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## A Prologue

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## A Prologue

ALFREDO NAVARRO SALANGA

It's been twenty years since *Philippine Studies* put out that special issue on new poems and stories edited by Gilda Cordero Fernando. I still remember that time for that was when I made up my mind to be a writer. I was a brash college freshman at the Ateneo and I'd just flunked my first semester math. That seemed very much like an omen to me and that was how I got around to investing all of two pesos and fifty centavos in a copy of that issue in January of 1965. I was as pretentious as I was ambitious and getting the autographs of the writers anthologized there was my rather cockbrained, idea of mixing with the masters. That was all important to me. I guess it still is for any young writer.

Copy in hand, I sauntered out to the parking lot in front of Bellarmine Hall and there bumped into a trio engaged in some good-natured bantering. Rolando Tinio and Bienvenido Lumbera were gently ribbing a pudgy Antonio P. G. Manuud for the editor's description of him as sporting 'a lush Hemingway beard'. That chance meeting netted me three signatures: Rolando Tinio's below his *Eartha Kitt at the Araneta Coliseum*, Bienvenido Lumbera's which came with a 'Best wishes from' beneath his *A Eulogy for Roaches* and a 'To a poet (budding): don't get nipped' at the end of Manuud's two-page *Durham Cathedral*. That last one left me elated no end. It was, no matter how oblique, an affirmation of fraternity, an acknowledgment of a bond. That continues to be important not only for young writers but for older ones as well.

Emmanuel Torres wrote his in, too, and accompanied it with an abstract sketch that, so he promised me, would guarantee future value. Valdemar Olaguer obliged with a smile I thought typical

of how he'd been described in the contributors' page, 'somewhat like a quiet librarian who just swallowed a tranquilizer'. The realization that they were all on the faculty aided my resolve: it was a good time to be at the Ateneo if you wanted to be a writer. The masters were within reach. You could actually go up to them and show them your fledgling masterpieces – and squirm as they tore into them. That was necessary even if it didn't always make you feel good. A writer thrives on criticism and the older ones need that as much as the younger ones do.

No doubt, that sense of there being a literary Ateneo and not just a literate one must have been the same sense that filled Emman Lacaba's mind when he first enrolled in June of 1966. I remember showing him the prize copy I had and I also remember how we sort of promised each other that we both would be in the next issue. As it turned out, Emman beat me to *Philippine Studies*. In the summer of 1967 a scholarly essay on Nick Joaquin, done for his freshman literature class under Father Joseph Galdon, appeared in the Notes and Comments section. It was a virtuoso performance. But, then, Emman *was* a true virtuoso. He won his first Palanca Award (for his short story "Punch and Judas") before he was twenty. He would have dominated this issue – and this writing generation, as well – if only he had lived long enough.

And so, while editing this issue, while sifting through the contributions that were sent in, I couldn't help being haunted by this obvious absence. Emman should have been here, I kept on telling myself, he should have been editing this himself. But – wishful thinking aside – the fact of his death was real. It is real. It will continue to be real. And this fact alone will make any anthology of current writing incomplete unless allowed to be retrospective. Truth to tell, I was early tempted to put in some of his poems until reliably informed that a definitive collection of his works – poetry, fiction and drama – will be out soon.

So I guess I ought to limit myself, this time around, to noting his absence. And, too, a happy coincidence in that this issue will probably be launched when his family and friends will be taking time to pause and celebrate what would have been – but for some senseless bullets fired in the night in a lonely sitio in the foothills of Asuncion, Davao del Norte nine years ago – his thirty-sixth birth anniversary.