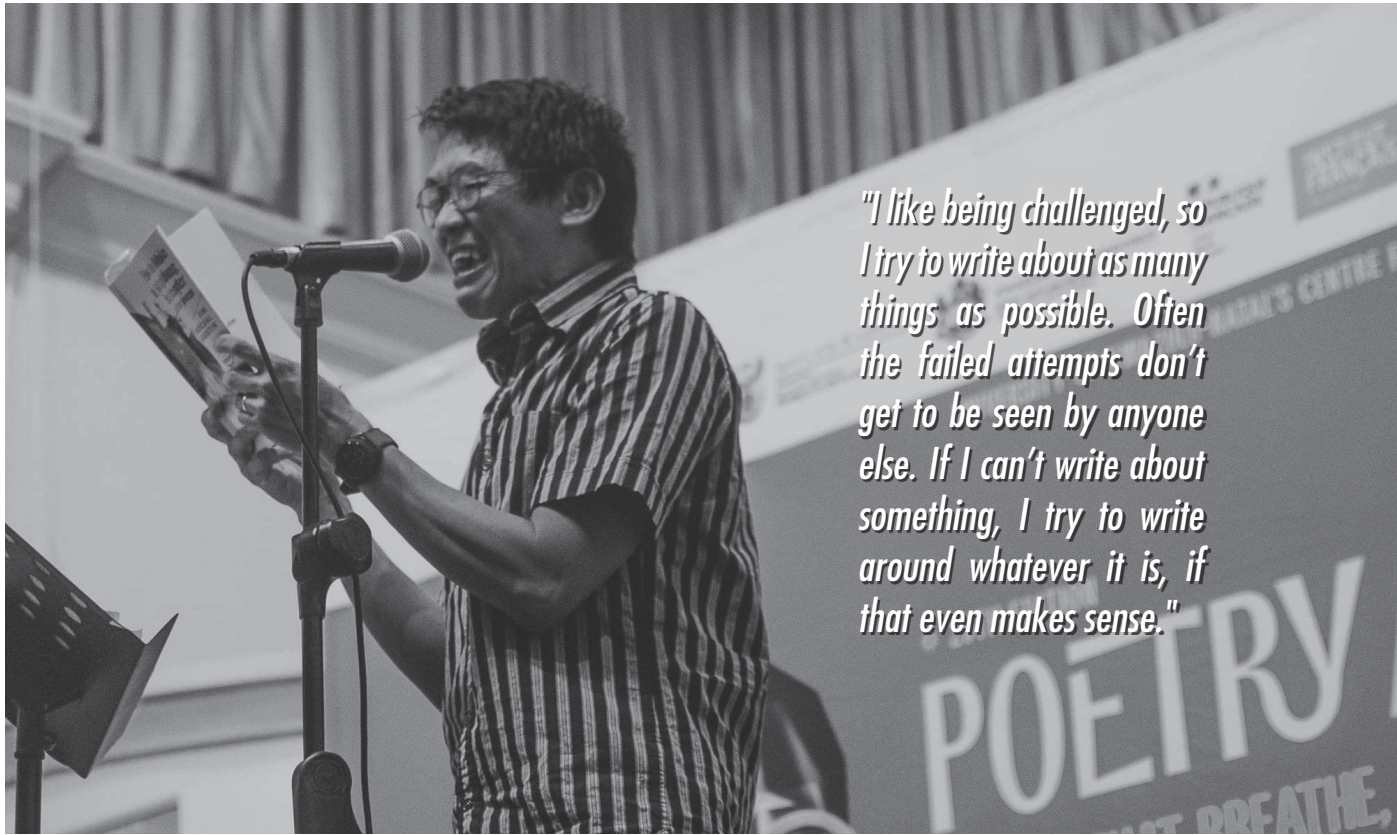


LOOKING FOR THE GOOD STUFF: AN INTERVIEW WITH JIM PASCUAL AGUSTIN

Winning the New York-based 2022 Gaudy Boy Book Prize affirms the international appeal of Jim Pascual Agustin's poetry. This Filipino poet now based in South Africa has published in the Philippines several notable volumes of poetry and one short story collection through Anvil Publishing, the University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, and San Anselmo Publications. His first international title was with The Onslaught Press, an independent publisher in the UK. After years of recognition in various South African poetry competitions, Agustin's first book in his adopted country was published by Deep South in 2022. The title of his new book is startling in its simplicity – *Bloodred Dragonflies*.

Born and raised in Marikina City in the Philippines, Agustin learned to love poetry during his elementary years because of the influence of Fr. James J. O'Brien, S.J. Through Fr. OB's Tulong Dunong Scholarship Program, Agustin was accorded the opportunity to study at the Ateneo de Manila University where he earned a degree in English Literature. His decision to move to Cape Town in 1994 is an engaging story in itself, part of which can be read in an essay in his new book.

We spoke with Agustin online about his poetics, his views on writing in general, *Bloodred Dragonflies* and his forthcoming publications.



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Agustin at Poetry Africa festival

SANTELMO: Why do you write? And why poetry?

AGUSTIN: I may have a different answer every time I get asked these questions. Here's the short version: I write because not writing isn't an option. Not writing — or the thought of never writing again — is a kind of dying.

I ended up writing partly due to the encouragement of various people and partly by choice. Fr. James O'Brien, S.J., introduced poetry to me when I was in public school. He made it enjoyable and a natural part of learning. Then, there was my high school teacher, Mike Gomez, who made me read something I wrote (a terrible piece!) in front of the class. In the university, Danton Remoto gave me feedback on all my early work until he "found" one that could be considered poetry. I "sat in" at a summer writing workshop where my writing got unexpected

praise. I was delighted when my poetry won prizes at Ateneo's Humanities Club. Then came the UP Writers Workshop where I met Bienvenido Lumbera. He became like a father to me.

I have written stories — but those require more space and time. Poetry I could write anywhere, even in a cramped jeepney while sharing fumes and sweat with other passengers who are forever abused by the government's inadequate response to the basic needs of the people. All you need is a pen and a scrap piece of paper. Finding readers is another thing.

SANTELMO: Tell us about your latest book *Bloodred Dragonflies*.

AGUSTIN: *Bloodred Dragonflies* took at least eight years. I'd been living in South Africa for nearly two decades when I approached

Robert Berold, the editor and owner of Deep South Publishing. Early on, he indicated that he wanted to publish a selection of my work. I wanted a new stand-alone collection, so I kept showing him various manuscripts through the years which eventually got accepted by other publishers. We reached a compromise, and so the long subtitle for the book.

It's important that *Bloodred Dragonflies* includes translations of a few of my poems from the Filipino as a way to make sure the readers know where I come from. It's a little sad that I write mostly in English now. But one day I want all my poems to find another home in my mother tongue.

A substantial part of the book tackles life under the Marcos dictatorship. Perhaps Robert saw those poems as a more urgent way to introduce my work to the South African literary landscape. I was a little uncomfortable about them because they also had hints of my personal circumstances. I didn't want "me" in the picture, I suppose. There are also poems about nature, ghosts, myths and legends. And love, most importantly, love.

SANTELMO: Your most recent win at the Gaudy Boy Poetry Book Prize must have opened many doors for you. How important do you think are awards and recognition to the life of a poet?

AGUSTIN: The Gaudy Boy Poetry Book Prize was like a wonderful explosion of joy out of nowhere, and a most welcome gift. My silly reaction to the announcement was caught on video! Nautal! Every now and again — sometimes even when I'm driving — I suddenly have a flash of that moment and I start giggling again in disbelief. It's like an antidote to all the grief I've had to deal with lately.

The win puts a spotlight on my other published work. Because of that I have found a literary agent who's going to try to find more readers for *Bloodred Dragonflies* in territories outside of South Africa and the Philippines. The South African edition of *Sound Before Water*, after a long delay, is about to be released.

My US publisher, Gaudy Boy, has invited me to attend the conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) in Seattle in March 2023 to present my winning book, *Waking Up to the Pattern Left by a Snail Overnight*. I don't know yet if I can come up with the funds for the trip. The real world has other more urgent demands. Good friends in South Africa are now starting a crowdfunding initiative. I still don't know how to handle the whole thing — I guess I am still overwhelmed.

More than these, the award has made me feel that there must be some worth in my work. That it isn't all a waste of time, bearing the weight of all that solitude, all those times when I was made to feel that I should be doing something else "more useful" in the real world.

Awards and recognition are dangerous. The legitimacy of awards largely depends on who runs them and how the judges reach a decision, and for what. Any literary award that has politics instead of putting the spotlight on a work that has genuine merit can only be destructive. Judges who can't read or won't give proper respect for each submission should not be given that power.

Recognition from readers who truly engage with a work is more important than awards. But then again you have to first get a chance to put your work out there, past gatekeepers, and hope your readers find it somehow.

SANTELMO: There is a growing following for your work, with your book *A Thousand Eyes* being named a finalist in the Filipino Readers' Choice Awards this year. What process do you follow when putting together a volume of poetry?

AGUSTIN: I love each one of my paper children, and *A Thousand Eyes* is a special one. It has this arresting cover by John Marin Flores with poems that are both deeply personal and also some that are weirdly unpredictable. It has snatches of science fiction and various versions of being haunted.

I don't have a clear-cut process when working on a volume of poetry. I often just write and after a certain point, when I see that there might be enough for a book, I gather the poems in hard copy and read through them to see if there is some kind of pattern or theme that might thread them together. I group, regroup, discard, add new ones along the way, and that process may take a few weeks to a few years. The poems search for each other, as it were, to form a bigger picture, a world of their own, where they feel they naturally belong. Each poem should be like feathers on a pair of wings, or at least they should all dream of taking to the air.

SANTELMO: Having produced a large body of work both in English and Filipino in a relatively short period, you are probably one of the most prolific writers today. Do the words "writer's block" mean anything to you? How do you deal with it?

AGUSTIN: I don't know about being prolific. I don't aim to put out books, I just write when I can. I used to write way more each day when I was much younger, but not necessarily better or publishable work. When I can't write something new, I try to translate my own work or someone else's. I see the times when I don't write as "filling up" time — simply

observing and soaking up the world around me, gathering in an unconscious way bits and pieces that may one day come together in the shape of words.

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SANTELMO: Protest against institutional corruption seems to be a recurring theme in your works. Is this a conscious and deliberate effort on your part?

AGUSTIN: We all know that stealing is wrong, so why tolerate it? Political corruption is a gross injustice. Politicians who are supposed to have been elected by the people are expected to serve the people, not to fatten their clan's hidden bank accounts. It bothers me because each cent stolen from the national budget is money meant to better the lives of

every single person and not just the very few, and it is a dagger in the back of those who are most vulnerable. It bothers me, so I have to respond. And writing is one way I can. Yes, writing to show one's objection is conscious and deliberate.

SANTELMO: *Is there any subject that you find difficult to approach, or a subject that you would never write about? Why?*

AGUSTIN: I like being challenged, so I try to write about as many things as possible. Often the failed attempts don't get to be seen by anyone else. If I can't write about something, I try to write around whatever it is, if that even makes sense.

SANTELMO: *The Philippines is slowly letting go of COVID-19 restrictions, while other countries have already declared an end to the pandemic. What can poetry offer to a post-COVID world?*

AGUSTIN: COVID-19 forced us to stare at who and what we lost, who and what we have left, what else could have been taken away from us. Poetry during the pandemic became one of the few things that one could still do — to read or to write. It became a kind of refuge. It would be wonderful if poetry became a more natural part of each person's life as it helps us to see the treasure that is in each moment.

SANTELMO: *Aside from poetry, you have a collection of short stories in Filipino published a few years ago. Are you planning to explore the short story or the novel in the near future?*

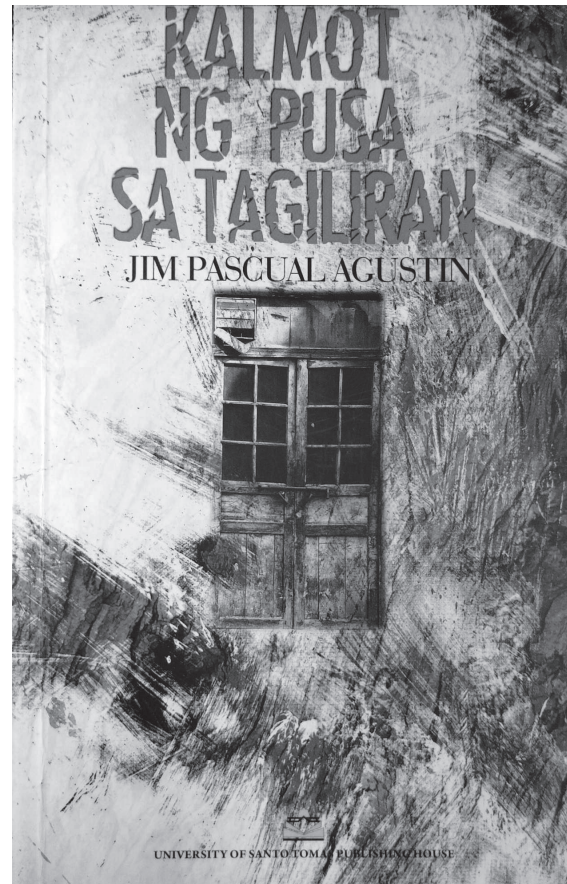
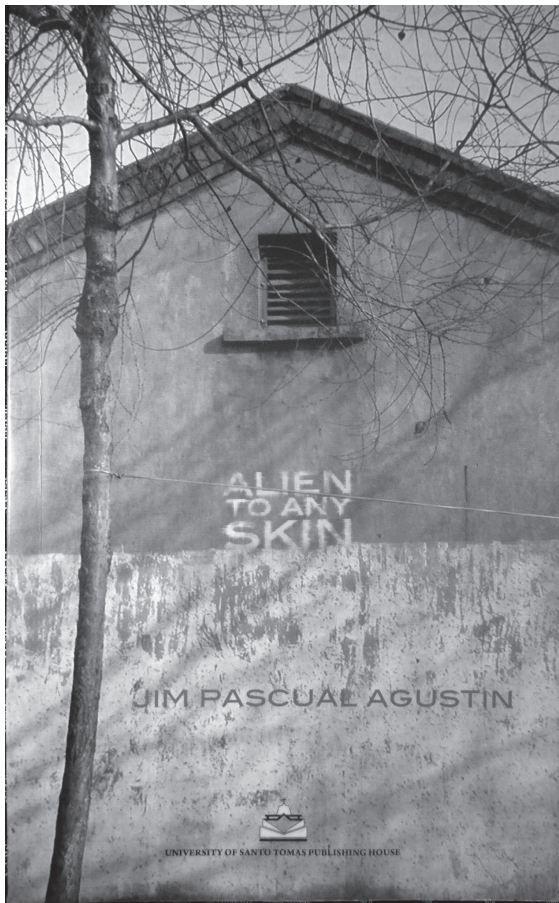
AGUSTIN: *Sanga sa Basang Lupa at iba pang Kuwento* is a collection that I put together before I left the Philippines. I remember the long nights of writing each of those stories,

the silent tolerance of my family. With intense hope, I submitted it to a publisher. They didn't even reply. So it stayed in limbo for over two decades. It was a weird experience to see it finally in print, this thing that nearly never got to see the world. The truth is it's a struggle for me to write prose, and I don't know if I can find the space and time like I had then. I do have plans to write more prose work, or I really hope to.

“COVID-19 forced us to stare at who and what we lost, who and what we have left, what else could have been taken away from us. Poetry during the pandemic became one of the few things that one could still do — to read or to write. It became a kind of refuge. It would be wonderful if poetry became a more natural part of each person's life as it helps us to see the treasure that is in each moment.”

SANTELMO: Because of social media, it has become almost second nature to express one's self through a post that can be a worthy read sometimes. Does this mean that such individuals can call themselves "writers"? At what point does an individual "become" a writer?

AGUSTIN: That's a trap, your question. I don't like labels (though I probably use them). I'd rather see and decide on my own if I like a piece of writing, wherever it may appear. Let the work speak for itself. Anyone can call himself/herself a writer, shout it out in as many public platforms and stages they could find, and still produce shit. Look for the good stuff, learn to tell what to take and what to throw in the closest recycling bin.



SANTELMO: You have been living in South Africa since 1994. What significant similarities and differences do you see between the Philippines and South Africa? How did these observations make their way into your writing?

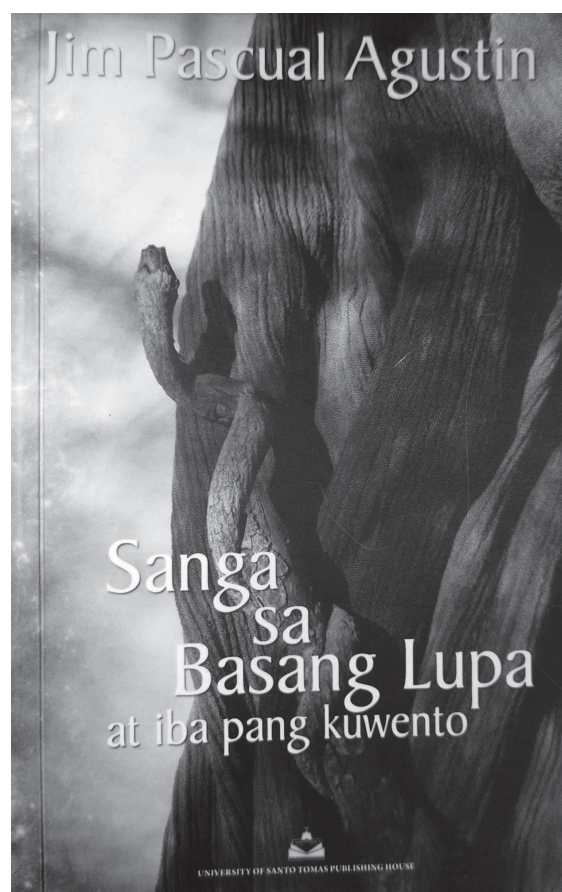
AGUSTIN: People are people (Depeche Mode nod). They wear clothes they find comfortable where they live, their skins take on different shades due to the angle the sun strikes the land where they were born, they each go through different daily experiences, and yet with just a little effort, a connection can be made between those who have never met each other before. The borders between what is strange and what is familiar grow blurry sometimes, more stark at others. Being aware and seeking those connections help us find our own selves.

One thing I am sad to say is this: I used to warn people about coming to South Africa; now it is the other way around. I could be wrong thinking like that, for there are many dangers in both my place of birth and my adopted country. And also much beauty, so much beauty.

Sometimes I am aware that I write like someone who has been split in half. Sometimes I forget.

SANTELMO: All writers must deal with rejection from a publisher at some point. How do you deal with such an experience?

AGUSTIN: In the days before email, it was tough. You either get total silence or, worse, a piece of paper that you stare at again and



again, like a knife you pick up by the blade while telling yourself it doesn't hurt. These days, the delete button is right there. You move on, perhaps never to submit another piece to the same journal or publisher, yet something in you itches to prove them wrong and you still do send that next piece. The rare moment they accept is pure joy. Finding the right place for your work is tough. Crocodile or even rhino skin are not tough enough, so you need to grow something thicker than that. Don't mope. This is what I tell myself again and again.

SANTELMO: Some say melancholy is the natural state of great poets. Nevertheless, there are certainly happy moments in life, even for serious poets. Please share with us what you would consider your happiest experience as a poet.



Agustin at Poetry Africa festival

AGUSTIN: That's crap, melancholy. It's not true at all. Choosing just one happiest experience is not possible for me. I was happiest when I met Bienvenido Lumbera whom I consider my literary father. I was happiest when my first poem was published (you'll have to guess where). I was happiest when my first book was published. I was happiest when I was told a manuscript was accepted. I was happiest when I was given an unexpected gift like the Gabo Prize, the Sol Plaatje EU Poetry Award, and more recently the Gaudy Boy Poetry Book Prize and the chance to be at Poetry Africa. It goes on. One hopes it never ends.

This interview was carried out by **EMMAN VELASCO** and **NOEL DEL PRADO**. They are both in the board of editors of **SANTELMO 3**. Velasco works in the shipping industry and writes poetry in Filipino. Del Prado is a poet, a lawyer, and a teacher of literature and law.