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## Critics of Philippine Poets

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## Critics of Philippine Poets

L. M. Grow



If a prominent Filipino poet publishes a collection of verse or has a single poem or a group of poems in a prestigious anthology, literary critics usually take notice. When Carlos Angeles published *A Stun of Jewels*, for instance, not only did contemporary reviewers like Dharam, Makabenta, and Mercado react in the newspapers, but so did, over the years, critics like San Juan and Tiempo in journal articles. And even before his first book, Angeles had come to the attention of Edwardson because of excellent individual works.

However, although there are exemptions—cf., my “Half-Velvet and Half-Trapped” and “Epifanio San Juan, Jr., as Poet,” respectively discussions of an outstanding poem by a relatively obscure author and a discussion of a prominent author of three collections of verse published over several decades—meritorious works still can fall by the explicatory wayside.

### Fernando Afable

A case in point is Fernando Afable who, as the recipient of a very brief paragraph in Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg (2-3) and a slightly longer paragraph in Mella (138) and who is included in Jose Garcia Villa's *A Doveglion Book of Philippine Poetry in English*, will certainly never rank as a household name in Philippine letters. The reason may be, at least in part, the pieces selected for the anthology.

Villa's stature in Philippine letters makes one hesitant to question his judgement, but there can be little doubt that the four Afable selections he includes in his anthology fall well short of the mark of “Preference for Name,” whose only appearance in print was in *Philippine Studies*. Most avid readers of poetry do not, of course, turn

first to learned journals, unless they are interested in professional poetry, so Afable's "Preference," though reaching an exceptionally well-educated and sophisticated audience, could not have been expected to have come to the attention of the majority of those keen on creative writing rather than scholarship. Yet the reader who chances on Afable's "A Preference for Name" might well wonder why the author never published a collection:

Traces of salt are in the air  
Seaward, and the grass grows sparser  
In the soil. Now the stars are briny.  
There is salt in the air, in the eye.  
Landlocked, we think  
The air transparent, as sea to fish  
Where the refracted light  
Shapes the reefs. Their sight  
Breaks through the ocean water.

Seaward, to an extreme  
Far from our neutral light  
That presently is barely seen  
We can change names; and gills  
Grow in a condition  
Where seaweed will suffice for grass.  
Yet the elements in the air,

The mortal stance we keep: so loved  
We will not risk a change of name  
Or think the ocean water clear.

Chiasmic construction is the foundation of this poem. That this is surely not accident we can confirm by a purely ocular scrutiny of Afable's "Mirage in Galilee," in which the last words of the lines create chiasmus:

We break our bread, and pray  
As the kneeling tides thirst  
To the burning waters:

Our faith and wine  
Shall once more flow  
Down scorched throats.

Through the needle's eye  
 Who shall venture –  
 Who shall venture

Through the needle's eye?

Down scorched throats  
 Shall once more flow  
 Our faith and wine.

To the burning waters!  
 As the kneeling tides thirst  
 We break our bread and pray.

The title is echoed in the penultimate line, "air" and "clear," terminating words of the first and last lines respectively, providing a linkage via slant rhyme. Alliteration of hard "g" associates lines 2 and 13/15. "The mortal stance" of line 17 is the counterpart to "Landlocked" in line 5; "the elements in the air" (line 16) is a variation of both "Traces of salt are in the air" (line 1) and "There is salt in the air" (line 4); "grass grows sparser" (line 2) is reprised in "seaweed will suffice for grass" (line 15); and the first stanza's "refracted light" (line 7) becomes the second stanza's "neutral light" (line 11). The intertwining reinforces the theme that sky and sea, air and water are perceived to be nearly coterminous. Just as the two stanzas seem almost to coalesce, so do the sky and sea, an impression suggested by imagery ("the stars are briny" [line 3] and simile ("We think/ The air transparent, as sea to fish" [lines 5–6]. Blurring the distinction between sky and sea is to become disoriented, to face the same fate that Frost's protagonists would if they did not observe and honor boundaries and guideposts, which is why the speaker—using "we" for additional force—firmly asserts that things will retain their names (i.e., "we" will not call the land "sea" ). For 15 lines the speaker has been tempted by the sea's siren song; in the last four lines he eschews it.

### Ramona Afable

An even less-known Afable is Ramona, whose poems "Unshell Me" and "Songs" are the curtain raisers in *Diliman Echoes*. It is probably safe to assume that the editor, Alfonso Santos, deliberately led

with strength (the rest of the verses in the volume do not change the reader's expectation that [s]he is reading a college anthology, so the overall quality of the volume may have doomed the Afable poems to obscurity. These delightfully insouciant compositions succeed not, obviously, because their author has mastered the craft of poetry but rather because of how fresh they are—"fresh" in more than one sense. "Unshell me" is in the tradition of Angela Manalang-Gloria in that it is an exuberant demand by the speaker for the reader to join her for physical union. This quality recalls the assertiveness and the candid expression about sex, implying male/female equality, so noticeable in *The Complete Poems* and noted by Manlapaz and Pagsanghan. But cf., Gonzales, Afable's poems are also reminiscent of Manalang-Gloria's in ways appreciated by Formalists: meticulous craftsmanship and irony. The insistence of the imperative verb mood in line one is almost immediately—and most amusingly—muted by the assumption that the speaker's nakedness will bring her to God's presence (lines 2-3):

Unshell me  
And expose my spirit-flesh  
To the breath of God!  
Let first the sparks of human lust  
Sear my earthly flesh,  
Give it mortal touch,  
Then shall I let my spirit soar  
Beyond the clouds and kiss the stars,  
While feet remain on sodden earth  
In mire and dust, encrusted still. . .  
Then shall I build anew a shell!

But the speaker has her priorities in order: "Let first the sparks of human lust/Sear my earthly flesh" (lines 5-6). "Lust" and "sear" show clearly enough that the speaker isn't angling for a husband and a house with a white picket fence around it. Immediately the speaker's spirit ascends "beyond the clouds" (line 8) to "kiss the stars"; but her feet "remain on sodden earth/In mire and dust, encrusted still. . ." (lines 9-10). Although the contrapuntal thematic elements (human level (line 1), spiritual level (lines 2-3), human level (lines 4-6), spiritual level (lines 7-8) do include a sub-human level (lines 9-10), there is no darkening in tone, for the speaker offers the alluring reassurance that she'll build another shell—presumably so that

the male reader can enjoy unshelling the speaker once again. It is precisely the slightly naughty but irresistibly charming ingenuousness exuded by the speaker that makes this poem. We cannot help but smile at the *pro forma* mention of soaring spirit and breath of God, pure pretext for bodily delectation. The fact that a certain inelégance attends the "unshell" metaphor (one may think of a peanut or a hermit crab) does not detract from the poem's mood.

"Songs" is redolent of the traditional "Riddle Song" in its apparent oxymorons and, again, tone of wide-eyed wonder. Its assertions that a song to be beautiful must be ugly, to be melodious must be rasping, to be soft must be loud-pitched are paralleled by the reversal of normal expectation in "Ugly as a night/Moaning through storm" (lines 3-4):

Some songs to be beautiful  
     Must be ugly,  
     Ugly as a night  
     Moaning through storm.  
 Some songs to be melodious  
     Must be rasping,  
     Rasping like the grating  
     Of flesh on tempered steel.  
 Some songs to be soft  
     Must be loud-pitched,  
     Loud-pitched like the din  
     Of a market place.  
 A song to be a song  
     Must be the song of the world,  
     The world whose beauty rises  
     From the haggishness of discord.

We were probably anticipating a storm moaning through the night. It is certainly a mystery how the beauty of the world could arise in the "haggishness of discord" (line 16), but perhaps only a riddle that "rises" from such discord is the explanation. "Rises from" may mean that beauty triumphs over "the haggishness of discord," not that beauty is impossible without "the haggishness of discord." We may have been lulled by the first three stanzas into expecting "arises," but we do not in fact get it. And the shift in implication may be signalled by the departure in the fourth stanza from the refrain-like "Some songs to be" wording used in the first three stanzas.

**Benjamin Afuang**

Although my earlier claim that readers are a bit skeptical about the quality of learned journal poetry I think remains intact, "The Gardener" and "Sunday Burial" by Benjamin V. Afuang, described by Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg as "a versatile and prolific writer" (3), are happy exceptions.

THE GARDENER

Always there is someone who turns away,  
From the garden or from his own believing  
Self, by sinking deep and wet in the earth  
With the doubting rain. Someone keeps  
Repeating there are strange ways and still  
Transplantable patterns of retreat  
From flesh to bone denying. This gardener,  
For instance, tiptoeing and brooding  
Over the still alienable evening, traverses  
The positive twigs and the possible flowers.  
He drills through the weeds, soils his speech  
With the fronds, and sprinkling brutal tears  
On the promised buds, disclaims, pollen  
By pollen, the blossoms he acts.

SUNDAY BURIAL

Sunday, for there can be no doubt about the bells,  
Is also my fingers' burial day. I bury them,  
But only their bones, in the wet wild field  
Of a girl's hair, and well, she will never forget  
The terrible pain. How beneath the earth's old  
Dryness my fingers tell of rain, o when she whispers  
Me brutal and bare! I hear her, I am all fingers?  
And that rings far beyond the field's forgiven garden,  
O then, explosion of flowers?

A week of knowing she has not died, but lived  
Like flowers among my fingers, entreats me to choose  
Peacefully the fine hour to tell her she must watch me  
Bit by bit, finger by finger, die. What is her surprise

Emotion for today? She has spread her hair to cover  
The white flesh that is also my shroud for the  
Coming end,

Has sung all that I dimly hear to be my own dull  
 Pulse of surrender. And this, in the secret moment  
 To tell her she will be fair,  
 She will be queen of minutes and myrtles,  
 Will read to me of ancient chimes.

All my fingers' life, she laughed the length of shadows  
 That died in the light—of life parlors and porches  
 And chapel candles that burned all prayers white. But  
 In my fingers' grave now she glows only at sights  
 Of fingerprints abandoned wickedly thereabout, her hair  
 In one dark wave of thought the dead, this Sunday,  
 Left to her all but his surface touch.

"The Gardener" is a low key, yet firm, lament for those who give up on life too soon and is thus an implied appeal to the readers not to do so. The poem's predominantly anapestic rhythm pattern impresses on us the potential for life's ongoingness. The evening is still alienable (line 9; i.e., the onset of *nada* can be forestalled); there are "positive twigs and possible flowers" (line 10); there are "blossoms" (line 14) and "promised buds" (line 13). "Sinking deep and wet in the earth" (line 3) is of course to be buried, but the burial may be of the spirit ("or from his own believing/Self"—lines 2-3) rather than of the body. And the gardener "*traverses*" [my emphasis] these twigs and flowers. "Traverse," as a legal term, means "to deny formally," which suggests that he rejects the bloom of life, a posture reiterated in "He *drills through* the *weeds*, *soils* his speech/With the fronds, and sprinkling *brutal* tears/On the promised buds, *disclaims*, pollen/By pollen, the blossom he acts" (lines 11-14; my emphasis throughout).

"Sunday Burial" is redolent of Archibald MacLeish's "Memorial Rain." It is overtly about the speaker burying his fingers, but actually it is an expression of regret over his own death. Appropriately, the lines are long—dirge-like, with an infusion of dactyls to contribute to the sombre mood. The speaker can imagine—as MacLeish imagines that his dead brother can feel—his dry fingers in the earth, awaiting rain (lines 5-6). Plangently, he must "tell her she must watch me/Bit by bit, finger by finger, die" (lines 12-13). He grasps at straws in order to maintain his grasp on life: "I bury them./But only their bones" (lines 2-3), but the poem is shot through with pathos, for we know that, wishful thinking and bravado aside, he is gone. He has "Left to her all but his surface touch" (line 28), the only thing that mattered. He wonders whether "I am all fingers?" (line 7) and



whether her whispers ring "far beyond the field's forgiven garden,/ O then, explosion of flowers?" (lines 8-9). The answer is yes, in both cases. He will never again run his fingers—synecdoche for all of himself—through his lady love's hair. He has forgiven the "garden" in the field where he must lie—garden because of the riot of flowers in it and forgiven because the bloom of life the flowers represent is such a bitter reminder of his own withered state. "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" To a garden "wet" and "wild" (line 3). This is no "Thanatopsis"; it is a lament, not a consolation, for the living as for the dead. Bienvenido Santos wrote that "Brief Beauty is Brave," but "O when she whispers/Me brutal and bare!" (lines 6-7). His left-behind love "will be fair" (line 14) but to what end? "She will be queen of minutes and myrtles,/Will read to me of ancient chimes" (lines 20-21), a bitter pill indeed. This dramatic monologue—in spite of its flat, apparently unemotional tone—is interlaced with as much tension as Frost's "Home Burial" is.

### Teofilo Agcaoili

Teofilo D. Agcaoili will probably always be considered a dilettante; after all, his credo, at least in youth, was "'wine + woman + song—in any order'" (Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg 3). Anyone familiar with T.D.'s fiction (see my review of his *Collected Stories Volume I* for cases in point) would be chary of quickly consigning Agcaoili to the artsy-craftsy scrapheap of poets, which is precisely what San Juan does in the course of a general lambasting of Agcaoili. San Juan remarks,

The singular verdict: Agcaoili's poetic sensibility represents the general neurotic and promiscuous delinquency of poetry nurtured in the tradition of experimentalism and surrealism which shields itself with Freudian symbols and Jungian justification of the archetypal images in the flux of myths and symbols in the realm of platonic forms. So much clutter, so much dirt and waste are offered by the interior picture of the thematic framework. Thus, there is no sensibility or an awareness of language and experience; on the contrary, there is only an addiction for the interesting and attractive (73).

Agcaoili, though no bard, does have a place—small though it is—in Philippine literature. His "Where You Walk the Flowers Follow" exhibits the qualities for which he will be remembered: originality and courage. Agcaoili was a very daring artist, undaunted by the

censorship of an issue of the college paper—whose literary section he edited—and had a reputation for radicalism. But his mettle was such that he served as a major with the guerrillas during the Occupation (Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg 3).

After a conventionally lyrical first stanza, "Where You Walk the Flowers Follow" becomes—in the context of the 1949 Philippines at any rate—almost graphic enough to join Nabokov's *Lolita* on the product list of the Olympia Press: "to kiss the hollow between your warm breasts" (line 15); "Your body shifted to follow a comet/and my mouth met the inner tide/that lifted your knees" (lines 16–18); "the petals of your mouth opening to receive love" (line 23); and "your thighs/white as jasmine buds bloomed with a sunflower" (lines 24–25). Yet there is nothing disgusting—or even really prurient—about this unabashedly erotic piece.

Where you walk the flowers follow.  
I see you where earth absorbs the sea  
in swift union  
and remember how stars flecked  
your hair spread darkly  
on the grass and how I leaned  
invocative on knees over your  
beloved body—a sachet of gardenias  
and the scent of crushed grass  
stirred the summer night.

Your eyes waited  
as I leaned on my elbows  
(Did the stars behind my back also tremble  
on their lofty perch?)  
to kiss the hollow between your warm breasts.  
Your body shifted to follow a comet  
and my mouth met the inner tide  
that lifted your knees.  
Your fingers sought my neck with an urgency  
matching the surf near our feet.  
Your breath caressed my locks  
and I raised my face to brush  
the petals of your mouth opening to receive love.  
Eternity rang a golden bell over us and your thighs  
white as jasmine buds bloomed with a sunflower.

I remember the deep peace coming after  
the stars rested on your kneeling eyelashes.

The cosmic imagery provides the poem an almost Whitmanesque context, a macrocosmic affirmation of the unceasingly procreative processes of the universe: "I see you where earth absorbs the sea/in swift union" (lines 2-3). Even the post-coital lassitude of the last two lines—"I remember the deep peace coming after/the stars rested on your kneeling eyebrows"—has the sanction of All itself: "Eternity rang a golden bell over us" (line 24).

### Paulo Aragon

Paulo Aragon's "Celebrating the Temporary" is a textual question mark, which makes it particularly difficult to interpret. However much it may seem to be a convincing piece of evidence for Isagani Cruz' pessimistic (and defeatist) notion that "Philippine literary criticism is futile" (1), we can and should analyze the text we have, realizing that it may not ultimately prove to be canonical. It simply does not matter that the text we have may not be what Aragon either wrote or intended. Cruz misses the point—though he does make a convincing argument for more careful publication standards—when he says,

Unless the textual critic manages to establish the text, the literary critic runs the risk of criticizing a text that no one has written, not the author (who might have meant to use a totally different set of words), nor the typesetter (who was certainly not out to create literature), nor the editor (who might simply have copied the text from an unsuspected corrupt edition). (4)

The long and vexed history of Shakespearean textual studies should be instructive. J. Dover Wilson quite appropriately raises the question of what Shakespeare wrote; but his findings did nothing to diminish the impressiveness of what was written, regardless of who composed what and regardless of whether the text was a typographical accident or deliberate bit of workmanship. E.g., it is certainly incontestable that Richard Burbadge—who could play Falstaff with no padding—could not possibly in 1601 have delivered the soliloquy beginning "O that this too too solid flesh should melt . . ."; he would have been hooted off the stage. Unquestionably the holograph must have read "too too sullied flesh," but the accumulation of philosophical interpretations depending on the reading "solid" is thereby not

invalidated. Perhaps Shakespeare, had he entertained the possibility—and possibly he did—might well have amended the text to read “solid.” A succinct discussion of the whole business of the text of *Hamlet* is in Weitz (106–133).

are there adverbs in the sun  
 caught by the filter of pollens  
 are there lustres undetected  
 chinks of light  
 within the globes of dew  
 rise to the call of the present moment  
 are there faces seen beneath faces  
 has the truth engaged a sliver that hurts  
 has the love felt beg to stay felt  
 is the ache annealed through waters  
 well a song burst from a morning-drunk roes  
 rise to the call of the present moment  
 these my stray leitmotifs  
 reach a point of confluence  
 so that i could confer to them  
 a sort of eternity—now  
 in the now while it is yet now  
 i canonize my obsessions  
 like:

my while love of place  
 watching grass bending in the winds  
 or simply knowing particular streets  
 and things like what i could  
 talk about all night  
 an intaglio with increasing awareness  
 to voices other than man's  
 of labor pains attendant to a poem  
 or freeing the mind to meander  
 along the flow of time  
 alive-ness to these  
 the conversations in the mornings  
 the tempers in the afternoons  
 and longings at night  
 the now is memory dug up—given color  
 thereon to see a dense-ness happen  
 a feeling which does not confess to a name  
 but just the same

it flavors the wind decanted from  
 yesterday's flagons  
 celebration is visitable memories  
 celebrating the temporary  
 remind of what i couldn't change  
 and there is a sense of swallowed terror  
 redeems the present to full use  
 in order that the future  
 even i could only deduce  
 is one pregnant with intended results  
 in the now i see patterns in the grass  
 as i walk hoping to stumble upon  
 bright eyed utensils for prose  
 to celebrate my meaning of creaturehood  
 or when these do not come  
 thus my hespaless sense of unease begins  
 yet by luminous weight of tears  
 other alternative become

"Roes" in line 11 and "hespaleless" in line 53 are clearly—or perhaps appropriately, unclearly—typesetting snafus. "Fish eggs" is not a tenable construal because of the article "a"; "rose" is the proper restoration, especially granted the outdoor setting ("the filter of pollens"—line 2; "watching grass bending in the winds"—line 21). "Helpless" is the only possible word for the latter context.

Much of the syntax is elliptical, making us wonder whether the text we are examining is complete. The run-on sentences and entirely lower-case typography do not reassure us that the text is intact. The result, however, is a happy happenstance—if such it is—in which matter and manner meld. The units of expression sound provisional and fluid—just like the temporary. But why celebrate the transient? Because the future holds unrestricted promise:

celebration is visitable memories  
 celebrating the temporary  
 remind of what i couldn't change  
 and there is a sense of swallowed terror  
 redeems the present to full use  
 in order that the future  
 even i could only deduce  
 is one pregnant with intended results  
 (lines 40–47)

Luminescence is predominant early on: "adverbs in the sun" (line 1); "lustres undetected" (line 3); "chinks of light" (line 4)—and then

flickers out, as though it, too, were temporary, to be picked up, fleetingly, in the ambiguous context "luminous weight of tears" (line 54). Tears are, like the illumination, evanescent, with as wispy an existence as the synaesthetic expression "luminous weight" suggests. The obvious parallelism to line 50, "bright eyed utensils for prose," with "bright eyed" the counterpart of "luminous" and "utensils" the counterpart of "weight," channels the reader's thoughts into the issue of discourse. The speaker hopes to "stumble upon" the vehicles for it, just as earlier he ruminated about the "labor pains attendant to a poem" (line 27). His/her opening line is the striking "Are there adverbs in the sun," which does more than link the motifs of discourse (whether oral or written; cf., the "conversations in the morning," line 31), and illumination as impermanent, important though this function is. "Adverb" goes with action, in this case the search of the speaker for the veridical. Stasis and motion are played off against one another, in fact, during the run of the quasi quest-genre poem. The journey, though mostly within the mind, is physical as well: ". . . I see patterns in the grass/as I walk . . ." (lines 48-49); cf., "watching grass bending in the winds/or simply knowing particular streets" (lines 21-22).

What is constant? What is mutable? The stasis/motion dichotomy is explored in a spatial sense: "are there adverbs in the sun/caught by the filter of pollens" (lines 1-2). The activity of "adverb" is restricted by "caught" and "filter." In "a song burst from a morning-drunk roes" (lines 11-12), "burst," "call," and "present moment" are signifiers of passing immediacy; "drunk" connotes torpor, lethargy; and "song"—which can be construed as either a written composition or the act of singing—is neatly perched between the two. One of the alternatives offered in lines 21 and 22—"watching grass bending in the winds"—is largely active and temporary, though "watching" is an activity not requiring movement. The other alternative—"simply knowing particular streets"—is largely passive and at least much more permanent than bending grass is. The poem ends with unspecified alternatives—"other" alternatives "become" (line 55)—so ongoingness is the final note sounded.

Time versus eternity is the most probing form that the motin/stasis question assumes, however:

There my stray leitmotifs  
reach a point of confluence  
so that i could confer to them

a sort of eternity—now  
in the now while it is yet now  
I canonize my obsessions  
(lines 13–18)

With “eternity” and “canonize” we should have reached finality—but we really have not, due to the qualifications, both express and implied. If “leitmotif” is used in its literary sense (cf., “attendant to a poem” in line 27), then it has a very nearly oxymoronic relationship with “stray,” since recurrence renders accident improbable (though of course this is not true of randomness). If “leitmotif” is used in a musical sense, “stray” can be assumed to convey a sense of whimsy yet be perfectly consonant with the specificity to character or other element—especially in its prototypical Wagnerian application. Eternity is hedged with “a sort of,” and the Hemingwayesque “now/in the now while it is yet now” is immediately ballasted with “canonize.” Even “love of place” is preceded by passages that erode its impression of durability. The love it is imbued with is mentioned only with effort, apparently: “has the love felt beg to stay felt” (line 9), and “while” in “while love of place” connotes “only during the time that.” There may be an almost ironic bendback to “the fixity of canonization in obsessions,” since these are fixations one hopes to eradicate rather than, for instance, memorialize in an intaglio (line 25). If “the flow of time” (line 27) takes us through an inexorable procession—“in the mornings,” “in the afternoons,” “at night” (lines 31–33), nevertheless we will be “freeing the mind to meander / along the flow of time” (Lines 28–29).

### Manuel Viray

The echoes of Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* add to the ambiguities and obliquities—what the actor John Theobald once denominated the poem’s “slanting lights”—of the universe of the poem. The use of the interrogative mode is also noteworthy. However, the resemblances of some passages of “Celebrating the Temporary” to passages in Hemingway, Eliot, and i.e. Cummings (visible in the function shift of “while” in line 20 and the exclusive use of lower case letters) are purely allusive, not tell-tale signs of imitation or dependency. In fact, the most convincing parallel may well be—overall—to Manuel A. Viray, whose poems are desiccated, profound explorations

or reality. Cf., my "Reticent Resolve" and "'The Haeccity, the Essentiality of Man.'" "Meander" involves sluggishness and indirection, a gravitation toward stasis. If memory is a permanent repository of sensory data, then "the now is memory dug up" (line 34) seems to invest the passing with preservation and vice-versa. Likewise, the wind is derived "from yesterday's flagons" (lines 38-39). In line 40, "visitable" (now) "memories" (past occurrences) coalesce. Paradoxically, "the temporary/ remind [me] of what I couldn't change" (lines 41-42). Is it the permanent that the speaker couldn't change?

The future is also part of the "flow of time." Brief mention of "labor pains attendant to a poem" (line 27) is in reverse gestation until, in lines 45-47, "the future/even i could only deduce/is one pregnant with intended results." Ironically, the reader's experience of the "flow of time" in the poem is contradicted by the sequence of procreative references. These may be one of a number of indications that our perceptions of reality are not always reliable or at least definitive. The sun's adverbs are caught by a filter (line 7); "are there lustres undetected" (line 3). Only "chinks of light" "rise to the call of the present moment" (lines 4, 6). The narrator wonders whether the truth has "engaged a sliver that haunts" (line 8). These expressions suggest that our notions of what is true and what is real are only partial and filtered. We do see connections, as in the case of "globes of dew" (line 5) being both the dew on the "morning drunk [rose]" (line 11) and the teardrops of line 54, signifying, respectively, exaltation and regret, if not tragedy, the Janus focus of human emotional experience. At times, reality seems to become palpable: "given color/thereon to see a dense-ness happen" and "flavors the wind decanted from yesterday's flagons" (lines 38-39). But we would be unwise to trust these sensory impressions too much; for Paulo Aragon, reality is a slippery fish indeed.

## Conclusion

We need to take at face value ingenuous—even for their time—statements like "the Filipino is a born poet" (Roseburg 9) and "In the Philippines the short story or essay or a poem is enough to earn for its author the name of writer" (Hernandez 502), but, though it may not always be appreciated or even noticed, first-rate Philippine poetry is not merely the achievement of the few or the serendipitous outcome of an effort on one occasion. It is, as the traditional ballad



claims about the River Jordan, a stream "deep and wide," which is why it has struck observers like Nandakumar (340) that "Contemporary Philippine poetry is suffused with soft lyrical grace." It is.

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