"Be here before sundown," Edith L. Tiempo always says to anyone who is visiting her for the first time, at her home in a place aptly named Montemar in Sibulan, Negros Oriental. For the many writers, students, and friends who seek out the National Artist for Literature, the Tiempo residence, fence-less and sprawling, is much larger than the total area of its rooms. The floor-to-ceiling glass walls dissolve the boundaries between indoors and outdoors, making the vast, air-conditioning part of the house indoors: the breathtaking view of Tañon Strait and the neighboring island of Cebu, and at the back, solid and majestic Mount Talinis. Looking at the sea from the front porch, you feel your soul expanding, as far as your eyereach. On someone who spends every single day under the shadow of skyscrapers, the effect is inebriating.

For much of her life, since she settled in Dumaguete City in 1940, Edith seldom strayed too far from the mountain and the sea, one emblematic of rationality, abiding presence and rootedness; the other open and receptive, signifying the unconscious. One tries to overlook the too-obvious symbolism, but with Edith's own account of her creative process, the temptation is difficult to resist.

In an essay she wrote for *A Passionate Patience*, an anthology of essays by ten Filipino poets on the writing of their poems, Tiempo affirms the role of both reason and intuition in her creative process. Beginning with the title "The Transport from Dream to Design," Tiempo stresses the presence of "inner" and "external" agencies at work in a poet's personality, and that the poet's discipline is to learn more and more naturally how to recognize and respond to the materialized promptings of that inner agency, the subconscious, as its ideas and sensibilities break into the more consciously guided evolution of the poem.

Chaos (Dionysian impulse) and control (Apollonian elements) are always battling for the writer's attention whenever she puts pen to paper. Learning to recognize the battle and respond to it is only the first step to the creation of a fully realized literary work. Undue attention paid to only one of these aspects to the exclusion of the other would result not in poetry but in what Edith calls...
part of the poetry workshop, and when Robert Penn Warren came to Iowa to Leyte, where he was then teaching, wrote back to explain that he liked Arlyne's explanation. The author of the story, Edilberto K. Tiempo, a native of Maasin, Edith's learning curve was short. By the next semester, she was officially their mother, Teresa, that she told Edith to write the author and demand an order.

The Well-Wrought Urn, Brooks's Understanding Poetry, The Modern Poet and the Tradition, and Warren's Crime and Punishment were her main literary influences, and who would later become the Department of Education's superintendent of schools in Baguio and Benguet. Browner introduced the young Bítlh to the works of great masters like Honore de Balzac, Maxim Gorky, Anatole France, authors who inspired her to take up a literary career. She went back to Nueva Vizcaya for her last two years in high school, where she studied under Felix Umaging Browner, who would turn out to be one of her early major influences, and who would later become the Department of Education's superintendent of schools in Baguio and Benguet. Browner introduced the young Bítlh to the works of great masters like Honore de Balzac, Maxim Gorky, Anatole France, authors who inspired her to take up a literary career.

MEETING HER TWIN SOUL

Writers who have been under the Tiempos' tutelage know the story by heart. It has been told countless times, by now an indelible part of Philippine literary lore. Before Browner, her main literary influence was her older sister Arlyne. Arlyne was the writer in the family, while Bítlh was the budding movie actor. Arlyne not only "developed" Bítlh's literary taste, giving her books like Crime and Punishment to read, she was also instrumental, albeit unwittingly, in Bítlh's meeting the greatest, most enduring influence on her life and her writings. Bítlh to K. Tiempo

THE MOTHER OF ALL WORKSHOPS

Gentle in manner and speech, Bítlh does not strike that first-time acquaintances as shy. Yet, Bítlh himself was a bit shy at first. He told the family that "only a bull can tame a lion," alluding to their zodiac signs—Ed was a Leo; Edith is a Taurus. When she followed Ed to Iowa in 1947, and Paul Engle welcomed her to his fiction workshop but not to his poetry workshop, her stubborn streak kicked in. As Ed relates it, she said "I didn't come ten thousand miles just to be told I can't even sit in." Despite Engle's cool reception, she persisted and continued to attend the poetry workshop. I wanted to confront this guy and fight for a higher grade, but my brother talked me out of it. He said 'no sister of mine will make a spectacle of herself.'

ITINERANT CHILDHOOD

Bítlh Lopez was born in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, in 1899, the first of what became known as the Tiempos, a team of related peace and harmony that would last until World War II broke out in 1940. The daughter of an auditor whose job took the family from place to place, Bítlh had a peripatetic childhood starting from the time she was only nine years old. By the time she turned thirteen, she had been to the country three main islands; she had lived and studied in Laguna, Rady, Zamboanga, Surigao, and Samar, were the family was staying when her father died.

She went back to Nueva Vizcaya for her last two years in high school, where she studied under Felix Umaging Browner, who would turn out to be one of her early major influences, and who would later become the Department of Education's superintendent of schools in Baguio and Benguet. Browner introduced the young Bítlh to the works of great masters like Honore de Balzac, Maxim Gorky, Anatole France, authors who inspired her to take up a literary career, her first short story, of which she could hardly remember only the title, "The Fan." Before Browner, her main literary influence was her older sister Arlyne. Arlyne was the writer in the family, while Bítlh was the budding movie actor. Arlyne not only "developed" Bítlh's literary taste, giving her books like Crime and Punishment to read, she was also instrumental, albeit unwittingly, in Bítlh's meeting the greatest, most enduring influence on her life and her writings. Bítlh to K. Tiempo

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Bítlh's literary career as a working student may not be at all lyrical. From her beginning writing, her poems often dealt with what she would later characterize as mere curiosities, presenting one side of the picture, without the complexities created by tragedy, paradoxes or ambiguities. She could not see that back then, her poetry was an expression of her thought, and was determined to learn. She first took some English courses at Carllash Brooks's The Modern Poet and the Tradition, Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's Understanding Poetry, and Brooks's The Well-Wrought Urn, in that order.

Bítlh's learning curve was short. By the next semester, she was officially part of the poetry workshop, and when Robert Penn Warren came to Iowa to
read their poems, the first three that he picked to read and comment on were hers, to the discomfiture of the rest of the class. Edith believes it was because Robert Penn Warren saw a new insight in those three poems, having been written by someone steeped in another culture.

SUBSTANCE AND ARTICULATION

For Edith, two elements always go together in the making of every poem or story of fresh insight into familiar ideas and situations, and craftsmanship in articulating this insight. Her creative works are testaments to this guiding principle, which run like a leitmotif through all her critical works, essays, lectures, and speeches.

In her book *Six Poetry Formats and the Transforming Image: A Monograph on Free Verse*, Edith shows through her close reading of poems by Alif and Yuyao, Rowena Torres, Gemino Abad, Robert Frost, AB Redillas, and Denise Levertov, among others, that the fusion of these two elements spells the difference between poetry and "prose preening as poetry."

While she gives equal weights to both conceptualization and articulation, lately she has been driven to harp on content by the undue importance placed on form by many writers today at the expense of content. This concentration on form, though, is quite understandable at the outset, she said in a recent lecture, "since it is taken for granted that the writer has something to say; the content is therefore early established and takes a backseat while the form and its craftsmanship gets the writer's prominent attention."

The young writer who is told in a writers' workshop that plain statements written in verse form do not constitute poetry, learns to use poetic devices such as "indirection, tone control, suggestiveness, ambivalence and ambiguity, thematic tension, understatement," among many others. As the writer attains more sophistication, the attention to poetic form sometimes becomes inordinate and overshadows content. Edith deplores this trend, and feels the need to bring the poet's attention back to content. She couldn't have been more emphatic than when she said, in a speech at the 56th Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature in 2006, that "fine craftsmanship and thin substance is actually much ado about nothing."

In trying to correct the imbalance, Edith takes every chance to share with young writers some of the ways they can enhance poetic content:

- by reverberating the theme of the poem, through the use of details or situations that echo the meaning of the poem.
- by the use of indigenous wit, which entails paying attention to the earthy humor of folks we deal with every day. She cites an example from the family's former cook, who once quipped, when Edith came home worn to a frazzle after class: "Budlay gayod maghimo'g ta-e?" (It's always wearisome to be making shit.)
- by using erudite terms and allusions, culled from religious texts and classical myths from ancient civilizations.
- by adopting an unusual and startling idea as the core of the poetic content.

"The poem owes its significance mostly to the use of its unusual core idea," she said in her lecture "Enhancing the Poetic Content." The lecture, first given in Cebu in February 2008, was sponsored by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts and the UP Institute of Creative Writing. She repeated it for the benefit of fellows to the 47th National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete three months later.

FRESH INSIGHT

Every writer who has ever attended the Workshop has heard Edith's delightful "Robert Frost moment," which she often recounts to illustrate insight that is fresh, startling, and totally unexpected. While Ed and Edith were in Iowa, Frost went there to give a lecture, and was invited to a dinner with the international students afterward. The students gathered around Frost and asked him about other famous writers, while Edith just wanted to ask him about one of his poems. She invited him to join her on the wall until she got close enough to him to say, "Mr. Frost, what do you really want to say in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'?" He simply said, "Easy does it."
"His answer annoyed me at first," Edith recalled. "I thought, ‘This man is pulling my leg.’ Then years later, I realized what he meant, and I felt honored that he trusted me enough to give such a cryptic answer. Pay attention to the last two lines:

And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

"You see, we thought the persona was saying ‘I wish I could stay and enjoy this scene, but I have promises to keep, obligations to fulfill, so I should be running along now!’ Yet thought he speaker is thinking not only of the many little things he has to do before he can rest for the night, but of the bigger things he has to achieve in his lifetime, and that he had no time to lose.

"That would have been fine, of course, but not very startling, not extraordinary at all. But listen again—why do long vowel sounds resonate in those lines, giving them a leisurely pace? Why not short vowel sounds, which would have given the lines a galloping rhythm, the appropriate tempo of the popular interpretation? Because what Frost was really saying is, ‘Sure, we have duties to attend to, but there’s time enough for them, and we don’t have to do them right this minute. We don’t have to sprint in a burst of speed. We can stay awhile and appreciate life’s beauty, explore its dark mysteries. Easy does it.’

Thus, the poetic meaning emerges through the various and often conflicting elements operating in the poem itself. Edith’s poems in her five collections—The Tracks of Babylon and Other Poems, The Charmer’s Box and Other Poems, Beyond, Extensions, Marginal Annotations and Other Poems, and the new Commend and Contend—are models of organic unity, each word inevitable, each line earning its keep. As Gemino H. Abad points out in his essay ‘Edith Tiempo, Exemplary Poet,’ Edith has established a tradition in writing with ‘two distinguishing marks: a fine critical sense for language and poetic form, and a ceaseless quest for that energy of idea and emotion by which the Filipino sensibility is most fully expressed’.

In her fiction, Edith is just as exacting, her characters complex and memorable, each defined by conflicts and principles. She always starts with character, even in The Builder, which she calls her most plot-driven novel. The character she created, Lawanagan Gimod, is a good person, ‘but capable of murdering a tribal man who was sent to the States and trained there to be a Christian preacher, but could not entirely throw away his tribal instincts.’

Edith would reiterate in workshop after workshop, ‘A thematic statement may be general and not yet a unique human truth, but the creative work has the obligation not only to make the general statement into a particular experience, but most importantly, to transform the statement into the story into an experience that generates fresh and unusual insights.

‘The story doesn’t move on only as a story. Every incident should be dramatized so connected that it contributes to the theme, revelatory toward the

THE NATIONAL WRITERS WORKSHOP

It has been said that every artist needs two teachers: an exacting mentor who teaches the rules and an inspirational guru who gives you permission to follow your intuition, and when necessary, break the rules. But it is important that the student comes into a student’s mindset first. The metaphor of the ‘thinking out of the box’ has meaning only if one has been inside the box.

Writers who have had the good fortune to study under Edith Tiempo get the two teachers in one. These writers were either students of Silliman University, or writing fellows of the National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete, or both.

After further studies and teaching stints in the U.S., Ed and Edith came back to Dumaguete and founded the National Writers Workshop in 1962, now the longest-running writers workshop in the country. Hundreds of writers have since sat at the feet of the masters, learning during the three-week intensive workshop, the craft of writing, learning to tame and shape their impulses with reason, to end the season with intuition.

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‘The story doesn’t move on only as a story. Every incident should be dramatized so connected that it contributes to the theme, revelatory toward the
...nothing to remember, you know, you can never create an
critical mass that is significant for society, in a sentence or
a phrase. You have to remember that. Bith had a
critical mass that is significant for society, in a sentence or
a phrase. You have to remember that. Bith had a

ed, Bith said, "I am in me now." Their daughter,
award-winning writer Rowena Triviño, has this to
say: "Of his talents are here now, because or 56 years his breath
was there... she accepted the task of writing, in her knee-and
goes on accomplishing Montemar room by room, and
restores his program in creative writing, knowing that these are all not just
manifestation from Dad, but he, himself, refers.
So the tandem is still there, Bith present in Bith, in every workshop.

A FAMILY OF WRITERS

University funding for the workshop stopped in 1992, and former workshop
alumni banded together to keep the tradition going. Over the next 13 years
the workshop continued through the efforts of the Creative Writing Foundation,
Inc.; CAP College; the Dumaguete Literary Arts Service Group, Inc.; the National
Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA); and various groups and individuals
who value our literary heritage.

In the summer of 2008, the National Writers Workshop came home to Silliman
University after SU President Ben Malingin, Jr., raised funds for the establishment
of the Bith and Billberto Tiempo Writing Center in Montemar, not far from the
Tiempo residence, where writers can come for residency, year-round. The center,
which will be called Rose S. Mephisto Building, will consist of several cottages
for the grantees, centered around a fifth
cottage where the workshop will actually transpire.

Not all writing fellows who come to Dumaguete continue writing. Many
have been claimed totally by their day jobs. Some have decided they could give
more in other roles, but keep writing as an option for a later phase in their lives.
But for Bith, whether a fellow continues to write or not, the time spent in the
workshop is never wasted, as long as they become good readers; if they learn to
look for with the pain of losing, one gains an insight into human frailty toward which we learn to become more human.

The fellows, and, admittedly, the other panelists, could only look at one
another and think, "Where did she see that?"

"It was always a point of contention between her and Bith, something that
always triggered what we used to call "the showdown" at an session, which
usually happened during the third week, when the differences in their approaches
would come to a head, with Bith pounding the table and saying, "The trouble with
you is you are too kind!"

Her husband never minced words, and Bith always joked at one to one
down his criticisms. But whenever someone remarked on Bith's harsh comments,
Bith's always quick to say that even his bluntest criticisms "were always garnished
with such rollicking good humor that even the story's author had to laugh at his
own expense."

We thought the tandem ended in September 1996, when Bith succumbed to a
heart attack. It was a devastating loss for many of us, who call them Bith and
Mom. But of the shock, Bith said, "He is in me now." Their daughter,
award-winning writer Rowena Triviño, has this to
say: "Many of his talents are here now, because or 56 years his breath
was there... she accepted the task of writing, in her knee-and
goes on accomplishing Montemar room by room, and
restores his program in creative writing, knowing that these are all not just
manifestation from Dad, but he, himself, refers.

So the tandem is still there, Bith present in Bith, in every workshop.
I only saw the old gesture of her passing me, the penniless dreamer years ago, the hundred bucks that assured me a good lunch. Misunderstood at home, I found a parent that one lonely summer.

The family keeps growing. On the first day of every workshop, when panelists are asked to introduce themselves, Edith simply says, “call me Mom.” Not National Artist, not Dr. Tiempo, not even Ma’am Edith, just Mom. “I could not understand,” she said, “and had been devastated why Heaven had not seen fit for me to have more children. During the war, all I had were two still-births and two miscarriages, and I was shaken with hurt and disappointment.”

She later realized why: “Having no child after the war, Ed and I had the time and the opportunity to train intensively in Iowa. Thus, we were destined to be properly equipped to help as many writers as we could.”

One day, about nine or ten years after we set up the Writers Workshop in Silliman, and we had Rowena and Donny and numerous writers calling us ‘Mom’ and ‘Dad,’ I thought I heard a Voice saying, ‘Now, do you understand?”

And like a true mother, her word carries a lot of weight, as Ino Habana, writing fellow in 2006, discovered. “For an amateur writer, it would mean a lot for an Edith L. Tiempo to say that she actually believed in you. In her mountain-top home, I was flipping through the pages of some of the books by her former students, when Mom Tiempo suddenly tapped me on the shoulder and uttered the words I will never forget: ‘God is willing, Ino, I will see the day when your book will be on this table.’”

One can have no greater wish than to be worthy of such confidence, and honor the mandate she so elegantly articulated in her keynote address at the Philippine PEN Conference in Dumaguete in 2001: “to affirm us, human beings, in all the diversity of our character and the finitude of our existence, as we are, yet constantly reaching towards the infinite as we engage in the transforming of our perishable world into the essence of the permanent, as we grapple with the exigencies of our destiny of disaster and transcendence.”

Thus, Marj Evasco may call herself old-fashioned but she says it with pride, because she still likes to read and hear poems that have a beautiful and apple form, feel deeply with mind and sing these feelings with duende, paint significant details sharply, and have new insights that go to the heart of things. Marj has Edith’s and Dad’s poetics and discipline are still my guiding stars.

Marj Evasco simply gave utterance to the abiding, unshakable sentiment of Edith’s children: each and every one of us is a portable Edith L. Tiempo, because we carry her around with us wherever we go.

And as time goes by, the home she dwells in grows even larger.

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