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Maria Luz Rebecca T. Anofuevo is a multi-awarded poet, essayist and fictionist winning nine times in the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature and the 1999 Salanga Writers Prize for her children's story. She has published three collections of children's stories; four collections of poetry, one of these *Saulado* which won the Manila Critics Award for Best Book of Poetry in 2006. Her dissertation for a Ph.D. in Literature at the De La Salle University won for her a gold medal from DLSU in 2002 and a National Book Award in Literary Criticism in 2003.

She has read her scholarly papers and poetry in London and Kuala Lumpur and she has done major translation works such as Moliere's *The Imaginary Invalid* (*Hakang-isip na Maysakit*) staged by Dulaang UP, and Ophelia Dimalanta's *Passional New Poems and Some Translations* (2002), together with poet Michael Corroza; Pablo Neruda *Mga Piling Tula* (2005), edited by Virgilio Almario.

She was former chair of the English Department of Miriam College in Loyola Heights, Quezon City and has been appointed chair of its Filipino Department. She has been treasurer of the Writers Union of the Philippines (UMPIL) since and she has served as president of the *Linangan sa Imahen, Retorika at Anyo* (LIRA).

# Fire and Faith in Writing

MARIA LUZ REBECCA T. AÑONUEVO

**M**y coming back to Iligan City is personally a joyous affair because I happen to be the kind of writer who has not gone far and to many places literally, and thus I welcome any opportunity to be away from my familiar space and activity even if only for a brief period. I was a fellow in the Third Iligan National Writers and Teachers Conference in 1996, which makes me 11 years older now. All I brought with me aside from my luggage of clothes, were a sheaf of poems that I intended to submit for publication in a book if I would have the luck to get the nod of any publisher, my confident anticipation that the folder I was holding deserved to be published soon, and my excitement at the place that was Iligan City famed for its scenic water falls.

The Iligan workshop was my second and last national workshop to attend as a writing fellow. I am not an avid fan of workshops; I don't believe that going the rounds of workshops held in different places in the country will turn one into a writer. But I had a selfish motive like many: I wanted to go some place, away from populous Manila, where I could enjoy the ride and sights for free.

I took home with me a number of bonuses I never expected: new acquaintances, serious attitudes and perspectives on writing and reading works, my memorable passing out after climbing back from the enchanting Tinago Falls, a treat from IPAG or the Integrated Performing Arts Guild, known and acclaimed internationally, Cheding's toasted peanuts for *pasalubong*, and most surprisingly, a warm, close brush with mentors and writers like the sullen-faced Cirilo Bautista and the suave Ricardo de Ungria, who we could only admire from a distance because we felt shy and small in their company.



One thing more, however, got me floored: listening to and watching the response of audiences when the young poet and journalist Adonis Durado from Cebu read his poetry. I heard *habalhabal* for the first time, and it seemed to ride so well in the naughty love poem that the audience, composed of teachers, could easily imagine. Their laughter shook the room, and all of a sudden I was sorry that I couldn't understand Cebuano. The other poem was a domestic exchange of *pansit* flying in the air between husband and wife, witnessed sadly by the son. Though a few giggles ensued at the back—because the scene was drawn to be comic—no one missed the pained irony. I developed a lump in my throat even when I could hardly read the text. The poem unfolded to me, I a stranger to the language.

The Iligan workshop was my initiation to the voices in the regions, the sounds and sensibilities of languages other than the Tagalog that I fondly and deeply know, or English, used widely in academic institutions. In an unexpected way I was being taught that writing was going to be a humbling experience. If I wanted to write, someone ought to read my work. No award could come close to the laughter or tears of a real audience, one or one hundred. And if readers are taking the extra step to buy a book, and not just photocopy or download from the Internet, writers are deservedly getting the recognition that belongs to them. Doomsayers will be gladly disappointed: writers won't have to be extinct. Publishers will continue to publish poetry, not just recipe books, because readers keep the market alive and the business of publishing a sane, courageous, and profitable act.

It is not wishful thinking, but necessary and basic—for writers to survive in a world that already finds its hands full with unrelenting afflictions of war and violence, extreme poverty, hunger, corruption in governments and institutions, global warming, brain drain, and the general breakdown in families and human character. What marvelous paradox thus that in a hapless country such as ours, young people still dream to become writers; just look at the spate of workshops and conferences made available in varying degrees in universities and colleges, and smaller groups and institutions. But why do you want to write? Why are you here? What *must* you write?

I will leave the answers to each one of you. I asked those questions when I was a beginning writer, and I repeat them constantly to myself even as I, or because, I have grown older. I realize that *to want to continue* to write is as difficult as wanting to begin to write. And most difficult it is *to do* continue to write. Some writers cannot reckon the day when they would stop writing; everyday they just have to write—whether in scraps of paper or in their blogs; whether in a cramped,



nondescript room or in an enchanting castle will matter least. Our National Artist [for literature] Virgilio S. Almarino will not pass a birthday without launching a book. Some writers organize a reading or an anthology to denounce human rights violations in Hacienda Luisita or by a multinational company. Some take the risk to perform, even to injure oneself, before a flabbergasted audience that cannot fathom the reason nor rhyme in the performance that first was born by way of the written word.

In my case I was finding excuses not to write: I was teaching, I was reviewing textbooks, and evaluating other people's theses and dissertations, I was recovering from illnesses, I was taking care of old parents, I was dealing with a crisis in the family. I avoided book events, workshops, and writers' wakes. I forced myself to be warm when impressionable students told me heartily that they liked my poems. I chose friends I would go out with, and more often, I went out with friends who were non-writers. In one of my book launchings, I invited writer-friends at the last minute so they would have every excuse not to attend. I did not write everyday as I promised myself when I was a young writer; I spent more time watching cooking shows and blind dates on TV. I could imagine not writing on my final day on earth, something so contrary to the ideal I espoused. And talking further of broken ideals, whereas I used to crumble whenever I heard writers admit that the first thing that came to their minds for every piece of writing was money more than any noble aspiration, I found that I too was capable and appreciative of the idea. The image of the starving artist, or the artist who bled or died for the craft had lost its tragic appeal to me. The daily practical concerns of life had to be managed, and emergencies that shook my comfort zone demanded cold cash rather than poetry. To my surprise, I did not miss the writing act—at least not the everyday kind of writing I plotted in my mind for a whole life.

Like all true consolations, thank God, everything passes away. Now that I am talking, and publicly at that, about this episode in my writing life, I feel weird and guilty, almost sad, but not thoroughly contrite, which makes it weirder perhaps. Something I did on the sly when I wasn't writing: I read. I reread my all-time favorite poets, Szymborska and Milosz, both Polish, who gave hope to ruins, and faith even when faith itself is floundering. They have succeeded to show me that I live in a completely different place and time that is not different altogether from the world that they saw and depicted in their poetry. Perhaps this is the power of the poem: no matter where we are, or what we are, it awakens again and again both our *longing and imagination* for things that escape our possession—like a fistful of sand, like the moon in a bowl of water or a river, fragile and genuine, everywhere



and missing, like freedom and peace, justice and unprejudiced compassion; like breathless love, an amount of constancy and devotion we thought we had forgotten or taken for granted and would never move us again at all.

The rush of poetry came back to me, not immediately, and only recently, but I knew the exact moment when it did: I was not jumping for joy. Instead my gratitude was silent, private, and trembling. One evening I sat before a blank screen, and struggled through lines that did not make sense until I resolved that they *ought* to make sense, they ought to be meaningful enough to speak to me as if I were another person living in a different time and place. Some kind of *déjà vu*, if I were to recall the early days of writing when I was pale with fear because I wasn't sure if I could write, and if the older writers and mentors or critics would notice. Or maybe they were secondary; my grandmother Felipa, when she was alive, would read to me and could read me. Sometimes I thought I did see a welling of tears in her eyes because she understood what I ached for her to know.

This wrestling with language and thought is what makes writing a gratifying experience: I loved the moments when I could write poetry almost effortlessly because words were rolling like marbles on a child's table, but also I was equally awed by those times when I had to sit through, writhing on my desk, in the dead of night or in the middle of a sweltering day, trying a welding between the precise word and the honest rage, taking in a solemn persona on the one hand, and its total contradiction on another, being alternately compact and kilometric, crystal and ambiguous because ultimately I *must* write, and I did. Poetry allows us to see our different selves and possibilities, which may be a mirror image to other people, or an inverse proposition to what they are familiar with.

But then not all things that excite at the onset need to be written about immediately or at all; and neither do you find a metaphor for everything that causes you grief or despair. Maybe you will never get to write every deep human experience that comes along, or another writer will do it for you.

Whichever the case—whether you are writing or frozen to write, one of the realities in the life of anyone who seeks to write is this: Writing is *not* easy. Much of what we shall write, if we are saying we want to devote a lifetime to writing, will be born not because of a haunting inspiration, but because of a tenacity that comes from the spirit of writing itself. You implore, push, drive, urge yourself to write when you are most darkly certain that writing has become the least of your priorities: think choosing between writing a poem and driving an old man who happens to be your father, to the hospital, or picking up a pen to write and feeling that it is a boulder between your fingers, because you yourself are lying in the hospital bed

and all you need to do is get back to health. Think of choosing between writing a poem and dodging a stray bullet if you have the misfortune to be part of a town caught in an armed conflict. You can't write on those days; you persist to live. You taste, smell, hear, memorize every detail and second of life. So when you make a choice not to write, what a relief that you are not afraid. You just know that like a true friend, writing will not turn its back on you even when you have made certain detours and stops.

I am still not writing feverishly and anxiously as I used to, but I am glad that I still write. Or better to say, I am only beginning to write. The early years were a test that any resolute, talented youth would pass, no sweat; a writer however grows not only in years, not in personal ambitions, but in quiet hopes. A writer hopes to witness what the human race is doing to rise from ravages, how the world will clean up its mess, what resources we can pool together to ease the burdens of the weary. A writer hopes even when everyone is despairing; she weighs her words, and sends her invitation: let us live, let us help others live.