

Ménage à Trois of Tongues
(*A Trilingual Homecoming*)

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The following brief essay and three versions of a poem are excerpts from *Pag-uli, Pag-uwi, Homecoming. Poetry in Three Tongues*. Merlinda Bobis, University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, Manila 2004. A few years ago, she returned to writing poetry after four novels.

‘Ménage à Trois of Tongues’ (Preface of *Pag-uli Pag-uwi, Homecoming. Poetry in Three Tongues*)

Strange to resurrect old voices, old images. Strange to hear them with new ones. Even stranger to sing ‘old-new’ all at once. Is this possible?

I stopped writing poetry in favour of prose. I stopped writing in Bikol and Filipino in favour of ‘just English’. I left more than a decade ago. Now I come home stuttering to my old loves that still give this heart an ache-ful turn.

Ay, maduso!

Laid out beside each other, these old and new loves (Bikol, Filipino and English) are contesting-romancing one other. And like in any romance, they surrender pieces of the self. Words, images and metaphors are sacrificed. Time and context are shaken; all must forego precious affinities.

Some of the Bikol poems were completed as early as the late eighties. In Australia, I visited them countless times: *Linakaw paduman-pabuwelta / paduman-pabuwelta / an sakuyang daghan* — lest I got lost. I translated them into Filipino then English, in little bursts. Strange to grapple with *biriran, tambis, milflores, kamyá* or *pili* in winter. The poverty of English! It can never sweat convincingly, not in the way we do among a field of *naglalaad-laad na bandera española*.

My newer poems are as new as 2004. There are also earlier poems written in English first then translated into Bikol and Filipino. I like to believe that most of them sound better in my first tongue, even Marilyn Monroe with her skirt flying and pale legs flashing. And she pales even more beside a banana heart just blooming: *Nabalikasan / bako su saiyang mapuputi na tabay / kundi su guramoy na saraday-saday — ay, amarillo!*

Yes, I come home stuttering, but I try. I even try to evoke in English the lilt of the old voices, their taste on the tongue. But the timbre of old loves is elusive and nostalgia can be a curse. It is wiser to make the most of wintering with the new sweetheart. English prose. But I know, try as I do, this English that I need to love more because of the demand of domicile, this English that has opened secret doors for me can never begin to comprehend how, at times —

napuputot an bayawas sa sakuyang puso.

Translations of Bikol lines (as in the order above):

1. Ay, how it stings!
2. Paced back and forth / back and forth / this breast of mine
3. star fruit, Java rose apple, hydraenga, butterfly lily, Philippine almond (*Canarium ovatum*)
4. flaming cana lilies
5. ... Unfurled / not pale legs / but tiny yellow fingers — ay, how golden!
6. the guava unripens in my heart

1. English

Banana Heart

right after my long flight,
i wore it on a tree
under a canopy of green flags,
my banana heart
magenta velveteen and just
beginning to open.

my petticoated flirt:

three layers of heartskin unfurled
in the air,
a la Monroe flashing
not pale legs
but tiny yellow fingers — ay, how golden!
as if strung into a filigree of topazes.

but yesterday,
grandmother plucked it,
stripped it to the core
(desecrating aesthetics and romance),
and cut it in two.

one half she served fresh,
dressed in vinegar;
the other, she cooked in coconut milk and chilli
while humming about young girls
who eloped with an alien tongue.

later, while filling my plate,
in the dialect, she said,
'here, two dishes from one heart.'
i could not eat,
not on a hollow growing
peculiar in my breast.

2. Filipino

Puso ng Saging

pagkatapos ng kaytagal na biyahe,
isinuot ko sa isang puno
itong aking puso ng saging —

sa lilim ng mga lunting bandera,
heto ang biyoletang pelus
namumukadkad pa lamang.

ang aking naka-*petticoat* na kiri:
tatlong suson na balat ng puso
iwinawagayway sa ulap;
a la monroe bagang naglalantad
di ng kayputing mga hita,
kundi ng maliliit na daliri — ay, amarillo!
wari'y tinuhog na topasyo.

ngunit kahapon,
pinitas ni lola itong bunga,
hinubdan pagkaraan hanggang kaibuturan
(di man lang iginalang ang estetika at romansa)
saka hinati sa dalawa

ang kalahati'y ginawang ensalada
sa asim ng suka;
ang natira'y ginulay sa gata at labuyo,
habang umaawit tungkol sa mga babaing
nagtanan kasama ng banyagang dila.

pagkatapos, habang sinasandukan ang aking pinggan,
ako'y tinitigan,
'heto, dalawang putahe mula sa isang puso.'
di ako makakain —
dama ko, walang kalaman-laman
ang aking dibdib.

3. Bikol (My first tongue)

Puso ki Batag

pagkatapos kan haloy-haloy na biyahe,
pigsulot ko sa sarong kahoy
an sakong puso ki batag —
sa lindong nin mga berdeng bandera,
honi an biyoletang pelus
na nagbubukad pa sana.

an sakong naka-*petticoat* na duraton:
tolong suon na kublit nin puso
an pigwawagayway sa panganoron;
a la monroe bagang nabalikasan
bako su saiyang mapuputi na tabay,
kundi su guramoy na saraday-saday — ay, amarillo!
garo bagang tinuruhog na topasyo.

pero kaso udma,
pinudo ni lola ining bunga,
tapos hinubaan hanggang sa kaubud-ubudan
(dae man lamang ginalang an estetika asin romansa)
tapos ginurot, pigduwa.

an kabanga ginibong ensalada
sa alsom kan suka;
su iba, ginulay sa natok asin sanggariya,
habang pakuru-kanta manongod sa mga babaying
nagdulang kaiba kan estrangherong dila.

pagkatapos, habang pigpapanuan su sakuyang pinggan,
tolos akong pinutitukan,
'honi, duwang putahe hale sa sarong puso.'

dae ako nakakaon —
mate ko, daeng kalaog-laog
an sakuyang daghan.

Merlinda Bobis is an award-winning Filipina-Australian writer who has published in three languages: English, Filipino, and her mother tongue Bikol. She has had 4 novels, 6 poetry books, 2 collections of short stories published, and 10 dramatic works performed for stage and radio. Her awards include the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, 3 Philippine National Book Awards, the Steele Rudd Award (Best Collection of Australian Short Stories), and the Australian Writers' Guild Award (Radio Play). While most of her works are in English, they incorporate words and concepts (sometimes untranslatable to English) in her original languages. To evoke the landscape of her first home, she echoes the cadence, tone and orality of these languages. These features are evident in her new book of short stories *The Kindness of Birds* (Spinifex Australia, Anvil Philippines 2021). She has also returned to writing poetry. Her latest poetry book *Accidents of Composition* was Highly Commended for the 2018 ACT Book of the Year Award.