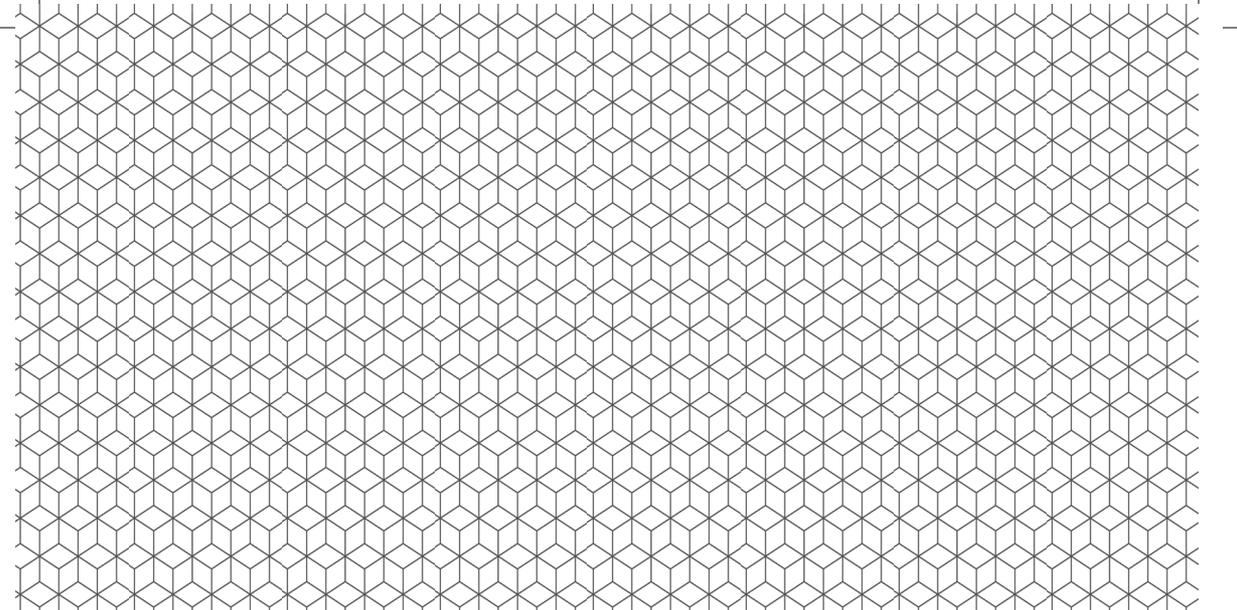


# INTRODUCTION



WHEN THE UNIVERSITY of the Philippines Institute of Creative Writing (UPICW) first conceived of the *Likhaan Journal* many years ago, we envisaged an annual selection of the best new writing in Filipino and English with which we could introduce contemporary Philippine literature to our people and the rest of the world. In our proposal to the chancellor, we noted then that

The UPICW (formerly the UP Creative Writing Center) has administered the UP National Writers Workshop since 1965, discovering and developing hundreds of the country's best young and new writers in all genres. Many of the Philippines' finest writers teach on the UP faculty, in charge of burgeoning creative writing programs that have attracted applicants from freshmen to accomplished professionals in other fields.



## INTRODUCTION

Yet for all these achievements, the University has long been in need of a literary journal of a quality and reach commensurate to our influence in the field of Philippine literature and creative writing. The *College Folio* ceased publication ages ago, and the *Diliman Review* is now focused on the social sciences, to name just two titles traditionally associated with new writing from UP. For the past few years, the ICW has done its best to produce annual *Likhaan* selections of the best of Philippine fiction, poetry, and criticism, but these publications have been sporadic because of the difficulty of covering so much ground within so little time.

To replace this old *Likhaan* series, we propose the creation of a new literary journal—initially annual in its frequency, with the possibility of being transformed into a semestral or quarterly publication—that will present the best new work by Filipino writers in both English and Filipino, and other Filipino languages in translation.

We intend for this journal to be the most prestigious local publication a Filipino writer can aspire to be published in. It will accept only original, unpublished material, selected by a board of editors comprising the associates of the ICW sitting en banc, with production decisions delegated to an Issue Editor and two Associate Editors.

Sixteen issues later, we are glad to report that our objectives appear to have largely been met, with the notable exception of producing the journal more often than annually. While we began with some apprehension over our ability to attract the best of new Philippine writing, those doubts have long been erased by the hundreds of entries we have received yearly from both well-known and new writers.

The publishing environment has radically improved over that time, thanks to new media, platforms, and investors riding on the surge in creative writing, which we might attribute not just to the growth of creative writing programs and workshops but also to a challenging political climate that threatens writers and other activists while at the same time provoking them to respond. The explosion of the internet has opened doors for young writers—such as through Wattpad and any

number of e-zines—which would have been hard to imagine two decades ago. At the same time, the role of traditional publishing intermediaries, such as editors (and overseas, literary agents), has been diminished, with self-publishing gaining widespread acceptance.

Despite these developments, however—and perhaps to some extent because of them—what might be seen as an old-school critic and publishing venue such as the *Likhaan Journal* remains important because it continues to set and apply standards of literary value and excellence while striving for relevance and contemporaneity. The number and quality of submissions we receive offer the best proof of that. We require, for example, that any submission to *Likhaan* should not have been previously published anywhere else, including online, and for any writer to resist that urge for an entire year without any guarantee of acceptance cannot be easy. And so we wish to thank all our contributors for this issue, as well as those whose work we had to pass on for one reason or another, for keeping faith with *Likhaan* and entrusting the best of their most recent production to us.

Along with fiction and poetry, we have included several critical essays that address important aspects of Philippine literature today.

The range of material and treatment in this issue reflects the nexus between hazy myth and hard reality that Filipinos can never seem to escape from. This current period in our political life—what we might call the Marcos restoration—will undoubtedly be marked by high drama so that its own literature has yet to emerge, but it has been preceded by a prolonged season of no lesser anxiety: that of Duterteismo and the pandemic. Not surprisingly, death and displacement figure prominently in this issue, as do questions of truth and history. If there is any theme that runs like a thread through these discourses, it could be that of generations—of people bearing each other and their burdens through time.

“Pedagohiya de Bista: Mga Paglalarawan sa Pagsasalarawan” by Tilde Acuña is a series of intricately constructed texts, some of which are ostensibly ekphrastic descriptions of panels from comic book illustrations of Rizal’s *Noli Me Tángere*. It not only attempts to bring forth new ways of constructing text but also demands new ways of reading and interpreting them.

“Kay Wuqijin, o Alaala ng Pagsasanay sa Pagsasalin at Pagkakaibigan” by Edgar Calabia Samar is a bittersweet personal essay about trying to

overcome the gulfs of space, language, and time to preserve a friendship. Physical distance is a given, and language something that could be bridged by ceaseless efforts of translation, but time gives in to forgetting.

“Si Magu na ‘Malansahon’ at si Sol, ang White Carabao” by Niles Jordan Breis is an essay that recounts the story of two university students in Albay, Bicol, the “fishy-smelling” Magu and Sol, the “white carabao.” A mutual penchant for music and passion for activism make them inseparable friends in the heady years before the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship, but one of them eventually betrays the other.

The narrator of “Maikling Kurso sa Kasaysayang Pampanitikan” by Amado Anthony G. Mendoza III tells the story of a shop in Recto called Labirinto, which contains an implausibly vast collection of impossible anthologies of every conceivable kind. Some darkly sardonic and comical reflections follow in the wake of a virtual survey of the countless failures and aborted projects of Philippine literary and intellectual life.

In T.S. Sungkit Jr.’s “Mga Bugtong ng Balagbatbat,” Melchizadek Makaindan is brought up to become a *baylan* (traditional priest) in his Lumad community. He is immersed in the complex lore, secret rituals, and traditions that are passed on from generation to generation, a world hardly glimpsed and even less understood by outsiders. After being separated from his community, he experiences a crisis and becomes a writer and a mathematics teacher, but he realizes that he can never escape the fate written in his stars.

“Sa Bisperas Bago ang Indak-Indak sa Kadayawan” by Jay Jomar F. Quintos is set in a richly detailed Davao City, where *tokhang*, or summary execution, has become a routine part of daily existence. This tightly written and suspenseful short story tells of a mysterious being who descends from the mountains on an inexorable mission to exact revenge.

“Kuwarantinig” by Randy Q. Villanueva comprises four texts written in the very short story form called *dagli*, depicting brutally honest and unforgiving observations about Filipino life under quarantine. The illustrations magnify their dark wit and seamlessly merge with and lend an unerring sense of unity to the four short pieces.

The poems in the suite “Umaga sa Katayan at Iba Pang Tula” by Ronald Araña Atilano take us through vivid working-class memories of traversing the squalid streets of Manila and Baclaran, stumbling upon exhausted bodies of workers caught in strange ways of sleeping juxtaposed with clinical images of animal carcasses dissected in slaughterhouses.

“Phantasmagoria” by Enrique S. Villasis a set of finely wrought poems, swirling and dreamlike, populated by all sorts of dimly perceived traumas and unnamable fears.

The poems in “Mundus Novus” by Ralph Fonte explore themes of ecological collapse and the futile search for new worlds to inhabit. This collection of poems strips the reader of any illusions of escape and redemption beyond the planet we currently live on.

In John Pucay’s “Missing Quarantine Pass,” locked down by the pandemic, Ramil and Eliza finally realize that more than a quarantine pass to buy strawberries, they are missing everything that once made their relationship worthwhile. The story is among many that have come out of, and will continue to emerge from, the pandemic experience and the surreality into which we have all been thrown.

“First Love Never Dies” by Kaisa Rillorta Aquino tackles debt, both emotional and material, and crimes grand and small. The corruption of the flesh and the spirit, as well as lingering resentment and desire, hangs like a heavy fog over the reunion of two young people, who, in quiet desperation, try to rekindle a relationship long ago precluded by societal power and the class divide.

In Reil Benedict Obinque’s “Blood Stew,” toxic masculinity, animal slaughter, and extralegal murder mesh in a witch’s brew of violence that begins in the family and ends up in the streets.

“Pickle for the Sunshine” by Tony Robles takes us to 1950s San Francisco, where Filipino American youngster Joey Rosales, alienated from his immigrant father, finds an unlikely mentor in the African-American Blind Fillmore Silk, a purportedly blind hip street character who shows him another way of seeing.

The essay “Whistle of My Father” by Herbert Herrero is a son’s tribute to his OFW father, whose long absences defined his growing up years as well as that of his siblings. This tale well known to many Filipinos is still worth the retelling as we take stock of fifty years of labor diaspora and how it has shaped family and nation.

In Zea Asis’ “Red Hibiscus,” a daughter wrestles with the memory of her murdered father, his abandonment of their family standing in poignant contrast to occasional manifestations of his tenderness. She reflects as well on how adults might have sabotaged her adolescence.

The poems in the suite “Enrique the Slave Dreams from Seville” by Jeffrey B. Javier are part of a larger collection that appeal to the idea

## INTRODUCTION

of *nostos* or the homeward journey, a yearning to return to an originary locus no longer accessible. The first piece invokes the voice of Enrique, Ferdinand Magellan's slave, and dramatizes his desires at the start of the Magellan-Elcano expedition.

The "Syncope" suite of poems by Carmie Ortego was inspired by three classes the author took in graduate school, two of which were electives in philosophy and poetry as well as pathography. They also draw from feminist reimaginings of mythological figures, reflecting diseases of the mind and body. We are at once trying to embrace and free ourselves from them.

Two critical essays discuss the use of English in Philippine literature: one in the iteration of nationalism in the novels of the late national artist F. Sionil Jose and the other in the representation of the Filipino LGBTQ community and its lived realities.

In addition, we are featuring an interview with one of the most remarkable and respected voices of contemporary Philippine literature, Ninotchka Rosca, undertaken by Clarissa V. Militante, herself a prizewinning author and professor of literature. And as it has been our practice for many issues now, we are providing a calendar of the literary year, for the scholars of the future to see what a lively time it has been—as indeed, despite the darkening political horizon, it was.

THE EDITORS