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The Write Place at the Write Time Book Review- Hot off the Presses

YOLANDA

AN ORAL HISTORY IN VERSE



Cover Image of Yolanda: An Oral History in Verse

Author Bio: Tim Tomlinson is co-founder of New York Writers Workshop, and co-author of its popular text, *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*. *Yolanda: An Oral History in Verse*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press in October 2015. *Requiem for the Tree Fort I Set on Fire*, his full-length collection of poems, will appear late 2016 (Winter Goose Publishing). His fiction, poetry, and essays have been published in China (*United Verses*), the Philippines (*Esquire*, *Tomas*, *Silliman Journal*, and *Fast Food Fiction* on Anvil Press), and in numerous venues in the US, including *The Blue Lyra Review*, *Barnstorm Literary Journal*, *Caribbean Vistas*, *Soundings Review*, *Theory in Action*, and in the anthology *Long Island Noir* (Akashic Books). He's been an invited speaker and workshop leader in China, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, and the US. He teaches in New York University's Global Liberal Studies program.

***The Write Place at the Write Time Book Review Presents
Yolanda: An Oral History in Verse by Tim Tomlinson***

Review by Nicole M. Bouchard

One of the most powerful tropical cyclones ever to be recorded according to NPR and the BBC—the most powerful as a storm recorded at landfall and as a typhoon in regard to one-minute sustained windspeed—Yolanda was one of those cataclysmic events that no one who didn't experience it firsthand can ever fully comprehend. Yet in *Yolanda: An Oral History in Verse*, we are brought so viscerally close, that we come up gasping for air after the final page. Clear, evocative, carrying many times its weight, it is as pervasive as water, invading every cerebral and emotional space. Like a net cast deep beneath the surface, it captures and ties together a varied grouping of perspectives and voices to be presented to us with the purpose of understanding.

Each poem bears a name, an identity, a personal account. If the words and messages aren't enough to bind us to the subjects, we find we are bound by the details of the voices we're hearing. In

crisis, a natural instinct is to look to the familiar for comfort; and amongst the debris, decay and ruin, we come upon names we know with relief, eager to learn of their fates. Salvadora Dagami, Father Hector, Dulz Cuna...just a few of the memorable voices you'll meet drifting through the pages. Names, ages, professions, personal moments and memories help you see through their eyes that which you cannot unsee.

There are moments of family, survival, hope and human compassion that you want to absorb; and then, there are images of devastation and fatalities that your mind beats against with both fists in a futile effort to keep them out before they engulf you. You can't help but be imagined into those rooms of the houses, watching the water rise, feeling the cold in its climb up your body, tensing in dread for what seems inevitable. Then the wall moves—the ceiling gives way and all you see is white—the water, everything and nothing. You might come to believe at this point that in so close a reading you know something of what drowning is—but you don't, you can't. Yet what the sharing of these raw truths in poetry affords us is the ability to understand and connect in a way that is closer, more real, more profound than anything we could feel when we hear about such happenings in the media.

The enormity of what transpires is shown best in the small frames of intimate portrayals, actions and thoughts. In both "The Storm" and "Evidence" there is a theme concerning the strong desire to have the end to one's story told; that if they should die this way, that there will at least be proof or witnesses to tell the survivors. It is as though in acknowledging or facing an end, the entire journey has its significance sealed. In "The Wall" the plight of the father and his family, the fear, love, strength, faith and helplessness against outside forces speaks a universal language so recognizable, each one of its one hundred and eighty-nine words strikes with emotive force. "The Surge" first moves and then shocks in its depiction of severed connection, loss and the visible and invisible marks left behind on the one left behind. In "The Cross" certainty is undone as symbols fall, desperate

strangers rush the doors in every state of distress and what cannot be changed cannot be forgotten: "One thing I couldn't forget— / drowning victims, kids, their lips already bluish, cold, hypothermic / I resuscitated them, tried to save them, / they were already ..." (13).

The poems follow the survivors through the days in the aftermath where care, supplies and food are scarce. Different voices describing similar losses of life and possessions, observing the dead and living dead—the living with blank stares, "zombie-like" in their countenance in the wake of unimaginable tragedy. There are balances with general and personal perception. "Looting" gives the overall perspective and "Looting II" takes it to the harsh daily realities, particularly when they ask if they can get a sack of rice and a man answers, "Oh yes. Just ask the owner" (22), pointing to a body lying there. This balance continues in "If the Dead Were Ours" and "Bodies"—Father Hector contributing compassionate views in both instances that comment on survival and grief.

The book ends with hope—that being the title and sentiment of the last poem. Succinctly, literally and metaphorically we go full cycle in ending with a beginning in nature: "We plant, we harvest, we have food to eat. / That is our only hope" (27).

The poet asks the questions that we need to never stop asking of the world because there are never enough answers—*Who are you and what have you seen?*—because there is always more to learn. In centuries past, poets, bards and storytellers were revered as the keepers of history and held a place of great influence in society. I believe this is true still when writers use their pens to share the untold, help us understand better the essence of one another, ourselves under every extreme and mundane circumstance. It is often through words, that we are able to remain mindful of just how interconnected we all are. In giving expression to the individuals affected, Tomlinson has elevated this art form to where it is an equal contribution to those who need to heal and to we who need to know.

Excerpt from Yolanda: An Oral History in Verse



[Excerpt from Yolanda: An Oral History in Verse by Tim Tomlinson \(Finishing Line Press\). Copyright © 2015](#)

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