hearing it referred to as a “dialect” or “the vernacular,” both of which, he

later realized, were derogatory terms. His own mother, an English teacher educated by the last of the Thomasites, spoke to her children mainly in English. Thus, his focus now is not only on poetry written in Cebuano, but poetry from Mindanao written in Cebuano, which is marginalized even by Cebuanos from Cebu.

The critical essays bring our anthology to a close.

Ma. Ailil B. Alvarez is the present director of the UST Publishing House. And her contribution to our anthology is unique. In fact, I know of no other Filipino critic in English today who is working in the field of Catholic criticism. And one wonders why this should be so in a country still predominantly Catholic. I remember taking a class in Modern Catholic Literature in graduate school in UST. Our professor was Clemencia Colayco, a small, frail-looking, white-haired woman. With her, we read the novelists Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, George Bernanos, and the poets Gerald Manley Hopkins, Francis Thompson, Alice Meynell... And we marveled at how she was transformed when she read passages out loud for us, particularly from the poets. She became passionate, she became luminous! Which is why I remember that class to this day. But I don't recall any classes in Catholic literary criticism.

But now there is Ailil Alvarez. As Ailil explains in her introductory essay, her work-in-progress posits “a theory of the sacred as reflected in contemporary women’s poetry, and through comparative analysis—paying close attention to the poet’s choice of imagery—(her) intention is to show how silence, in its many forms, has helped shape the concerns of the spirituality of the female lyric persona.” The excerpt she submitted is a study of the poet Dinah Roma’s poetry collection, *Naming the Ruins* (2014), from this perspective. Building on the work of St. Tomas Aquinas, Hugh Pope, Andrew Greely, Joseph Pearce, and others, she focuses on Roma’s choice of

subjects, her imagery, even her enjambments, to reveal how “the exploration of the spiritual can only be fulfilled by treading the path of silence,” by which means we might all might “inch closer to the Eternal and to the divine.” I imagine Ailil’s eyes shining as she writes these words.

Lito B. Zulueta’s ongoing project is an ambitious one. “The project is more or less to trace the European roots of Philippine literature and culture—the roots being Latin in general, and Spanish in particular.” He is aware that “postcolonial academics... may decry this as Eurocentric and even anti-Filipino.” But he asserts that focusing on the European roots of Philippine culture is a “corrective to the Anglo-American bias of much of our literary taste and scholarship.” His essay, “Romance and its Invention in the Philippines,” ranges over a broad field. It begins with *Florante at Laura*, which he identifies as a “*korido*,” derived from the Mexican “*corrido*,” a ballad that tells a story. It discusses the medieval metrical romances/chivalric romances: “Love and romance are inventions of the medievals...inventions or constructions brought about, at least based on Foucauldian terms, ‘discourses’ or knowledge production about them.” It then looks backward to the ancient folk songs about love, to love in pre-Hispanic times, to ancient sex toys... Then it segues into the arrival of “*amor cortes*” or courtly love, which was the chief influence on *Florante at Laura*, along with the “sentimental novel” of 15th-century Spain, which antedated the 18th-century sentimental novels like Richardson’s *Pamela* and Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*. And finally, it takes up Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere*—which Lito describes as “a modern evolution in prose of the metrical romances”—and offers a stirring defense of Maria Clara, the woman loved by Crisostomo Ibarra, and derided by many modern critics as weak, clinging, cloistered, shrinking, etc. Lito stands with Nick Joaquin, who believed Maria Clara to be “a very strong girl,” compassionate, courageous, loyal, possessing a mind of her own, and the will to carry out her decisions against all opposition. In short, a fit mate for her lover.

Lito too becomes almost incandescent when speaking of these things.

Hopefully, some of the pages of this special 10th anniversary edition of *Tomás*—which the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies offers with our greetings for the season—will light up your holidays too!

