

Classic Poetry Series

Gemino Abad
- poems -

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Gemino Abad(05 February 1939)

Gémino Henson Abad is a poet and critic from Cebu, Philippines.

His family moved to Manila when his father, Antonio Abad, was offered professorships at Far Eastern University and the University of the Philippines. He earned his B.A. English from the University of the Philippines in 1964 and Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Chicago in 1970. He served the University of the Philippines in various capacities: as Secretary of the University, Secretary of the Board of Regents, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Director of the U.P. Institute of Creative Writing. For many years, he also taught English, comparative literature and creative writing at U.P. Diliman.

Abad co-founded the Philippine Literary Arts Council (PLAC) which published *Caracoa*, a poetry journal in English. His other works include *Fugitive Emphasis* (poems, 1973); *In Another Light* (poems and critical essays, 1976); *A Formal Approach to Lyric Poetry* (critical theory, 1978); *The Space Between* (poems and critical essays, 1985); *Poems and Parables* (1988); *Index to Filipino Poetry in English, 1905-1950* (with Edna Zapanta Manlapaz, 1988) and *State of Play* (letter-essays and parables, 1990). He edited landmark anthologies of Filipino poetry in English, among them *Man of Earth* (1989), *A Native Clearing* (1993) and *A Habit of Shores: Filipino Poetry and Verse from English, '60s to the '90s* (1999).

The University of the Philippines has elevated Abad to the rank of University Professor, the highest academic rank awarded by the university to an exemplary faculty member. He currently sits on the Board of Advisers of the U.P. Institute of Creative Writing and teaches creative writing as Emeritus University Professor at the College of Arts and Letters, U.P. Diliman.

In 2009, he became the first Filipino to receive the coveted Premio Feronia in Rome, Italy under the foreign author category.

** Awards, Prizes and Fellowships **

University Professorship, University of the Philippines

Carlos P. Romulo Professorial Chair, University of the Philippines

Henry Lee Irwin Professorial Chair in Creative Writing, Ateneo de Manila University

Rockefeller Fellowship, University of Chicago

Visiting Professor, University of Hawaii at Manoa

Visiting Professor, Saint Norbert College, Wisconsin
Visiting Professor, Singapore Management University
International Writing Program Fellowship, University of Iowa
British Council Fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge and at Corpus Christi
College, Oxford
U.P. Outstanding Faculty Award
U.P. Distinguished Alumnus in Literature
Ellen F. Fajardo Foundation Grant for Excellence in Teaching
U.P. Gawad Chancellor Best Literary Work
Palanca Awards for Poetry
Philippines Free Press Awards for Literature
Cultural Center of the Philippines Award for Poetry
National Book Awards from the Manila Critics' Circle
Asian Catholic Publishers Inc. Catholic Authors Award
Gawad Pambansang Alagad ni Balagtas from Unyon ng mga Manunulat ng
Pilipinas (UMPIL)
Patnubay ng Sining at Kalinangan in Literature from the City of Manila
Premio Feronia, Foreign Author, 2009

Care Of Light

As soon as it gets dark, I turn on the lights
in my old professor's cottage, and the following
morning before office, turn them off again.

With one key I open the iron gate, and with two,
the main door. I turn the lamp on in her library,
the vigil light for the Sacred Heart on the shelf
jutting out a wall; then I switch on the single
electric bulb outside the kitchen, and last,
the red and green halogen like Christmas lights
below the front eaves.

I follow strictly her instructions.

She loves order in her life, and requires
a similar order in other people's behavior –
a discipline of mind sometimes terrorized
by the haps and hazards of thieving time.
She needs to be always in control,
but she's old now and frail, can hardly walk,
deaf and half-blind, and often ill, so that,
having no choice, no housemaid able to endure
her sense for order, she had to leave

and stay at her sister's place,

finally dependent.

In the half-darkness and mustiness now
of her deserted cottage, all its windows closed,
her books and papers, once alive with breath
of her impetuous quests, are filmed with dust
on her long working table, awaiting it seems
her return.

I think of how a time ago
she'd walk briskly to her early morning class,
dressed in style to shame old maids; then call
our names as though each had irreplaceable
post in her invincible order of things;
and then, her shoulders hunched, teach
with a passion that, before the imperious gale
of her questioning, drove us bleating
on the open plain of the world's sharp winds.

So; at the day's end,
I'm her lamplighter on her silent asteroid,
among books, papers, rubble of chalk.
I close the gate behind me as I stride out,

making sure I hear the lock's tiny click.

I follow strictly her instructions.

Down her street the street lamps cast

my shadow ahead. Crickets in the bushes

whirr according to their nature.

In the same order, the sun too will rise

tomorrow, and I shall be back.

Gemino Abad

Imaginary Letter To My Twin Sons

Dear Davie, Dear Diego

I am on an island called Oahu.
Here there are many white people, they are called Haules.
There are also Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos.
I have seen the fields of sugar cane
Where the Ilocanos worked when they first came over.
How poor they must have been and lonely;
No one could follow their speech to their own island home.

There are very few native Hawai'ians;
Their words which are the names of streets and buildings
Outnumber them. "How could happen this be?"
A long time ago, they had a queen, but soldiers came from America
And took away her throne, and then all the land.
Those who fought were killed, and then many more died
Because they did not know the diseases that the soldiers brought –
They were never so sick before on their island.

But it is a beautiful island
Perhaps because nature's story is so different from ours.
Trees and mountains and falls and beaches are her speech.
And perhaps, because our own story is dark,
We see only half her beauty, and only dream of good will and peace.
I cannot fathom the human sadness that infects our sense for beauty.

Let me just tell you now
About the Chinese banyan tree by my window.
Tonight it is my father because his love
Was like a great tree, but without speech.
Every morning on that banyan tree
Many species of birds are in full throat,
So that now I wonder: would my sons, years from now,
Gather from a tree's silence my own heart's affection,
And in that moment know that once, while I made their world,
I had deeply wished, when they shall have left that world behind,
I would be the tree to their morning?

Gemino Abad

The Book Of Embraces

I'm vexed with myself tonight
that I, fitful tiller of words,
cannot write you a poem,
warm as your ironing-board,
well-shaped like your finest vase,
which should tell everlastingly your truth
clear like any ordinary morning
when the smog lifts to wide-open skies.
What is your truth, or what is love?
Where you move without ripple in my blood,
there the clods of deep little hurts –
oh, forgiven, nameless in memory,
and yet, without my conscious intent,
let to grow like thorny touch-me-nots
and rankly creep with tiny purple eyes
to demean me darkly in my sight.
How their bramble cut my soul
where I would not look to save myself!
Why do I struggle toward your truth?
Where words and words swirl about,

dust in my speech, without power
to trace their meaning in my blood,
I coax like a conscientious gardener
from dead clods their hurtful bloom,
then look upon my soul's wildness
that you had loved, and strain
from our days' erasure of worship,
syllable by syllable,
the struck bliss and dazzle
of our secret 'book of embraces.'

Gemino Abad

Toys

Now our boys have such toys
as my brother and I never dreamed;
Did the same spirit stir our make-believe?
Yet outdoor was where we took its measure.

But how could I wish it were otherwise
for them, and would it be wise
since other kids inhabit the same quarry
where X-men wage their fantastic wars?

Indeed we knew the hot spill of blood,
with slingshots searched the bushes and trees,
but also knew ourselves pierced
where the world's songs first were made.

But those video games, those robots,
armaments of glory, sirens of terror,
must root their eyes in our politics
and scavenge for hope in the world's rubble.

Something's amiss, or toys perhaps
have changed their meaning.
In the overflow of their kind,
they've lost their round of seasons.

It may be the same with the world's
weather, but in our time,
there was one season for kites
when the wind seemed to make the sky rounder;

There was another, for marbles and rubber bands,
the earth firmer, the blaze of sunshine brighter;
and yet another, for tops and wheels,
as streetwise we vied for dusty prizes.

And when the rains came,
and the skies fell with the thunderclap,
how we would run in drenched nakedness
to dare a lightning race to the edge of time.

But how shall I travel to my boys' heart
and break their dreadnought of heroes,
and find, as when light breaks,
the pieces of their manhood whole?

O, their heroes create them,
but if they could invent their games
and stage their future, might they not
surprise the hero with their fate?

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