



Abstract

Simeon Dumdum Jr. left the seminary of his youth to set out a life as a poet. Though in the legal profession for most of his career, he is defined by eighteen books of poetry and prose as a true man of letters. His poetry has the specificities of the human and humane bearing witness between history at large and moments in particular. He has written 129 bird poems within the duration of a chemotherapy, versified grief over a loved one's death, played tanka with the wife, and even wrote judicial decisions like literature. If attention is a measure of a poet's care of the world, Dumdum's gaze freezes the fleeting. A poet can never be cruel, he says. The humanizing effect of writing verse becomes an invocation to the divine.

Keywords

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AH! SIMEON!

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“DEATH OF A Naturalist,” the titular piece in Irish poet Seamus Heaney’s first anthology, published in 1966, ends with the terrified child bolting from the vengeful “great slime kings,” thinking that if he dipped his hand into the erstwhile beautiful “jellied specks,” “the spawn would clutch it.” Set in a swamp with “huge sods,” the poem’s sensory experience (“*a strong gauze of sound around smell*”), the poem, told in active voice, captures the quick turn in the child’s view of nature. The boy loses his innocence.

In the curious hands of another boy, Heaney’s volume of verse would clutch the heart of a would-be poet, at the time headed for priesthood. The young Simeon “Jun” Dumdum Jr., already in the Redemptorist congregation, was a seminarist in Ireland, “a country of priests, poets, and alcoholics.”

“A lot of poets in Ireland, and at that time, a young teacher from Belfast named Seamus Heaney came up with his first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, which I liked very much,” Dumdum Jr. says.





To test his current preoccupation, the young seminarian took a walk with an Irish confrere to have a “friendly debate” by the garden. “Why don’t we debate? What use is poetry?” He argued for its frivolity. “I think I lost that argument. So that came to my mind. Maybe I should start writing poems.”

Set to try his hand on Heaney’s world, he went, not to some festering “flax dam,” but to the beach to seek his “jampotfuls” of inspiration and found a sandbar, “which would disappear when the tide was up and appear again when the tide was down.” That was a poetry catch, so Dumdum promptly wrote the verse, sent it to Irish magazine *Hibernia*, and earned a guinea. “A guinea was one pound and one shilling, it’s no longer currency in UK,” he recalls. He would follow it up with another poem, and then the guinea came, and with it he bought a guitar. “Not that I play the guitar. I just wanted to buy one.”

That was how it all began—a poetic find, the writing, the prints, the guinea. The spawn of poetry had clutched the boy’s hand, the same hand that would scribble away 18 volumes of poems and prose and let fly 129 bird poems within the duration of a chemotherapy. At seventy-five now, Dumdum asks, “If I write you a poem, will you make it fly?” in a book of poems more potent than any healing that science and medicine could ever try.

But it was Heaney’s poem that set the young man ablaze, and it might be through that awakening where we’d get to follow Dumdum’s decades of craft—the active voice, the tactility of objects, and the universe they harness into a “thousand eternities.” The Death of a Naturalist was The Birth of a Poet.

A year further into the seminary after Ireland, he’d sneak out of class to read literature in the library. There he would devour *Doctor Zhivago*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, all the literature he could get his hands on. “I wasn’t interested in theology anymore. Especially when in a class, there were too many, and the professors were using a microphone, and there was a lack of personal connection,” says Dumdum.

Poetry it was where he found that hushed, magical commune. From the good old community geek enclave called the United States Information Services library along Osmeña Blvd., Cebu City, he’d haul books; no small thanks to the librarian who was a relative.

“Because of that, I think, I left the seminary.”

Writing more poems, he sent out some to the *Philippines Free Press* and was greenlit by then editor and later National Artist Nick Joaquin. “That



was a big thing. The feeling of fulfilment, these were ecstatic, that actually kept me on the road of writing poems,” he recalls. The poems were about “leaves, the death of a five-year-old, about sleep, not love poems. I wasn’t in love then. Later, yes.”

“I never used poetry to woo a woman. Because she would not understand. I think she would much prefer poems like Rolando Carbonell’s ‘Beyond Forgetting,’ but that wasn’t my style of poetry,” says Dumdum. Not the bard beneath the balcony, Dumdum’s poetic genes from Heaney could not muster anything near “can’t you feel the depth and the tenderness of my feelings towards you.” No small thanks to fate, we have Philippine letters alive with Dumdum in the right league.

“My wife actually liked poetry. And that was one of the things that got us together,” says Dumdum. Ma. Milagros “Gingging” Dumdum would be a poet herself, launching her first book, *Falling on Quiet Water*, a lump of 123 haikus. This would lead to her 2023 collection of 56 haibun titled *Moving with Moonrise*.

Her third book would be an experiment, a collaborative renga series with Dumdum. Renga is a Japanese verse form, a series of tankas, the oldest form of Japanese verse. The tanka is composed of five lines. The wife would write the first three, Dumdum responded with the last two, and so on and so forth. It was like chess, Dumdum recalls; she moved the white, and he responded with his black.

“It turned out very well, it was very smooth. It was surprising because, you know, when I wrote the last two lines, it would be a surprise move like in chess, then she would write another five lines, and another surprise. There was a dialectical flow, and it was all about going home, the rengga, one hundred tankas,” says Dumdum.

In 1997, the second daughter figured in a sea mishap along with a number of cousins. The poet wrote of his grief and named it “Bolo,” a Bagobo-inspired epic poem where the tribal *kathak* (storyteller) would weave between the tale of the hero revolutionary Leon Kilat and his own tale, of sorrows and joys. “I’ve been the narrator, talking about Leon Kilat and then talking about my daughter, dying and so on. And then of course Leon Kilat dying also in Carcar (Cebu),” says Dumdum. In Bolo’s final moments, a flying boat called *sinalimba* ferried the heroes, including Leon Kilat, the daughter, and others who died (“She died with seven others.”) to heaven.

“It was difficult, but at the same time I had to do it because I had to contend with what happened, you know. And then at the same time



look at the event as something with a happy ending. As a Christian, of course, the afterlife with Jesus, resurrection. And in that epic, of course, the *sinalimba* was going to a better land, you know. So in that sense, I was helped in looking at the event from a point of view that raised it to a spiritual level,” says Dumdum.

To those that resonate deeply around, the poet deploys the figuring nature of words. “I write about them. I draw out from them insights that I find sublimating. I mean insights that put them in a greater picture,” says Dumdum. To that bombing in Jolo, Dumdum responded with verse spoken from a spider’s eye. In the church ruins, the spider catches sight of the crucifix, Jesus with hands outstretched and sputtered with blood, and it identifies itself. “The spider thought that it was a spider, too!” It isn’t that nothing escapes the poet’s eye. It is that even the unlikely becomes poetry in his eye. The poor George Floyd, choking under cop knees, the dying and drowning runaways at the Mediterranean, and yes, the daughter on the flying boat, they all go around and come around in Dumdum’s poems.

“I was healing because I was able to pour out my grief, and the poem (‘Bolo’) didn’t turn out sentimental. So it helped me in my grief. Yes, it was a healing thing, you know,” says Dumdum.

Third World Opera, Duterte and Robredo

Rewind. The poet’s youthful steps fell into a disruptive track when Martial Law loomed over. While there was the Japanese notion of the *keriji*, that intuitive and ghostly cut that could be the poem itself, or the inspiration, as it were, “without which I would not write a poem,” to push the young Dumdum, there was on the other hand the Philippine political upheaval to contend with. “When Martial Law came, I was ready for my second collection, ‘The Third World Opera.’ My poems became a commentary on the political and social condition. I think the poem ‘Third World Opera’ was the beginning of a political perspective. That poem was included in Alfredo Navarro Salanga in his anthology of Martial Law poems called *Versus*,” Dumdum recalls. “It was difficult not to write about politics.”

In “Third World Opera,” Dumdum skirts any affront with a little disguise. “I changed a few little things.... The governor, of course, I was referring to was the governor of Manila, a lady. So I changed the governor to a man. The thing is it’s not actually a noisy kind of poem. It has humor and irony. And people reading it would know who I mean.



Unlike the usual political poems that are really hard-hitting and noisy and confrontational,” says Dumdum.

In the early days of the Duterte presidency and the push for federalism, Dumdum could not but rally behind, even with poems. “One of those poems was about myself, a chance with [Duterte] at the restroom. We were passing water together, you know, we didn’t talk. But I just, like, reflected on the idea of how this man, considered a killer, was there with me. And both of us doing a very human thing of passing water in the toilet. But then I changed my mind when I saw that he was not the kind of president that I wanted, especially when he dropped federalism,” he recalls.

In the 2022 rundown, he supported Leni. “During the campaign of Leni Robredo, I wrote poems. Especially that poem ‘A Poem for Leni Robredo.’ She was someone in touch with the people, like a ray of sun, you know. And going to the homes of the humble, helping, giving them hope.”

Law and Poetry

A former regional trial court judge, Dumdum once listened to a witness testimony when a bird outside the courtroom sang. The moment inspired a poem. “I told myself, ‘That’s a better witness.’” A court dog, a German Shepherd that reacted to witnesses telling lies. “It was trained to ferret out the truth, and if the witness began telling a lie, you know when a person tells a lie, he sweats, and the German Shepherd starts barking, and I would know that the witness was telling a lie.” That, too, became a poem.

These are some of the handful of poems inspired by what transpired in his work in the judiciary. “My work and my poetry, they blended, they influenced each other, because somehow that’s life, that’s me, a lawyer, a judge.”

Local journalists covering the justice beat oftentimes bounce off the wall for the printouts of the judge-poet’s rulings, written in bare yet beautifully elegant prose. Right words in the right order, as it were. Some colorful quotes for the day’s reportage. In 2005, the Supreme Court gave Dumdum a judicial excellence award, formally cited as the Best Decision in a Criminal Case – Second Level Courts. “If the convicted doesn’t understand a court decision, that would be double jeopardy,” Dumdum says, thus a judge had to make the prose speak in the simplest terms. A jealous husband burned his wife’s clothes and was sued for



arson. Dumdum acquitted the husband as arson technically involved burning a building or a part of it. The burning of the wife's dress could only be malicious mischief. "They awarded me, I think, for a decision, a short one, but I thought I wrote it quite well, simple English," Dumdum recalls.

All the cases on a judge's docket are at once a repository of tales, of potential material for fiction. But the poet could only think in terms of poetry. "Come to think of it, they would be very good material for fiction. The stories, a lot of stories, some of them dramatic, some of them tragic, you know. Yes, that's right. But I'm ashamed to admit that I did (write a short story) once. In fact, it was published, but I didn't think it was any good. It was about a lizard. But a fiction about a lizard is never any good, you know."

Judges, by the nature of the profession, are not as free to write away their heads, and one can only imagine Dumdum, a published essayist, for the longest time in that state of restraint. The Supreme Court forbade him the writing of secular topics, politics, popular culture, etc. But with a car mortgage to pay, Dumdum needed extra cash, and writing essays for a local daily would be handy. The Sunday essays would be gospel-pegged, and one of these it turned out reached the chief justice, who promptly expressed admiration for it. "So I took that as approval. Actually, my style there is the gospel related to something in my life, an incident in my life, like I might see an ambulance, and then I write about pain. The Christian idea of pain." The essays would turn out to be a collection called *Ah! Wilderness!*

Cancer and the Bird Poems

In 2009, the poet was diagnosed with stage-three colon cancer. "I thought I was going to die." Dumdum went under the knife and chemotherapy for six months. Advised to keep himself busy, he picked up on an old project of writing poems about birds in different verse forms. "So I resumed that project, wrote two bird poems a day, and by the end of my chemotherapy, I had 129 bird poems, using different verse forms, villanelle, sestina, sonnet, haiku, they all went into a book called *If I Write You This Poem, Will You Make It Fly?* It was part of my healing, because when the project ended, the chemotherapy also ended. And I realized that I was able to bear the discomfort, the nausea, and lack of appetite, because of my writing of the poem."





Helped by a book on Philippine birds, he used the catalogue of species as the writing guide. While writing the poems, he imagined the birds visiting his house, alighting on a branch, “and they kind of became alive, and I got to know them. While before I just knew about the *tikling*, the *maya*, then they had become almost human, having characteristics, having knowledge, and even affection, you know. They became human. That was how the birds came.”

In all, the collection shows the poet’s sleight of hand, the style and tone mimicking the nature of each bird. “They were actually happy poems about birds. Depending now on the characteristic of the bird. If it’s *siloy* or black shama, song. If it’s about the doves, fruit doves, so I kind of adapted the style to their behavior, the habitat, they are all joyful poems, really.”

Poetry as Prayer

That friendly debate with the Irish confrere in his youth on the uses of poetry is now but a distant memory. But eighteen volumes of poetry and prose later, how does the older self see this whole caboodle?

“Of course, poetry is not something that will feed your family. But it certainly feeds my soul. It has a humanizing effect, on me, on the way I look at the world, because a poet, or any writer for that matter, can never be cruel,” Dumdum says.

An author, says Dumdum, can never be cruel about a character. To write about a flower means writing in praise of the flower, “in praise of God who created that flower.... So in that sense, it humanizes me. And I hope that it does the same to the reader. And especially as my concept of poetry evolved, and I began to consider poetry as a kind of prayer. Because I could not just write about myself,” says Dumdum.

END

