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.
nagbihilis bigla ng munting bituin,
nang butasin ng iyong titig
ang lamig ng kongkreto—
sige, kukususin 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,
implying how stallions rear
in the outback,
hooves raised to this august light,

kakaibang liwanag,
kasimputla't kasinglamig
ng hubad na peras.¹

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.²

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¹'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

²'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
crevise 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
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.
Oyaiiyyaiiyiayiiii— once,
mother pushed the hammock
away—oyaiiyyaiiyiayiiii,
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—lunggggggg—
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.

Merlinda Carullo Bobis