

## A REVIEW OF RIO ALMA'S MEMO MULANG GIMOKUDAN <sup>1</sup>

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**Y**ou need to brush up on your mathematics when you *must* read a writer like Rio Alma. Also known as living National Artist for Literature, Virgilio S. Almario, has just come up with his 16<sup>th</sup> (if my math is correct) collection of poetry, which instantly looks like its very opposite —prose. For *Memo Mulang Gimokudan* (University of the Philippines, 2005) is indeed a prose poem collection, “*tulang tuluyan*,” *tulantuhayan* in one word, as the poet suggests, as if to blur the distinction and close the divide between poetry and prose.

As you would expect from every Almario book, whether he is writing poetry or criticism, the intellectual rigor is present. He does not address the lazy, uninvolved reader, although the invitation is open to all. He does not seduce, he compels. We know an office memo when we see one, but those of us who hardly know our mythology will be asking, what is Gimokudan?

So first, a definition of terms: Gimokudan (or “Gimokodan”) is the underworld of the Bagobo tribes of Mindanao, where resides, by a dark river, a female giant covered with nipples all over her body who feeds the spirit of dead infants before they can enter this underworld. Gimokudan has two regions: the red region is for those killed in combat and the white is for ordinary people. The former will rest in daytime and wander around at night.

Rio Alma takes us to *our* Gimokudan, which he introduces only apparently to Arsene Houssaye, the French bohemian poet

and novelist whose typical working day is to labor over what he hoped will be a future masterpiece. Yet Houssaye could be anyone of us: old poets, struggling poets, poets who never came out from the closet, tired poets who write tired poems, feverish young poets who can't wait for their next book every three months, poets who wait a full circle before they publish their second book, poets who write for the Palanca, poets who have won Palancas and made it to the elite Hall of Fame. And then there are poets like me caught in the middle of pressing academic duties on one hand, and *American Idol* every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, on the other — and who, after reading Rio Alma's book, wished they had more time to dwell on it worshipfully, or nitpick, and thereafter resume writing as if a poem were being written for the first time, or the last.

For that is the way of the poet Rio Alma — he who year after year seems to heed the ides of March more solemnly than many of us do, and counters by proposing a toast by means of a booklaunch. Nothing scandalous about that, except that *Memo Mulang Gimokudan* can leave us bewildered and lost as to whether it is indeed poetry or prose, or more prose than poetry, or more poetry than prose. “Mula't sapul, ayoko ng tsamba,” he says, and it is no accident now that we find him venturing into the realm of the prose poem. For the plan had been laid early: Rio Alma is a poet who has committed his life and spirit to letters and education, and at this instance, by tracing the history and development of the form not only among the French masters, but also within the ranks of the Filipino writers — Emilio Jacinto, Deogracias Rosario, and gentleman Mike L. Bigornia whose *Prosang Itim* has ensured the Filipino poet's voice a place in the contemporary classics of Philippine literature.

So at 61, what does Rio Alma have to offer that should make everyone sit up and listen?

Rio Alma's prose poems are no mere experimentations in prose/poetic devices and language — sorry to disappoint his detractors, if not occasional cynics like me.