

CPMA 2010 - Poetry - 1st Prize
"Tales of the Spider Woman"
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P-E
1st PRIZE
WINNER
2010

TALES
OF THE SPIDER
WOMAN

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RECALLING PHOENIX BLOSSOMS IN JURONG EAST
For Kia Hui and Sow Keng, Li-Ray and Li-chung

In my city that smells of grass and dung
and fish cooking, these crimson flowers
grow wild at the foot of South Mountain.
Flagrant blooms we call *bandera española*.
In Jurong East, they blaze an elegant march
by the roadside. Lovely Fu Ching
lilts its name, dimpling, "Phoenix blossoms,"
she says, "here we call them phoenix blossoms."
New name for an old familiar. In this city
of stone, glass and steel, even here,
I tell myself, a stranger may feel welcome.

Entering the fourth gate of Far East Square,
I sense a thousand ghosts flocking down
from the antique wooden stalls—faceless
bodiless presences rising from the aged stones
to pluck at my sleeves, cling to my hair,
get under my skin—my scalp itches.

Welcome to the stranger, they tell me,
their whispers sibilant in the brain,
great honor for this visit, daughter,
they tell me. Strange recognition—
is it blood leaping at the encounter, these
my fleshless dim ancestors, sensing between us
the shared strain, those driven from home
years ago, my great grand sires among them,
beached among these tropic shores,
their bones lost, their stories forgotten?

So then, my new friends, Kia Hui and Sow Keng,
young Li-Ray and Li-Chung, so brief this time
we touch hands. Our eyes grope for common
histories words can gather no longer from our faces,
sagas locked with those ancient bones, dust now
on the earth of young Singapore. Are we not
their children after all, hence this friendship sudden
between us, and kindness given swift in the heat
of tea jasmine over dinner of soy duck sesame
and sweet spring greens, so soon savored,
so soon gone no doubt, but yet leaving a trail
of flavors on the tongue for memory's return.

Home again now, I breathe the green wind
from South Mountain, wind smelling of earth,
sea, and wood fire. Somewhere a blue fish roasting,
everything common and dearly familiar.
By the morning gate, see, phoenix blossoms
shake their bright plumes in the sun.
I ask you in my mind, Kia Hui and Sow Keng,
do they bloom still in East Jurong?
Do kindred ghosts at Far East Square
also remember a daughter who wandered there?
No one here to answer. Only the swallows
nesting in the eaves, dickering.

WOMAN OF MANY WORDS

She loved him with words, torrential.
She threw the words down from skyscrapers,
cathedral spires, belfries of country churches,
thatched eaves of peasant homes. The words
tumbled and clattered and zoomed and slithered
and flew over tin roofs, tops of trees, umbrellas,
they tickled the ears of children and dogs
and elephants in the zoo, and made them dance
and wriggle and prance, they rained down
on rivers and ponds and oceans, rode
on the backs of turtles and seal, and the whales
heard them and echoed them in arctic waters
cold and deep, and some words fell on the sand
for snails to nibble and crabs to drag to their lairs .

Her words would not stop coming, so now
his ears were full of them, clogging his nose,
they cramming his pockets, his shirts ballooned
with them, they squished in his shoes, they littered
his bed, the carpet, the table where he worked,
every cup in his kitchen brimmed with them.
They fell from the trees when he took a walk,
every flower he passed called them out to him,
even the birds could not stop chattering
as they flew from earth to tree to earth again,
the red dragonflies spelled her words in the wind,
and the fireflies blinked them all night long.

Still her words came, an endless joyous rain,
he swam in its flood, he filled his mouth
with them, and still she loved him and loved him,
her words flooded his mind and stole his sleep.

July 19, 2008

THE WIDOW, UPON LEARNING
THAT HER OLD LOVER HAD RETURNED
TO THE ISLAND OF SAN ANTONIO

So. The poor sot I married, the one
who gave me ten children
and a permanent crease on my brow
I buried, oh so many years ago.
What's to stop me now from brewing
chamomile and mint touched with ginger,
tea to welcome this one, a drink hot enough
to scald the tongue and loosen up the stories
locked by many years of absence?

Arrah, this woman staring back from the mirror
with her rage of white hair and spider webs
around her tired eyes -- he'd never know her
for the sapling that once he'd bent so easily
with a look, a touch. Another lifetime,
and now, look at this, mirrors cannot lie --
ten folds of my belly hung loose,
one for each child that had once curled there
and fed from my womb's bounty.
Now I'm a barren field, my wells dried.
My breasts sag joyless to the ground,
too tired even for memory.
What then, when all the stories have been told
and the tea runs cold in the pot?
Arrah, am I not like fish left in the ebb tide,
flopping around, more dead than living?

Ah, but they tell me the waves
swell cloud-high between Guiuan and San Antonio.
The shoals are tricky in this gusty weather,
surf running high, a boat slamming the rocks
could break into sticks--
he won't be coming out here, I'm sure,
for many more days. Let the waves rise then,
high, high, higher! May he never come.

So. But I must stop this-- thinking what it feels,
touching his face, his seeking hands,
hearing in the dark the rumble of his laughter...

March 28, 2008

AFTER THE STORM

A whole month of rain, water cutting gullies
down the hillside, trails rampant with vine,
grass and fern—a hard crossing to her hut
high in the mountain, so soon after the storm.
A rough trek up to the clearing, he'd arrive
as the sun strikes the cliff sideways, the crickets
humming in the dark, stars blinking.

If he comes, bearing the memory
of her honey-gold skin and cornsilk hair,
how would he find her in that wasteland
of moss-covered boulders, lichen barks peeling,
lightning-struck branches bleeding green sap?
If he comes up to her house, he'd find there
to greet him only her poor things—chipped china,
dented pots, the cracked and empty water jar
turned down, a cold hearth, thatched walls
leaning on the emptiness around him.

Blinded by memory, what would he say
when he comes to some clearing and meets
someone—gnarled of limb like old vine,
gray-haired, slow as a dog with mange?
Smell of the sun would be in her hair,
earth on her sweat-stained clothing and skin.
“You're the one...” he'd begin.

He would not see her
die inside as she reads his blinded eyes,
"Ayah," she says, "a long way to come
for this," laughing her old strong laughter
against her grief, adding, "Life does this
to anyone." What would he tell her
as she turns her back on him, bending,
to hack at the brambles. She must free
her plants to the light, working at it now
in the blue drip of the evening.

He might think, It's a long trek back to town,
though easier now. On the way up
he'd marked well the homeward trail.
Should he stay the night?
Would she let him? Dare he ask?
Too soon after the storm, the roused mountain.
Too many things lost, broken or maimed,
too many things to find, to heal, or to mend.
A long way to morning, he might deem.
Time enough in the dark to think.

April 3, 2008

When your shadow crosses my door,
please enter without fear.
But remember not to ask where I'd been
or what had fed me in this empty room
curtained with fine webs of silk.
Ignore the seethe of all my memories.
Come, take my hand.
I am human at your touch.

TO TEACH A HEART

For Felipe Lim, my accupuncturist

"Your heart," he says, planting a needle
on a point between her brows,
"beats too fast. Too strong.
Works too hard." More needles.
Side of her neck, her throat,
her shins, her feet, on her back.
Immobilized by the needles,
she wants to tell him

*— This heart has always chosen
its own pace, won't slow for anyone's sake,
not even its own. Makes its own rules
as hearts have done these ages now,
maybe till all time. Quite beyond reason,
this heart listens to no one,
not even to me, deaf to everyone but itself—*

but she says nothing, closes her eyes,
watching behind her lids violet suns
fold in, unfold, swirl, burst upon a world
known only to herself—caves of her fear,
ridges of her sorrow, thickets of rage
where sharp-clawed leopards prowl
in great hunger. Tissue and blood,
bone and flesh—fragile remnants
of her ebbing days—why her heart now
flails wild like fish caught in a drought,
thrashing in the mudflats of her memories.

His fingers count landmarks
among her ribs, down her spine.
More needles. "For heart's ease,"
he declares. Now she's a secret
he reads too easily with his salient eyes.
She sighs. Bless the live air streaming
in rivers of her veins, bless trees,
the quarter moon, the purple suns
swirling in the dark behind her eyes.
Bless earth, bless wind and fire, bless rain.
Bless these thin needles in her throbbing pulses.
After all, when all is said and done,
who can tame a heart wild
in its cage of mortality?
Still she lies, rehearsing faith
in his deft device.

Who can teach a heart
what the heart desires?

THE SECRET OF PLANTS

why they grow or stunt--
too little water or too much
not enough sun or too hot
why they bloom or waste--
nights too long, days too short
why seeds shrivel at the pod--
why they lie dead cold
though the earth throbs
warm around them...

now tell me, you snipwit,
why I waste my time
coaxing you alive
bringing you water
waging wars on bugs
aphids ants and and such--
your enemies, not mine

why I grow the patience
of rocks and stones waiting
for your sign-- a bud a leaf
unfurling, a stingy blossom
opening here and there,
a grudging fruit now and then--
never knowing the secret
of your life, your silent
unprotesting death

April 26, 2004-
Iligan city

STRANGER UNDER MY SKIN

A stranger lives under my skin,
an awful slob--all the time
I've to pick up after her, mislays
her own things all the time, so now,
hard to say what are hers
and what are properly mine, *aaieee!*
This bum knee, this cold in my back,
soreness on my feet, as though like her
I'm ready to trade in my shoes
for a corner in the house
where the high winds never visit--
hers, hers, I'd say, hers, all these.

She just happened. One morning,
there she was in my usual place
at breakfast, blinking at the light
with myopic eyes, acting for all the world
as if she'd always belonged at my table
and lived in my house, much as I would,
wondering too, at that time of day,
what to cook for lunch, or why these days,
no one else seems to be at home but me.
Ungracious guest, paid me no heed
shelling my egg, eating my orange,
and sipping my coffee.
Of course I didn't press her to stay,
hoping she'd take the hint and leave.
Not her. She'd lived here ever since.

Dips her hands, she does, into all
that's mine. Why I don't like her, see?
So many things I'm losing these days,
Old recipes, old love letters, names
of things, of enemies and friends,
keys to treasures I've kept secret
that now I can't put a finger to,
the twists and turns of familiar tales,
songs cramping their tunes in the throat,
their lyrics tingling on the tongue,
but no memory now to nudge them into sounds—
ayah, that's when I most wish her gone.

This must stop, this sniffing around
my little dreams as when she learned
of my gentleman with a snake-headed cane
and a mask of gold and vermilion who
each night comes to the edge of my sleep
—“Shameless, shameless,” says the hussy,
making an awful face. If I could, I'd take her
by her heels, and give her a smart smack
on the butt to make her cry, that primal yell,
as it were, to brighten a world grown slack,
to make innocent and fresh as in the beginning.
“Go away, you old witch,” I told her once.
Ayah, she took me by the wrist and pulled,
laughing, running, running, crying, “And you,
you'll come with me, come, come, come, come!”
Aaiiee, could've dragged me off easily too,
she's that strong. The pain of her grip
has lingered since in my bones.

Some nights, when my vermilion knight leaves,
and the crushed papaya blossoms reek
with odor of longing and the smell of death,
I turn my back and close my eyes so
I don't see her. But she's there, I know,
this awful stranger sharing my skin.
She'd never go, never go, I know.
Never, never, never, until I do--

April 18, 1998

WHEN I GO

Everything I'll leave behind of course—
clothes, books, the blue stone I bought
from the gap-toothed gypsy in La Paz,
bottles of perfume languishing for years
in dim closets where I've always kept them,
the basil bush in its corner in the garden
where the sun is sure to find it everyday,
old wine vinegar scented with tarragon,
jars of jams, pickles and conserves—
how long, you think, will they last you?
Who will replenish them
when the bottles run empty?
Oh, but really, should I still
care about any of these?

About the photos, Time will oblige
to wash them white or bleed the colors
till they faint. They'll breathe on their own
for a while, to keep you company
some gray morning as you sip jasmine tea,
as you wait for the clouds to clear.
You might try in that quiet time
to gather in your mind places, faces, words,
perhaps even my name inscribed
in the rusting empty mailbox by the gate.
As you sit in the watery light, a whiff of song
might float by, you might say to yourself,
"That one, I know that one, it reminds me of—"
and stop, your tongue unable to shape it,
the syllables crumbling, murdered by memory.

Then have I truly gone, my love.
Silence has closed over the space I have been,
even grief would not keep it.

Ozamis City
April 25, 2004

BANQUET OF BONES, CIRCA 2004-2010 A.D.

To my poet friends in this era of despair

We're all here, oh yes, but it's been no party. Who summoned us, we don't know. The room's bright, the linens fine. But what's to celebrate? No one's raised a toast for anyone—not for welcome, thanksgiving, nor for honor, that vague face we don't think about anymore. No acolytes to ease the way, no priests to give the blessing, or tell us we did right, or curse us for erring.

Nothing to fear here, we're told. Believe, they say. Barring accidents, falls, beestings, snakebites and such, earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, occasional attacks from backhand knife throwers who're said to operate with license everywhere, we are safe enough, and eat and sleep well. The rooms are full but none around to call friends, no one to love, and none we hate enough to kill. No one that we know, at any rate, raging for our blood—though rumors of murders and wars are rife everywhere.

Someone had been at the board before us
and finished off the meat, leaving only
these bones. Bones bones bones, bones,
everywhere, nothing but bones gnawed clean.

Well, we stay on, knowing no other place but this, swallowing lumps of air for bread, drinking the very wind for water. The wine may not last till light, the harp strings stretched to breaking. Will the singing end when the dogs come yapping in at dawn? Shall we leave then? We grow leaner, hungrier by the day. Oh yes, will stay. Though our tongues hang out, licking the dryness, sucking on silence with the faith of weeping clowns, biting down what words may come straggling in—these poems, these...

February 9, 2007

Well, we stay on, knowing no other place but this,
swallowing lumps of air for bread, drinking the very
wind for water. The wine may not last till light, the harp
strings stretched to breaking. Will the singing end when
the dogs of war come yapping in at dawn? Shall we leave
then? We grow leaner, hungrier by the day. Oh yes, we'll
stay. Though our tongues hang out, licking the dryness,
sucking on silence with the faith of weeping clowns, biting
down what words may come straggling in— these poems,
these...

February 9, 2007

AMPATUAN, MAGINDANAO, NOVEMBER 23, 2009

They're like bats, he'd always thought, the words holed in his skullcave, never still, hissing, shouting, whispering, laughing their wild laughter as they flutter about, flocking at the slightest quiver of leaves, the flick of a fishtail in a quiet pool, water in the stream stirred by a buck's feet crossing. How they'd come rushing, closing in on the news, raising a tumult in his head, making the hair on his scalp rise, his armpits to reek with excitement. His senses come alive then, and seeds of poetry sprout at the tip of his tongue.

One morning in Sitio Masalay, Ampatuan town, Magindanao, in the year of our Lord 2010, fifty-seven died. Massacred, the news said. Gunned down, stabbed, hacked, smashed, their bones broken, the torn flesh flung among the thorns—men women children old people husband wife with children waiting for their return the youth the maiden with her empty womb—none of the party spared. News swirled to the main like an evil wind from Ampatuan town. Even he in his neat and peaceful home, hundreds of miles away from Sitio Masalay, heard. Not the shrieks of pain, the cries for mercy, the dying rasp. He was spared that. Blood flooded the road to Masalay, but the stench never stained the air around him. He skipped neither lunch nor dinner that day, slept well as usual—except for

the words in his head that had fled, the bats in his skullcave turning wild, smoked out, it would seem, by the noxious wind, not even a whisper of wings to announce their departure. A great silence now hunkered inside him. He had turned mute and dumb. Did the words scare at the moan of the dying? Felled in their flight as the killers laughed over the bodies of the slain? A venomous wind whirling to the main from Ampatuan town, Magindanao. Such a wind to shake the very pillars of the Law. The halls of Justice shuddered. The edifice of Government quaked. Fork-tongued big-bellied bosses and their thieving minions glutted the streets with alibis—the killers, they said, were not known to anyone.

Only the fly-specked dead
could not lie. Neither could the earth deny the blood it had drunk,
the holes clawed on it by iron hands of machines for the graves.
Deceit teemed the streets as the guilty and the innocent, both, feared
for their lives, they thought lies could hide them. Could it be the
peddled lie then that crushed the words and poisoned them? Now
they were just dust in his mind, dust caking dry in his mouth, clogging
up his voice. Or fear, could it be fear? That, too, could have forced the
words to fly. Now his tongue lay stiff inside his head. No protest
issued from his mouth. What would a beast in heat feel, glimpsing
its mate—a great urge balling inside, but its limbs are weak.
Voodoo man without his centipedes and snakes, shaman whose oils
have run dry, both helpless against the demons they must fight.
Without words to his aid, he was a knife that had lost its edge.

How to lure back the words he had kept so well
until this time in his skull cave? Would whistling bring them back?
Would they ever yield to his will again? This is what he had come to
decide: to walk every day in his mind the road to Sitio Masalay,
Ampatuan town. He would go alone. He would take no arms but the
silence in his mind. He would graze among the grass, lick the salt of
blood in the soil, grope the rocks where pieces of flesh had clung,
listen to the wakeful voiceless leaves, the only true witnesses to the
murder. What did he need? A name—all he wanted to know: Who
ordered the killing? Whose hands acted out the deed? If this is found,
surely the words would fly back to him. Scrabbling among the grasses
there, who knows what he would find?

An eye, an ear, a mouth, a tongue,
a piece of skull bone, a smidgen of brain.
A soul so rudely unhoused, torn from love
so suddenly, uneasy at the new order
of loneliness it now has to bear, angry,
despairing, lost, cursing the one name
that had brought him to this—the name,
the name he was looking for, the word
of power to bring back truth, and to restore
all the words he had lost. Then on his tongue
might sprout once more the seeds of poetry.

This name then he will proclaim to the seven hills, call out loud to the sky that girdles the earth. This name he would tell to the children of the fifty-seven, those that are born and those yet to come, and thus with his words, evil will have a face, a name, never to be forgotten.

Who ordered the killing? Whose hands acted the deed – he will make that name known with his words. Let shame and dishonor fall upon that name, and follow him to his grave. To him and his kind who continue to live and breathe on this world, let rice turn to sand in their mouth, water into bile. Let the tears of widows and orphans, lovers and friends, drench their sleeping mats every night. May their dreams swarm with the cries of the murdered. Let the fifty-seven cram their sleep with nightmares. No mercy. Wherever they go, blood will trail them forever with its stench –

March 19, 2010

TOWN PHOTOGRAPHER

For Ric

The guest who never seats at the board, never raises the glass for a toast, never joins in the talk. Can't be required at parties to dance, or sing, or do any such silly thing. He brings no gift to showers and weddings. He's not obliged at funerals or wakes to offer flowers, wear mourning, or look properly grim. He's always patient. Poised, though the bride's late and the groom fidgets and frets. Calm, alert, though the carnival queen's in a tantrum and has torn off her wig, though the consort's in a rage, and the minor muses are all screeching in tears. Unperturbed, though the dinner roast is burning, the hungry guests arrive, and the panicky cook breaks dishes on the serving men's head. Oh he's cool, never misses a blink, aims his lens and shoots, for posterity, the breaking scene.

He's marked well every little spin of our humble fate—from naked babes to dreamers to lovers, and rogues and fools—every step of the human way, from cradle to tomb. Over and over he's plodded with us to some hilltop, to someone's waiting grave—for enemy or friend, or for simple enterprise. Stories he knows of our flagrant vanities, our little shames, sensing by instinct what we want to hide, what schemes and ruses we perpetrate behind our careful smiles. And hence he has a code by which to tell which scenes to keep, and which to leave for time's tender mercies to erase. "Smile," he instructs us, or he orders, "Freeze!" snaps the shutter to catch the moment. Or stays his finger, to let the moment slip for faithless memory to fade.

A poet might by chance miscue, and speak out her verse
where a gesture would have served more, or stricken dumb
when drum rolls, trumpets, a tumult of words are due. So
then, call in the town photographer, our true familiar, kinder
to us than we deem, conjuring for us the sense or soul of what
we are, or want ourselves to be, conspiring with his lens,
with motifs of shadow and light, to trap our minor claims to
eternity...

THE PERFECT LINE OF POETRY
For Ana Neri

August has shaken the leaves off,
the garden fills with their litter.
When I think of you, words swarm my mind.
Ah, to feel this tenderness for all things
needing our care, dear Ana.
We've both stood watch through long nights
awaiting strange births -- to still the flood
of music, or words, to cut the measure of perfection.
Mornings catch us dry-mouthed, gabbling like apes,
our throats sandy with midnight cold.
Dear Ana, the perfect line of poetry may not exist.

No credence give to perfect love, my sweet,
ravished we might be by men whose hands tear
at our flesh a hundred thousand ways.
Their kisses leave us smoldering all our days --
still there is a place no sense can fill but death.
Sweetest Ana, it might be to this we are pledged.

Think of feathers loosed in the wind --
when will they land or where or how?
I bungle things up, talking like this.
Watching the blown butterflies
among the cracked stones, I think of you.
Under my feet, dry leaves mottled with decay,
hiss and crackle. Someone has piled them high
and lighted a fire. Smoke fills the air
and stings my eyes. But dearest Ana,

These are but words, words, words.
Aye, so much litter in the mind.
The perfect line of poetry is hard to write.

September 27, 2007

WHEN A POET DIES
For Rene Estella Amper

The hunting hawk loses the airstream,
falters and dives, one second pinched
for fish to hide among the bending reeds.
The nestling dreams of its nest crashing
on the ant heap below, cowers, and sleeps
until wakened by warm beaks for food.
The trees in their green dance may pale a little,
and flowers shiver though no breeze blows.

As before, mimosa opens
and shuts its leaves as pigs and leopards
snaffle by, cicadas sing the hours of their love,
never stopping for any reason under heaven.
The treacherous and the true fall as ever,
and tyrants rule for faith as for gold.
The thirsty sands of Lebanon is quenched
with the blood of childless young men.
Should the sky fall over Iraq, it would fall
on old and young alike, the guilty and the pure,
good and evil, sin and justice confounded both,
as ancient law foretells, nothing spared,
and thus,

a poet's death is as a sparrow's
fall, quiet, without rancor or sound, is no more
ponderous than our own. Felons and saints be
among us still, as vexed by debts and taxes
we would ever be. Mere vanity to say truth ends
with him, or honor, or joy, or even love.
His breath has not the savior's pitch to save us
from any of our fates. Words will go wanting to be said.
And how unsay what should have been vaulted
in the tongue? No matter what, we will find means
to please tomorrow, we'll get on, we'll get on,
despite today's raw deals, learn to forgive, no choice.

Now that he has breathed his last,
women who know these things, true to their calling
will gather the little children at dusk and make them
kneel on wooden floors to pray for his peace.
Despite the massing of the dark outside,
their frail voices will seethe among the leaves,
and cross the silence where he lies, next to stones
and roots of weeds and grass under the mold.

Should he hear them, he might, as they say,
turn a little in his grave. The candle flames might
flicker for a while, a bit of air stirred by his movement.
Think nothing of this. In our innocence,
we would comfort one another, saying,
It's only the wind, the wind, nothing more.

March 1, 2007

DANCER

This too familiar territory—
tight fit of skin over flesh,
the bones' strict measure,
tendon and muscle harnessed
to lift, stretch, sway, bend
to a design—space, the finity
of her body, she makes
or unmakes with a gesture.

She flutters a hand and history
breathes—innocence returns,
sin ripens on the tree of knowledge,
death comes to be. She leaps,
the future gathers at the point
of her feet—memory resurrects
—wefts of our common hope.
Within the known ground
of her limbs flexing, shoulders
straining, breasts thrusting,
head upturned to the unseen stars,
the world in a second held captive
as water sleeps, tamed for the while,
in a vessel of fragile clay.

Oceans may crash in her veins,
in her blood unseen rivers roar
in flood, but what she knows
within her flesh we cannot see:
wind lingering over valleys
of her need, her hair a thicket
of dreams to snag the moon
in its tangles, in her womb
a well full of shadows.
What eternity of sky yearns,
empty behind her far gaze?
Beneath the tempo of her gait
the hidden idioms of her flesh.
We sit and watch, testing
our truths, tasting our passions
in her grace. Her body stays,
weighted to its changeless fate.

March 30, 2009