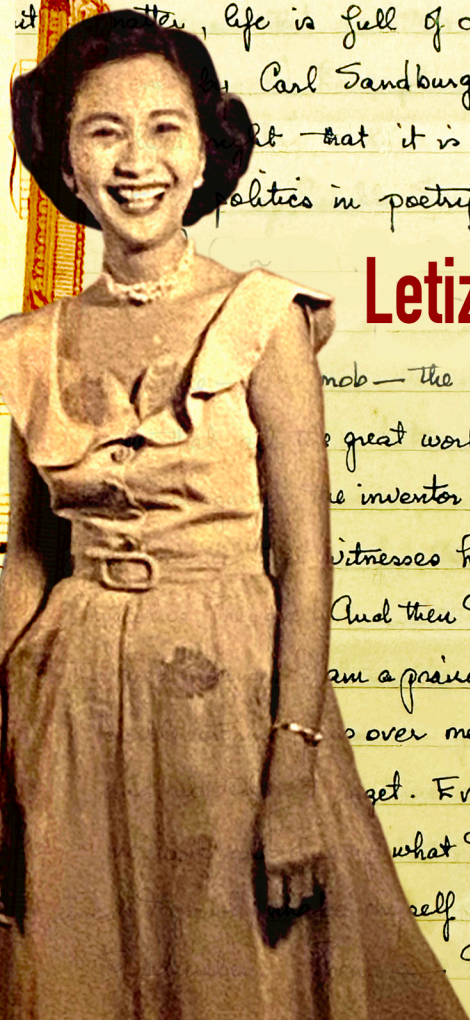


Surprise! A letter at last. This was prompted by your statement that you are currently interested in poetry — a real relation to me, and I am pleased. I did tell you I personally was not into poetry these days (though I taught poetry analysis/appreciation many years ago), but here's a happy coincidence: I am on this year, in an effort to exercise a rapidly deteriorating memory, I've been memorizing poetry and reciting a couple of them before sleeping, in lieu of other people's Hail Marys, the Lord's Prayers, the Hail Marys, the Lord's Prayers. There's a fiction in it, as much as in the real thing. Life is full of contradictions. Well, I don't know if Carl Sandburg and I realized as I was writing that it is a good one to share with you. Politics in poetry or poetical politics.

Letizia: A Life in Letters



mob — the crowd — the mass.

The great work of the world is done through me
the inventor, the maker of the world's good and
witnesses history. The Napoleons come from me
And then I send forth more Napoleons and live
am a prairie that will stand for much plowing
over me, I forget. The best of me is sucked
get. Everything but Death comes to me and
what I have. And I forget.
myself and spatter a few real drops for
I forget.

Introduction

Letizia Roxas Constantino (April 9, 1920-June 27, 2016) was a relentless chronicler who recorded the daily and monthly rhythms of life in a vast array of notebooks and journals. She was a prolific writer whose intellect and heart was best expressed through countless letters she wrote to friends, colleagues, and family, regardless of the subject. From the mundane to the unsettling, writing to a great grandchild, to her daughter or husband, or to an editor or employee she barely knew, Letizia wrote with elegance, precision, and concision.

The letter in this pamphlet was written to one of her grandchildren. It is a good example of Letizia's analytical mind, the way she lays bare the fabric of a subject to reveal inherent complexities even as she sews back the threads to show the entirety of intricate concepts, never needing convoluted sentences and always striving to avoid words that might be unfamiliar to the reader.

The brevity and simplicity she employed in her letters reflects Letizia's firm grasp of the subject she was writing about, a quality conveying confidence and clarity in her thinking. She was a writer, a historian, a political analyst, a dancer, and a classical pianist. With her husband, Renato Constantino, Letizia helped advance the cause of people-driven nationalism anchored on history and durable democracy.

Even as she would often raise high the banner of science, Letizia was foremost a teacher as well as a champion of the humanities. She believed deeply in the power that a thoroughgoing sense of the past can engender among Filipinos determined to understand the root cause of the country's problems while acting to secure a more just and free future.

She was a remarkable Filipina.



Letizia: A Life in Letters

The exhibit runs from April 9-May 30, 2025
at the Linangan Gallery of the Constantino Foundation

For inquiries or feedback, write to constantinofoundation@gmail.com

20 August 1992

Dear Red,

Surprise! A letter at last. This was prompted by your statement that you are currently interested in poetry—a real revelation to me, and I am pleased. I did tell you I personally am not into poetry these days (though I taught poetry analysis/appreciation many years ago), but here's a happy coincidence: off and on this year, in an effort to exercise a rapidly deteriorating memory, I've been memorizing poetry and reciting a couple of them before sleeping, in lieu of other people's Hail Marys, both sleep-inducing because they shut out other thoughts. There's a contradiction there—poetry as mental stimulus and as soporific, but no matter, life is full of contradictions. Well, my current poem is one by Carl Sandburg and I realized as I was mumbling it last night that it is a good one to share with you because it is politics in poetry or poetical politics.

I Am the People, the Mob

(1916)

I am the people—the mob—the crowd—the mass.

Do you know that all the great work of the world is
done through me?

I am the working man, the inventor, the maker of the
world's food and clothes.

I am the audience that witnesses history.

The Napoleons come from me and the Lincolns.

They die. And then I send forth more Napoleons
and Lincolns.

I am the seed ground. I am a prairie that will stand for
much plowing. Terrible storms pass over me.

I forget. The best of me is sucked out and wasted.

I forget. Everything but Death comes to me and
makes me work and give up what I have.

And I forget.

Sometimes I growl, shake myself and spatter a few red
drops for history to remember. Then—I forget.

When I, the People, learn to remember, when I,
the people, use the lessons of yesterday and no
longer forget who robbed me last year, who played
me for a fool,— then there will be no speaker in all
the world say the name: “The People,” with any
fleck of a sneer in his voice or any far-off smile of
derision.

The mob—the crowd—the mass—will arrive then.

Stop here. Don’t read the rest of this letter until you have re-read the poem slowly and savored it. Its message/meaning is simple enough. But my days as a literature teacher came back from the haze of forgotten memories—memories that only this sharing have summoned from the past. I feel an urge to recreate the classroom discussion I might have conducted on this poem.

First, I would have placed the poet within the context of history and his own particular milieu. Carl Sandburg: An American poet born in Illinois in 1878 of humble Swedish immigrants. His life is a kaleidoscope of occupations: at 13 was delivering milk in a milk wagon, later worked as a porter in a barber shop, a scene-shifter in a cheap theatre, a truckhandler in a brickyard, a soldier during the Spanish-American war, a tutor, janitor and captain of the baseball team in college, a salesman, an advertising manager of a department store, a district organizer for the Social Democratic Party of Milwaukee, a newspaper reporter—and through it all, a writer of poetry and prose. Dubbed the “laureate of industrial America, he celebrated in perhaps his best-known poem, the new vigor of Chicago and the dynamism of the machine age. But he hated exploiters and wanted the wonders of industrialization to serve the people whose voice he was in poems that used folk speech and chronicled folk ways. Yet there was also another poet inside Sandburg. As a literary critic wrote: there are “two Sandburgs”: “the muscular, heavy-fisted, hard-hitting son of the streets and his unrecognizable twin, the shadow-painter, the haunter of

mists, the lover of implications and overtones.” Here is the “imagist” Sandburg in a poem I love (also written in 1916) for its economy, simplicity, and sheer beauty.

Fog

The fog comes
On little cat feet.
It sits looking
Over harbor and city
On silent haunches
And then moves on.

To go back to the “muscular” “I am the People, the Mob.” Just as you think you have squeezed the poem’s core, close reading, critical reading will yield more stuff to appreciate.

Some questions:

In the title, why did the poet choose to call the people the mob?

“the mob—the crowd—the mass” Is there any significance in the arrangement? Couldn’t he have written “the crowd—the mass—the mob” just as well?

If the people do all the great work why does he say they are only an audience, witnessing history? Is he right? Aren’t the people the makers of history?

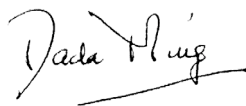
Examine the metaphor: “I am a prairie that will stand for much plowing.” Is it a powerful metaphor? Does it tell you more about the people?

What are “a few red drops for history to remember”?

What is the sign that the People have arrived?

What is the effect of the same arrangement of mob-crowd-mass being repeated in the last line?

End of lesson.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dada Mung". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping 'D' and a long horizontal line extending from the end.

I thank you for this honor.
In the twilight of my life it is
good to be remembered.

Let me repay your kindness
with three thoughts to ponder on:

1. The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory.
2. Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.
3. Education should make a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave.

Phil. Normal University
Oct. 5, 2002 International Teachers' Day



Constantino
Foundation