Abstract

"The Risks of Engaging with Poetry" is Maria-Fe Parco Ortner's personal reflection on writing, literature, poetry, friendship and learning from a beloved teacher. Specifically, she talks about the poet Joel Vega and his award-winning book *Drift*, and the friendship that goes back to their student days at the University of the Philippines at Los Baños.

Keywords

Joel Vega, *Drift*, contemporary Filipino poetry in English, National Book Awards 2019, UPLB

THE RISKS OF ENGAGING WITH POETRY

MARIA-FE PARCO ORTNER

POETRY IS THE refinement of a deeply felt experience through language, and active engagement with it—through reading, writing and publishing—is a risk that readers, writers or publishers of poetry knowingly take upon themselves. This is what Palanca-winning essayist and poet Joel H. Vega says in his preface to *Drift*, his debut collection, which won the prize for best poetry book in English in the Philippines in 2019.

Early reviews of *Drift* have raved about Mr. Vega's extensive use of science as raw material. This is evident even before you dive deep into the works. A quick scan of the titles in the table of contents—"Pistia Stratiotes," "Sternum," "Scalpel," "Nephrectomy," and "Anatomy—is enough to show you where this voyage of discovery is taking you.

Joel Vega has spent a great part of his journalism career writing and editing a medical journal in the Netherlands. When I last visited him in

Arnhem,[1] we had a detailed conversation about a loved one's illness. He described what happens to the human body when the immune system is under attack, and how vital organs respond to different types of treatment or medication. He sounded like a doctor or health care professional, and I told him so. His reply: That is the side effect a writer experiences when he works with the language of medical science every day.

I have known Joel since we were classmates at the University of the Philippines at Los Baños. Back then, we belonged to a minority of students called Communication Arts majors.[2] People like us were an anomaly in the UPLB, famous for its leading-edge research, and its programs in the applied and natural sciences, from A for Agricultural Engineering to Z for Zoology. Its reputation was such that our chancellor, Dr. Emil Q. Javier, was appointed as head of the National Science Development Board.[3] Excellence in the sciences was the backdrop of our lives, and because we weren't math wizards, computer geeks, or laboratory nerds, we poked fun at our supposed ineptitude ("math flunkers"), and turned it into a running gag.

But this bastion of science had a small, significant outpost. A holdover from the days of the old College of Agriculture, it was also the seat of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. And on that ground and inside its halls, everyone learned to write research papers, discussed works of sociopolitical thinkers, reflected on Philippine history and identity, and broadened their horizons through literature and the arts. Most fittingly, it was called the "Humanities" building. For Communication Arts majors, it was our spiritual home. And of the many outstanding teachers who taught in that building, one great and beloved teacher stood out. His name: Professor Pacifico D. Espanto.[4]

1 A city in the eastern part of the Netherlands located on two tributaries of the Rhine River, which was the site of a failed military mission during the Second World War. Called Operation Market Garden, its aim was to create an invasion route for the Allied Forces into northern Germany. The plan was to seize a series of nine bridges using airborne troops, followed by land forces crossing over the bridges. However, the British paratroopers tasked with securing the Arnhem bridge encountered stiff resistance from the German Wehrmacht and were eventually forced to retreat or surrender. This encounter was depicted by Richard Attenborough in his film *A Bridge Too Far*, based on the book by Cornelius Ryan.

2 The only other Bachelor of Arts program in UPLB at the time was Sociology. Philosophy was later added to the curriculum. A key proponent responsible for the curriculum of the Communication Arts and Philosophy programs was our professor Pacifico D. Espanto.

3 The NSDB later became the National Science and Technology Authority, the precursor of today's Department of Science and Technology. Dr. Javier later became President of the University of the Philippines System from 1993 to 1999. In 2019, he was appointed National Scientist of the Philippines by the Duterte administration.

4 Aside from teaching, Professor Espanto also held the following administrative positions: Humanities Department Chair (1978–1980); Associate Dean, College of Arts and Sciences (1982–1985); and Assistant to the Chancellor (1989–1991). A native of San Esteban, Ilocos Sur, he also wrote short stories that were published in *Bannawag* magazine.

Professor Espanto unfortunately passed away a few weeks before this book by his former student was published. It was he who showed us that—if we set aside our literary aspirations for the moment—good writing was a craft that can be learned. In his course English Prose Styles, he encouraged us to read as much as we could across genres, with a focus on nonfiction writing. He required us to submit five short papers, each written in a specific "prose style," with two rewrites before its final submission. Each week we discussed what we had read, read aloud what we had written, and critiqued each other's works. We had a lot to do in his class, but his mentorship made it such a joy.

We couldn't escape the science around us, so Professor Espanto made us face it. Two of the papers he asked us to do both had a scientific bent. One was a detailed description of a process, and the other a popularized article based on a current study. If we ever had an overblown fear of writing about the sciences before, doing these tasks turned it into an exercise in clear thinking. As William Zinsser says in his book *On Writing Well*, "Science, demystified, is just another nonfiction subject."[5]

All this sounds like too much talk on prose when the subject is poetry. But writing is a personal journey, according to Eric Gamalinda, and "one's development as a writer is influenced more by one's determination to be so."[6] And when the mentor who honed your skills at the early stage of this journey always challenged you to reflect on what "writing style" meant to you, this determines your path as a writer. In his case Joel took the tools, the discipline and the mantra—so to speak—and applied it first as a political journalist in the Philippines and Saudi Arabia, and later as a medical writer and editor in the Netherlands. These professions then gave him the raw materials and terminology that helped him find, concurrently, his poetic voice.

"Narrative is governed by the Latin rule *Rem tene, verba sequentur,*" according to the Italian novelist, critic and philosopher Umberto Eco. In other words: "Stick with the subject and the words will follow." However, in poetry this rule is reversed to: "Stick with the words and the subject will follow."[7]

5 William Zinsser, *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, 25th Anniversary ed. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 149. This was one of two books Professor Espanto often referred to during the course. The other one was *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White.

6 Eric Gamalinda, "Doesn't matter if we're Filipino or Fil-Am: we contain multitudes," Ataraxia, http://ericgamalinda.tumblr.com/post/188951122827/doesnt-matter-if-were-filipino-or-fil-am-we.

7 Umberto Eco, *Confessions of a Young Novelist* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 14

This narrative of my friend's beginnings as a writer puts into perspective why I tend to take the science aspect of his poetry—the terra incognita of his preface—as a given. He took a risk on unfamiliar territory and its language, and later claimed ownership of these. They are now organic to him, and this defines his "style" as a poet. Thus when I read his book, what captures my attention more are the poems grounded on terra cognita: poems about places, things and people that evoke strangely similar memories of my own, and feelings so deeply familiar.

Consider for example the tension and poignancy in "No Lullaby", where the persona addresses a loved one whose absence is brought about by an illness: "A chair knows the history / of a sitter even before / the moment of rest. // Your shirt, printed with palms / and tropical flora/hangs on the chairback. // Chair carries a wide forest / where you roam/with bare feet. // Will you return after / this journey, I dare / not ask."

This poem is dedicated to the late Sjef Kerkhof, Joel's longtime partner, whose short, sudden illness and death was also the subject of his Palanca first prize-winning essay "A View of Masada" in 2016. The essay described a scene when Sjef got injured while on a hiking tour in Israel. However, not wishing to call attention to himself, he still managed—with great effort and unbearable pain—to reach the mountaintop and be rewarded with the view. In the poem entitled "Birdhouse," the persona recalls this as he entreats the loved one to stay: "Autumn's branches touch / the empty birdhouses / one after another. // Live with me / in a room with a vast view / of a lake, a wooden boat anchored, / tied with a frayed rope / to the crumbling pier."

Our separate journeys down the road since Los Baños took us many years, as Joel and I crossed continents and back. Throughout this we managed to keep contact somehow, but I never—to my regret—ever met Sjef. Since then I have sat on his favorite chair, and seen the birdhouses he collected in the terrace of Joel's house. When I read Joel's words about Sjef, I learn something about his kindness and grace, and this is my consolation.

In the section of the book called "The Fifth and Careful Season," the Quiapo district of Manila plays the lead role in the poems. Here you find them all again: the noise and chaos of Plaza Miranda, the amulet sellers and Black Nazarene devotees, the mosques and the churches, Mendiola bridge and its demonstrators, the streets leading to the seat of power in the palace by the Pasig, a fortune teller asking for alms, and various

other people in transit, including the persona himself. However, this is not an overseas Filipino's nostalgic trip back home. On the contrary, the persona is very much aware of the sociopolitical problems these Quiapo inhabitants still face on a daily basis. There is also the realization that, after all this time, nothing much has changed over here.

For instance, in "Songs to a Fallen Comrade," he says: "I am / tied to the length / of your grave. / Though you received / all the fire and bullets / it is I who bleed. / Though they tore / your skin to pieces, / it is my soul/ that limps." This could refer to anyone who died during the Marcos dictatorship and beyond, but I can't help feeling that he is talking about a friend and mentor, who was influential to his political development in Los Baños. Danilo Sibal was a brilliant young professor of political science who was popular with the students. In 1987, he was a guest at a late-night television show in Quezon City, together with New People's Army founder Bernabe Buscayno, who had campaigned for a seat but lost in the recent senatorial elections. After the show, Sibal and two others hitched a ride in Buscayno's car, which was then ambushed by heavily armed men on a dark street corner. Cameraman Manny Sanchez was immediately killed, Sibal's pregnant wife Fatima and the driver Monico Atienza were severely wounded, and Buscayno survived the attack with his back wounded by shrapnel from an exploding grenade. Thirty-six hours later, Dan Sibal succumbed to his wounds. To this day, no one has claimed responsibility for this attack. It is a wound on the psyche that has not healed, and the persona is still trying to make sense of this loss.[8]

In "Learning How to Breathe," the theme is about losing one's sense of direction. The persona, a bowhead whale separated from its herd, must now find its way back alone in the vastness of the Arctic ocean: "What massive bony skull I have to use / to break ice drifting in these waters. I am the slowest swimmer, / I cannot dive deep. I travel alone, northwards. // The herds have left me, far ahead they drift to Chukhi, / the breach in ice providing direction. Now, I have none, / only the repetitive songs of mating will save me./" The whale is given a human voice here, but this anthropomorphic device is devoid of sentimentality. Rather, it is a science

8 This poem was first published in 1986. The assassination attempt on Bernabe "Kumander Dante" Buscayno and his companions happened in June 1987, shortly after the late night public affairs television program Public Forum hosted and written by Randy David was aired live, and where Buscayno and Sibal had appeared as guests. Dan Sibal and his wife Fatima, together with Manny Sanchez, had hitched a ride with Buscayno and UP professor Monico Atienza in the latter's car. All of them were on their way to a nearby restaurant for a late-night snack after the show when they were ambushed. Fatima Sibal survived to give birth to their daughter in early 1988.

lesson in miniature: brief, fact-based and clear, not unlike a scene from a David Attenborough documentary.

On a lighter note, the poem "If This Dirty River Could Only Speak" resonated with me for a very simple reason. I once had the chance to take a riverboat tour down the Pasig many years ago. A guide explained the sights along the riverbanks from Intramuros and Tondo, on the way to Santa Ana and back. The boat ride reminded me of the steamship Tabo on its way to Laguna, in the opening chapter of Jose Rizal's *El Filibusterismo* (1891), and of the lyrics to Nicanor Abelardo's *kundiman* "Mutya ng Pasig" (1926). It drew a straight line between two different images of women in Philippine pop culture, which connected Maria Clara from the nineteenth century to the iconic carnival queens of the commonwealth era. It is hinted at in Joel's poem, but then it takes a twist: "It used to be a beauty, they say. / In forgotten songs it was a femme fatale / with a mournful tune and doleful stare. // Now it could not even wash its hair./" If once it was a woman of legendary beauty, the Pasig has now has become a madwoman with mangy hair, like the character named Kuala played by Lolita Rodriguez in the Lino Brocka film *Tinimbang Ka Nguni't Kulang* (1974). And with this, I can't help asking: What trauma has driven this woman to madness, and where is the elusive beauty in this stinking mess?

"Writing is a social act," said Umberto Eco, who emphasized that "I write so that you as a reader accept what I propose to you."[9] In my case, the poetry of Joel Vega made the sensory recollections outlined above possible. Specifically, the five poems discussed allowed me to explore a physical and an interior landscape and idiom covering emotions like grief, love, sadness, mortality, regret, and consolation. They took me back on an instant tour of Quiapo and the Pasig that captured the quirky sights and sounds of these places. It gave me a glimpse of the natural world through the eyes of an Arctic whale in its habitat. But most of all, it made me look back on specific aspects of recent Filipino history and culture, which touched me in a profound but personal way. The person who wrote these poems is a good friend, but I am also a reader who found herself in a dialogic transaction with the poet through his poems.

This takes us back to the premise given by Joel in his preface and restated at the start of this essay. Poetry is a risk for the reader because when you get actively engaged with it, you enter a strange country and deal with its language, where your initial fear is that you might not "get the drift"

9 Umberto Eco, *How to Write a Thesis* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015), 155.

of the strangeness the poet is trying to show you. On the other hand, the poet who explores this geography and language in order to make sense of his anguish and confusion risks exposing the most vulnerable aspect of himself to his readers. The publisher further intensifies this "exposure" by providing the poet space that enables him to reach a wider audience, but in the end it is a business risk. In other words, when we get actively involved with poetry, we risk making fools of ourselves.

Part of poetry's magic is that this risk brings lasting rewards. For Joel and his publisher, these were the positive reviews and honors occasioned by the book's publication. Such accolades should boost book sales in an ideal world, but even that is beside the point. For readers and lovers of poetry, the reward is intangible and goes beyond statistics. "Writing is not a special language owned by the English teacher," said William Zinsser regarding prose.[10] This applies to poetry too, and by extension neither is it a domain reserved for language and literature students only. To paraphrase the critic Harold Bloom citing Shakespeare, poetry is a high and ancient art that in essence is figurative language in concentrated form, which raises our consciousness of glory or grief, and of woe and wonder.[11]

"Poetry emerges from silence, but it is the good poem that embraces a multitude," said Joel in his acceptance speech at the National Book Awards in November 2019. That same week, he was invited by UPLB Humanities Department Chair Nora Fajutagana to give a talk to the current crop of Communication Arts majors under Jerard Eusebio's tutelage. He emphasized that poetry "has a life-nourishing role. It can be a warm embrace to those who are cold, mark the fragile bonds among humans or serve as a beacon in dark times."

I began this essay two months ago[12] after rereading *Drift* and noticed how I lingered over poems that caught my eye. Following that impulse, I started detailing my responses. But in doing so, it turned into a narrative of Joel Vega's journey as a writer. Toward the end, I see how it has become a broader reflection on poetry, and why it is a vital human need.

The book's cover shows a body of water, still and half-frozen in winter. It is a perfect fit to the meanings evoked by the title. To drift is to wander

10 Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 148.

11 Harold Bloom, ed., *The Best Poems of the English Language from Chaucer to Robert Frost* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004). xxvii, 1.

12 The writing of this essay began in late November 2019 and was finished on 23 January 2020. This was shortly after the Taal Volcano eruption, and before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that led to massive lockdowns around the world in the middle of March 2020.

without aim, like deadwood swept by the currents. But this wood at some point would be cast ashore, miles from where it fell into the water. By then it would likely be burnished, transformed by the force of circumstances. In the meantime the landscape would have changed, and the shape of continents would have shifted.

That is also a metaphor of the transformative power of poetry. It is the most intimate of all the arts, and this is why we have carried it through the ages. Poetry sometimes seems to talk of things far removed from ourselves, but it involves our emotional response to an instant. And in reality, it reveals to us the truths we hold deep in our hearts and our souls.

Poetry can transform your life, and that is the greatest risk.