

Marjorie EVASCO PERNIA

From *Dreamweavers: Selected Poems*
(Manila: Editorial and Media Corporation, 1987)

**CARAVAN OF THE
WATERBEARERS**
(Mitzvah with Grace)

We will not forget the evil eye
of the storm they raised,
gutting the grounds we defended.
We have been trained
to look away too often
when man's flesh, muscle, bone,
knifed woman, to protect
the child's eye from the dust
of the lord's sin against
our kind, pretending
our tears are daughters of the wind
blowing across no-woman's- land.

We have had to seek the center
of the storm in the land we claim
is ours, too. Faces keening towards
the full force of winds
once blinding us, we see
the blur of broken earth,
blasted wastes, damned seas.

Our vision clears in our weeping

We have joined the trek
of desert women, humped over
from carrying our own oases
in the claypots of our lives,
gathering broken shards we find
in memory of those who went
ahead of us, alone.

When we seize the watersource

our ranks will complete the circle
we used to mark around our tents,
making homes, villages, temples,
schools, our healing places.
And we will bear witness for
our daughters and sons,
telling them true stories
of the caravan.

From
Ochre Tones: Poems in English & Cebuano
(Manila: Salimbayan Books, 1999)

INTO THE GROVE: WRITING IN TWO TONGUES

After the publication of *Dreamweavers*, my first collection of poetry which I call a 'book of origins,' I journeyed on to write poems for this second collection which I now feel is a 'book of changes.' Four years after the first book came out, in April 1991 found myself enjoying a writing residency in a castle in Scotland. There a curious but inevitable thing happened. In the daily company of three British and two American writers, I made a new and distressing discovery: I wanted to write poetry not only in English but also in Binisayà, and I did not know where to begin. Or, to put it more precisely, I sensed I was back to that strange place of portents. Out of this configuration I composed "Poet in Exile" – the second of the three poems I completed during my writing residency at Hawthornden Castle.

In October 1992, I accepted the invitation of then Cebuano Studies Center Director Resil Mojares to serve as panelist in the 9th Cornelio Faigao Writers Workshop, which was held in the picturesque seaside town of Boljoon, Cebu. More than half of the manuscripts submitted were in Binisayà. I rejoiced in the vigor and vitality of the Cebuano language and resolved to return to it in my writing. Perhaps it was the confluence of the bare Boljoon hills which seemed to carry all the blue of the world on its back, the quiet sea which felt like a huge hammock enduring my weight and never letting me fall, and the lilt and verve of the *balak* that gave me a direct link back to my desire to write poetry in Binisayà.

The road home proved to be long and circuitous. But whenever I tried my hand at writing in my mother language, my ears curled like a child's fingers around the vowels of a tongue I knew, but seemed to have forgotten how to dream in.

Translation was the path I took into the grove. In the next six years I found myself translating poetry in English by poets born and raised in the Central Visayas into Cebuano. I learned how to test the seaworthiness of my translations by sending them out to poet-friends like Grace Monte de Ramos of Siaton, Negros Oriental, and Clovis Nazareno of Loon, Bohol. The translations of my own poems were sent to Resil Mojares and Erlinda Albuero. All of them gave me encouragement and taught me how much more work I need to do, how much more time I want to devote to reclaiming my mother tongue.

On March 31, 1993, a month after I received a literary award from the Mariano Manguerra Foundation of Cebu City together with poet Simeon Dumdum Jr., *Bisaya* Literary Editor Tiburcio Baguio, chose my poem “Yuta-Tubig-Kalayo-Hangin” for the *balak* section of the magazine. To me, this was a first way-station of the difficult journey back home. It was an affirmation of the intrinsic rightness and intangible rewards of the pilgrimage. In the bosom of that place in poetry and language which I call home, I know I have my mother’s milk on my tongue at last!

Marjorie M. Evasco

February 1999

New moon of

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THE QUICK BRUISE AND RUN OF LOVE

(for Mary Ann & Marc)

I.

Summer twilight slices into two
Halves of a sweet cantaloupe;
At table, the speckled stargazer
Opens its fragrant petals windward;
At my foot, our old cat dreams.
Nothing here betrays the grace
We speak of at each meal, together
Or alone. Today, while one of us
Sits under the tamarinds,
And another wades the golden river,
I alone sit at table, a mother
Attending to the core of fruit
Cleaving to the knife, the fuchsia

Flower sundered by summer's heat,
The cat purring its ninth life away.

II.

Yesterday night after dinner, we told
An old story, pausing at a part
We did not love but could not
Gnaw off. It is your hurt fathered
Into child's shape, vulnerable
To faithlessness. As the story twists
In the telling, you speak of a new-
Born child, whose limbs could break
Or neck snap. were one of you to hold
The tender heels and swing against a wall.
We need to put this story right.

III.

Long, long ago on a fevered night,
A mother sat by her child's bed,
Damp cloth soothing flame of forehead,
Limbs. in her vigil she vowed
On pain of death, to beg the life
Or health back into those cheeks.
The fever broke, she held her kind
And knew the gods had ears.
Son, Daughter, take this story-child
With care. In the curve of your arms
Your father's fruit survives the fall,
Becomes your bruised but living grace.

GRIOTTE

the story I remember Sandie Mbanefo remembers
her Igbo father telling her the old village storyteller

sat in the moonlight middle of a circle of ears and drums
beating the story in to let each one remember
stories from the very beginning simple complete
the way to throw nets onto the center of the lake
the way to cast spells to tame spit of the black mamba
in the countless spirals of words seeking the listening
whole navel dark pit memory called Mother in any tongue
in any story remembered and passed on in time
from time to time resurfacing in another other parts
of the world woven with skein like hers like mine like
Lina Sagaral Reyes bathing in the moonlight because
Bohol Electric cut off her supply her power to tell
the moonlight to me undiminished under the candleglow
as she remembered how rain water splashed
a shiver of fireflies on her brown body washed off salt
and silt from her twilight search for mollusks at Loay Beach
with the village women who also tell stories
what they remember everyday where crabs dance mate spawn
at new moon tide extraordinary things glowing
in the mangrove swamps while my feet tread their way
back to the night Sandie showed me Nigeria
the ceremonial clay figures in the round of storytelling
pulling me into the silent stretch of words as time curves
the gesture of fishers' nets on to another lake where
I sit listen with Mabel Alampay to the blind
storyteller of Talisay remembering Taal Volcano
spewing lightning bolts the memory burned onto thin membrane
of eyelids shut forever into seeing inward a story of awe
passed on passing

BAKED OYSTERS ROCKEFELLER

We take shelter from the monsoon rains
In the warm inflections of dinner
Spread out to our liking, a la carte.

The sky's the old cliché: no limits here,
Chef's a master at re-incarnating Lapu-lapu,
Or carving a plateful of Manansala's heart.

Will I, I wonder, be so bold as to say
With a straight face to the waiter: we are
Carnal you see, hungry for the Other.

And we'd like everything as raw as we
Can get it in this civil place, with its piano,
Violin, china, silver, spotless linen.

You look at me, intent, your voice encodes
Bite-sized pleasures — (*Kani Sushi*, yes?)
Dipped desires — (*Oysters Rockefeller*, baked?).

My mind scuttles the crab's tangent
To our table, shelled; my tongue
sauces at the thought of succulents.

Even when the waiter interjects
Those Rockefellers are out of season,
What a feast live absences meant!

INVITATION FROM LATVIA

(Inspired by "Big Sea # 1" by Vija Celmins and "Penelope as Painter" by John Berger,)

I.

It is the sea, Vija, before my eyes —
Shimmered by the constant measure of your hand's
Pressure on trough and crest: each wave
Crumpled by shadows the wind makes

As it blows from the frozen steppes
Of your knowing heart. But you are
Nowhere in your painting.
You have stepped into anonymity,
Thirty years an explorer with your graphite
And oils, tracing the world's visible lines,
Searching the mysterious vast,
The mast of your pencil or brush
Following the light in the eye,
In the disciplined patience
Of an old hand of the Baltic.

II.

Big Sea #1 reminds John Berger of Penelope
On her own odyssey of beauty and faith,
Ravelled strand upon bright-colored strand
Measuring each day's exacting frame,
He calls your way of loving hand made,
Hand maiden to the daily art, moving inch
By slow inch with allegiance to matter,
To what truly matters in the long stretch:
Design the careful eye sees, waiting
For images to reach their own completion
That the artist's hand may fix the vision
To memory: stones from the desert,
Nightskies of our wondering,
The threatening distances only patience
Or love can warm into wonder.

III.

In the Visayan Sea, Vija, lies an island
Shaped like a water buffalo cooling itself
After a day's work under the sun
Pulling the plow furrow after furrow
Of possible plenitude. On this island
Called Apo, old women call the fishermen
"Weavers of the Sea," criss-crossing
The waters Furrow after furrow

For the meagre meal. The sea which surrounds
Their island resounds to the sea of your memory
As you compose the tones, precise as music
Heard from the lips of a conch shell, bringing news
of the world's magnificent indifference
To which we give homage
With an old and deliberate tenderness.

SAGADA STILLS IN A FLOATING WORLD

If with images		If with words
I		You
	could catch	
on photographic film		on silk paper
	a likeness	
of You		of me
	in Sagada	
I would have have		You would
	to sit a thousand years with master of austere	
Light Measure		
Masferré		Shikibu
	To learn the process	
of rendering staining		of
Silence		

Sound

ORIGAMI

This word unfolds, gathers up wind
To speed the crane's flight
North of my sun to you.

I am shaping this poem
Out of paper, folding
Distances between our seasons.

This poem is a crane.
When its wings unfold,
The paper will be pure and empty.

ORIGAMI

Mibukhad kining pulong, mitigom sa hangin
Pagpadali sa lupad sa talabon
Amihanan sa akong adlaw, ngadto kanimo.

Gilalang ko kining balak
Gikan sa papel, gipilo-pilo
Ang gilay-on sa atong panahon.

Kining balak usa ka talabon.
Inig bukhad sa iyang pako,
Ang papel motin-aw ug mahawan.
