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SEA SERPENT. By Alfred A. Yuson. Manila: Monsoon Press, 1980. 85 pages.

Poetry is not a strong suit in Philippine writing in English. The short story has a long tradition of competence, and the novel has emerged in the postwar period with a certain amount of respectability. Drama in English still struggles and, it seems, will be overshadowed by the emergence of the vernacular drama in years to come. Poetry in English is very uneven. One might speculate that poetry in English suffers because it has no roots, no traditions, and no directions as yet in the Philippines. There are a few poets of note, but a good deal of what is being published at the moment is uneven and confused. Those adjectives also, perhaps best describe the first collection of Alfred A. Yuson's poetry in book form. His poems are uneven and confused.

Although *Sea Serpent* is his first book, Yuson has been writing poetry and fiction for some time. He has won first prize in the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards, the Philippines Free Press, and the Cultural Center of the Philippines literary contests in poetry and in fiction. He has participated in poetry conferences and workshops in Iowa and at the East-West Center in Honolulu. The poems collected here have appeared in magazines and periodicals both in the Philippines and abroad. The introduction is by Edith Tiempo.

The dominant theme of the collection is geographical — days together that “stopped and met with place” (p. 20). Ophelia Dimalanta, in her review of Yuson, prefers to see the theme as time and change [*Weekend* 1 (13 July 1980): 31], but the journey theme, both physical and psychological, is the more obvious one, and encompasses the ideas of time and change as well. The lead poem in this regard would have to be “Travelogue”. It begins with Coron, Mambajao, Camiguin, and Cuernos de Negros, moves through Pulau P'ngang, Melaka, Singapura, and Songkhla, and finally ends on North Dubuque Street with Tom, the Irishman, who “professed disbelief in place paeans.” There is a bitter chess image that underlies “Filipino in Frisco,” a complicated playing with allusive images in “Filipino in Chicago” — “my kind of forlorn town” — and a list of “ghosts of expats past (who) follow us following the parade” in “Filipino in New York”.

All contemporary saints; each to each
to each to each his own sincere patch . . .
It's a personal anecdotal whoop in the sky
over this private private pulsing pulsing
solo world . . .

Since now so safe, strafed on the lap
There is also Songkhla in “Coming Back Like a Songkhla” (the title is a good example of Yuson's inscrutability — is he kidding?), “Sarangani Bay,” where “mountains are pincers, phalanges, ochre palms closing upon the sea,” “Saga-

da, June 1970," and "Midlandfall."

Since now so safe, strafed on the lap
of unfamiliar roads, I feel for rocks
for slime, for something tough and round,
a shell perhaps with the dear filial roar.

The journey has come full circle and the searcher is back at his roots.

My strongest criticism of Yuson is concerned with what professionals call tone. It is complex, changeable, and all too often indecipherable. He tries to be "all things at all times" (p. 9). It is a quality of his poetry that Tiempo seems to praise in her introduction: "Alfred Yuson pitches a tone of voice to be noted for the elusive quality of being many things all at the same time." Dimalanta is not quite sure whether she wants to accept Yuson's slippery persona or not.

It is extremely difficult to see what Yuson's tone is precisely. What is his stance, his attitude towards what he is writing? He is now serious, now joking, sometimes flip, sometimes cute — all in the same poem. One cannot help but feel that he is, at times, hiding behind a somewhat adolescent posturing. The best comment seems to be his own words: "Why am I writing like this?" (p. 63).

The allusiveness of his images complicates the matter of tone. All too often the images belong to a "private pulsing solo solo world" (p. 33). Even Dimalanta comments that Yuson's poetry is "difficult reading where even the plainest discursive line entails much more than a cursory reading" and the reader goes shadow boxing with *terminologies* and images which are at times vague, hovering between two or more levels of meaning, shifting from the concrete to the abstract and abstrusive" (*Weekend*, p. 31). The honest critic or reader must inevitably ask himself: Is this virtue or vice?

The problem of tone is further complicated by Yuson's language. He writes of "Bionic Boy, presidentially adopted . . . as . . . mascot of martial law. Hee haw! Why not Nixon?" (p. 33), and

Zing zing lofting
Green you speared me between the eyes and I
Can do no less than spare the travel rogue's good-byes. (p. 21)

Language is often incomprehensible (or the images are), but more disconcerting are the lapses in what the ancients would have called decorum. "Sonnets are for the birds" writes Yuson (p. 55) and "I experience the inevitable foot-long turd after a night of lambanog" (p. 63). He calls Quiapo the "armpit of the country" (p. 47), and in Mambajao he records:

We slept lightly
Cradled close on a cot coerced so by her kindly
Old consonants. Mumbo-jumbo night! To tango
It takes two, thus, in lieu of snore we coo.

Yet one must admit that there are extremely good lines in Yuson, like the opening of "Father":

Must everything begin and end with tension,
as with father and son,
the memory of games and sins between? (p. 15)
and in "Sagada":

Close by, your chin
cupped and kissed
by the lamp's thrown
gold, recalling the
upshoot of lilies –
I plucked one from
among the obelisks
of shale, remember! (p. 84)

And there are very good poems in the collection, like the opening poem, "Father," and the title poem, "Sea Serpent." "Poem For E" is excellent:

Do you suppose the most beautiful
friendships are those
flung from both
sides of the river which led
to different cataracts of the same poem? (p. 53)

Yuson is a young poet, and he is experimenting. We must forgive him that he infuriates us as often as he delights us. For those are the liberties we allow young poets struggling to find a consistent tone and a reason to write.

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.