Interview With Anthony L Tan

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ANTHONY L TAN was born in Siasi, Sulu, on 26 August 1947 to Utoh Hotiong Tan and Kimchu Lu, both of Chinese Sama descent. He is the fifth of ten children. He earned his BA English from the Ateneo de Zamboanga in 1968 and went on to Silliman University in Dumaguete City for both his MA Creative Writing (1975) and PHD. British Literature (1982). For more than a decade he taught at the English Department of Silliman University and was a regular member of the panel of critics at the Silliman National Summer Writers Workshop. In 1983, he joined the faculty of the English Department at MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology and became one of its chairpersons in 1984-85. Together with Jaime An Lim and Christine Godinez Ortega, he helped organize the first Iligan National Writers Workshop/Literature Teachers Conference in 1993. He retired from teaching in 2012.

He has won a number of awards for his writings, among them the Focus Philippines award for poetry, the Palanca 1st prize for "Poems for Muddas" (1993) and another Palanca for the essay. His poems and stories have been published locally and abroad, more prominently in the prestigious Atlanta Review and Manoa, the literary journal at the University of Hawaii.

He is the author of two books of poems titled The Badjao Cemetery and Other Poems (1985) and Poems for Muddas (1996).

The conversation was held 3 July 2015 in Cagayan de Oro city.

The Interview:

"It may not solve everything, but it helps if you have art"

RMU: So, Tony you've been retired for several years now—

ALT: Three years.

RMU: How's life as a retired professor of English?

ALT: Well, right now I'm enjoying my retirement because I like idleness (laughs). Being idle gives me a lot of time to watch all the movies that I've been dying to see (laughs) and of course what keeps me busy is facebooking. I do a little writing every now and then when I am inspired. I enjoy my retirement, although sometimes it gets to be lonely, you know. You want to have people around you, students especially, and talk with them, exchange ideas with them. I hardly get to socialize with people. I'm not a very sociable person. So anyway, I'm enjoying my retirement right now.

RMU: Can you tell us something about your invincible childhood in Siasi that you call Muddas.

ALT: At first I thought Muddas was just the Badjao equivalent of the island. You know when you ask the Badjao fishermen, "Where are you going?"—as in going to buy their supplies, like rice, sugar, etc.—they say, "Muddas," by which they mean Siasi. But when I researched on the term Muddas, I discovered that it actually is not just a Badjao name; it was actually the name of the island based on somebody who was called Muddas. But I like the sound of "Muddas" compared to "Siasi," which they say is of Spanish origin. Also because I thought it really was a Badjao term, and I like that association with the Badjao since many of my playmates were Badjaos. Swimming at the wharf, you know. Especially during summertime, from soon after breakfast—and my father's house was just like a hundred meters away from the wharf—we would

go and run to the wharf and jump into the sea and swim until twelve o'clock noon. When we come home, my mother would say, "Aha! Kayo!"—me and my younger brother—"Kayo your legs are like wheels, your tummy is like a clock." She was really actually scolding us, but telling us in a metaphorical way that we only come home when it's time to eat.

RMU: You have a big family, I imagine.

ALT: Ten of us, actually. Seven boys and three girls.

RMU: And you're the eldest?

ALT: No, no I'm the middle. I'm the fifth. I have two older brothers and two older sisters.

RMU: You're father is a Chinese Tausug?

ALT: Yes yes.

RMU: And your mother?

ALT: Also Chinese but native-born. I grew up with my grandmother who would tell me that when she was a young girl she would see American soldiers running naked from the barracks to the wharf to swim.

RMU: Oooh. But you mentioned, not only in your poetry but also I think in your essays, that your mother was a not so happy or unfortunate woman. Why did you say that?

ALT: Well, I say that in relation to the story that she was promised to be married three times. This is actually my mother's story. One day, when they were little girls—there were about seven of them in the family, including cousins—my grandmother, her mother, invited their neighbor, an Indian friend, who was a photographer to come to the house because he was also known as a fortune teller. My grandmother said, "O will you read the fortunes of these girls?" So he did. In those days, you know, Chinese women wanted their daughters to get married before they were eighteen. Anyway to make the story short, when it was her turn, the Indian fortune teller said, "Mmm…this one does not have a very happy future.

Because the men who want to marry her will die before they get to marry her." And that became true. Because the first one who was supposed to marry her died of tuberculosis before there was any marriage between them. And then the second one died a horrible death because one day, when he was in town ready to do the engagement ceremony—he came from another island—there was a man who ran amok and killed people in the house. One of the three people who died was the guy who was going to marry my mother. So my mother was like a cursed woman.

RMU: So the prophecies turned out to be true?

ALT: More or less. It was like that. Strange (laughs).

RMU: And then your father came?

ALT: (laughs) And then my father came. He was just a rising businessman then. You know, I think I heard from my older brother that my father used to work with the grandfather of Desdemona Tan, the wife of Nur Misuari. The grandfather of Desdemona Tan was a big man in Siasi. So my father worked with this man. But later he went on his own. He was given or lent capital by the grandfather of Desdemona. I don't know at what stage of his career he decided to marry my mother. The people told him, "Hey! Not that one 'cause that's a cursed woman." You know, in a small town everybody knows everybody and things like this would be grist for the mill, so to say. But my father insisted that she was the woman he wanted to marry, my mother. So he went on inspite of the curse and he managed to get married and produce eleven children (laughs). Ten na lang pala kay one died. Strange story in a way you know fiction. But it's true. That's why she mentioned that she was unhappy in that sense.

RMU: But eventually she became happy with your father, I imagine.

ALT: I don't know (laughs) because I never got to ask her about it.

RMU: Because of the number of children she had to bear and feed.

ALT: But that one can be either a fortune or misfortune, depends on how you see it, right?

(Both laugh). But I don't know. I didn't hear her complain very much, except that there was a time—and this is probably why I said she wasn't happy—when my father would be away for a long time and not come home. He would be in another island and people were saying, "Hala! Your father has another woman!" (Laughs). But he, my father, was like somebody who cannot sit down for a long time. He was always moving. He had a lot of energy. But he was used to this [lifestyle] before he became really successful as a businessman. He used to own several stores in outlying islands. It was part of his business to go to these islands and sell goods. But I'm sure it was kind of lonely for my mother because he would be away for some time—for maybe months, and my mother wouldn't know where he was, in those days without telephone or telegram.

RMU: How did that affect you, if at all?

ALT: Well, it did affect me for some time. But I was able to outgrow it later on. But it kind of stuck in my mind, (whispers) "Papa has another woman" (laughs).

RMU: So it was more the presence of the mother that was there in your childhood?

ALT: Yes. I'm sure without her we would not have been, say, "successful" (laughs). She was like really a strong post in the family, because my father was not the person who would stay at home. My mother would do everything—watch the store…Of course we had to help—cook.

RMU: How was it growing up with all those brothers and sisters?

ALT: I really don't know how I managed (laughs). I remember my brothers were always telling me to "do this, do that" or "go get this upstairs." We had a two-storey house. And I thought, "Hmpf. It's not good to have brothers and sisters telling you to do this and do that." But most of the time we were out swimming. Gallivanting in the neighborhood. Playing cards. Black Jack, stag poker. We already knew those things.

RMU: Were you conscious of your being a Christian in a Muslim area?

ALT: No. Not Christian, because we were only baptized into Christianity.

RMU: Later?

ALT: Later. I was baptized when I was in Grade 6. I became a Catholic by accident. Because in school when we were in Grade 1, the Catholics were dismissed earlier because they had to attend catechism. The rest of us who had "no religion" had to stay behind and scrub the room, clean the room. So my friends said, "Hey join us. Join our catechism so we could be dismissed early." So I went to attend the catechism so that I could be exempted from cleaning the classroom. So I became a Catholic by accident.

RMU: But your father was a Catholic?

ALT: No no. Actually he had no religion. "Buddhist" probably.

RMU: Also your mother?

ALT: My mother really had no religion. Religion was not important in our family. They did not emphasize it. We became Protestants or Catholics again by accident, depending on our friends. So like my younger brothers, three of them had Protestant friends so they went to the Protestant church. We had Catholic friends so we became Catholic. Me and the one next to me became Catholics. Our parents didn't mind what religion we embraced.

RMU: You studied in Siasi for your elementary and high school?

ALT: Yes. Elementary and high school.

RMU: Do you remember any encounter with literary works at that time?

ALT: No, not at all. What I was reading was Reader's Digest. And love novels of my elder sisters. And I also read the Child of Sorrow. And the sequel to it.

RMU: Where did you get the penchant for reading?

ALT: Ah! That's a very good story. As I said, Papa was always away and so it was my mother managing the store. My two older brothers were in Manila studying and we were in high school, me and my younger brother. Between the high school, we went to a private school ran by a friend of my father, and our house was

near a billiard hall. You know the temptation to drop by because playmates were there. Anyway, one day on the way home, my younger brother and I dropped by the billiard hall and watched what was going on there. And we forgot about the time. When we arrived home, it was already past twelve o'clock noon. My mother was very angry. Because how could she go to the kitchen to cook when she was looking after the store? Somebody had to be in the store so that she could go and cook. So she was very angry and she got this big stick of bacau firewood and beat us. But it wasn't the physical pain of the beating that made me cry—it was the pity for her, because she was disappointed with us. And so when I cried it was more because I pitied her. And it changed my life. The beating changed my life. Because after that I decided to come home when it was time to come home and then watch the store. Now while watching the store, waiting for costumers, I would start reading whatever there was to read.

RMU: Comics? Or whatever?

ALT: Yes. In those days our wrapping paper was newspapers. And we would buy these by the bundles. Now sometimes these newspapers would have American magazines, like Saturday Morning Post, Look, McCall's, Life, mixed with them. Of course these were past issues, but nevertheless they were so beautiful. I would read the articles, at first without understanding (laughs). But I kept on reading just the same—

RMU: How old were you then?

ALT: I was second year high school. So I must be thirteen.

RMU: And that was the first time for you to enjoy reading?

ALT: Yes. Then later on, my older brother who was studying in Manila was a subscriber to the Reader's Digest and he had volumes. When I discovered that he had all of these, then that's when I started to read the Reader's Digest too. In one way or another it changed my life because it made me fall in love (laughs) with this language. 'Cause there was really no English at that time except in school.

RMU: What was the language that you used to play with your playmates?

ALT: Tausug. And then sometimes switch to Badjao. When we want to make jokes, we would use Badjao. I don't know why (giggles). It's a funny language for us during those days.

RMU: Those are different languages?

ALT: They are different. Do you know that Tausugs do not speak Badjao because to them Badjao is lower class? So to speak the language of the lower class is like a kind of loss of dignity for them (laughs). But we didn't mind since we were not really pure Tausug, so it was all right. Also because the people who would come to the store to buy were a mixture of Tausug and Badjao. So we had to learn how to speak Badjao. We learned naturally.

RMU: But you were aware of the—

ALT: The difference? At that time, no.

RMU: When did you learn about the difference?

ALT: Oh later when I went to college.

RMU: There was no college in Sulu or Siasi during that time?

ALT: At that time, there already was, but offering only elementary teacher certificate. It was ETC.

RMU: What were you interested to study in college?

ALT: I wanted to become a journalist because of my fascination with the English language. It opened a new world for me, that Siasi had become very small when I learned about all of these things. And of course through a friend, I was able to read two history books cover to cover, as in. If you asked me about Hannibal, Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great, I know all of those things. I read them before I went to college. That really opened a whole new world for me. And it started with learning the English language.

RMU: What were the options for you for college during that time? Must be Zamboanga?

ALT: Yes, because my two brothers were studying in Manila and my parents couldn't afford anymore to support more than the two of them. So my mother kind of begged me (laughs) if I would just be

contented with studying in Zamboanga because I could stay with my aunt, her younger sister. And so I said, "It's okay."

RMU: In Ateneo?

ALT: In Ateneo, yes. I said, It's okay. But because there was no journalism in Ateneo, I went into English, instead. From '64 to '68.

RMU: How was Ateneo de Zamboanga at that time?

ALT: At that time? Oh my gosh (laughs). I mean, when I went to Silliman I said, "Oh my god what I missed in college. This didn't happen in the Ateneo. It was so poor. I mean, as far as that aspect is concerned you know, the English thing. Our best teacher, for example, didn't even have an MA. Yeah.

RMU: Did you have Americans for teachers there?

ALT: No. We had American priests though, Jesuit priests who were terrors, you know. The Americans speaking to us and of course my [limited] understanding of English then, the accent of the spoken English—it was very difficult for me at that time.

RMU: Who were the authors that you read at that time?

ALT: Oh. I was already also reading, at that time. Hemingway and Joseph Conrad. Yes. Aside from those poets that we studied—English and American authors, yes.

RMU: Who did you become fascinated with?

ALT: I don't remember about the poets. Wordsworth was the one I could understand. The others I didn't really understand them so much.

RMU: Did you start to write in college?

ALT: I think I started to write in college, but I didn't know what I was doing.

RMU: You wrote poetry?

ALT: Oh yes. In fact I won in the Christmas Poetry contest. I won third prize or something. I don't remember. There was an annual Christmas writing contest and I submitted a poem and I won.

RMU: What was the poem about?

ALT: I don't even remember now (laughs). I don't want to remember because it was not a poem. It was just a rhyming thing, you know. Because nobody was teaching us anything.

RMU: So you just wrote on your own?

ALT: On my own, based on my readings. Based on what I have read of British literature—so Wordsworth and the rest. You read their poems, like that. I was even surprised I was trying [to write], you know. We did not really have any good teacher to teach us when we were undergrads. They were probably good teachers in the classroom, but outside of it, it was different.

RMU: You wrote only poetry or did you also start writing essays and stories?

ALT: No, I only wrote poetry in college. Because I thought it was easy, it was the easiest (laughs). But I did try writing a story for the short story class. There was a course called Short Story. So, we studied the short story. And then I tried writing it.

RMU: It was not a writing course?

ALT: It was not. There was no writing course at all 'cause no one was "capable." None of the teachers was a published writer or something.

RMU: Did you show your poems to anybody?

ALT: No. I would be ashamed (laughs)! My classmates didn't even know either, so how could I? I was ashamed to or afraid to show it to the teacher.

RMU: But did you write a lot?

ALT: Not really a lot. It was just every now and then. Some love poems intended for the crush, for example.

RMU: What were your plans after graduation?

ALT: Nothing at all, I had no plans at all. All I wanted was to become a teacher. A teacher there or in some barrio in Zamboanga. I was

actually working for two degrees in four years. At the same time I was taking AB, I was also taking education subjects. In fact I had like 18 units of education subjects because I wanted to get the BSE degree at the same time with my AB. I was hoping I could make it in four years—of course I didn't make it in four years—so I could join my classmates who were going to Buug, Zamboanga del Sur, to teach at an Ateneo-affiliated high school there. But that did not materialize, because after graduation I had to take over the business at home. Because by that time my father had died, so I had to take over the business. Just a few months before graduation, in November he died. I graduated in March the following year.

RMU: So you went back to Siasi?

ALT: My two older brothers were supposed to take over the business, at least one of them. It should be the eldest son who should take over the business. But when I graduated, they haven't—they were not done yet with their courses because they kept shifting and shifting [courses]. So I finished ahead of them. After graduation, I went home to help my mother run the business. There was the store and there was the buy and sell business also.

RMU: How long did you stay in Siasi after you returned?

ALT: Well, one year running the business, and then one of them came back home, and since he was the older brother he took over. So I went into teaching but only there in Siasi. I taught high school and college in Siasi for one year, and then I went to Silliman.

RMU: How was it to run the business at that time?

ALT: We grew up in that business so we knew more or less how to run it. Even the buy-and-sell business of my father, buying copra and then bringing it to Zamboanga. And so I got to travel once a month to Zamboanga to bring the copra that we bought in Siasi.

RMU: You wrote in one of your essays that it was after the death of your father that the idea formed in your mind to leave Muddas.

ALT: Yes. But the idea of leaving was already there even when I was in high school. I already wanted to leave. Partly because of the

influence of reading American stories, you know. I said there's a world out there that's a lot bigger than this island could offer. So when my brother took over, I was free to go.

RMU: How did you end up in Silliman?

ALT: Yes. That's a good question. Silliman was always there already. Si Richard, the second eldest, wanted to study in Silliman. But my father said, "No you cannot go there. You study in Manila." Because the classmates who were kind of bugoy in high school were studying in Silliman. "If you study in Silliman you'll never make it because you'll just be going out with these people. So better go to Manila where you won't meet them." So he was sent to UP. But he did not finish there because he was kind of "bulaog"—the Tausug word for not doing well in school because you gallivant.

RMU: Lakwatsero!

ALT: Lakwatsero! He was lakwatsero in UP, so he stayed only two years. He was kicked out of UP, I think. But he was bright. It was not just his thing to study, or maybe he was just young. Getting out of Siasi and then going to Manila—it's a whole new world all of a sudden! You don't know what it is like to grow up in a small island like Siasi. So when you go to Manila, you become wild, you know (laughs).

RMU: How did you learn about the Silliman Writing Workshop?

ALT: That came later. Yes.

RMU: So first was the idea of just going to Dumaguete?

ALT: To Dumaguete, yes. Because a lot of Siasi people studied in Silliman. So you already hear this talk that it is a very beautiful school or it's the best school. The owner of the school where we went to graduated from there. So I also dreamed of going there.

RMU: For a post-grad degree?

ALT: Even that one was just by accident. A lot of things happen by accident to me. Anyway. I didn't plan it. It happened that that summer I was suddenly free. I had resigned from Notre Dame. I told my mother I'd go to Dumaguete and look for a job. So I went

there with savings from my salary. And I attended the summer writers workshop in 1970.

RMU: What year were you there?

ALT: 1970. Summer.

RMU: The first time you were there you attended the workshop?

ALT: I attended the workshop but not as a fellow. I was not a fellow. I wasn't writing yet.

RMU: You were an observer?

ALT: I was a student. I enrolled in the graduate school. In Silliman, you could only enroll six units in graduate school. But they saw to it that you take the first three units the first month, the second three units the second month. The first three units I was studying Philippine folklore under Remollorca. And then for the writer's workshop I had to sit-in as a student. That's why I was there. Conrado de Quiros. Ricky Lee. Carlos Aureus. Albert Casuga. Then there was a Jesuit priest. Lumbera. Myrna Peña Reyes. And of course the Tiempos. Am sure Demetillo was there, and Franz Arcellana.

RMU: Did you have anything that was workshopped?

ALT: No no. I was just a student enrolled for credit.

RMU: What was your impression of the workshop at that time?

ALT: Oh! Those people were like big big giants of literature, you know. People like Albert Casuga would come to the workshop with his tie and long sleeve and he would sit like he was a professor, oh my god.

RMU: He was teaching at La Salle, I think, at that time.

ALT: Yes. And we were just there at the back. Many of us who were enrolled for credits said, oh my god look at these people—"great" writers (laughs). So we were there at the back listening to them. Except that one day, I think it was Lumbera who said, "Can we turn the table and ask the students or the fellows to criticize instead of us?"

RMU: Were you able to say something?

ALT: I said I have read a story of this guy from Bicol. And I found a lot of faults in his stories, too many characters, you know chechechecheche. By the way, before that I have prepared myself because when I was taking the Philippine Folklore course I was also reading a magazine from Purdue University, Modern Fiction Studies, and that was like the bible I was reading every month. Modern critical studies I read a lot of those. So when I got to that story I saw all of those things that I have read. So, when that morning Bien Lumbera said let's turn the table, I started criticizing the story, cutting it down to pieces—as in "mercilessly" (laughs). And Lumbera was impressed. In fact, after the workshop he said, where are you from? What are you doing here? You're not a fellow. But that was the only time that I spoke there.

RMU: Whose work was that?

ALT: I can't remember the guy. Like, Jun Ragragio? From Bicol. Good looking tisoy.

RMU: So that made you feel good? I mean the comment of Bien Lumbera?

ALT: Oh yes! It really made me feel good. I mean, because he's a guy who's a member of the panel and then talking to me. The Tiempos didn't mind me (laughs), they didn't talk to me, you know. They didn't know me because I just enrolled. Although that class was under Mrs. Tiempo.

RMU: New student too.

ALT: Oo. Second month in Silliman actually. That was me already. But Bien Lumbera came to talk to me. I think he was impressed by my comments, you know. Yes, because it was very thorough, you know. I think he agreed with much of what I said (laughs).

RMU: Did that do anything to you—in terms of your attitude towards writing or literature?

ALT: I don't remember. I was too busy with other things. But I can't forget that comment because it really kind of gave me confidence because even until now I still suffer from, you know, crisis of self-

confidence. Because I always say, I'm from Muddas, I'm from Sulu, nothing good coming from this place. Something like that, you know. In this high school that we went to, we didn't even have textbooks in those days. You just had to rely on what the teacher was writing on the board. The library that we had was always closed. It was only open when there was a school inspector there. That's why many of my classmates never really made it to college. I'm just one of the lucky few because of my father who could afford to send me to school. I'm sure there were many bright boys there at that time, but they just didn't have the opportunity to study. I was lucky because I had a friend from another school who was lending me books. I could read, and because I became interested in Reader's Digest and in other things, I became more improved than the rest.

RMU: So Dumaguete opened you to the field of writing?

ALT: In a way, yes. Because I always wanted to write in a way, after reading.

RMU: You continued to write in Siasi after graduation?

ALT: Yes. I continued to read. Read a lot. Not really write because, "Para unsa man ni?" Where will I publish this? I didn't know anybody who was writing. But I kept on reading.

RMU: Was any of your works published when you were in college? Aside from that poem that won?

ALT: No. Not not at all.

RMU: So in Dumaguete you took up MA in English?

ALT: Oo.

RMU: There was no creative writing yet?

ALT: Well, in that course, you were supposed to take nine units of Creative Writing. So I already had three. And then I had to take six more. So I had two more subjects with Edith Tiempo. She was the one handling the Creative Writing class.

RMU: So all three Creative Writing courses were with Edith?

ALT: Yes, yes.

RMU: On Poetry, Fiction and—

ALT: It was undecided like that. It was like Creative Writing in general. Enrolled in three times.

RMU: What do you remember of the Creative Writing classes?

ALT: They really made me, even if it was no longer new because of the Writers Workshop in the summer time. So when I went to the regular class it was no longer so new to me. I don't really remember much, but I was just in awe, you know. These people were writing. By the way, American classmates knew the language better. So I would be impressed.

RMU: Who were your classmates?

ALT: I can't remember their names. But I had a classmate like Daniel—Daniel or David Eng? He was an American-Chinese or Chinese-American guy from Hawaii. And he always carried his attaché case with him, and he would look like a, Wow! You are so—

RMU: You envied his English?

ALT: Ay, of course I envied his English (laughs). And there was another guy whose work I used. Remember that in my story, "A Time to Dance," there was the parrot who recited a short verse, "May I come in and drink your gin?" That's really taken from the work of this classmate. Just a short four-lined poem—"May I come in and drink your gin? / The night is cold and I'm old." Something like that. So that's from his work actually.

RMU: You remembered that?

ALT: Yes (laughs). That's one of the things that we took up in class.

RMU: So which genre did you enjoy most?

ALT: I enjoyed both poetry and fiction. Fiction because more challenging, as I told Myrna Peña-Reyes in my letter to her.

RMU: Was she teaching there?

ALT: She was also my teacher yes. I think that was the time when Edith Tiempo was away. I remember Myrna Peña-Reyes invited Kerima Polotan and kami nina Caloy [Aureus] were there. We were in Silliman 45. There was a small restaurant there. The class was in the evening, and it was not a regular class, but Kerima Polotan was invited. They were friends, Kerima and Myrna. So we listened to Kerima Polotan.

RMU: Did you find your writing of poetry and fiction changed because of your studies?

ALT: Oh yes, definitely. My work definitely improved.

RMU: You submitted poems to Edith as class papers?

ALT: As classwork. And then of course many of them were just criticized (laughs). But then it's in the process of criticism that you learn where you are wrong, or where you can improve. That's why it's better than reading a book. You can read many books but you have to read many first before you really learn those things. But when it's orally discussed by somebody who knows, it's quicker, and it stays in your mind. So you should avoid these things (laughs). Right? You should avoid preposition things, you should cut this line somewhere here, you know. Like that.

RMU: How was Edith as a teacher?

ALT: She was very good. She was very sharp. I mean you cannot really fault her as a teacher. Because she was really sharp. What I admire in her is that she could see the possibility of a work even if it is a not successful work, you know. She could expound on how a poem could be, how the poem could be improved, without telling you where to improve. She could discuss this thing, you know. So that one is really something. As I said, you cannot learn [everything] from books. You have to read a hundred books before you come across those things.

RMU: Did you write more?

ALT: Well partly because you have to submit assignments, yes. So you are forced to write.

RMU: Who were your new influences this time?

ALT: As a writer—oh, TS Eliot. Because when we got to TS Eliot, oh my god, I was just impressed by his imagery, by the facility in language, the originality. Do you know that I wrote an imitation of "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock?" It was published in Sands and Coral, in an issue edited by Caloy. I don't have a copy of that but I did write an imitation, trying to copy the rhythm, the jokes, mostly sexual jokes, you know.

RMU: You didn't study with Doc Ed?

ALT: The short story. The course in short story. But not the writing. The writing was all handled by Edith.

RMU: All the writing courses were handled by Edith?

ALT: Yes. Doc Ed taught courses in the history of literature, like 16th century British literature. With thick books (laughs). John Donne and the rest. Because the courses were divided according to centuries. So you have 15th century, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, modern, and then modern poetry under Edith, and then modern fiction with Ed, something like that.

RMU: Did you attend any writers workshop as a fellow when you were in Silliman?

ALT: Yes. In 1973. I was officially a fellow.

RMU: How was it?

ALT: It was good. Only this time—at the beginning Ed didn't want to give me the fellowship because he said, "You're already from here, so you don't need this. This is for outside people." But I don't know who convinced him in 1973 to give me the fellowship eventually (laughs). Well, he could have given it to me in '71 or in '72, but—

RMU: Did you apply in both years?

ALT: I think so. But he didn't want to give it. He said, "Ah, you're already from here. So, no. The fellowship is only for people outside."

RMU: Did you not like him because of that?

ALT: Ah no. I didn't hate him for that. It was okay. Because eventually he gave it to me in 1973. So I was a fellow together with Mauro Avena. I remember Mauro Avena was a very nice guy. He gave me a book of chess. He made a sketch of me. I don't know where it is now, it was a very nice sketch, you know. Really it was good. He was like a father to us because he was much older than us.

RMU: Who were the other fellows?

ALT: Angelito Santos. Who was a troublemaker (laughs). I think he was beaten up by some Sillimanians there in the dorm because he made a lot of racket daw in the night. I forgot na the others.

RMU: He taught in UP later, I think. How did the workshop as fellow compare with your first workshop as an observer?

ALT: I don't remember much about this workshop except that I was there as a fellow. So that's the difference. I was a fellow and Rolando Tinio was there, who was never pleased with anybody's work, you know. Not one of the poems or stories submitted in that workshop did he like. Not one. So, you know.

RMU: How did you take negative criticism like those?

ALT: I really suffered a lot. Somebody tells you that this is bad, or this is not good, this is amateurish (laughs).

RMU: You had sleepless nights?

ALT: Oh yes of course.

RMU: Were you able to write after that?

ALT: Ah yes, yes. Because eventually you forget those things. I mean you have to. Practically you have to forget. You cannot really just ponder on these negative comments. You just have to the best. You just have to improve. But the moment they were said in the workshop, oh my god, I felt like (laughs)—let me go away!

RMU: So after you had your MA, what happened?

ALT: It was like this. I really wanted to teach in UP Baguio. In fact, it took me five years to finish my thesis. So instead of 1970 I finished 1975. I could have finished that in 1972 or 1973. It took me so long

because I didn't want to leave Silliman. It was so good, you know. Compared to Siasi, my god, Silliman was paradise (laughs). But I had to finish it by challenging myself, like I remember putting on my mirror in the boarding house, "Next Stop: Baguio." That kind of reminded me to work hard to finish my master's degree. Because I didn't want to leave Silliman without my master's degree! Baguio inspired me. In 1975 I finished.

RMU: What was your paper on? You have a thesis then?

ALT: Yes, a thesis, and upon the advice of Mrs. Tiempo it was a Creative Writing thesis, but there should be a critical foreword. Because that's the style in Iowa daw. You have your work but you have to have a foreword to it. So the critical part is really the thesis, because the works you have already written before. Alright, so my critical foreword was not really craft-wise but content-wise because Mrs. Tiempo said she saw a lot of indigenous elements in my work.

RMU: You submitted poetry?

ALT: Poetry and stories. The point was that a Filipino writer could be writing in an English language or in a language that is not native to him and yet the content of his work is still very Filipino. That's why the indigenous element. Long before people were talking about indigenous, Mrs. Tiempo was already talking about indigenous at that time. That was 1974 or 1975.

RMU: So she was saying that even if English were not the language of the Filipinos, the Filipino spirit could be revealed through it?

ALT: Yes—could still come out. And that's what I was trying to write in my thesis. So I studied the sociologists, the Filipino psychologists, and then with this knowledge explained my works: how this "Filipinoness" is there in my poems and in my stories.

RMU: Were any of the poems in your thesis published? The ones that went into the first collection, Badjao Cemetery?

ALT: Yes yes. Some of them, I think.

RMU: And the fiction?

ALT: Of course the fiction I have written. Ah, "The Second Coming," which is about revenge. Tausug revenge. I got a lot of negative comments for it (laughs). It's not really a successful story, craft-wise. I think I have only one story there at that time, and then poems.

RMU: So after graduation, what happened?

ALT: So yun na nga, in the summer I went to Baguio. I wanted to see the place first before I wrote the application letter (laughs). But when I saw it, I was disappointed with the campus. Why? Because it was so small—I found it too small compared to Silliman.

RMU: But you were impressed with the city?

ALT: The city? Not even the city, because I found the roads going up and down not to my liking, not to my temperament. I wanted it plain. I didn't want it to be rolling because it's tiring to go up and down. Unlike Dumaguete, so plain. So that made me decide against applying in Baguio.

RMU: One visit and that did it?

ALT: Yes. And that's where I met Sylvia. Remember Sylvia de Guzman?

RMU: Ah. She was there?

ALT: I don't think she was teaching or she was a student. Maybe she was a student. And then we met when I was going around the campus alone. That's how adventurous I was in those days. Alone with my broken Tagalog, you know. I went around the campus and then I met Sylvia. My god, of course too beautiful!

RMU: You fell in love with her?

ALT: Yah, like love at first sight. I talked to her briefly I don't know what about. Anyway, that afternoon I left—and who was on the bus? She was there, on the bus. So I sat beside her and then we got to talk all the way from Baguio to Manila. So I said, could I see you at your place (laughs)? So I went to see her. I visited her one night and it was rainy. It was already May. But I visited her. Her father was a colonel in the army. And anyway, talktalktalktalktalk there. And then we had a date (laughs) and we went to the movies together. Yeah!

RMU: That was quick! All in a week's time.

ALT: Yes, yes. So we went to the movies together and then I brought her home. I don't know how I managed with my broken Tagalog in those days (laughs)!

RMU: Where did you stay in Manila at that time?

ALT: I think I was squatting at Alfred's place. In his room. I think I was squatting there (laughs) near UE. Yes.

RMU: So what happened to the romance?

ALT: What happened was nothing really happened because I had to go back to Dumaguete for my teaching. I wrote a letter but she didn't answer. And for me that was it. Had she answered maybe I would have gone back to Manila. I mean, maybe not at that time but—

RMU: But you remained friends?

ALT: In a way yes. That was it. And then twenty-five years later I met her again. There was this international poetry conference by PLAC where I was a speaker. And then I saw her there and then I got to talk to her. And then she's married siguro na and had kids. Oh my god (sighs then laughs) what a love story. You have seen her, she's very pretty, right?

RMU: Yes yes yes. So you went back to Dumaguete to teach?

ALT: Well, I went back to my teaching. I was teaching part-time already when I was a student. Like I said, it was an accident, and it's a very nice story how I got into the English department. And I owe this to Caloy. That's why I can't forget Caloy. One night—because I had applied at some schools there sa Dumaguete but there was no response—I was really packing up my bag and going back to Sulu, to Siasi, with no prospects of teaching since I resigned already from the Notre Dame. Well, maybe just be a storekeeper or whatever. In fact, my mother didn't want me to leave. "Why do you have to go away? Just stay here and watch the store and who knows? Maybe one day this will be yours?" That's what she said. And I said, no I want to go away. I want to find my own, you know, destiny somewhere. So anyway I was resigned to going back since

there was no hope of landing a job in Dumaguete. But just before that happened, si Caloy came to my room. Caloy was already given a job. The summer workshop was over. He went back to Naga but came back because the Tiempos promised him a load in the English Department. The Tiempos were so impressed by his story, "The Cathedral," and they could see a lot of future for Caloy. So they invited him to teach in the English department. And he had come back to Dumaguete. And then we saw each other. We weren't really close friends at that time because we just knew each other from the workshop and had gone out together sometime with the group, with Conrad [de Quiros] and Ricky [Lee]. Anyway, this was already June, and Caloy came to see me. He was alone and he did not know anybody. So he came to me and said, could you accompany me to the Tiempos because I had to arrange my load with them? And since it was evening and I had nothing to do, I went with him. And so, they were talking [about his situation]. I just sat like a non-presence in that gathering. The three of them talked and talked about his subjects and a lot of other things. He was going to see them Monday for his load etc etc. But when we were going out of the gate, Dad Ed talked to me and said, "What about you?" he said, "What are you going to do?" Or where are you going to study? Or something like that. So I told him I was going back to Siasi. And he said, "No, no. You see me on Monday (laughs). I think I was supposed to leave on Sunday. "You see me on Monday and we'll see what we can do there. Maybe a fellowship that is available." He was the head of the graduate school at that time. "Maybe a fellowship we can give you. You can enroll and not pay and we'll give you an allowance of 150 a month." At that time that was enough already, you know. P150 in 1975. I said, ok sir. So Monday I went back, and that's what happened. My job was as a graduate fellow. The job was to help the teachers, the regular faculty members, check their papers. That's what I did.

RMU: At the same time that you were studying?

ALT: At the same time I was taking nine units. This was 1975. So I was checking papers for Mr. Tiangco. He was from Manila actually, but he migrated to Dumaguete. He was a senior faculty member at that time.

RMU: So that was what you did during your four years?

ALT: Not really four years. I did that only for one semester. Because in the second semester, again, in a way, by accident, one of the faculty members went on leave to finish her master's thesis. So they were looking for somebody to take over her place. Mrs. Tiempo called me and asked me, will you take over the subjects of Galiling because he's going on leave? So I became a regular. Although my official designation was still graduate fellow, I was no longer checking papers. I was already teaching. So that's how I started.

RMU: And since then you've been teaching?

ALT: Yes.

RMU: Did you start on your PhD then? '75 or '76?

ALT: There was already a program but I was not enrolled in the first semester. I don't know why. There were already people who were enrolled there. Sina Mr. Opulencia, Leoncio Deriada, and Linda Alburo were already there. So I came in one semester later, yes. '75 second semester. Although, you see, I don't know if it was good or not because around that time I was also applying for a fellowship at the Rutgers University and I was taken in. I was supposed to leave.

RMU: What happened?

ALT: Anyway, that PhD thing was not so good for me because if it had not been there I could have gone to Rutgers. Did you see that? I was already into my third year as a PhD student in Silliman when the Rutgers thing came. This was around 1978. I was trying to decide, if I leave for Rutgers I would have to start all over again. That's two years lost. So you know. But, if there was no PhD program in Silliman, I could have gone, right? And it would have been a very different thing for me. So. The might-have-been, you know. So I stayed in Silliman until I finished.

RMU: Who were with you in the batch? In your batch, the second batch?

ALT: Wala wala. We were classmates with the first batch, oo.

RMU: This is PhD in Creative Writing English?

ALT: Officially it's PhD in Brit Lit. Because according to Dr. Tiempo there were more British Literature subjects being offered. But there were also Creative Writing courses to take.

RMU: You continued to write that time?

ALT: Oh yes. I continued to write.

RMU: Did you have to make a decision whether you'd become a poet or a fictionist, or both, or what?

ALT: No, it was not really a problem to me. I had subjects just for poetry and subjects just for fiction. Parang, in my mind, there was no problem. If the subject is just fit for a short [statement], ten or twenty lines, then that's poetry. And if the subject needs a larger treatment, I had to write it in a story form. Something like that.

RMU: So you finished the PhD in how many years?

ALT: Oh it took me again a long time (laughs). I'm really a very slow and very deliberate worker. I think it took me seven years. So if I started in 1975, I finished in 1982. Long (laughs)!

RMU: Did you start publishing at that time that you were there?

ALT: Every now and then I would be published. I was already publishing at Focus.

RMU: So you submitted poetry to them. Who told you to do that?

ALT: The people there, you know. In Silliman there were so many people who were writing at that time. So submit to this, submit to this.

RMU: And in 1976 you won?

ALT: Yah. I don't remember if they put up a streamer for me. I don't think so. There was no streamer. So like I said, it's like ordinary. It's not news anymore for people to be winning or winning prizes, it's not a big thing.

RMU: Did you get special treatment in your classes because of your award?

ALT: No not at all. Not at all.

RMU: Did you get more criticism then?

ALT: (laughs) Maybe. Why did this win? This is a bad poem. But nobody said that thing.

RMU: So in your workshops, both in your MA and in your PhD, you got good criticism from Edith and Ed?

ALT: Yes. But around that time I was already a member of the panel.

RMU: When did you start sitting in as a panelist?

ALT: I don't remember. Was it '76? But at that time, kami ni Butch Macansantos.

RMU: He was also there?

ALT: Yes. In the summertime. We were really unofficial panelists.

RMU: What does that mean?

ALT: Unofficial in the sense that we weren't paid at all. We volunteered to be panelists. We were there commenting, criticizing. We were there almost like "elder brothers" to the fellows, being years ahead of them in the workshop. If I remember right, we didn't sit at the table of the panelists. We sat with the fellows. We kind of "blended" with them. Kami ni Butch wanted to do that in summer time. We got our free meals (laughs). And we were happy. Butch and I were also the entertainers. We were the ones who told the Manila writers all the stupid jokes about the Maranaos and the Chinese. They remembered us for the jokes. Si Butch would have his Maranao jokes, I would have my Chinese jokes.

RMU: So you were a panelist when Susan [Lara] and Geraldine [Maayo] were fellows in '79, and you got to criticize their works?

ALT: I'm sure I did. But I can't remember now what I said. I can't remember what I said (laughs). In fact in an article by Geraldine, I was referred to as "The Anthony Tan." Like I was a terror (laughs).

RMU: You must have been very sharp, like Doc Ed probably at that time?

ALT: Yeah, but—. Geraldine mentioned that it was actually JC Badillo

who coined that term, "The Anthony Tan." So here comes the ano, that I was very cruel in my critique of their works (laughs).

RMU: So you had a reputation then as a panelist?

ALT: Yes, so at least. I was the terror, you know (laughs). I think Doc Ed was terror also. Maybe I could not be as cruel as Doc Ed but I was cruel too. I was also very very strict (laughs). I remember, with regret, there was a Silliman student and he submitted a long poem, and for me it was kind of pretentious. I mentioned it was pretentious, he was trying to be like Shakespeare. I really regret saying that. Although, at that time I was really very honest. That was what I thought about the work.

RMU: Did you find yourself sounding like Edith or Ed?

ALT: More like Ed. I didn't have Edith's diplomacy, you know. And tact. Dad Ed didn't have the tact either. But Edith is very good with tact.

RMU: Who else sat in the panel with you?

ALT: So of course, Ma'am Edith and Doc Ed. [Ricaredo] Demetillo would be there and Franz [Arcellana] would be there.

RMU: How was Demet?

ALT: Demet? I don't know. I don't know. I would not really know how effective he was. But he was kind of feared because he could be very very cruel too (laughs).

RMU: What about Franz?

ALT: Franz was a very gentle person. Because he did not have a big voice, that's why. No? But he kind of got into a debate with this Locsin Nava girl from Bacolod. I remember that time when Locsin Nava said something like, it's easier to understand a James Joyce compared to this story written by one of the fellows. And I think Franz got very angry with that comment because that's really insensitive daw. Basta they got into a debate. I couldn't remember the rest. That's the only time I remember Franz getting angry or raising his voice.

RMU: Did you learn anything from the panelists about the art of making comments during workshop?

ALT: No no.

RMU: You developed your own?

ALT: Yes. Based on my readings.

RMU: And your experience with Edith and Ed's criticism?

ALT: Yes. From the others I did not really learn. Not that I did not listen. I listened but I did not really learn.

RMU: Did it help you in any way in your practice of poetry? Your critical framework?

ALT: Yes, of course.

RMU: By that time have you written Badjao Cemetery poems already?

ALT: Yah, I think so.

RMU: And Poems for Muddas?

ALT: No. Poems for Muddas came much much later. I think I was in Iligan already.

RMU: And you were writing fiction also?

ALT: Yes, I was writing fiction at that time too. Yes, most of my fiction were written in Silliman.

RMU: And you met Marj [Evasco] at that time, and who else?

ALT: Grace [Monte de Ramos] was my student by the way. Marj went there as a graduate student; I was post-grad. We were all classmates in Doc Ed's class. But of course, during that time since we were the post-grad students—Leo, Linda, Opulencia, and myself—the rest of the MA students and undergrads just kept quiet. They could not speak with the four of us there (RMU and AT laugh).

RMU: You ruled the class.

ALT: We ruled the class, yes. I'm sure they had ideas, and were just as bright as us, but they were afraid to voice their ideas with our presence there (laughs).

RMU: So could you say you found your voice as a writer in Dumaguete?

ALT: Yah, I think so. Although I think, personally, at that time I still needed to improve. The way I look at it, my later writings seen in Badjao Cemetery are a lot better than what I wrote in Silliman. But it's there where I read a lot. You could not help but read a lot of books with all the books available. My goodness the complete works of William Butler [Yeats].

RMU: So after 1980 you continued to teach there?

ALT: Until 1982. I left in '83.

RMU: I think we met in Silliman when PLAC went there in '82.

ALT: Oh yes. We were there. We were the ones who kind of welcomed and entertained you there.

Even when you were in the '83 workshop I was there already.

RMU: Although in '76 that was when we were in the UP Writers Workshop as fellows.

ALT: Exactly. UP Writers Workshop pa, oo.

RMU: So from Silliman you attended the UP Writers Workshop?

ALT: Yes. '76. Kita yun.

RMU: What was your impression then of the UP Writers Workshop compared to the one in Silliman?

ALT: (laughs) Honestly, I did not think it was as good as Silliman.

RMU: Why?

ALT: This one I remember. First day of workshop we were there and I felt honored because they gave me a prominent seat, you know, like Anthony Tan from Silliman. Anyway, first day the subject for that session was the art of the essay. There were speakers talking about the essay and I was disappointed because talking about the art of the essay they were not even giving you the history of who started it and how it started, why, something like that. Wala. And then in the open forum, they were discussing what language to use, so I got kind of pissed off. In those days, I was kind of did not have tact—even now (laughs). And so, I stood up and I said:

"We are supposed to be discussing the art of the essay but I don't hear anything about the art. We are just talking about language and content—we are not talking about art." I think si [Amelia] Lapeña [Bonifacio] got angry at me (laughs). She was scolding me! I think she really got angry with me. I had the audacity to say it (RMU laughs).

RMU: What happened to you? What did you do?

ALT: Basta I know she really got pissed off (laughs). She didn't say anything, but you know, it's okay (laughs). During those days I was kind of tactless, you know, like this is UP.

RMU: But that did not stop you from speaking also?

ALT: No no. It did not stop me because like being in Silliman and having attended the workshop and being in the panel, I did not fear anyone, actually. Now—I would not be able to do that (laughs).

RMU: What was the essential difference that you found in the Silliman and the UP Writers Workshop?

ALT: I don't know if it's still true now, but at that time there were too many outsiders—kibitzers—who were commenting. And I don't think that was good because it kind of derailed the discussion. Instead of the discussion being focused on the work of the writers, the kibitzers were discussing about irrelevant things or peripheral things anyway. So the student, the fellow, was waiting for comments about his work so that he could improve, pero wala na.

RMU: And the discussions were more political, I remember.

ALT: Exactly. It's more politics than craft.

RMU: Do you remember we had to take a vow at the end of the workshop not to write in English anymore but in Filipino because that was the language that we had to use?

ALT: Yah. That was the issue talaga. What language to use. So they were debating about the beauty of the native language as against the English and some people commented that Chinese is better (laughs)! But the funny thing about Demetillo, if you remember, for all the many

poems that were discussed there, there was not one poem that pleased him. Then all of a sudden there was a poem, and maybe particularly because the moon was described as the host of a certain— and he said, "This is the poem that is the future of Philippine poetry in English," something like that. And then when everybody wanted to know who the poet was, it was the girl beside me, she was a Korean (RMU and AT laugh). It really made me laugh.

RMU: Yah. We had a Korean fellow and an African.

ALT: I forgot the name of that Korean girl. She was close to me, we were seated together. We also went out to eat in Makati, you know. I don't know why I forgot her name, but she was the one [who wrote the poem] (RMU and AT laugh).

RMU: Did you report to Silliman when you got back about the UP Writers Workshop?

ALT: I did not report but I told them the story.

RMU: In '83 you left Silliman already?

ALT: Oo for IIT.

RMU: Why?

ALT: Well because I think partly [for] financial [reasons]. Because the salary of the teachers there was not able to rise with the inflation. I was getting P1,000 at that time in 1983 and it was not enough anymore. And I don't know why at that time I already began to be restless. Like I'm through with this scenery—I need a change of scene, a change of place or atmosphere, something like that. That's why I left.

RMU: How did you end up in IIT, in Iligan?

ALT: Well, actually honestly I was going to Manila to work with Edwin Ang, the husband of Ros [Camara]. Edwin said come to Manila.

RMU: How did you meet Edwin?

ALT: Through Alfred. Kay Ros and Alfred were classmates in Silliman. Edwin was a big guy in Chinabank in Makati at that time. So, come to Makati we'll help you find a job in the bank. I said, ok sige I'll go.

RMU: You didn't mind working in a bank?

ALT: No no, I didn't mind because I really wanted a change of scene or scenery at that time. But before I could leave for Manila I was asked to report to IIT because I had written a letter to Henry Opulencia who was chairperson of the department of English at that time and they decided to accept me. And the telegram just came a few days before I was to leave for Manila. And me being an island man, I preferred the smaller place over Manila. I knew I couldn't survive in Manila.

RMU: You applied at IIT? Who gave you the idea?

ALT: Well, I had a former student in Silliman who became a member of the English department and told me, Sir, adto na lang didto sa IIT kay chairperson si Henry Opulencia. Henry was my roommate for around a semester in Silliman. So I wrote a letter and they accepted it and they asked me to report just a few days before I was to leave for Manila.

RMU: And you did?

ALT: Oo. Instead of Manila.

RMU: And what did you find there that made you stay there, until now?

ALT: As a person, I wanted to stay put, you know. But maybe I got to be comfortable in the place, and the apartment, which I was renting at that time, was walking distance to the campus and that was very convenient for me. I think that was one of the things that made me stay.

RMU: And the pay also?

ALT: The pay was very good. The salary was already twice higher than Silliman, so my salary was like four times bigger than in Silliman. We were also even given two incentive pays of P2,000 per month for just being PhD holders. So this also made me feel secure, financially.

RMU: Who were the other literature teachers there who were writers also?

ALT: Well, Christine [Godinez Ortega], although she hadn't made a

name at that time for herself, was ahead of me by two or three years. Jaime An Lim was already, in a way, connected because he was a graduate of MSU Marawi. But when I went there, he wasn't there yet. He was still in America for his PhD. He came around 1989, so I was ahead [of him].

RMU: You continued to write when you were there?

ALT: Oh yes, yes. The essays in Intimations of Mortality, I started writing. I don't remember having written an essay in Silliman, though. These were already written in Iligan.

RMU: So it was in Iligan where you developed your essay?

ALT: Yes, in Iligan already.

RMU: You never went back to Siasi since going to Dumaguete in 1970?

ALT: Well, I had gone back briefly for a week in 1976, but that was the last time I had gone back.

Then when I left, I did not go back anymore.

RMU: How would you describe the literary scene in Iligan? In '83.

ALT: None at all (laughs). There was no writing. The literary community there kind of slowly developed, you know. And in a way climaxed with the opening of the workshop. By that time Jaime had come around.

RMU: How did the Iligan Writers Workshop start?

ALT: Well, even before it opened we were already talking about it—Jaime and me and of course, Christine. We wanted to open a workshop there. But it materialized because one day, we were winners in the Palanca, I think me and Jaime An Lim. It was already '91, or '92, '93? We went to the Bulletin [office] because Cirilo was there in the Panorama. And then we got to talk about it.

RMU: Cirilo gave you the idea?

ALT: Well, in a way, he did not give us the idea because we already have the idea. We had the same idea and we were there. And it happened also by chance that the one who was newly elected as Vice President for research and extension was a friend and

classmate of Jaime in Marawi—si Jimmy Balacuit. So with Jimmy Balacuit as head of research and extension, we were able to easily get funding. See, the idea was there already long before that, but no one was supporting us, higher than us—somebody like the Vice Chancellor for extension and research. And with Jimmy, we were able to get the money. And so we started the workshop.

RMU: When was the first Iligan workshop—'92 or '93?

ALT: Around '93.

RMU: I remember that we formed a Creative Writing Foundation for that. I was a part of that.

ALT: It's not there anymore officially. But there was, there was.

RMU: We were panelists there together. And then the workshop included teachers, right?

ALT: Yes, there was a time when there were teachers also, but they removed that later on because it was too expensive, I think.

RMU: Okay. So with the coming of the writers workshop there, you finally had something to look forward to every summer?

ALT: Yes, yes, in a way.

RMU: But you quit as panelist in 2002?

ALT: Well, this is all water under the bridge now (laughs). But yes, I quit because I was disappointed with things. We could not agree. What happened, if you remember, the workshop was getting shorter and shorter and Christine was taking over.

RMU: Who was the first director?

ALT: Si Jimmy. It was supposed to be me after that. But I don't know why it went to her. And then when it went to her she did not want to give it up. Did you see that? That was supposed to be three of us. Si Jimmy and then me, kind of parang seniority, no?

RMU: May term ba yung directorship?

ALT: It was not agreed formally, but it was like kind of understood that it would be me and then it would be her. I don't know why Jimmy turned it over to her. And then when she was the head she did not want to give it up anymore.

RMU: You were expecting it?

ALT: In a way.

RMU: You asked for it?

ALT: I did not ask for it (laughs). You know me. I'm not that I'm not that kind of person. But even then, I still continued to support.

RMU: And what broke the straw in the camel's back?

ALT: Like I said, the workshop was getting shorter and shorter. There was a time when it was only three days or four days and her reason was that kulang sa budget. I think it would not be kulang sa budget. Kulang sa budget because she was inviting so many panelists and that's why we even had to have evening sessions because we cannot finish with the work because there's so many people who want to comment because there's so many panelists. I mean, it should be limited. That's why my suggestion was limit the number of panelists. If they all want to comment, let them come next year. Something like that. I did not say so many words but that's what I wanted. She wouldn't because they were her friends (laughs). That's why I left, without telling them exactly why I left. My excuse was that I'm going to Singapore. Which was true. I went to Singapore (laughs) and then I did not come back the following year even if they wanted me to come back.

RMU: When was the first time that you went out of the country?

ALT: That year. 2002 na.

RMU: What did you do in Singapore?

ALT: I went for the poetry reading because we got to be published by Atlanta Review, and Atlanta Review, I think, wanted a wider market because this is a bit exclusivist poetry magazine published in Atlanta. I think they were experimenting with trying to breaking

in Asian poets. I think they decided to look for contributions from Asia and publish a lot of Singaporean writers there (laughs). And so we were there, two of us from Philippines, me and somebody from Ateneo de Manila.

RMU: How long did you stay there? One week?

ALT: I stayed for about four days, and then three days side trip to Malaysia. So one week. It was Alfred who paid for it, and also my hotel for one week (laughs). I did not have money at that time. So I was there for four days, kami nina Alvin Pang. In fact I told Alvin Pang about our workshop in Silliman.

RMU: So that was your first time to be exposed to an international audience?

ALT: In a way, yes.

RMU: What was your impression of it? The experience there.

ALT: It was great to be in a foreign country (laughs). It was great to be reading your poems to an audience of Singaporeans. I don't think they are better than us, but because they're Singaporeans, they are richer than us. It felt great to be there. It was a nice experience for me.

RMU: How are things between you and Christine now?

ALT: Right now we are friends. She has invited me to NCCA-sponsored gatherings, at least those held here in Mindanao, which I have failed to attend for one reason or another. We are friends in Facebook, too. I try to keep my distance. Getting too close to people could oftentimes burn you beyond skin-deep.

RMU: When did you marry, by the way?

ALT: I married in December of 1983.

RMU: That was your last year in Silliman?

ALT: Yes. I got married to Leyda Banogon. I brought her to Iligan and stayed in the apartment. Until I was able to build a house.

RMU: So when Leyda became ill—

ALT: I discovered that 1988. But like it was already there even before. I just did not see. I could not, I mean, know.

RMU: What made you decide to marry?

ALT: Yah. I just wanted to get married.

RMU: Did the marriage affect your writing?

ALT: Oo, definitely.

RMU: How?

ALT: Definitely because it did not make me write more (laughs). Because I could have written more if I was single. So because I got married and it was a difficult marriage. It's a very difficult marriage (laughs). I cannot describe how difficult it is, but—

RMU: The difficulty was mainly because of her illness?

ALT: Yeah. And I had to take care of her. It took so much of my time away from (laughs), you know.

RMU: Can we go backtrack a little? In '85 you published, Badjao Cemetery?

ALT: Yes

RMU: This was published in MSU?

ALT: Through the help of Dr. Lacar, who was a Sillimanian.

RMU: So this was OVCRE?

ALT: OVCRE yes. Have you seen the book?

RMU: You know I have a copy of that but I cannot find it anymore. It must be in Paco. I have a copy of it eh. I think either I bought it or you gave a copy to me.

ALT: Yeah. You must have bought it (laughs).

RMU: It's like the Honing Weapons of Lina Sagaral. That's what I remember of it eh. Brown paper?

ALT: Ah this one. I brought, just in case. It doesn't look very impressive but this is how it looks. It's a faded copy already and that's the last one that I have.

RMU: What convinced you to publish your first book?

ALT: I don't remember. I think Dr. Lacar persuaded me. He said, "Oh we have money, you know. We have budget. Why don't you publish your book of poems? Compile your poems and then we will publish." And then I gave them the manuscript, and that was that.

RMU: These were the poems you wrote as a student in Silliman?

ALT: Yes

RMU: Did it make any money for you?

ALT: No, not at all. Not one peso (laughs). Kahit isang kusing. I never thought of my art as something that would give me money. So if I get, good. If not, that's okay. That did not matter to me.

RMU: And then your second book came eleven years after, Poems from Muddas?

ALT: Yah.

RMU: This is where you recall leaving Siasi. There is a very marked difference between this and the first book. The Badjao Cemetery, and some other poems here, are mainly free verse in form; the Poems from Muddas are more regular traditional works. And I find the Poems from Muddas more musical and influenced, I think, more by Hardy and Yeats than by Eliot. But the speaker's vision and poetic voice, I think, remains true for both collections.

ALT: There has been no change.

RMU: Very little. I mean the equanimity of mind, for instance, of the speaker and the ability to extract insight from experience are there and much more sharp in the Poems from Muddas. This is very poignant and very much mature, I think. And the Badjao Cemetery is more of a tribute to your Badjao or Tausug heritage.

ALT: I think it's a recognition of my beginnings, in a way. This is where I started (laughs).

RMU: There appears the idea of you trying to understand why people stayed in that small place or returned, but stayed. In that sense, you appreciated the fact that somehow some people must be there to continue what has been started by those gone.

ALT: Yes.

RMU: And like you mentioned, somebody has to put their names on the graves. I thought that was a very good insight into, or appreciation of, why people remain in a place instead of condemning them that they have failed to see beyond their own little place. There was an appreciation of their role, but seen from the light of continuing a tradition. This is probably Chinese?

ALT: It is Tausug also. Chinese Tausug is the same.

RMU: The very strong sense of tradition?

ALT: Yes. They desire continuity even if it's no longer very practical, you know, or economical to do so. For example, it doesn't make sense to continue to live in a place where you almost do not have anything, but one still stays in the place just the same and endures whatever, simply because you belong to the place. You know, a sense of place.

RMU: A sense of belonging to a place?

ALT: A sense of belonging. Yes. Our dead are here.

RMU: And your themes about permanence and change and moving and staying on are very clearly limned in the Poems from Muddas. But while there is regret in leaving Siasi, there is also hope. I mean there is a very strong balance between grief at leaving Siasi and hope for something better.

ALT: Yes.

RMU: Even if, as you said, it was Schopenhauer who will be there waiting for you.

ALT: (laughs) That one I—Cirilo published that in Panorama.

RMU: "The Beaten Turf?"

ALT: "The Beaten Turf," yes that one. It's a dramatization of that theme. Of course, that's the pessimist in me (laughs). You said Hardy, yes that's Hardy's Schopenhauer—the earth is a tragic place. It has happened to one before you, and it is happening to you now, and it will happen to those who will come after you. In a nutshell, that's what the poem is about.

RMU: One very distinct difference between the two collections would be the modernist characteristics of Poems from Muddas. It's very "learned" (AT laughs) in the sense of citing Schopenhauer, Monet, Wallace Stevens, Camus, Van Gogh.

ALT: Yes, that's right.

RMU: And the mention of Yeats and Hardy made the Poems from Muddas very modernist in content.

ALT: In a way yes.

RMU: And you were writing here also of love that was very intense but came for naught.

ALT: Yes (laughs).

RMU: Was it first love that you wrote about here?

ALT: In the end, yes.

RMU: Who was the model in "The Imaginary Canvass," which is a very harrowing poem, I think, modelled after Carlos Angeles's "Landscape II." Or at least it reminds me of that poem.

ALT: Although, of course, I have read Carlos Angeles I don't remember this imaginary canvass. I wrote this back in Silliman. It is very pessimistic (laughs), very dark. I don't remember now the origin of this poem. But what I remember is it's almost atheistic (laughs).

RMU: Yes. And you were not looking at any particular canvass there?

ALT: No no. Not any particularly. Like life itself, in general. Like the specifics of this imaginary canvass are the specifics of life, in general.

RMU: Very dark.

ALT: Very dark. So maybe in retrospect you might say, Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," something like that.

RMU: But what prompted it? Because I think that you somehow left Siasi with the coming of people who were too much in love with drugs and violence.

ALT: Which is true.

RMU: So you left it? But who were you referring to?

ALT: The Tausugs, of course. Yes, it's the Tausugs from the hinterlands. Or from other islands who have moved in to Siasi bringing their culture of violence. .

RMU: For what? Was there a political motive there?

ALT: No. It's just that the people are violent, almost—

RMU: By nature?

ALT: By nature (laughs). There's no such thing, but almost by nature they are violent. They look at guns as murag power to them, an extension of their life—an almost physical extension of their life. That you live longer if you have guns, something like that. So I'm also referring to them—the people who have come. And that's very true because although in Siasi there are many Tausugs, they are not so violent. In those days if you have fist fights, they end as fist fights also. But with the coming of this people, fist fights almost end with blood, you know, with killing already. So it has changed dramatically from a very peaceful town to a violent town. So that's one reason for leaving the place.

RMU: In one of your poems, "Listening to Chopin," you gave the idea that art is a means to escape the reality of horror and pain.

ALT: Yes it's a way. Although it's temporary, but it's still an escape. I was thinking of Martial Law, actually, the violence there.

RMU: That was the context?

ALT: The context was Martial Law, yes.

RMU: How did Martial Law affect you? As a person and as a writer?

ALT: Let me see, I was in Silliman at that time. It did, in the sense that there was so much violence. Although I was not personally affected or my family, it's the sense of the country being under this power and you're not really free to do what you want. I have heard horror stories from my uncle who have witnessed executions of young men simply because of past history. The burning of Jolo remember? 1974. My mother was actually in Jolo at that time (laughs).

RMU: What happened?

ALT: My mother was called by my sister to help her with the children. So my mother stayed in Jolo, and then that happened. My mother being used to war, or to trouble, because she was already a mother when the Japanese attacked the Philippines, she lived in her younger sister's place where her sister was panicking and could not do anything anymore. My mother was cooking hot cake in the kitchen so that the children, her nieces and nephews, would have something to eat for breakfast because their mother could not work anymore—she was already in panic and the bombs were (imitates the sound of a falling bomb) going like that. Artillery fire was all over the place (imitates the sound of gun explosions) and she was in the kitchen. During the escape, they went for three days without food. My uncle witnessed a young Tausug, young teenager, who was executed by a military man just for wearing a jacket with the name Muslim Brotherhood on it.

RMU: Without any provocation?

ALT: Without any provocation. He was just wearing Muslim Brotherhood jacket and he was shot. My uncle saw that. Ay sus it was a terrible time. So just that sense of danger. I just stayed in the dorm during that time (laughs).

RMU: Did you get to meet any Muslim writers?

ALT: Calbi Asain. But we never really got to talk about these things. And Noralyn Mustafa, but I never had the chance to talk with her one on one.

RMU: The brothers Sadain? Did you ever get to meet them?

ALT: No, I never really met those people.

RMU: But have you read their works?

ALT: Also not really. Not really intensely or deeply, not really read the works.

RMU: And then you have a poem, "Etude," that talks about the end of a relationship?

ALT: "Etude" (laughs). Part of romantic musings written in Silliman.

RMU: So it's not based on a real experience?

ALT: Yeah. Actually it was written for someone. If you take a look at this, you read the first letters down, you know. What do you call that type of writing? See? Sometimes it does not make sense, really because I'm just following that "edna gogo edna" [pattern]. That's the name of the girl, Edna Gogo, very pretty girl from Butuan. Of course, the crush of everybody (laughs). So pretty my god.

RMU: Acrostic. So you do this kind of exercise?

ALT: Well yah. It's a kind of exercise. That's not really (laughs)—

RMU: You were doing measured verses here. Which do you enjoy most: doing free verse or doing metered verse? Because you do both well.

ALT: (laughs) Thank you. Thank you very much. In Silliman it was partly imitation. But it was also learning how to control. Imposing meter on your writing is a way of learning how to control the words because words might just spill out and not have any bearing [anymore on the whole]. So by putting meter you control this.

RMU: Do you like that more than free verse?

ALT: I prefer free verse, of course, because, well, it's freer—you don't have to worry about those [metrical and controlled] things and so you can write what you want to write. But I don't do meter anymore. But the experience of doing it kind of helped me control the craft of writing.

RMU: Where do you get the sense of music that is there both in your metered and non-metered verses?

ALT: I don't know where I got it. Maybe from reading a lot of poems also.

RMU: They're more pronounced in the metered ones. I mean, as I said, the rhythms are like Hardy's or Yeats' and even the diction sometimes.

ALT: Yes. That's very true.

RMU: Very slow, meditative, repetitive.

ALT: Yes (laughs). That's very true because I read them in Silliman.

RMU: And loved them? Did you like Yeats and Hardy?

ALT: Yes.

RMU: Dylan Thomas?

ALT: I can't understand everything of Yeats because of the Irish folklore in it.

RMU: And the occult part of it.

ALT: But I did enjoy the sound, the rhythm, the musical sense. Hardy does not have really much of that musical sense, but I liked his philosophy. I liked the darkness.

RMU: You mentioned Irish folklore in Yeats. You never used Tausug or local folklore in your poetry, did you?

ALT: I don't remember really. Maybe because I'm not too steeped in the Tausug folklore. I know a bit of it. Maybe one of these days I will try (laughs). Maybe it's good to use it. In the stories I have [used it], I think. Like in "The Cargo" I used a bit of the Tausug folklore, that when the star is near the moon it's a sign that lovers are going to elope. When a boat is carrying a dead body, the boat becomes very slow because the dead body is accompanied by forty-four spirits (laughs).

RMU: That's a very remarkable story of yours published internationally.

ALT: It was published in Manoa.

RMU: Where did you get the idea for that?

ALT: That's a good question, you know, because one day, I did not go home. I did not like going home anymore (laughs).

RMU: When was this? When did you write that?

ALT: In Silliman. One day, my younger brother Arman came back to Silliman from home and told me a horrible story. He said, "Do you remember that bodyguard we called Bad Boy?" He was a bodyguard at the Notre Dame when he was studying there. I taught there. He was a handsome guy and sometimes he could really be very handsome, you know. Big guy and almost a six-footer, and chubby; fair-skinned almost like a Spaniard. He was really Tausug, and he was a bad boy when he was a small boy, and then he kind of reformed. That's why he was taken in as a bodyguard because he has changed and gotten married etc. "There's a story of bad boy daw killing several men in a motor launch." So that's his story. That kind of moved me so much—for him to become bad again after he had reformed. He was a bad boy, then he reformed, and then he became bad again. "Ngano kaha?" Arman was asking me. So I sat down to write from that seminal idea, from that fact that this bad boy had killed several men. So I built on that and the rest of course [was] partly imagination, partly taken from life, taken from experience.

RMU: And then you took some kind of Tausug culture of a vengeance?

ALT: Yes, that Tausug vengeance is really strange. Tausug vengeance basically, in that story, is that you cannot insult a Tausug and get away with it. So be careful (laughs) if you insult—never ever insult a Tausug. If you do, be prepared to die, something like that. So that's one of the basic ideas there. So the rich man in the story was killed by the killer.

RMU: The nephew of the narrator.

ALT: The nephew, because he was insulted as a glutton. And a Tausug cannot be called a glutton whether it's true or not, whether it's a joke or not. Never ever say that in his face or even in the presence of many people—he'll kill you.

RMU: Now, where does the narrator get his confidence that he will get away with going back to land with all the dead people around him and telling the truth about the incident, knowing that he will not be believed?

ALT: Yes. Believe it or not it's Tausug guts. It's just Tausug guts. I mean from the practical point of view you should not go back. You should just stay [away].

RMU: At sea?

ALT: At sea or go somewhere else, you know, or run away with the money. But if he did that, his wife and children would not be safe. So the devil in the deep blue sea has actually, you know, surfaced.

RMU: But he was going back.

ALT: He was going back to bring back the dead.

RMU: And tell the truth.

ALT: And tell the truth.

RMU: And suffer—

ALT: Consequences—

RMU: Of the truth?

ALT: Yes. If the people believe his story, then probably they will spare him. But if they don't probably they will kill him. But at least, he would be there with his family. I mean his wife is there, his children.

RMU: From the point of view of the author, would that be his motivation for going back?

ALT: Yes. But that's also very Tausug—not really to run away even in the face of that kind of (laughs) terrible danger.

RMU: Well it's a classic story, and I think it should be taken up in classes.

ALT: If it is discussed like that too. Because some people cannot see it like that—they don't see that Tausug dimension. They have to see that culture, how that culture works in the thinking or philosophy of the characters. Especially the narrator.

RMU: That's right. And in a "A Time to Dance," you have a widow who—

ALT: This one is no longer Tausug setting. Like in a university setting, yes. This is also a true story by the way (laughs).

RMU: It's based on a true story?

ALT: I mean, not everything is true, but the basic story is that it's true. It's a confession of a woman friend, a much older woman friend, whose husband had passed away. And she told me the story about dancing on the bed as a way of—expiating? or releasing?—exorcizing the past. So this is about exorcising the past.

RMU: That is a very nice poetic scene there with the character dancing on the bed with all the letters and photographs, I think. Very cinematic as well.

ALT: Oo. Nobody knows who she is but she's a real person. She was a friend of mine in Silliman.

RMU: And then you have the symbolism of freeing the parrot from the cage?

ALT: Yes, which Grace Monte de Ramos did not like (laughs).

RMU: Because it was obvious.

ALT: It's too obvious, yes. She did not like it because it's too obvious.

RMU: You prefer it this way?

ALT: Yes. My justification is that it has been prepared for because before that there's the parrot, right? So I kind of invented that part already about the parrot reciting the poem (RMU and AT laugh). So it's foreshadowed already, more or less, right? So there's really no abruptness in it. It's foreshadowed already because the parrot was mentioned much much earlier in the story. I think the point of Grace is that it has become too obvious already, (laughs) releasing a parrot for freedom. But I cannot change it anymore. I don't know how to, you know. It's difficult to rewrite that.

RMU: What year did you write "The Cargo?"

ALT: I think I was still in Silliman at that time. Before I left for Illigan So that must be before '83.

RMU: Which was earlier—"A Time to Dance," "The Cargo," or "Sweet Grapes, Sour Grapes?"

ALT: First it was "The Second Coming. 1970. And then "Sweet Grapes, Sour Grapes." It came out in the Free Press, so mga mid '70s. "A Time to Dance" almost together with "The Cargo." I don't know, which one came first now.

RMU: "Sweet Grapes, Sour Grapes" is like Araby—

ALT: (laughs) It's "Araby." Although that never occurred to me when I wrote it. I wanted a funny story. A sad-funny story.

RMU: Yes. Where did you get that kind of combination, that sad-funny style, which really is more pronounced in your essays?

ALT: I don't know. I don't know where I got that. But at home, anyway, we do laugh a lot. We make a lot of very funny comments about people (laughs). So I think it's in the family. We tend to see the comic side of things, you know.

RMU: This is back home? When you were young?

ALT: Yes, at home. We made funny comments about people. Because anyone who comes down from the boat will have to pass by our house (laughs). So we would sit there in the afternoon— because usually the boat from Jolo would arrive in the afternoon. We would sit there at the store and watch people and we would make comments about the people that we see (RMU and AT laugh). Of course it was cruel sometimes, very cruel, you know.

RMU: You were young boys then.

ALT: Oh yes. Me and my brothers, you know. That's part of it. I think I kind of just developed it in [my] writing, you know, to see the funny side.

RMU: Have you written other stories after "The Cargo?"

ALT: No, no.

RMU: So "The Cargo" would be your last story, as it were?

ALT: My, yes, my last story. I want to write some more. I have written a story but it's not kind of good enough (laughs).

RMU: It's still in progress?

ALT: It's finished but it's not good enough. Again, I'm not very imaginative in that sense, you know, because it has to be based on something that I really know or have seen back in Siasi. It's about a man who always wore dark glasses, even in the evening. And nobody really knew why he did that, or whether he was cross-eyed or not (laughs). It's about this guy who was an army man who killed one of the natives. It's a potentially good story, but I don't know (laughs).

RMU: You're not happy with it yet?

ALT: Yes, yes, I should go back. I should go back and look at it again.

RMU: Maybe it needs time for it to get finished. In one of your poems here you have the "Letter to Ling" where you say "I have lost my gravity." That's your poem to the person you were in love with when you were a boy?

ALT: Yes. As a young man, in high school. Yes.

RMU: Do you have any rituals before you sit down to write?

ALT: I do not have any rituals, being 90% godless (both laugh). When I sit down to write, the poem is almost a finished product already. It already has percolated in my mind for days before I sit down to write it. The only poem that came almost as if it wrote itself is "Ways of Dying." Like it took me only about an hour. Of course, nothing "great" in that, if the poem is bad. I hope it isn't. At least Leo Deriada liked it. He gave it the grand prize in the HomeLife magazine poetry contest.

RMU: Did you ever write a poem about your wife?

ALT: No. Ah, I did. But that was before she was a wife (both laugh). The sonnets (laughs). So many typos, no? The first sonnet and the second sonnet really were for Leyda.

RMU: In your poems of 2009, the more recent ones, I noticed that there is a change in terms of versification. Are these experiments or have you changed your view about some aspects of poetry? Like some poems are centered and some poems are flashed right.

ALT: Right, okay. Yes.

RMU: Are these more or less the final versions or were you just trying out some typographical experiments?

ALT: No. I think that is the final version. But why I'm doing that? Partly because I want to experiment with the physical form, how it appears on the page and what is the effect of that, you know.

RMU: You have not published any of these yet?

ALT: Which one? Some of them [I have published already].

RMU: In 2009, "La-itan"—

ALT: Oo, wala pa.

RMU: "Imaginary Letter to Edith Tiempo"—

ALT: Kanang "Imaginary Letter" has already come out in Facebook, I think. Susan Lara put it in the Edith Tiempo page. Facebook. But when it appeared, it did not have the right flash, you know, because Facebook daw could not do it. So it appeared differently. But I wanted it flashed right, I don't know. I'm still experimenting how it looks.

RMU: In that poem to Edith you said, "But no sooner had I grown fledgling wings / than the blades of life began to pinion me / to the ground." Are you talking about the conflict of life and art here, which is very Yeatsian in subject? And in your own experience of life and art, how do you reconcile them, where do you put art in the place of life? I mean, what kind of role does art have in life?

ALT: (laughs) That's an interesting question. Right now, I can think only of art as a kind of [something that] saves man from the troubles, you know, if only temporarily. Although eventually, from my pessimistic point of view, the problems of life will overwhelm him, you know, more or less.

RMU: The problems will overwhelm?

ALT: Yes, eventually. But at least, temporarily if you have art then it makes you stay there, it makes you grapple with the problems of life. It helps. It may not solve everything, but it helps if you have art.

RMU: So art is a temporary grace?

ALT: In a way, yes. That's one way of looking at it. So I think you have seen that in "Imaginary Letter," the words of wisdom from a teacher kind of help you, you know, when the boat is sinking (laughs). This is like a lifejacket that you can wear, the words of wisdom from somebody wiser who does not have to be an artist, actually.

RMU: But the poem appears to give a picture of a young artist who has been defeated by life.

ALT: Yes, exactly. You're right.

RMU: Or on the verge of being defeated by life.

ALT: Yes, oo. But the grace is the words of wisdom from this master or teacher, you know.

RMU: It should give motivation for the artist to go on, is that what you're saying?

ALT: No. I don't remember—I don't think the poem has gone that far.

RMU: So it's just that the words were spoken by the master and the student is just saying, "I cannot do it."

ALT: Yes, something like that.

RMU: Life is too powerful for me.

ALT: Life is too powerful, yes. But it's good enough that those words are there. So whether eventually or ultimately they will help him, I don't think the poem has come to that yet. I didn't have the confidence. I left it like that. I did not want to be so presumptuous to say that in the end art will save you from all of—no. Because I don't really honestly believe that art can save you from the troubles of life, in the end.

RMU: It cannot.

ALT: But temporarily.

RMU: Temporarily, if you write about it.

ALT: Yes, if you write about it. Because that would seem like very moralistic already if you say that everything can be solved by art, you know.

RMU: You're not into that?

ALT: No. I'm not. It's too presumptuous (laughs).

RMU: What is your philosophy of art, then, of writing?

ALT: Well, art is helpful to the spirit of man, you know. That's why he has invented it because it helps him deal with the problems of life even if only temporarily. So, it has its uses in that sense. Because somehow you can bear the troubles of life if you have this, like a wall to lean on. It's like a wall to lean on.

RMU: That's art?

ALT: Yah, I think so. Art is like that. And that is why sometimes some of the great works of art are those of the horrible things. Because it's the artist's way of dealing with what is horrible. And my pessimistic philosophy is that life is horrible. But it's partly from my experience (laughs).

RMU: Why were you not able to write anything about the burning of Jolo? It was not an attractive subject for you enough?

ALT: I think people like Noralyn Mustafa can do that better because they were there and I think culturally they are closer. I am distant, so I don't think I have the know-how. I think Noralyn Mustafa has done that already. Have you read her work?

RMU: You know I was trying to get it. But I'll tell you about it later. Very sad story. And then you have a collection, "Crossing the River," which won the Palanca in 2002?

ALT: Yes, yes. That's the one I would like to come up with as a book. So it's a kind of the one you suggested, "Crossing the River and Other poems." And then the other poems from here. So it's kind of selected. New and selected poems and the ones that have not been published.

RMU: Have you given it to any publisher?

ALT: No no, I'll give it to you (laughs).

RMU: (laughs) Why don't you? Well, I was actually thinking of the essays. But the poems also, but maybe later. Kasi dapat sa Mindanao ito nilalabas eh because your poems, for instance, are set in Mindanao. And that's what my next question for you is: do you find yourself a Mindanao poet? or how would you define a Mindanao poet?

ALT: I don't really look at myself that way—as a Mindanao poet. I look at myself as a poet from the Philippines. But since I don't have the imagination to imagine the outside world, I can only write from where I come from, which is really Mindanao. Or at least Muddas. So that's how I look at myself. I don't particularly see I'm from Mindanao, no no. I don't want to be categorized like that.

RMU: Why not?

ALT: But that's kind of, oh just from Mindanao. Does it mean he has no relevance to the Philippines (laughs)?

RMU: No, but as a matter of locating a person, because everybody writes from a specific place.

ALT: Exactly, yes oo. That's where I write—from that location.

RMU: And your setting is very much southern in a sense: Mindanao—more specifically, Sulu. I mean the Poems from Muddas are very exquisite pieces about a particular landscape, with beautiful water images. And it could only be written by somebody who has lived there.

ALT: Exactly, yes. That's what I want, that's what I like my poetry to be.

RMU: Very specific to a place.

ALT: Specific to a place.

RMU: Doesn't that make your poems very Mindanawon?

ALT: Yeah (laughs). But I don't want to be categorized in just that one. I want to be also, in a way, universal, you know.

RMU: Well of course with universal implications. But it is first a Mindanawon poem that could only can be written by somebody from there.

ALT: From there (laughs). True, true.

RMU: Do you have any definitions of Mindanawon literature? Has it ever occurred to you to define it?

ALT: No no.

RMU: What would comprise Mindanao literature if I ask you now?

ALT: Well, the writers from Mindanao. But more than that, the things that he writes are or should reflect the experiences of Mindanao. But then again it should not be just that—it should be universal too. It has a very strong locale, but it has a universal resonance.

RMU: Yes. Wouldn't the universality naturally emerge from the specificity of it?

ALT: Yes, that's what it should be.

RMU: Because if you read Chekhov and Dostoyevsky, they're very specific to a place. They talk about Russian things, and yet you know that you could identify with them.

ALT: Yes. That's why they are masters (laughs).

RMU: Yah, I mean, but it's the same, you know. Like Nick Joaquin's works are very specific to Manila, your poetry very specific to Mindanao, as Jun Dumdum's to Cebu. And yet there is something there that you know, somebody from Mindanao or Manila can relate with.

ALT: Yeah, it should be like that actually. Of course (laughs).

RMU: I'm saying that being categorized or being defined as someone from a given place is not necessarily a kind of confinement. But it's a matter of framing, because if the writer is good enough the local is always transcended. Di ba? There's always the universal there. If the writer is good enough.

ALT: In a good piece of work, yes. Yah you are right (laughs). That's what I was trying to do— have a strong sense of locale.

RMU: And I think you are a writer who has a very strong sense of locale, Southwestern Mindanao.

ALT: Maybe they don't know anything else (laughs).

RMU: That's possible, but that's your place—that's where you're writing from.

ALT: Yeah.

RMU: And that defines your place in Mindanao Literature as well—

ALT: Yes, I know, yes.

RMU: You have put Siasi, Muddas, on the face of the literary map of the Philippines.

ALT: Hopefully, yes. I hope.

RMU: Nobody else has done that yet, di ba?

ALT: No one. I don't know, yes.

RMU: And the ideal for every writer in Mindanao is to put where they came from on the consciousness of everybody else. Calbi has written about Sulu rin, di ba?

ALT: Yes. Stories.

RMU: And the late Tony—

ALT: Enriquez, yes. Zamboanga. Yes yes.

RMU: Yes, that's right. Wait. The Poems from Muddas—did you design the book in terms of the sequence of the poems?

ALT: Yes, I did. I arranged them according to themes or subject.

RMU: It's a very consciously arranged book. Well organized: departure, and then there's a new place, and then love, end of love, death, ancestors, and then surprisingly, Tony, you end up with creatures.

ALT: Yes.

RMU: Crickets—

ALT: Because I wrote about them in blocks—they are blocked.

RMU: Yes. They are thematically blocked. Why did you end up with insects? Is that a kind of philosophical statement or what?

ALT: That I don't know. No, not really. If there was, I was not conscious

of it. Only because I have written about insects. I was writing about other things, but I was always writing about insects.

RMU: I thought that was very poetic.

ALT: Yeah?

RMU: In a sense that kasi the whole collection Poems from Muddas is fantastic. I can think of music, like Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band is a concept album or the Pink Floyd's The Wall. Yours is a concept book.

ALT: Because the subjects are arranged—

RMU: From beginning to end there is a story and every poem segues into the other almost seamlessly.

ALT: That's good, that's good.

RMU: The graveyard, ancestors, and then those insects. I thought that you were saying that after death, insects will survive us. Something like that.

ALT: Yes. But I was not conscious of that. I was not conscious that it was arranged such that I ended the book with the insects. I was not conscious that that is the philosophy. It just came to me lang, ok let's put the insects at the last part (laughs).

RMU: Because you were talking about man at the beginning. From birth to maturity to death. And then insects in the end.

ALT: In fact, I have an insect poem about the praying mantis.

RMU: Which is not there? Is that a new one?

ALT: It's not in the book. I just finished it, like a month ago. I'm very happy about it (laughs), about the praying mantis. It's the one I saw in the garden. A praying mantis on the wall in my garden.

RMU: Would you, as a practitioner of the poetic art, be able to define a "southern style" of writing? (AT laughs) Are you able to detect that? Distinct for instance—

ALT: No. Are you saying that there's a special style of people who are writing from the south?

RMU: Yes. Distinct from the writings in the north and Manila.

ALT: Maybe there is (laughs). I don't know. I am not aware, but I'm sure there is.

RMU: I noticed that the southern sensibility is attracted more by the landscapes and the details of things around them, which are of nature in its element. Landscapes of seas, you know, like in Edith and Rowena [Torrevillas], Myrna Peña Reyes, Marj [Evasco]. Waterfalls, rivers, mountains. It's very oriental, like the Chinese and Japanese in that sense. And the loving attentive gaze at small things, like insects, grasshoppers, and the like—this is always there. Which I didn't see at all in the poetry in the north, which is very cerebral. Yung Manila poets are mostly very cerebral. In the Visayas, think of Merlie Alunan and Vic Sugbo. It's the same concern for what is around me, the landscape, the people. Very simple, without any cognitive gymnastics and manipulations.

ALT: Maybe nature is still there as a conscious presence. In Manila almost without exception, people are very cerebral because there seems to be no [natural] landscape anymore. Or the landscape has no attraction anymore for them.

RMU: That's why the writing is about cement, and steel, and buildings.

ALT: Wala na kasi, di ba?

RMU: No sense of nature landscape.

ALT: Wala na oo.

RMU: And that's what, I think, is very particular to southern writing and of course in its poetry.

ALT: Oo, because nature is still there. It still has a strong presence for them, and it has shaped their sensibilities.

RMU: Yes. People from elsewhere call it "unsophisticated" writing in a not so good way because there's nothing pyrotechnical there. But of course there's technique there. I mean, it's a new appreciation of writing from the south, which just dawned on me because of exposure to it. Now, yung Cyrenaic poems mo—what was the impetus behind this one?

ALT: It started with—there was this teacher of Oscar Wilde in Oxford who became rich. Who was that teacher? He was also murag a closet gay professor. The author of a very famous book about art, paintings.

RMU: John Ruskin? Walter Pater?

ALT: Morris, no. Walter Pater, yes. That's the guy. And so through him I got the idea about cyrenaicism. Of course it's also connected with Albert Camus—the cyrenaicism. It's like a variety of Epicureanism except that it was Aristippus of Cyrene who founded it. That's why it became Cyrenaic or Cyrenaicism. The difference is that in Cyrenaicism they accept pleasure—not just physical, as in drinking, loving, and eating, but accepts also the mental or spiritual pleasures. That's the difference. But basically they are the same in the idea that everything is passing, something like that.

RMU: You are attracted to that idea?

ALT: That idea, that's why I wrote a series of poems about Cyrenaicism. So the images that I used—

RMU: It's a wedding of the mind and the senses.

ALT: Yes.

RMU: What is the source of your pleasure these days?

ALT: (laughs) Well it is both, you know—pleasure not spiritual only but mental pleasure, reading or watching interesting movies. That's mental pleasure.

RMU: You have a garden?

ALT: I have a garden, a small yard. I like physical pleasure also, like working, walking. But of course you cannot do all of these especially in the evening. So I have to sit down. If you still want pleasure then you can read or watch a very good movie. A detective movie, for example. That would give you mental pleasure. So that's what life is, you know (laughs), for us anyway or for me

RMU: Do you have any regrets Tony?

ALT: I think if I have regrets it's because I don't have a good marriage. That's one of my regrets.

RMU: But that was not your fault.

ALT: Well, yes (laughs), because it's somebody else's sickness that has made my life, in a way, bad. So anyway—that. It's a regret. Of course you think of the might-have-beens. What if I had married the other girl? What if I had gone to Rutgers? That's one of my regrets. This probably would not have happened to me, you know. Although on the whole, I still consider myself fortunate compared to other people. So I have regrets, sure. I wish they were not there, but it's there so I have to live with it. I live from day to day only. I don't think about what will happen a year from now. I just have today. When I wake up, I have to do what I'm supposed to do and try to enjoy as much as I can, within my means, and that's it. Tomorrow is another day. I have no, kung baga, paki for what will happen five years from now. It doesn't bother me anymore. If I have fame, well then good. If I don't, well then good. If I have riches, good. If not, good. It's kind of like—

RMU: Philosophical—

ALT: It's like a kind of Stoicism already. So I'm not bothered by anything anymore, almost. But sometimes I am afraid to become heartless, you know (laughs), which is not good. You become insensitive. I hope it will not get to that point, but that's the philosophy that I take. I try to be happy as I can today.

RMU: Who are the writers whose books you've continued to read and cherished to this day?

ALT: I have so many. The one influence was Albert Camus, especially in terms of philosophy, in terms of the way of looking at things. He really made me conscious that, hey, nothing's perfect (laughs); hey, we are not going to be here forever; hey, this life is kind of absurd that you do not expect so many things from this life. If it happens, it happens. If not, well it doesn't matter.

RMU: Which book?

ALT: The one that has really influenced me is some of the essays in The Myth of Sisyphus. Yeah, those are the essays that really kind of shape my mind philosophically. But I enjoy almost everything though—Garcia Marquez. And if I have time to read or reread I still read those—

RMU: Homer?

ALT: Yes, every now and then. Dante. If I feel like reading something nice, I turn to the Odyssey or the Inferno because you can read and read and read and they always have something. Fascinated by the language, yeah. That's one of the pleasures of the mind, enjoying the pleasures of language, how language is used by the great poets, for example.

RMU: Do you sing, or play any musical instrument?

ALT: Yes, I sing, love to sing but I don't have the right vocal chords, so I confine my singing to the bathroom. But Myrna Pena-Reyes said I could carry a tune. One time she heard me sing a Tausug love song during Mom Edith's birthday in Montemar. I have a photo of that occasion. Sorry, I don't play any musical instrument. I don't have a gift in that department.

RMU: Do you listen to music? what kind would this be?

ALT: Yes, I listen to a lot of music, both classical and modern. My taste in music runs from Mozart to Mancini and Mantovani, from Bach to Bacharach. I love the deep sound of the cello in an adagio and the sax of Fausto Papetti, Paul Desmond, Benny Goodman, and Stan Getz.

RMU: Would you say that music has an influence on your writing?

ALT: Yes, I think my love for music has a deep and extensive influence on my poetry; at least, I don't sound sintonado in many of my poems. Isagani Cruz, in a review of my book The Badjao Cemetery and Other Poems, said there is music in my verses.

RMU: How would you want Anthony Tan to be remembered?

ALT: I don't know if I have to be remembered at all (laughs). But I would

like to be remembered as somebody who was kind of funny. I just want to be funny, you know, and never mind greatness. I don't really care for greatness. I just want to be remembered as somebody who was funny—who wanted to laugh or enjoy life laughing. Yeah that's why my essays are like that—they are funny.

RMU: And even in your Facebook postings you have a lot of funny things to say. You have a lot of jokes.

ALT: Oo nga eh. That's what I enjoy doing (laughs): funny things, you know. I don't really care for some people to discuss philosophical things. Not for me anymore. I'm not that young anymore, so it's probably beyond me.

END