Reviews


In this, his second collection, John Edwin Cowen derives both inspiration and subject matter from his participation in the 2011 International Poetry Festival in Swansea, Wales, Dylan Thomas's birthplace. Cowen, who passed away in 2012 at the age of seventy-one, was also a devoted friend, student, and literary trustee executor of José García Villa. I knew John, having taken Villa's workshop held at his Greenwich Village flat, but only kept regularly in touch with him once he started editing the collection of Villa's poems, with an introduction by myself that was published in 2008 by Penguin as *Doveglion: Collected Poems*.

Cowen was a man who was as gentle and even-tempered as José was acerbic and temperamental—a perfect yin-yang combination. He proved to be one of Villa's most devout pupils, studying with him for thirty-four years, more than satisfying Villa's dictum that you needed to have at least a decade with him to get anywhere in terms of mastering the craft—and the poet, informally nicknamed the Pope of Greenwich Village, considered himself a master. (I myself attended the workshop for about a year and a half before declaring independence from, but not forswearing a friendship, albeit prickly, with the patriarch.)

Being a student of Villa that long carried a price, and that can be inferred from the fact that Cowen's two collections of poetry came out only after Villa's death in 1997: *Mathematics of Love* in 2011, more than a decade after, and then the following year, *Poems: From Dylan's Wales*. There were the heretofore mentioned posthumous collection he edited and the earlier *Parlement of Giraffes: Poems for Children Eight to Eighty*, again, a collection of Villa's works.

Dylan Thomas was the justly celebrated lyrical Welsh poet who died in a New York hospital in 1953 at the young age of thirty-nine years, done in by his famously heavy drinking. Villa recommended that his students read Thomas, primarily for the musicality of his lines. The Filipino poet had met Thomas at the White Horse Tavern, around the corner from where Villa lived, a favorite watering hole for the Welshman whenever he was in town, and a place that has since capitalized on this fact. (Legend has it that the poet is buried underneath the floorboards—a legend, I suspect, the tavern has always encouraged.) It was where I'd meet Villa from time to time, along with other Filipino writers in New York, and where John and I would talk about putting together the collected poems after Villa passed away.

In this second collection there is a quiet confidence and an understated lyricism. Cowen knew better than to imitate the inimitable Dylan-esque line that at its best was the exultation of an enormously gifted young poet, held fervently by the muse.
“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” the celebrated elegy on his father’s death, and “Fern Hill,” with its concluding couplet, “Time held me green and dying/ Though I sang in my chains like the sea,” are classic works that exemplify Thomas’s lilt and pith.

It is the spirit of Dylan, his innate sense of how to make language sing, that Cowen attempts to re-create in his own fashion. The reader can glean this, for instance, in lines from “Dim Stars in the Tower”: “And, like the numb tucked into tombs/ or the brightest hanging limbs/ like the so-called living seem/ now old and dried-up streams” (61).

Poems like “The Day I Fell on Dylan Thomas’s Grave” and “Song from Fern Hill” commemorate John’s visit to the different sites where the Welsh bard lived or wrote or wrote up. Such poems constitute the first half of the book, and there are some fine lines in these. It is in the second half, however, that we get the sense of the poet hitting his stride. The best works here are those that do not directly reference specific places in the Dylan itinerary, though clearly his being in Swansea proves to be a boon.

Cowen’s own lyricism comes to full flower, beginning with “Once I Knew” and concluding with the heartbreaking “Getting Ready,” a prescient testament to Cowen giving in to death’s dominion, to paraphrase Thomas, a few months after the book’s publication. Here are some lines from “Once I Knew” (66):

once I knew all love’s moves
twice: hers and mine, loaves
that held us as one, words
that warmed us, warned us
as nights turned coldly as
our love grew lonely, sighed
for a love once glowed
turned to flesh grown old
and ashen.

And here is the last poem of the book, “Getting Ready,” in full (71):

Somehow when we get ready
to put things in
order, we know
our time has
come and

relieved like a racehorse
who has broken its
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leg, head down,
— before
the ending shot

We gather papers and wrap
them in rubber-
bands & with
Post-Its mark
their importance:

saying without saying it—
“I love you.” Now
I leave this to
you to remem-
ber me … as you go on

Such words speak of a man at peace with himself, who lets us in on the
conversations he is having with himself and with whatever fixes his eye and heart.
They may seem to be simple ruminations but there is nothing simplistic or, for that
matter, pretentious about them. The discerning reader will note the underlying
craft, and the deployment of a poetics that subordinates sense or meaning to a poetic
sensibility without the poem’s being the less clear for that. These are the lyrics of a
true poet, and in a quiet way they rage against the dying of the light.

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Lorenzo. Written by Juan Ekis and Paul Dumol, with Joem Antonio. Music by Ryan
Cayabyab. Directed by Nonon Padilla. Green Wings Entertainment. SDA

At the center of the new rock opera Lorenzo is the diaspora experience, represented by two figures who live centuries apart. The premise of the story is simple