

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Merlinda Carullo Bobis**  
**- poems -**

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# Merlinda Carullo Bobis(25 November 1959 -)

Merlinda Carullo Bobis is a contemporary Philippine-Australian writer and academic.

Born in Legaspi City, in the Philippines province of Albay, Merlinda Bobis attended Bicol University High School then completed her B.A. at Aquinas University in Legaspi City. She holds post-graduate degrees from the University of Santo Tomas and University of Wollongong, and now lives in Australia. Written in various genres in both Filipino and English, her work integrates elements of the traditional culture of the Philippines with modern immigrant experience.

Also a dancer and visual artist, Bobis currently teaches at Wollongong University. Her play Rita's Lullaby was the winner of the 1998 Awgie for Best Radio Play and the international Prix Italia of the same year; in 2000 White Turtle won the Steele Rudd Award for the Best Collection of Australian Short Stories and the 2000 Philippine National Book Award. Most recently, in 2006, she has received the Gintong Aklat Award (Golden Book Award, Philippines) for her latest novel Banana Heart Summer, from the Book Development Association of the Philippines.

# DETAINEE

how easily a speck of bird  
shatters the evenness of skies—

she peers, stunned, from cell 22

that such dumb minuteness  
can shake the earth

Merlinda Carullo Bobis

# DRIVING TO KATOOMBA

Today, you span the far mountains  
with an arm and say,  
'This I offer you—  
all this blue sweat  
of eucalypt.'

Then you teach me  
how to startle kookaburras  
in my throat

and point out Orion  
among the glowworms.

I, too, can love you  
in my dialect, you know,  
punctuated with cicadas  
and their eternal afternoons:

'Mahal kita. mahal kita.'

I can even save you monsoons,  
pomelo-scented bucketfuls  
to wash your hair with.

And, for want of pearls,  
I can string you the whitest seeds  
of green papayas

then hope that, wrist to wrist,  
we might believe again  
the single rhythm passing  
between pulses,

even when pearls  
become the glazed-white eyes  
of a Bosnian child  
caught in the cross-fire

or when monsoons cannot wash

the trigger-finger clean  
in East Timor

and when Tibetans  
wrap their dialect  
around them like a robe

lest Orion grazes them  
from a muzzle.

Yes, even when among the Sinhalese  
the birds mistake the throat  
for a tomb

as gunsmoke lifts  
from the Tamil mountains,

my tongue will still unpetrify  
to say,

'Mahal kita. Mahal kita.'

Merlinda Carullo Bobis

# From Cell Nine

Mula Sa Selda Nuwebe

hindi hubad ngayong gabi  
itong pader na itim.  
nagbihis bigla ng munting bituin,  
nang butasin ng iyong titig  
ang lamig ng kongkreto—  
sige, kukuskusin ko ng mata ang siwang  
na para bang amuleto,

bukas, bukas,  
mahuhusto dito  
ang humuhulagpos tang mundo.

From Cell Nine

it is not bare tonight,  
this black wall.  
it suddenly wore a tiny star,  
when you stared a hole  
on the cold concrete—  
all right, i shall rub the crack with the eye  
as if it were some amulet.

tomorrow, tomorrow,  
our world struggling to be free  
will pull through here.

Merlinda Carullo Bobis

# GOING ETHNIC

When I met you,  
you even wished to learn  
how to laugh in my dialect.

Between the treble of bees  
and the deep bass of water buffalos  
on tv's 'World Around Us'.

Between the husk and grain of rice  
from an Asian shop.

Between my palms  
joined earnestly  
in prayer,

you searched for a timbre  
so quaint,  
you'd have to train your ears  
forever, you said.

And when I told you how we village girls  
once burst the moon with giggles,  
you piped, 'That must have been  
a thrilling sound,  
peculiar, ancient  
and really cool—

can't you do that again?'

Merlinda Carullo Bobis

# HOMECOMING

for Mama Ola  
the sea clings  
to the roof of my mouth,  
but the tide of my heart  
cannot swell.

only this salt-taste,  
this dumb remembering,  
sharp as the flavour  
of fish dried on the beach.

Merlinda Carullo Bobis



## IN A ROOM TO LET

every night from work,  
she proceeds to test for damp  
the lingerie redundant on the line.  
the wash are shadows of other hangings;  
they need to be tucked away  
like virtue nightly slipped  
into an old rose vanity.

she shuts her windows tightly  
from a fire-wall never higher than her grim  
stare, and begins to strip away  
the opaqueness of the day.  
she resists the sin of a lone mirror;  
it might reveal her luminous.

a monotone of rice and fish  
is laid out then—the voyeur yellow bulb  
is asked to dinner. it's their affair  
to have it hug her limbs,  
and gentle them to grace.  
she squints in welcome  
of its savage repetition on her face.

nightcap follows, a glass of milk  
for gut-wounds. they nag for feasts  
that hush with sleep.  
tucked between eight and nine,  
the willing mattress holds her down,  
its weight unstirring as a mother's arms.  
she, too, does not stir,

except on moments when her hands flail,  
ever slightly, to toss aside  
this mother's clasp  
in dreams of maybe younger arms.  
but they only flail-flop  
back to her breast  
like some impotent reliquary.

her mouth half-opened  
cups the darkness for posterity.  
so she does not hear the rustle,  
the young wife's skirt,  
the fabric-sigh that ransoms  
the next room from shadows.

Merlinda Carullo Bobis

# IN BED WITH LORCA

when fringe of lips  
and tips of hair  
run a sweet fever  
at one o'clock in the morning

when a shameless nipple  
stares like a hot-hard eye  
at one o'clock in the morning

when the little finger  
and the little toe  
burn holes on wind and earth

it is the hour of the gipsy heart  
vagrant of my lover's body  
cul-de-sac of belly

avenue of thigh  
still dark and silent  
at one o'clock in the morning

when the whole world sleeps  
save me who waits  
for the double somersault  
of the heart

Merlinda Carullo Bobis

## Life Today, Manila, 1990

i love too beautifully today,  
as if tomorrow I will die.

i even tie my hair from cliff to cliff  
and invite tightrope dancers.

In her first poetry collection with line drawings, Merlinda Bobis invites all to rituals of being, breaking and being again — each instance is embodied, indelible:

it cannot let go;  
just read my back.

i know — this skin,  
this memory of turtles.

Merlinda Carullo Bobis

# POLITICS

the blind are showing movies  
in the plaza  
so the deaf are gathering  
in the plaza  
so the mute can debate  
in the plaza

the fate  
of one beloved nation

Merlinda Carullo Bobis

# SIESTA

take me not  
in mid-winter,  
only to thaw the frost  
of your old bones,  
imagining how stallions rear  
in the outback,  
hooves raised to this august light,

kakaibang liwanag,  
kasimputla't kasinglamig  
ng hubad na peras.<sup>1</sup>

but take me  
on a humid afternoon  
made for siesta,  
when my knees almost ache  
from daydreaming of mangoes,  
tree-ripe  
and just right,

at higit sa lahat  
mas matamis, makatas  
kaysa sa unang halik ng mansanas.<sup>2</sup>

—————

<sup>1</sup>'alien light,  
as pale and cold  
as a naked pear'

plucked from my tongue you have wrapped  
in a plastic bag with the \$3 mango  
from woolworths

while i conjured an orchard  
from back home—mangoes gold and not for sale, and

<sup>2</sup>'above all,  
sweeter, more succulent

than the first kiss of the apple.'

Merlinda Carullo Bobis

# Summer Was A Fast Train Without Terminals

I, too, can love you  
in my dialect, you know,  
punctuated with cicadas  
and their eternal afternoons —

To love in a language prised from my wishbone.  
To sing a landscape where village girls once burst  
the moon with giggles.  
To dance through the fattest eye of a rice-grain —  
To do all these in peace and war is the wish  
embodied in Merlinda Bobis' poetry.  
From her epic poem Cantata of the Warrior Woman Daragang Magayon to lyric  
reflections on longing,  
and finally to an erotic poetry-dance-drama,  
Bobis traces the cartography of desire  
and its intimacy with death —

I am the mouth remembering  
the coupled heaving of women  
and men in another passion  
called a war.

I am deeply furrowed  
by the universal scar.

Merlinda Carullo Bobis



# THIS IS WHERE IT BEGINS

Once upon a time in Bikol, Pilipino, English —  
we tell it over and over again.

Digde ini nagpopoon. Anum na taon ako, siguro lima.  
Si Lola nag-iistorya manongod sa parahabon nin kasag  
Na nagtatago sa irarom kan kama.

Dito ito nagsisimula. Anim na taon ako, siguro lima.  
Si Lola nagkukuwento tungkol sa magnanakaw ng alimango  
na nagtatago sa ilalim ng kama.

This is where it begins. I am six years old, perhaps five.  
Grandmother is storytelling about the crab-stealer  
hiding under the bed. Each story-word crackles  
under the ghost's teeth, infernal under my skin. I shiver.

But perhaps this is where it begins.  
Grandfather teasing me with that lady in the hills  
walking into his dream, each time a different  
colour of dress, a different attitude under my skin.  
I am bereft of constancy, literal  
at six years old, perhaps five.

Or, this is where it begins.  
Mother reviewing for her college Spanish exam:  
'Ojos.'  
'Labios.'  
'Manos.'  
Suddenly also under my skin, long before I understood  
'Eyes': how they conjure ghosts under the bed,  
'Lips': how they make ghosts speak,  
'Hands': how they cannot be silent.

I remember too Father gesturing, invoking  
once upon a time. This is where it begins.  
Story, word, gesture  
all under my skin. At six years old, perhaps five.

And so this poem is for my father, mother,

grandmother, grandfather and all the storytellers,  
the conjurers who came before us. They made us shiver  
not just over crab-stealers hiding under the bed  
or a lady uncertain of her garb. They made us shiver  
also over faith, over tenderness.

Or that little tickle when a word hits a hidden  
crevice in the ear. Just air  
heralding the world or worlds that we think  
we dream up alone.

No, storytelling is not lonely,  
not as we claim—in our little rooms lit only  
by a lamp or a late computer glow.  
Between the hand and the pen, or the eye and the screen,  
they have never left, they who 'storytold' before us,  
they who are under our skin.

Perhaps they even conjured us, but not alone.  
Storytelling, all our eyes collect into singular seeing,  
our lips test one note over and over again,  
our hands follow each other's arc, each sweep of resolve.  
Eyes, lips, hands conjoined: the umbilical cord restored.

Merlinda Carullo Bobis

# WORD GIFTS FOR AN AUSTRALIAN CRITIC

I bring you words freshly  
prised loose from my wishbone.

Mahal, oyayi, halakhak, lungkot, alaala.

Mate those lips,  
then heave a wave in the throat  
and lull the tip of the tongue  
at the roof of the mouth.  
Mahal. mahal. mahal.  
'Love, love, love'—let me,  
in my tongue.

Then I'll sing you a slumber tale.  
Oyaiiyaiiyaiiyayiiii— once,  
mother pushed the hammock  
away—oyaiiyaiiyaiiyayiiii,  
the birthstrings severed from her wrist  
when I married  
an Australian.

So now I can laugh with you.  
Halakhak! How strange.  
Your kookaburras roost in my windpipe  
when I say, 'Laughter!'  
as if feathering a new word.  
Halakhak-k-k-k-kookaburra!

But if suddenly you pucker  
the lips—lung—  
as if you were about to break  
into tears or song — watch out,  
the splinter cuts too far too much—lungggggggg—  
unless withdrawn—kot—  
in time. Lungkot.  
Such is our word for 'sadness'.

Ah! For relief, release, wonder or peace  
in any tongue. 'Ah!'

of the many timbres;  
this is how remembering begins—ah!—  
and is repeated—lah!-ah!-lah!  
Alaala. This is our word for 'memory'.

How it forks  
like a wishbone.

Mahal, oyayi, halakhak, lungkot, alaala.

How they flow  
East-West-East-West-East  
in one bone wishing  
it won't break.

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