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ABSTRACT. A re-working of a 2012 lecture for the Philippine PEN, this essay looks at how thequotidian and the political serve as generative occasions for five poems from the collection *Everyday Things* by Fidelito Cortes. Poetic devices and forms explored include a sonnet, a coda, alliteration, and a short and a long polemical lyric.

The Poetry of Everyday Things: Poetics and the World

Keywords: art of writing poetry, Filipino writing in America, Filipino identity, history and poetry, Philippine-American relations, polemical poems, W.S. Merwin, Ivan Turgenev, T.E. Lawrence

Fidelito C. Cortes has published two books of poetry, *Waiting for the Exterminator* and *Everyday Things*. Two of his most recent poems are included in Rina Garcia Chua's *Sustaining the Archipelago: An Anthology of Philippine Ecopoetry.*

(This lecture was prepared for the Philippine PEN in 2012.)

I'd like to thank the Philippine PEN for hosting this lecture. This is only the second time I've read in Solidaridad Bookshop, the first having been around twenty years ago when I was but a wee lad. I must confess that during that first time I was overawed to be in this great sanctum of Philippine literature—the holiest of holies, if you will—and I feel I must fight down the same feeling of unworthiness again. Yet I have to say that it always feels good to be reading poems in a place surrounded by books, where books are truly treasured and where writers are valued not as producers of commodities (which is to be expected in a bookstore) but as practitioners of the art. It's quite a terrific honor to be here.

This is the fourth time in less than a month that I've given this lecture. The first two times were at Silliman University and at the University of Santo Tomas, where I began both talks with a complaint about how writers have been marginalized in society—and about how *among* these already marginalized writers, poets are in the farthest margins still. It turns out I needn't have been so gloomy. At both Silliman and UST, my mostly young listeners had overflowed the venues' seating capacities and were squatting in the aisles—their professors obviously did a good job of packing the house. Nonetheless, I sensed a strong and genuine interest in poetry among my audience that I found completely heartwarming. And just the other day at De La Salle University, the impressive turnout and enthusiasm of the mostly young audience were again in evidence; and to have this kind of reception three times out of three in the Philippines, when compared to typically tepid poetry reading audiences in the States, is really quite fantastic. If anything, I fear I might have defused the youthful spark somewhat, because the students may have been expecting a dynamic charismatic performance—a la, say, Pablo Neruda—and instead encountered a surly incoherent mumbler, a la Robert Browning. Browning was reported by Henry James, who went to one of his readings, to have read his own poems terribly, "as if he hated them and would like to bite them to pieces" (302). Browning had no reason to hate his poems; at that time, he was Britain's most popular writer, whose poetry was outselling all fiction, including Dickens' novels! Yes, this is how the world has changed. Not longer than 150 years ago, poetry was outselling fiction—something laughably outlandish in our time.

But this takes me back to my original premise: Even though, in the Philippines at least, there is quite a surprising enthusiasm for poetry, the sad fact is poetry does not sell, a fact confirmed by my publisher, UST Publishing House. We all know that years ago, Anvil stopped publishing poetry precisely for the same reason. Poets have become fringe players on the literature pitch who have ceded the field to far more marketable prose writers. Some types of poets—because the genre has mercifully expanded its definitions—do have a huge following; these are performance artists and hip-hop artists who are poets on the vast popular culture stage. But for old school poets like me, who do not perform or rap, but who primarily produce text on the printed page, our insistence on being read narrows our appeal and limits our relevance to a slow and specialized, even anachronistic, mode of consumption that does not make a ripple in the mass market.

However marginalized our poets now are, I would argue that their kind of poetry, *my* kind of poetry—the antiquated, unkinetic, non-

marketable kind that has to be read in order to be consumed—is never more needed in our 21st century's hurly burly. Every second of our everyday existence, we are blitzed by information that comes at us in a glut of bytes and electrons. Our poor senses and attention are vexed to the limit by this overload of words and images, which we have barely finished processing when another thousand or one million more come hurtling our way. And it is close to impossible to tune out, or to unplug; the old Danish King Canute, who once ruled the Anglo-Saxons, could no more command the ocean waves to stop than we could make our overload of information end. This is where, I think, the old-fashioned pleasures of poetry might come useful, and prove eventually to be necessary. Poetry might be quick to read—its economy of language and short lines, its brevity and compression, invite easy access—but it is harder to comprehend than prose or even performance. For one thing, it does not have to follow the straightforward syntax of prose. And it makes use of established yet unique shortcuts and codes such as prosody, imagery and figurative language to clue us to its meaning. So we have to work a little more to figure out what the poem is saying. Poetry therefore does what John of Gaunt in Shakespeare's *Richard II* claims that the tongues of dying men do, which is to "enforce attention like deep harmony" (2.1.6). Poetry makes us pay attention to what we are reading, unlike all the junk we access with one click and then abandon just as quickly. Poetry, one might say, is a kind of drug that slows down the brain's absorption of all the information trash all around us, and I think we do need to slow it down sometimes, or we drown.

"For the Anniversary of my Death", all of 13 lines, with no punctuation, paradoxically forces us to pause at the end of each line and honor the line break. The poem is by W.S. Merwin, an American poet who went to the island of Majorca to tutor the children of the poet Robert Graves, and is about an event that all of us, without exception, will one day come to possess but never be able to personally commemorate.

For the Anniversary of My Death
Every year without knowing it I have passed
the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
.....

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
.....
As today writing after three days of rain
.....
And bowing not knowing to what (58)

I was very young when I first read this poem, and was blown away by the poem's message of impending mortality, but my shock of recognition did not make me sad or depressed; in fact, it made me feel elated. I had simply not thought of death and death anniversaries this way, because the young rarely ever think of death anyway. Thus, the untypicality of poem's message and the gorgeous incongruity of its celebrating images force us to contemplate, and then to savor, a thoroughly universal yet almost unthinkable event. The idea that every year we pass the date of our death, unknowingly, but inevitably, was for me an important, paradigm-shifting realization. It certainly made me more aware of the passing of days, and perhaps taught me to take better care of each day's passing as more than just an everyday occurrence. Now that I'm no longer young, I really treasure the poem's gentle acceptance of life's major and

even minor transitions, and feel thankful that a poem had allowed me a thoughtful insight into meaningful existence now and an imaginable non-existence in the future.

Now allow me bring up a poem of mine that tries to echo—though less skillfully—the ending grace of Merwin's poem, but reverses the changes. In the previous poem the wren starts to sing as soon as the rain ends—whereas in my poem, the birds cease their song and the rain starts falling. But it is the rain itself that produces an accepting and consoling epiphany similar to that in Merwin's poem.

Letter to Home

I would write about how cold and bleak
it is right now, the end of fall, the oak
and maple dead of self-burning, dull
embers scattered on the sod. How full
the air of chill and mournful birdsong,
before the silence. And how merciless
this shift of seasons, this sudden tumble
into melancholy and distress.
Yet this is California, and there is mercy
in the rains that fall endlessly
on the still green hills of Berkeley.
Rain, not snow. So I walk to the bus stop
to meet my wife, solaced and wrapped
in this knowledge, in mist and the bright
drops. (9)

The poem is a sonnet that shares the octet-sestet dialectic structure of the Petrarchan sonnet. The first eight lines say one thing, the next six lines say, "yes, but, there's something else…" This sonnet form seemed suited to what I was trying to say: I wanted to describe to others, as well as perhaps explain to myself, my topsy-turvy reaction to changes around me as one California autumn turned into a California winter, because the Pacific coast does not really have distinct seasons and seasonal transitions that are clear-cut. When you're trying to sort something out, it helps to slow things down and to measure your responses breath by breath, line by line, and not in a rush of paragraphs, or an onslaught of images, words and sounds. Poetry may be marginalized, but it may also, as in the two poems we just heard, help you find if not enlightenment, then at least repose.

The poem "Letter to Home" begins my second collection of poems called *Everyday Things*, as well as the chapter that deals with domestic life, which is an everyday thing in terms of time and chronology, but is truly an extraordinary thing in terms of the pleasures and joys it has brought. As a poet, I've had the misfortune of having a happy family life. Just imagine what a great poet I could have been had I had a miserable marriage, an insufferable family, and horrible friends, following the old belief that for poets to amount to something, to anything really, they ought to have drunk of the milk of bitterness. It does not mean that I write only happy, contented poems; my poems in this very domesticated chapter of my latest book struggle through the learning pains of newly married life, through arguments and quarrels, the trade-offs of being a househusband, of living in a small town, and so on. That these are the most traumatic (knock wood) events of married life attests, I think, to the solidity of the relationship, and this next poem, which closes the first chapter of my book, tries to sum up the everyday things, as well as the highlights, such as they are, of a satisfying domesticity.

Coda

In the end, what are these passing years
but lost opportunities strung together
to transform regret into craving?
Deep into winter, we are warmed

by desire, even as the leaves, long
fallen, have crumbled their autumn
colors into the cold ashen earth.
Mirth we've shared but not yet birth;
enjoyed all orthodoxies of love and lust;
overcome worry and fear of dust;
lived minor triumphs and despairs between
chores, quotidian, housekeeping
and enlargements of the spleen.
All told, a quiet life of half events
and satisfying nuances, and hardly
any thoughts of abandonment.
Little's changed inside, but outwardly
snow has gathered on our hair
and with those twisted trees we share
an incipient yet irrevocable gnarling.
But no matter, darling — winter's
wise and deep and knows our thoughts
even in our sleep, and finishes
wayward sentences with a universal
mist of emission and renewal...
assuring, as we get yet ever humbler,
that our longings stay immortal. (30)

"Coda," the poem's title, is an old prosodic form that echoes the themes and motifs of the texts that came earlier, and thus typically comes at the end of anything. The snow gathering on the hair, as you may have surmised, is poetic shorthand for creeping old age, and obviously all the winter imagery refers to the same thing. However, the "enlargements of the spleen" mentioned in the poem are not symptoms of a geriatric condition; rather, I once heard a doctor say on TV that when someone desires something, their spleen expands. When all sorts of organs are expanding, I think it becomes possible to have immortal longings, a phrase that comes from Shakespeare's Cleopatra who was made to exclaim, "I have immortal longings in me!" (5.2.274-75)

Poetry and the World

The next two chapters of my collection contain poems about our public lives, as opposed to the private domestic life the first chapter explored. Even though I aspire to be, as Saul Bellow described one of his protagonists, a "Columbus of those near at hand", exploring the everyday as though it were terra incognita, I am all too aware of the inextricable overlap between the private and the public. Public lives, of course, are nothing but the context against which our private lives are lived; they encompass world realities that influence and even shape our daily lives, such as politics, money, travel and migration, and the environment. This is the "Poetry and the World" portion of my talk, and looking at many of the outright political and social poems, and their seeming diversity of issues, I am struck by how they are all really concerned about what it means to be Filipino in this world and at this moment. It is an odd realization, because I have lived in the Philippines for only four of the last 27 years, and have missed most of the watershed moments that have made up the recent history of our country.

A Refusal to Bury the Dead of Luisita
It must be that the reek
Of earth rouses the wrath
Of rulers, like ripeness
Draws the greedy flies.

How else to explain
This wrack and ruin,
The cracking and scattering
Of peasant gristle, marrow and gore?

To be sure, the starved,
Bedraggled and dispossessed
Parade such stinging rebuke
To the full-bellied and powerful.

Nails ridged with soil,
Bodies racked with troubles
Undeserved and tedious toil,
Cratered by sores and boils —

What else but an unsightly affront
To taste and enterprise?
So leave their corpses where they lie.
The ghost lives when the body dies. (33)

I wrote this poem in less than three days, from November 20 to 22, 2004, which is still a speed record for me. I can't explain this kind of "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth xiv), other than it was precisely that: I was moved and angered by the rank injustice of killing peasants in order to keep wealth in the hands of the very wealthy. You just don't kill poor people; you exploit them if you're rich; if you want to get richer, you work them close to death; but you never kill them, that's just too tasteless and not classy at all. The poem's title was stolen from Dylan Thomas, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" (221), which was his outraged response to civilian collateral damage in World War II and ended with the line: "After the first death, there is no other". The sustained alliteration of "r" sounds throughout my poem, particularly in the first two stanzas, tries to simulate the same growling outrage that starts the Dylan Thomas poem: "Never until the mankind making / Bird, beast and flower / Fathering and all humbling darkness" (221). And I envisioned the ghosts at the poem's end to serve as eternal finger-pointing spirits, very much like Shakespeare's ghosts, that disturb the living so they can take up the cause of the unquiet dead.

The ghosts in the next poem are far from righteous, they're sort of riff-raff ghosts: the guilty, restless spirits of humans who committed terrible crimes when they were alive and are doomed to forever seek absolution for their sins.

English as a Second Language
Today I tried to give a talk about
Philippine history to a bunch of
Americans and ran into a wall
of language. It was a white thing,
really, that room of Americans
doing good for their fathers' sins,
and I thought I saw the chastened
ghosts of McKinley and Bell and
Otis and Howlin' Jake Smith walk in.

I started with the Spaniards and had
no problems there. I got an attentive,
even sympathetic, hearing. But when
history turned, as it always must,
to the Americans, the ghosts stirred
uneasily and the wall slammed in place.
It was formidable and tall, bricked with
impregnable verbs, impossible idioms.
On it rested the ruins of foreign accents

used as scaling machines. At its feet
the foiled battering rams of gutturals
and sibilants. Caught on its barbed wire
of nuance, truth. But history heeds more
than language, and I brought blood and gore
of my forebears, marrow of their crushing,
spit of their muzzled insurrection.
Let Americans play deaf behind walls.
I will not give comfort to their ghosts. (57-58)

When it comes to its colonial and neo-colonial past in the Philippines, the United States has much to make amends for. It behooves us, who continue to suffer from their meddling and exploitation, to not let Americans off too easily. But our enduring regard for our former

colonizers—which I submit they did not earn—and our easy inclination to forgive and forget have allowed Americans to construct a revisionist history of their time in the Philippines, where they claim to have set up public education and public works here, but gloss over having killed from 200,000 to one million Filipinos, mostly civilians, along the way. Mark Twain, an ardent anti-imperialist, marveled satirically at the ability of the United States Army to kill one million individuals, which was one-sixth of the Philippine population then (qtd. in Zwick 170-173). If that genocide were to happen today, the Americans would have to kill more than 16 million Filipinos, which would make it the largest ever mass killing in human history.

We should perhaps learn from Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans who have succeeded in making Americans accountable for the detention of Asian immigrants, sometimes for months, in Angel Island, on San Francisco Bay. Not many people know about the Angel Island immigration center, unlike its far more famous counterpart Ellis Island on the eastern United States coast. The reason for this is Ellis Island was far more welcoming to immigrants than Angel Island and was therefore a nicer fit to the American myth that the United States was open to all immigrants. This was largely true if you happened to be white and from Europe, hence Ellis Island represented a hopeful gateway to a new land, and the Statue of Liberty, which European immigrants passed along the way, remained true to her exhortation: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free…" But this was not the case if you happened to be Asian, in particular the Chinese who were excluded by law from immigrating to the United States, but other Asians also suffered a far more severe processing, including extended detention, medical exams, and fumigation, in Angel Island than most Europeans went through in Ellis Island.

If you will bear with me, I'll be reading a long poem, called "Angel Island." It starts with an epigraph from *Macbeth*, a scene in which the Scottish king Duncan and one of his thanes Banquo are in front of Macbeth's castle and admiring how delightful it was, not knowing of course that it would be the source of their doom. It's a deliciously ironic passage.

Angel Island

Duncan: This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.
Banquo: This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here: no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendant bed and procreant cradle:
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed,
The air is delicate.

— *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 6

Out of breath from the climb and
just as breathless from the scenery,
we finally glimpsed, through the trees
split-leveled from the sparkling sea
and the multicolor billowing sails
of the boats at play on the bay,
the roof of the immigration station.
It looked surprisingly drab,
that ordinary roof over an
undistinguished building, and as more
of the station came into view, we found
none of the drama we were expecting
in a place of such infamy : no walls,
barbed wire or watch towers; and the boards

and bricks made to look honest by age
and decrepitude. Yet a million people
were processed here, lost dignity,
lost time, lost hope, got cold, got sick,
or — most cruelly — got sent back.
There ought to be some trace of such
immense sadness, yet the day was
too brilliant even for shadows
and the happy cries of picnickers
still rang from the docks we had left behind.

Where has evil gone, how quickly vanished,
as though the creatures for which this island
is named had filtered it off the air,
leached it off the earth. All over
the island were huge holes on the ground —
all that were left of eucalyptus trees
uprooted to make way for the
native oak, bay and madrone
they had displaced. Was this perhaps
a metaphor for what had
happened here, cycles of migration
and displacement, invasion and
upheaval, but with just the holes left
as testament to the uprooting,
and angels and groundskeepers
connived to contain the residue
to silences, gaps and ellipses?
True, the docents who guided us
around the station took pains to
point out its cruelties, but of our
surroundings there was nothing
palpably wicked, and like the two Scots
standing in front of the castle
they would soon be murdered in,
we could not help but be charmed
by the mildness of the place,
even as we half-expected
an ornamented Lady Macbeth
to make her entrance soon after
to offer a perfidious welcome.
In any case, she was not needed.
The island's detainees had eked
onto barrack walls of solid wood
poems of such despair and desolation
they might have been scratched out
by bare fingernails. Here was proof
of wickedness and injustice,
as indelible as the blood
on Macbeth's hands, which not even
"all great Neptune's ocean" could
wash clean, its waters surging amply
just steps away upon an island,
named for angels, and the gateway
to this so-called land of immigrants.
Welcomed thus, how else could those
wretched travelers have worked out
the irony of their situation
than by scarring the walls
with their pain and confusion?
Ghostly as Banquo, those markings,
and, these days, just as unnerving. (59-61)

What is the point of preserving poetry like this, etched on a wall or printed on paper? Certainly, as a chronicle of suffering and injustice, they have emotional resonance and historical value. They move us, just as they also serve to remind us of the institutional racism of white Americans against Asians. When written by those who suffered these outrages, they bear powerful witness to terrible events that could be easily denied because they took place so long in the past.

But what about the kind of poems I read earlier, which were not written by the participants themselves but were written as literature by practitioners like myself? Do such political or polemical poems have any utility? Are they capable of producing change? The constructive value of political poetry has been debated for ages—Auden, for instance,

says in his elegy to Yeats that "poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its making … / A way of happening, a mouth" (82). As a starting poet I too was skeptical about poetry's ability to produce change. I came of age in the Marcos years, and while I was sympathetic to those who opposed his administration, I was also happy to let others write the political poems. That may have been cowardly, and perhaps it was a cop-out; nonetheless, before 1985, not one of my poems was political or polemical.

It was when I was studying poetry at Stanford that I changed my mind about the vast potential of poetry and literature to provoke change. The person who triggered that epiphany was my teacher, the renowned poet Denise Levertov. It was around the time of the first EDSA revolution, and all of us at Stanford were giddy at the prospect of regime change in the Philippines, none more than Denise herself. She asked me why none of my poems were political, given the political storms raging in my country, and the tremendous opportunity they afforded those who are able to write for change. When I told her about my doubts about the efficacy of political poetry, she strongly encouraged me to reconsider, and insisted I read the essays on political poetry she had collected in two of her books, *The Poet in the World and Light Up the Cave.*

What I read convinced me. Apart from the well-known example of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* helping end slavery in the United States, I had no idea that another book, *A Sportsman's Sketches* by Ivan Turgenev, a far better book than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had even more directly influenced the Tsar Alexander II to free the serfs in Russia, a full five years before the Thirteenth Amendment freed the slaves in the United States. Apparently, the Tsar read the book himself and was so affected by the book's depiction of the hardships suffered by serfs that he ordered the end of serfdom not long after.

The essays also chronicled how the imprisonment, oppression, exile or death by violence of hundreds of poets and writers, such as Nazim Hikmet of Turkey, Yannis Ritsos of Greece, Pablo Neruda of Chile, César Vallejo of Peru, José Martì of Cuba, Federico Garcia Lorca of Spain, and so on, ultimately served as catalysts for change in their countries.

It seems that poets and writers do have a political utility that's not limited to their works alone, but extends to their lives and beliefs and the inspiration all of these seems to produce in their readers. And if we are still unconvinced by the capability of political poetry and prose to catalyze change, we need look no farther than our Jose Rizal and the other propagandists, who by dint of their pen were able to inspire a revolution. That this example, so close to home and so rote in my upbringing and schooling, had failed to inspire my early poetry is really painful to think of. How blind I was when I was young…

But here's T.E. Lawrence, also known as Lawrence of Arabia, a firebrand and warrior and trouble-maker, in the preface to his book *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*:

> We lived many lives in those whirling campaigns, never sparing ourselves: yet when we achieved and the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our victory to re-make in the likeness of the former world they knew. Youth could win, but had not learned to keep: and was pitiably weak against age. We stammered that we had worked for a new heaven and a new earth, and they thanked us kindly and made their peace. (6-7)

Now this is beautiful and moving stuff, but in the end, disheartening. T.E. Lawrence died young, in a motorcycle accident, so he never had the chance to grow old and change his mind about old men. When I was putting together my second poetry collection, I had to look back at my continuum of everydays, and I confess I was somewhat dismayed by what, at first glance, I mostly saw: the blur of my life in the wake of time's speedy passing. Not long ago, I was a young poet waving "my leaves and flowers in the sun" (Yeats 102). Now I'm just an old guy—but by turns consoled and inspired by poetry, and that may have made a difference, because I feel I still have the fire and passion and drive for change. If all we ever did as old men (and women) is look for the anniversary of our death in every day, then, yes, we would grow embittered and fearful and spiteful, and in a state to take back the world from the young, as Lawrence of Arabia feared, so we could die in a world that's old and familiar. Our challenge is not to age like this, and we need to be helped by poetry that teaches us a new way of looking, so that our own death anniversary won't be about death but about life, those thousands of days that were full of living in the miracle of the everyday. Now that is worth bowing not knowing to what.

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CREATIVE