

Onward for the next 50

KRIPOTKIN By Alfred A. Yuson (The Philippine Star) Updated May 21, 2012 12:00 AM



The 2012 National Writers Workshop fellows take time out for a swim at Antulang Beach Resort.

The 51st Silliman University National Writers Workshop concluded last Friday at the Writers Village in Camp Lookout, Valencia, on the foothills of Mt. Talinis in Negros Oriental.

Serving as the guest panelists for the third and final week, Jimmy Abad and I were picked up daily (at an ungodly hour, if you ask me) from our chosen lodging place in Dumaguete, Florentina Homes, and brought to Silliman University's Katipunan Hall by 8 in the morning. The parking lot (a smoke-free campus, but devious ways win the day, always) serves as the assembly point for the Workshop secretariat, Workshop director Rowena Tiempo Torrevillas, panelists, auditors and guests, and balik-Fellows.

We are ferried by van for at least half an hour up the mountain road that snakes from the pretty garden town of Valencia, to what's officially called the Rose Lamb Sobrepeña Writers Village — put up three years ago in time for three-week occupation by the 49th Workshop batch.

Once again we must commend the dynamic leadership of Silliman U. president Ben Malayang for seeing that visionary project through — in a highly creative way at that. S.U.'s architects and engineers suggested using container vans, or parts thereof, as core structures for the five pretty cabins that have since sprouted and in turn been surrounded by lush, colorful flora.

Each of the cabins has two rooms with double-decker bunks and a common bathroom, plus a front porch with bench privileges. All together, a total of 20 occupants can share the amenities.

Then there's the main cottage, or what used to be a rather ramshackle one of wood, with a large balcony as its prized feature since it offered a commanding view of the lowlands, the southern coast of Negros Oriental, Tañon Strait and the Sulu Sea, and the islands of Cebu, Siquijor, Apo and Mindanao towards the horizon.

I still recall, most vividly, how it was over four decades ago when I spent my first weekend in this Camp Lookout cottage built by American missionaries as a summer retreat on these foothills that led to the twin peaks called Cuernos de Negros.



Jimmy Abad, Rowena Torrevillas and Annabelle Lee-Adriano enjoy a dinner at Gabby's Bistro of Florentina Homes.



Cozy cabins in lush surroundings house the fellows for three weeks of the workshop.

In the 1980s, other Maytime weekends were just as memorable, spent with the young writers who didn't mind spreading sleeping bags or mats on the grassy knoll lorded over by an old regal pine, and sleeping under the night sky.

Now the large cottage has been reconfigured and brought up to speed, with its former basement turned into our regular Workshop session venue that spreads out into an open, semi-circular patio, so that birds swoop and dart past our heads as we discuss a poem or story. The upper floor serves as a social and dining area, where a buffet table provides three meals a day and then some to workshopppers and guests.

The old wooden balcony has been narrowed but made modern with concrete railings, albeit that vintage vista of lowlands and sea is no more, the view curtained now by trees that have grown so much taller since our first visit in 1970.

But now three batches of Workshop fellows have enjoyed this idyllic "village" where mountain air, wild greenery and an hourly concert of cicadas make it a most memorable summer of learning about craft and passion and resolve

when it comes to wielding words.

It is the first workshop not only of the projected "next 50" but also of the post-Edith L. Tiempo era. Our beloved Mom, the first and only Filipina writer thus far to be declared a National Artist for Literature, left us last August, but not before gracing the golden year's activities exactly a year ago. Conscripted from the University of Iowa each Maytime, her daughter Rowena has taken over as Workshop director.

Our siblings Susan Lara and Danny Reyes served as guest panelists for the first week, together with Rowena. Dumaguete writers Cesar "Sawi" Aquino and Bobby Flores Villasis took their turn for the second week. Jim and I became the "closers." Also pitching in was Rowena's husband Lemuel Torrevillas for the last literary piece taken up this summer, a one-act play actually performed on that main cottage patio by an S.U. theater group.

The Workshop lost out on NCCA funding this year, but other sponsors helped S.U. for this year's edition held from April 30 to May 18, among them the United States Embassy in Manila, the United Board of Christian Higher Education in Asia, Negros Or. Governor Roel Degamo, Bais Mayor Karen Villanueva, Globelines, Annabelle Lee-Adriano and Edo Adriano, Antulang Beach Resort, Atty. Felipe Antonio Remollo, Eugene Kho, Prof. Diomar Abrio, Marita Ong, Angeline Dy, Ritchie Armogenia and Baby Armogenia, Azalea Restaurant, American Studies Resource Center of the Robert and Metta Silliman Library, Enrique Sobrepeña, Chantilly, and SkyCable.



US Embassy cultural affairs officer Alan Holst receives a citation from SU English Dept. chair Evelyn Mascunana and Prof. Philip Van Peel.

A dozen fellowships were awarded, to the following:

For Poetry: Nathan Aw of Singapore Management University, CD Borden of University of San Carlos, and Deborah Rosalind Nieto of University of Santo Tomas;

For Fiction: Thomas David Chavez who teaches at Philippine Normal University, Michael Aaron Gomez of Silliman University (the first Sillimanian in five years to receive a fellowship), Ma. Vida Frances Cruz and Michelle Abigail Tiu Tan of Ateneo de Manila University, and Christian Tablazon and Timothy James Dimacali of University of the Philippines-Diliman;



The main cottage at the Writers Village in Valencia

For Creative Non-Fiction: Hazel Meghan Hamile of University of the Philippines–Mindanao) and Zendy Victoria Sue Valencia of University of Santo Tomas; and

For Drama: Karlo Antonio David of Ateneo De Davao University.

Manila-based Vietnamese writer Nguyen Phan Que Mai, this summer's Visiting Asian Writer and Lecturer, stayed in the Writers Village with the Fellows for the second week, when resource persons from the US Embassy also came up to conduct presentations.

This was repeated on the third week, when U.S. Embassy Cultural Affairs Officer Alan Holst spoke on "Literature and Film" and multimedia specialist JR Dalisay on video and the art of the narrative. They were accompanied by U.S. Embassy Cultural Affairs expert Tony Perez, himself a notable Filipino author and painter.

It was a terrific batch (and we don't say that every year!) — with the level of writing inviting a raising of the bar in terms of evaluation and suggestions for revision and/or enhancement. .

At the closing rites, Dr. Gémino H. Abad was asked to speak in behalf of the panelists. We share his brief remarks:

“The writer finds his own trail through language. This is just another way of saying, You find your own voice.

“There is only one trail through language — the trail you have found. As you go along, the trail changes. So does the way you have with language change. The language of your time and place also changes.

“So, you always have to be alert. You always must reflect on your craft, and always be aware of, and observant of, your own people, the way they think and feel and so live their lives, your history, your own culture — which are all dynamic processes.

“Always aware, reflective, critical — meaning, you have an inner life from which you draw when you write. If you imagine that inner life as a forest, then as you go on with your life, and your trail through language changes, it might happen that you are going deeper and deeper into the forest where you make newer and brighter clearings.”

And from Ma'm/"Mom" Rowena's closing lecture, we highlight this excerpt that rings of the spirit of farewell as much as of confirmation:

“What are the voices we bring with us, after three weeks in these hills?

“We bring with us the voice of the cicadas swelling upward from the old pine tree on this slope. We bring Soeey's voice as she rings the massive church bell in that faraway European meadow; and *Manang Bibi*, more certain that it will be listened to; confident that there is a Mountain Momma traversing that now-imaginary space between the prairies of Iowa's Field of Dreams bright in the Midwestern sun and this ringing silence of the mountain slopes of Valencia... who will always have a moment for you, wherever you happen to go.

“Your voice. Saying, *Good morning*, and Karlo saying *Lacan and Derrida*, and the ten-year old Megan saying, “I want him to go to jail” for taking away her father. It is the voice of TJ's violin.

“And it is your voice — more sure of itself.”