

Introduction (2009)

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by Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

More than a decade ago, the Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz contemplated what he called “the troubles in the present phase of our civilization,” and the resulting sense of *deprivation* afflicting contemporary man. Theology, science and philosophy are no longer effective, he said. “They are at best able to confirm that our affliction is not invented ... The world deprived of clear-cut outlines, of the up and the down, of good and evil, succumbs to a peculiar nihilization, that is, it loses its colors, so that grayness covers not only things of this earth and of space, but also the very flow of time, its minutes, days, and years.”

This led him to turn, once again, to poetry. “By necessity, poetry is ... on the side of being against nothingness.” His offering was the lovely volume, *A Book of Luminous Things*, his personal selection from the works of the world’s best poets. Its purpose, he said, was “to remind readers that for some very good reasons, it may be of importance today.”

A similar impulse must lie behind our own efforts to seek solace and salvation—from both the global international crisis, and from a bankrupt national political leadership—in the arts.

Our National Artists have shown us the way. BenCab has built—carefully, lovingly, and over many long years—a hilltop museum which offers, not just his own oeuvre, but the art of a people, from the anonymous tribal woodcarvers to the old masters. Virgilio S. Almario—with full support from UP Diliman Chancellor Sergio S. Cao—determinedly mounts annual festivals to revive interest in traditional theatrical forms which, though they might be forgotten in urban centers, remain vital and vibrant in the margins. Edith Tiempo rises from her sickbed to participate in a program that takes each national artist to different parts of the country—starting from his or her own hometown—to introduce them to the common folk. Billy Abueva goes in his wheelchair to be part of the “necrological service” at the Cultural Center of the Philippines to protest a decision that demeans the National Artist Awards themselves. Bienvenido Lumbera abandons classroom and lecture hall to appear on national television and argue the same cause.

In Likhaan: the UP Institute of Creative Writing, the late National Artists Francisco Arcellana and NVM Gonzalez, and Lumbera and Almario today, have worked tirelessly, alongside fellow writers, to ensure the steady development of a national literature, by providing invaluable support for successive generations of writers, through a myriad projects, among which are the annual National Writers’ Workshop, the national literature portal (www.panitikan.com.ph), and numerous publications. The latest of these is this journal, of which this is the third issue.

Introducing the new journal in 2007, issue editor and present ICW director Jose Dalisay Jr. wrote of “showcasing the best of new and unpublished Philippine writing in two languages, English and Filipino.”

The “best” literature—the best art—addresses itself to humanity’s vital concerns and

aspirations, offers itself as illumination. And the more urgent the pressures, the more beleaguered the dreams, the greater the need for art truly luminous.

Dalisay mentioned another imperative: what we value is writing “with some vital connection to Filipino life and Filipino concerns.”

These guided our selection of the handful of stories, poems and essays to be included in *Likhaan* 3. It needs to be said that the quality of the entries received seems to grow—357 this year (158 in Filipino and 199 in English)—and to improve with each year. But budgetary constraints and page limitations forced us to turn down some pieces which our referees had deemed worthy of inclusion. Where other things were equal, we generally chose for the new. Implicit in the responsibility of a leadership role is the ability to recognize the bold and the innovative, even as it values the traditional and the exquisitely polished.

Thus, this year’s fiction collection includes on the one hand, a chapter from Bambi Harper’s forthcoming historical novel, “Águeda,” and on the other, “U d Toilet” and “Media Presents: ‘Savages’,” irreverent metafiction by Zosimo Quibilan and Dustin Celestino (at 25, the youngest of the authors); both Rommel B. Rodriguez’s straightforward realist narrative, “Kabagyan,” and Chuckberry Pascual’s comic, marvelous realist “Berde.”

Former ICW director Gémino H. Abad, given a preview of the poems, observed that Edgar Maranan, Mikael de Lara Co, Joel Toledo, and Carlomar Arcangel Daoana are among the finest poets writing today in English ... “naming everything that passes, leaving nothing to chance ... stones turning in the mind” (Toledo), for what is written and composed is wrought *from* language, and the naming seeks “the true feeling and the fruited silence, (Co). Everything “the world our made-over home,” (Daoana), our country and her history, the lot of the poor and oppressed, Nature, passion. “It may well be,” Abad added, that, as Howard Nemerov says, the poet is ‘a metaphysician in the dark,’ and feeling is wider and deeper than thought, and what is sought is that most subtle and mysterious fruit from the roil and toil of daily living called *grace*.”

Some of our referees, on the other hand, felt that it is the poetry in Filipino that best represents the “new voice in Filipino writing.” Rolando B. Tolentino describes Joi Barrios’ poetry as “mapanlaro pero matalas na pagninilay hinggil sa mga politika na isyu,” poetry meant not just to be read but performed in collective action. He calls Frank Cimatú’s poems, amusing yet arresting in their exploration of poetry as high parody, “napapagsanib ng koleksyon ang matulain na pamamaraan at malalimang pananaw sa pagtula, lipunan at kasaysayan na pawing kontemporaryo ang laman ng tula at kiling na pananaw.” And he says that Kristian Cordero’s rewriting of old Bikol stories are a postmodernist intervention, through modernist free verse, a good lesson in how to interrogate tradition, “kung bakit at paano tumula mula sa laylayan at rehiyon.”

But perhaps the most interesting of the contributions are the creative nonfiction pieces. Jose Claudio B. Guerrero’s “Talking to a Fu Dog on a Wedding Afternoon” combines a sad little tale of alienation and exclusion with erudite reflections on Philippine church architecture. Karl R. de Mesa, one of the earliest Philippine writers of gothic punk, traces his obsession with the genre to a childhood that strikes him now as surreal, in the remarkably candid “Report from the Abyss:

Episodes from a Coming of Age in the Philippine Left.” Eugene Evasco’s narrative of confrontation with death—both his and his father’s—is dark comedy, but it is also an angry tirade against the state of Philippine health service. And Jun Cruz Reyes’s “Ang Galak at Lumbay ng Makata,” a chapter from his forthcoming literary biography of Amado V. Hernandez, is full of digressions and ruminations about, among other things, early history, anthropology (fiestas and burial practices), and gossip about modern writers, both living and dead.

This year, an unprecedented number of critical essays have been included. Lumbera’s “Versus Exclusion” is an important restatement of a dilemma faced by Filipino writers for more than a century now, a dilemma made sharper by globalization. Ricardo de Ungria’s elegantly precise, highly technical critique of Cirilo Bautista’s poetry is an interesting contrast to Vlad Gonzales’s spirited presentation of the significance of “hyperwriting” and Sharon Anne Briones Pangilinan’s polemical advocacy for the inclusion of lesbian literature in Philippine literary studies.

Finally, there is the interview with Gilda Cordero Fernando by prizewinning essayist, Rica Bolipata-Santos, a worthy successor to Susan Lara’s interview of Edith Tiempo in *Likhaan 2*, combining as it does a close friendship with the subject and a deep appreciation and understanding of her contribution to the nation’s culture.

As fine a harvest as we had hoped for when the project was first conceived each one a brave attempt to create order and beauty from tumult and uncertainty.

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