

CROSSING BORDERS:
coming home to a language of one's own

Merlie M. Alunan

I must have been about four or five years old when my father packed off the family from the boondocks of Dingle, a town in the hinterlands of Iloilo, and brought us to Iligan City. Early in my life I experienced the dilemma of coping with language differences. One day I was among family and kin speaking the gentle musical language of Kinaray-a of a rural Iloilo village. In a week, I was among the Cebuano speakers of Northern Mindanao. Missing the circle of family and playmates I grew up with, I thought it would be a mark of loyalty on my part to disdain the new speech in this strange new country. This was the early part of the 1950s and I was barely five years old. Even at that tender age language was already a real issue for me.

This was to go on for most of my childhood. The family went where my father wanted to go. We did not understand why we had to move, but move we did. We ranged the Visayan islands until in the late 50s we made a beachhead in Leyte. There the family finally parked, in utter exhaustion it must be, and after my father realized that his family had become the veritable model of that old adage, "Rolling stones gather no moss." I was then in my early teens. I hadn't given up my Ilonggo snoot--I still thought Hiligaynon was the only civilized tongue in this country. My linguistic politics consisted of an assiduous effort to resist the barbaric languages spoken everywhere outside Iloilo.

From Ilonggo Snoot to Bisdak Panache

My father was quite aware of the difficulties of adjustment we kids had to deal with. Eager to make things easier, he encouraged us to learn English, even stretching the preternaturally short family budget to buy us books. I

remember in particular a copy of Mother Goose Rhymes which we, all five of us at the time, wore down to tatters. The book did not survive long enough for the two more kids that came along later. By the time the two youngest ones showed up, everyone had more or less become pretty much “mother goosed,” anyone of us could recite those silly rhymes at the slightest encouragement. Thus we easily infected the two youngest siblings without trouble.

My father did not realize that an English-spouting kid was not exactly a smacking success in the playground. The playground is any kid’s real world, where one gains or loses respect, discovers an identity, makes a mark among his or her peers. The end of any kid’s life is to be like everyone else, dress the same way, play the same games, and speak the same language. The weirdo who speaks a foreign tongue in the playground becomes an outcast who, if she is lucky, gets merely ignored. The unlucky is mercilessly teased and made the butt of cruel jokes. Being different is hell for any child, the worst kind of luck any adult could foist upon her.

My younger siblings, wiser to the ways of the world, nurtured no illusions of linguistic loyalty or paternal awe. Or if they had, they never showed it, giving priority to peer acceptance than to parental demand. They quickly mastered the lingua franca of the playground and adjusted easily, it seemed to me, to the peers. Less physical than the younger siblings, I became creature of my father’s “high” expectations. I coddled my sentimental loyalties, learned my English well, stuck to my books, and consequently earned the label of being “different.” I was a bit of a social outcast even as a child. I survived my unremarkable teenage years only because I was living in a world of my own, a world drawn for me by the printed text, constructed so eloquently and elegantly in English.

Yet I did not write until I was well into my middle years. I conscientiously avoided and rejected writing. I finally accepted the vocation at the ripe age of forty, and when I did, there was never any question of the language I would use—I chose to write in English. Why the writing began only when I was well into my middle years is another story in itself. The turbulence of my childhood made me yearn for a simple life, a family in a home of its own. Permanence and stability were the “ideal” state I aspired for. Anything that might threaten this, I kept at bay. Some residual survival instinct in me yearned for a sense of “normalcy,” such as my limited experience of life in a rural environment defined it. I thought I was choosing to live rather than write, as if these were two distinct activities one could decide to do or not do, not writing in favor of living, or so I thought. Sometime in my life, however, the ideal that I thought I had achieved blew up in my face. In the long run, my old love—books, reading, writing—became the only stability I could ever hope for.

Anyway, at the age of forty, I was no longer the resentful little girl who

had been repeatedly torn away from the comfort of familiar places and faces to take her chances in unfamiliar places and among strangers. At forty I had children of my own to protect, and my own vulnerabilities besides to defend. Thanks to the distinctive experiences of my childhood, I had developed an extraordinary ability to make a home anywhere I found myself. I had gotten over being scared and tongue-tied. By now I spoke all the major Visayan languages. And there was English besides, a language of power and authority which anyone could use to make things happen.

Moreover, at forty, I had completely lost my Ilonggo snoot. Life had taken me out of that country and I have proven my worth at every stop. I had stopped thinking of myself as a straggler who has no right to the water or the food until she/he had done something extraordinary to earn her/his place. I learned what I had to. I made friends wherever I went. I dropped my illusions for what they are. Living at various times away from where life started for me, I understood that the boundaries are mostly in the mind and once the mind is cleansed, one can find commonalities more than differences among people. At forty, I was well on my way to becoming what Erlinda Alburo calls a *Bisayang dako*, or in typical Visayan telegraphy, always to be read as a sign of affection, a *Bisdak*. *Bisdak* is a complete and complex cultural package that covers language, attitudes, behavior, lifestyle, relationships, mirroring the nature of the true-grit *Bisaya*. At forty, I might already have “arrived,” as the saying goes, at Visayan *panache*. However, it would take me many more years to earn the name.

Reading Women, Libraries

The women in my family read. Lola Paping, my father’s maiden aunt (full name, Doña Josefa Zamora y Con-ui), read *Liwayway* and *Bulaklak* magazines and passed on her old copies to us. She kept every copy she ever bought and when the pile got too high, she gave them to us to do with as we pleased. We got to read all the serialized novels and komiks in sequence without having to wait for each weekly edition of the magazine. To be sure, the magazines, crisp and glossy from Lola Paping’s cabinet, soon became crumpled and torn in our unmerciful hands. Then they were good only as kindling for the fire. But before they got there, they were read, the copies passing from hand to hand until they fell to tatters from overuse.

My Ilongga mother read *Yuhum* and *Hiligaynon* when we lived in Negros and Iloilo, but readily shifted to *Bisaya Magazine* when we moved to Iligan, and then to Leyte. She listened to radio drama and was quite a fan of Inday Nita, Piux Kabahar and Natalio Bacalso in their heyday. Despite the “drama sa radyo,” however, Mamang never lost her Hiligaynon accent and

intonation, though she did learn enough Cebuano to bargain for food in the market.

The libraries of my high school years allowed me to indulge my bookwormy proclivities. Educators in those days believed in home reading as an indispensable part of one's education. We were required to submit home reading reports. All those little schools which shaped my high school education—St. Michael's College in Iligan City, Don Felix Montinola Memorial College in Victorias, Negros Occidental, Western Leyte College in Ormoc City—the high school libraries of these schools were stocked with home reading books. Western Leyte College in Ormoc where I graduated, I particularly remember for its collection of US Army edition pocketbooks. There I made the acquaintance of such racy novels as *Butterfield 8* whose author I have forgotten, Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*. These were hardly home reading fare for high school kids as anyone who has read Miller would know. It was in the Western Leyte College Library where I tackled Tolstoy's *War and Peace* but gave up after reading a third—the print was too small and the book too thick for my myopic eyes.

In the early and middle 50s, we still had municipal libraries, stocked with lots of tattered US Army issue pocketbooks. Those libraries were probably remnants of American benignity. There was a municipal library in Victorias and when we had gone through the books there, we foraged for more reading in the nearby municipal library of Manapla, eight kilometers away. We turned to reading for entertainment, perhaps because we could not afford the movies on our high school allowance. There definitely was no television in those days in the Visayan boondocks where we were trapped. There was not much else to do for entertainment except wait for the trains that took the sugarcane to Victorias Milling. We would pull out a few stalks of cane from the cars to munch between classes. Those were the earliest of the postcolonial years and we had just been cut off from the American political umbilicus.

Illicit Reading

In Ormoc City, the last stop of my itinerant childhood, I became friends with the librarian, Inday Hermosilla, a lovely woman whom I adored for being so kind to us kids. Inday really did seem to love taking care of those dog-eared books in the Ormoc City Library. I did not know then that those books would never ever be replaced and that the library would soon close because keeping a library was never a priority of the government. My high school reading fare was complete, and as wide and wild as anyone can wish for—books in school, popular magazines at home. I had never had it so good, except that in those days, *Bisaya* and Tagalog magazines were considered bad

reading. Thus reading them was illicitly and surreptitiously undertaken. We kids were taught to snob the *Bisaya* because it was said, it would add nothing to the formation of our minds as future citizens of the world. In school we were fined for “speaking the dialect.” Thus, reading Tagalog *Komiks* and *Bisaya Magazine* became thrilling adventures, glossed by the aura of the forbidden.

Then Tagalog became the “national language,” and was redeemed from the ordure of the forbidden, regaining stature as *the* language of patriotism. Reading Tagalog quickly lost the sense of adventurism and reading it became more duty than romance. By this time, too, Doña Josefa Zamora y Con-ui had gone to her reward and there was no one now to supply us with *Liwayway* and *Bulaklak*. My mother’s eyesight was also starting to go and she stopped buying *Bisaya*. Radio became her only means to enter the world of the imagination and she remained a fan of radio drama for most of her life.

When I went on to graduate school in Silliman University in the late 60s, my head was already stuffed with all that indiscriminate reading grub I had indulged in from elementary days through high school, through four more years of college and afterwards. I came under the tutelage of Edilberto and Edith Tiempo, the two great teachers who would change drastically the landscape of language for me. Studying under them, I discovered a whole new literary map that would determine forever my work as a reader, a writer, and as a student of Literature. The Graduate Program of Silliman University was anchored on Anglo-American Literature. The Creative Writing Program was unabashedly New Critics and patterned after the methods of the University of Iowa International Writers Workshop. I sat at the feet of my masters and learned the craft of writing. Thus, after earning my degree, there was never any question why I would choose to write in English when I finally turned to writing.

This was not to happen until I was twenty years out of grad school. It seemed like I had to get over grad school and get on with living before I could write, whatever that meant. Anyway that’s what happened to me. Another decade later, after gaining moderate success as a writer in English, I developed a powerful homesickness for the language of home as I want to call it, a desire to write about ordinary people and their ordinary or extraordinary lives in their very own tongue. You might notice the alienation from the way I got to think of Binisaya as “their” language, though heaven knows what I might consider my own true language. I was diffident about considering English as *that* language. My childhood experience continued to haunt me into my middle years.

Finding the Way Back

This was already the middle of the 90s. So much had happened to

me—I had written off a marriage, my five children were hitting their teens, and I was trying to survive single parenthood on the slim pickings of a teacher's salary. Indeed I had gotten on in life, or life had taken the better of me. As if all these were not too much to deal with already, I conceived a powerful desire to write in Visayan. I had become uneasy about the sense of inappropriateness I felt when dealing in English with the native experience. I must say that all that illicit reading innocently perpetrated by Lola Paping and Amina, my mother, prodded me to find my way back to the home language.

The memory of my mother, head cocked to the rambunctious events of a radio drama or to Inday Nita in one episode of "Sugilanon sa Usa ka Awit," gave me my early lessons on the nuances and accents of the Cebuano language. On hindsight, these preparations were no better nor worse than my preparations to write in English. My only models for how the English tongue sounded were John Gavin and Rock Hudson, the movie stars of my generation. The one great exception was that no matter what I read in English, whether they were classic or pornography, had the approval of the established state, whereas anything I read in the native language was considered gunk. In reality, however, English and Cebuano Bisaya were both foreign languages to me, I learned both by artificial means, not systematically but by simple immersion. Many years later, in a way that no one could have predicted, or that I could ever explain, when I was well into my fifties, I ventured into the unthinkable—I began writing in Cebuano. The first piece I wrote was a poem, "Kun Unsaon Pagdakop sa Bulalakaw."

Using the journey motif, a magus voice advises the young poet to hold firm to her purpose (to seek the *bulalakaw*, translated here as "the bird of fire," metaphor for the poetic muse),¹ not to fear loneliness, fear, strangeness, even indifference, which she would encounter along the way. And then one day, if she persists, the *bulalakaw* might show itself to her willingly and would be tame to her touch. This is a mythic journey, hence every step of the way is attended by symbols. From this very first poem in Cebuano, I resolved to do my own translations. I thought it would be easy going since being both author and translator, I would not have to second guess the meaning of the piece. Besides, I was already writing poetry in English, I would know what to do, or so I believed.

I discovered soon enough that translation is not the same as composition, fraught as it is with its own problems, that the translation process requires certain disciplines of method and thinking not synonymous with writing a poem. I also discovered that "Pagdakop" was not an easy poem to translate. This is as much as to say that I could never have written this poem in English. It was conceived and composed in Cebuano, and no matter how I tried, its *duende* was to remain in that language. The mythic journey it describes can

only happen in the magical terrain of Bisaya. The glow of the images does not transfer into English, they leave their nuances behind, and fall flat in translation. The translation fails to recreate the textual density of the original poem in Cebuano. The failure humbled me, to say the least. I console myself with the thought that what it lacked in poetic magic, it compensated for by being, at least, adequate as translation.

Wrestling with the Text

I have since written other poems in Cebuano and meticulously translated most of them into English, not always with great results. The experiences of translation enforce reflection on the translator's craft, at least as they apply to my work as author-translator. Translating "Pagdakop" disabused me of the presumption that being one's own translator gives one full control of the text and its meanings and it would be easy to rework that meaning into the other language. I discovered that nothing worked that simply. The original piece always sets the limits and bounds of the process. The writer translating his or her own work from one language to another is still compelled to respect the primary form. She cannot take more liberties with the text and the translation than anyone else. So it happens to me all the time. Thus, though I feel dissatisfied with the translation of "Kun Unsaon Pagdakop sa Bulalakaw," and several other poems I have worked on as author-translator, I had to let them rest after due effort, after I had wrestled with the text and its meanings the best way I could and declared the result "adequate."

One of my early Cebuano works is "Ang Misay Kun Mangagalon," which, translated literally, means "When the Cat Seeks a Master." The poem deals with the irony of our human belief that when we tame a cat, we become its master. The reality might be the opposite, that it is really the cat who "tames" us by making us answerable for its needs. The cultural artifact itself in the poem is the Cebuano voice, a gossipy persona full of home-grown savvy. It is the poetic base and the job of work for the translator is to find the exact equivalent of that voice in English. The Cebuano voice carries a whole world of attitudes and nuances peculiar to Bisaya. Such nuances and attitudes disappear when translated simply into English. Attitude is impossible to "translate," unless one finds from within the cultural body of English, a persona to sound the nuances in its own speech. Can such a persona and such a voice be invented? Would it have the ring of authenticity within the matrix of the cultures forged by the process of translation?

The reader who understands both Cebuano and English will find many fruitful differences between one language and the other, so much, as a matter of fact, that the only way to enact a translation is to define each voice within

the cultural and psychological context of the original as well as the language of translation. Let the Cebuano speaker speak in Cebuano. Let the speaker in English approximate within his own peculiar cultural milieu the appropriate tone and attitude for the translation. In “Misay,” the voice remains Filipino, although it speaks in an idiom not exactly Bisaya.

The translation of “Ang Misay” works well, I feel, and may be read almost as a poem by itself, apart from being a reasonably faithful transcript of the original. I changed the title in English, simply calling it “About Cats” as a more appropriate means of summing up what it is all about, thus moving a little away from the title of the original which would sound long-winded in English. Were these improper things to do? If they are, so be it, it is a forgivable liberty, I imagine. Crossing borders is never simple as any traveler knows.

I wrote several more pieces, independent of one another, and a few which were written specifically for a collection entitled *Escrito en Sangre*.² “Ang Istorya ni Carmelita ni Kutoon” is one of those poems which especially tested the insight I have gained from work on the cat poem. Another poem, “Si Barbieg si Tarzan,” was written on another occasion and without the pointed purpose of “Carmelita,” but the two poems make use of the provenance of very sharply drawn personae with definite voices. The themes of these two poems are by all means far apart from each other, but they both make broad reflections on nationhood and identity. Both poems deal with women, so one might view gender as central to both works. I shall deal first with “Si Barbieg Si Tarzan,” being the earlier of the two. It was published by *Bisaya Magazine* in its issue of September 28, 2005 and has therefore endured a nationwide exposure.

Reinventing the Language of Translation

I wrote “Si Barbieg si Tarzan” during a two-month residency at Hedgebrook Retreat for Women Writers in Langley, Washington in 2001. It was in this thoroughly American environment (even the Korean and the Filipino girls I met while on this residency were born and bred in the USA) that I conjured this unabashed Bisaya voice criticizing the American sense of feminine beauty from her very third world perspective. The persona, a farm woman, discovers in wonderment her humble virtues and her strength as a woman of her own milieu. I had to read the poem to the eight women writers who were guests of Hedgebrook at the time, so I had to translate the poem to make them understand what it’s saying. I stayed with that communicative first translation for many years. I did not give the poem up for publication until many years after. The original translation was never published.

I wrote the “Carmelita” poem under the title “Kuto” for “Escrito

en Sangre” and made a communicative translation for it in the same way that I translated “Si Barbieg si Tarzan.” Like “Barbie,” the persona is of the folk, a grown woman who might have been a child in Balangiga during the unfortunate occupation of the town by the 9th Infantry Division. While her mother was hunting for cooties on her head, a favorite pastime among mothers and their children in rural Philippines, her father, along with other men of the village, marched by in a row, their hands tied behind their backs. They had been rounded up and were being taken to prison, followed by a procession of wailing women and children, now joined by her own mother, shocked at what had become of her husband. Carmelita recalls how one day, they reversed the situation, how the village men hunted down the American soldiers and killed them like cooties.

Reviewing “Escrito” and preparing it for the press, I made certain important revisions on “Kuto,” changing the title to “Istorya ni Carmelitang Kutoon.” The change of title keyed me in to a new way of handling the language, in which the story-telling element would become more dominant. Thus, Carmelita tells her own story, increasing the dramatic character of the poem, to an indefinite but palpably interested audience. A new challenge in translation emerges with this innovation, the invention of a similar voice using English, but the English possible with the Filipino folk. For Filipinos know English, they can use it to express themselves authentically, that this use of English has been going on these many years already, and all with absolute impunity if we had but the courage to accept it. The beleaguered classroom teacher may shudder at the grammatical lapses of her students, but the countryside Pinoy, from pier hands to office clerks to market vendors, have been mauling the King’s English for their own purposes for the last hundred years. Let the rest of the world do a double take and struggle to understand. If the Jamaicans could do it, why not the Pinoy, who has more clan than anyone in the world if he chooses to put it on?

Thus came the accompanying translation to “Istorya,” whose title has been slightly modified to “Carmelita, the Cootie Girl.” The translation assumes a persona not unlike Carmelita herself were she to speak in an English possible to her social position. That voice, speaking in its folksy way, evolved from the very voice of the original persona herself, a garrulous old woman recalling, many years after, her childhood in the days of the American Occupation of Balangiga. That woman would have learned English but it would not be the too self-conscious classroom vintage expected of an educated Filipino. It would be an English picked up here and there by one who has had no formal schooling but who has the ear for language and the guts to use it any which way she’s capable of. The grammar and syntax would be bad, but it would be communicative enough. Anyone with a modicum of intelligence would

understand it, and above all, as I imagined it, it would carry the authentic voice of the folk which is the true voice of the poem.

I went back to the Barbie poem after I had wrapped up “Carmelita.” After due reflection, I reworked the translation, again hewing close to a language possible with a folk persona that abounds in the Philippine countryside but which, as far as I have observed, we have consistently ignored and the peculiar language they speak, so common and ordinary that we don’t think too much about it anymore when we encounter it in the speech of the jeepney drivers, the watch-your-car boys, the vendor women, the office clerk, the shoeshine kids, the bar girls, anyone who has picked up a few words of English and use it out of necessity for the commerce of survival.

Translating Personae

As far as I know, these poems are the first attempts of this kind to appropriate the way the folk speak English. Singaporeans have been doing it for a long time, and so have the Malaysians, parodying themselves in bad English as a way of reflecting other dimensions of their own reality. This is not unique as far as the Empire writing back is concerned, but we have not tried this feat from our end. What we have been doing is switching codes. Media has been doing this for the last twenty to thirty years, and in doing so, they are only following popular usage. Code switching takes place in all levels of communication, from everyday conversation to formal presentation, classroom lectures, speeches on formal occasions, even sermons and homilies in church. Print media has taken it up, especially entertainment magazines. Some serious poetry have been written using mixed coding or code switching—Rolando Tinio’s collection of poetry entitled *Kristal na Uniberso* might be cited as an example.

Some Filipino readers might squirm in discomfort, offended or embarrassed by the murder of language. I have shown the translation to a few readers who have found it amusing. And yet, both poems, “Barbie” and “Carmelita,” are not really comic pieces. Anger and sarcasm thread through both poems, though handled with generous doses of Bisdak humor to modulate the rage and salvage a sort of back-handed pride. The comic element might proceed from the character of that abiding traditional female personae in our imaginative life—the *atsay*³—epitomized in such showbiz classic figures as Chichay, the Inday in Tagalog telenovelas who is the butt of all kinds of cruel jokes, and the contemporary funny character, Pukwang in all her gutsiness and flaring faux sophistication. We have never taken these personae seriously, albeit we make them the vehicle of our discomfort as we navigate our transition from the rural past to urban present and unknown future. Yet these female types are

the ones who triumph over circumstances by sheer gumption and the kind of grainy unselfconscious intelligence we encounter in trickster archetypes, the dumbo who pretends ignorance but turns the cards around and wins in the end by her own wit' or because chance has seen fit to reward her, deserving or not. These women represent the strength of the folk and reflect the supreme capacity of the Filipino, especially the Filipino woman, to laugh in the teeth of the wind.

The raving lunatic, the weeping woman, the martyr, all of which are summed up in Rizal's Sisa, often represented as the archetype of the Filipino women, is one cliché of the popular imagination. But to me, they are not half as interesting as the laughing, fighting, garrulous, bawdy women who slug their way through all kinds of adversities and ill-fortune to win a little space for laughter and love and hope. I have a special affection for these women personae whom I encounter everywhere I go in the Visayas, but seldom among the well-heeled and the better educated. In the original as well as in translations of "Carmelita" and "Barbie," I let these women speak as themselves. Well may they speak too for the Filipino woman, who, despite what most men think about her and about themselves, ultimately speaks the last word in any argument, and refuses to be silenced.

At Home in a Language of One's Own

It's a long way from the playground for the kid silenced by too much strangeness. These days, I am fully at home in the Visayas. In Samar and Leyte where accents and lexicon change from town to town, north, south, east and west of the twin islands, one has to sharpen one's ears for meanings as one moves across the terrain. This is where I find myself these days, and maybe they'll seed my ashes on the land here someday—it's not likely that I'll ever get out of here anytime soon. Have I learned the languages spoken by the people in these islands? Yes, and no. Yes, for as Visayans put it, you can't sell me down the river in any language without my knowing about it. No, because while I am functional enough in Waray to ask about the price of fish and *kangkong*, I cannot summon enough of it to translate my own poems or even attempt the rudest lines. Besides, there are too many versions of it to learn in one lifetime. The Warays themselves speak only the version they grow up in, though they go around their islands with confidence, knowing they can't be sold down the river in any language by anyone. Moreover, the Cebuanos are everywhere, and if you push a little, people prove they know a lot more than they let on. One gets by with the little capital between one's ears.

I have written a story in Cebuano, some poems, and a few essays. I hope to write more, of course. I am content enough to have regained the use

of one Visayan tongue. I am at home in a language of my own. I have never forgotten my Kinaray-a and my Hiligaynon, and if push comes to shove, I can read Aklanon, not with a hundred percent understanding but close enough. Listening might be something else, but give me a month, I always say, to figure things out. What does that make me? A true Bisdak, I hope, one genuine Bisayang Dako, in the best style to make my good friend, Dr. Erlinda Albuero, proud.

Being the Visayan gypsy that my father was, so much of the Visayan argot has stuck to his daughter's tongue. That, in sum, was his final gift to me--to make me at home wherever I am in these beautiful islands, and heir to a broad legacy of languages, so that it is impossible to be a stranger wherever I go. It's more than anyone can ask for.

So as to be able to read the poems without the unwanted authorial intrusion, they are given below.

KUN UNSAON PAGDAKOP SA BULALAKAW

Una sa tanan, hugta ang imong larang.
 Unya way kukatulog. Pananglit di kalikyan
 ang pagduka, higda lang una sa ngilit
 sa nagdugitom nga mga dag-om.
 Ay'g padala s'katalaw, katapol, kahangawa,
 kahigwaos sa mga magpunsisok unya
 nga mga pangutana dinha sa unahan.
 Ay'g lingi-lingi. Timan-i, ang dag-om sinati
 sa balaod sa unos nga iyang hinambin.
 Ang tun-og way pagtagam. Ug unsa pa?

Ang way kataposang hawanan
 sa langit may mga tinagoang dalan nga angay
 imo gyung latiron bisan sa imong kahinanok.
 Ang mga tunok ayaw'g likayi, ayaw pasipala
 s' mga sawa nga mamalikuko daplin sa karsadang itom--
 mangtas na sila ug kanunayng gutom.

Ay'g kahibuong unya kun sa imong paghidunggo
 o paghimata ba hinuon, way leon o tigre
 nga moyukbo sa imong tiilan.
 Ang mga anghel way kisaw.
 Ang sapa sa Candijay tingali gani'g hubas,

ang nangigdal nga kabatoan nangliki
sa tumang kauhaw, sama sa imong dila.

Tingali'g maamang ka, ug ako sab mabungol--
kay usahay ang pulong bansan man sa tidlom
nga kahilom, ayaw tawon ko'g basola
kun wa natoy makaalinggat,
bisa'g siyam pa ka dila ang magyamyam
sa tanang matang sa kahinam
o molitok ba hinuon sa ngalang bathala.

Ug karon, tungod sa nagkautas nga kahayag
sa imong lampara, paglingkod, ang tagak nga pluma
sa garbosong agila kapti pag-ayo,
ituslob kini sa dugo sa imong galamhan,
tul-ira ang papel nga nakun-ot sa pagpanlimbasog.
Nan, karon, sugdi na ang pagtukaw,
tangaga ang kahadlok, ingon man ang kamingaw,
ugoma sa imong baba ang kalisang.

Pilay palad, sa imong pag-atang,
takulahaw sa imong atubangan
ang karnerong pula motungha, ug unya,
hinayhinay, sa imong kiliran motugdon
ug magpahikap sa iyang balhibo
ang nagdilaab ug idlas nga bulalakaw.

November 2, 1998

###

TO CATCH THE BIRD OF FIRE

Firmness of will from the very start.
Forego sleep. If drowsiness overtakes you,
Make your bed on the dark ledges
of those black clouds. Fight your fears,
don't yield to sloth, worries, unease
at all those questions gathering up ahead.

Don't look back. Remember this—
that clouds breed the storm and is familiar
with its ways. Dew falls everyday
though its lifespan be brief. And what else?

The boundless stretches of space,
the regions of the sky, has secret pathways
you must traverse even as you sleep.
Don't evade the thorns, don't dare upset
the pythons coiled on the sides of the black road—
oh they're wild, and always hungry.

Now do not be surprised if upon arriving,
or waking up, as the case might be, no lion or tiger
comes to meet you and bow at your feet.
The angels are still. The spring at Candijay
could be dry, the rocks jutting out cracking
in utter thirst, like your own tongue.

But if you don't move on, you won't
reach the house of the blind bats.
They are the keepers of magic to plumb
the chasms of darkness and cold.
Beg them for a chip of their wisdom—
you'll need it to obtain your resolve.

You could turn mute, and I could be deaf—
as often words are banished
by the sternest silence. No blame then
if neither of us hears,
though nine tongues would cry out
all the ways of desiring,
or proclaim the name of God.

Now by the flickering light of your lamp
sit, hold firm in your hand
the proud eagle's plume,
dip it in the blood of your soul,
smooth the paper crumpled in your great effort.
So then, begin your watch,
bite the terror in your mouth, and loneliness,

close your teeth against your fear.

With luck, as you sit there waiting,
Before you the red sheep
may suddenly appear, and then,
softly softly by your side will light
and allow you to touch its feathers
the bright and untamed bird of fire.

ANG MISAY KUN MANGAGALON

Di una siya magpaduol, pila 'sa ka adlaw
adto sa layo maghukdong, magpahipi
sa pandanan, kunohay di motagad
kun imong labyan. Piyongan ka lang sa mata
o molingi ba hinuon, motan-aw sa layo.

Ikaw nga way gusto sa iring, o bisag
unsa pa dihang hinoptan, bisan pa
sa bakiking hiniktan ni Tingting Kimpang
nga gibantog tsampyon sa siyam ka tigbakay
sa Libungao, bisa'g sigbin pa gani hisgotan,
nga matod pa sa mga karaan masugo
pagkawat sa bahanding naa sa kinauyokan
sa kinabuhi, tingali'g sa kadugayan,
maaghat pagduol, unya sa kahimuot,
mosangpit sa iring, "Ming, Ming, ngari Ming..."

Hastilan, ayawg kahibuong kun talikdan ka lang
sa banbanong daku. Tingali'g matintal ka
sa pagsunod, dakung disgrasya.
Da, naa ra nimo, uy. Hinumdomi, ikaw
way balhibo, way kumagat nga tango,
way kukong tinagoan, wa sad kay ikog nga sakto.
Labot pa, usa ra gyu'y imong kinabuhi.
Unsay alamag nimo sa mga lutsanan
o sa mga palusot nga iring ray nahibawo?

Wa kay kalibotan, nahubad na
sa misay ang tigmo sa pangagalon.
Nasukod na sa iyang bungot ang imong
katakos pag-alagad sa iyang panginahanglanon—
pananglit, ang gutom, kalaay, kamingaw,

kahidlaw sa pag-amuma'g pagtagad—
unya, nasuta na niya nga ang kapintas
sa iyang tinagoang kuko imong maantos.

Adlaw-adlaw imo siyang lawoga'g bukog
ug salin-salin sa imong pinggan.
Makaingon kang pinaagi niini, imo na siyang
napaanad, kay makaila na man siya s' imong tingog,
moduol kun imong tawgon, mobaid-id pa gani
sa imong bitiis. Unya di pa gyud mosibog
sa imong baho, moyukbo, mora'g nagpasabot
nga gamhanan ka s'iyang kinabuhi.

Na, tingali baya'g masayop ka.
Balik ra gud sa sinogdanan, klaroha'g maayo
kun kinsa'y unang nipili, ikaw ba nga agalon,
o ang misay, nga kunohay kanimo nangagalon.

Abtik nang iring, uy!
Di ka motuo?
Pangutan-a si Miming.

###

ABOUT CATS

He'll keep aloof a few days
squats from afar, sulks
under the pandan leaves.
Makes like he doesn't see you
when you pass him by,
closes his eyes, turns aside,
or pretends to look away.

Well, say, you don't care for cats,
--or any pet for that matter,
not even the grey cock
that One-Leg Tingting keeps,
famed veteran, nine-time champion
of the cockpits of Libungao,

not even, say, the *sigbin*,
which, old folks say, could be sent
to steal the bitterest root
in the evil heart of vampires--

still, one day, you might call
the cat, "*Ming, ming*, here, *ming...*"

Well now, if that rogue'd just
turn around and walk off, don't wonder.
Follow him, you think?
Mind, before you do, remember
you got no hair, no sharp teeth,
no hidden claws, not even a tail
going for you. One life, that's all
you have, against nine of his.

Everyday you feed him scraps
from your plate and by this means,
you may think you got him tamed—
he knows your voice now,
doesn't flinch at your smell,
comes to rub against your shins
when you call him, scrapes and bows
to prove you're the biggy in his life.

Well, he's got you well-trained.
He's smelled out your fitness
to give him the affection and care
he needs, to save him from hunger,
boredom, and loneliness.
You bet he's made sure you can bear
the sting of his hidden claws.

You never know about cats.
If you doubt this, ask Miming.

SI BARBIEG SI TARZAN

Ngano gud nga si Barbie Doll bisa'g asa lang nako punita?
 Usahay sa ilawom sa sopa, gikawras-kawras anang banbanong
 si Catullus kung wa siya'y minyak nga madakpan, usahay
 napiko-piko uban sa mga labhanan. Matumban naman,
 masilhigan, mahitipon sa mga basura. Karon, tua sa balkon, ay,
 bulingit sa nangamatay, sagmon na, gum-os intawon.

Merkano si Barbie, 'sa no? Tan-awa, wa'y makatupong
 sa iyang kagwapa (hila-os una), buraw'g buhok,
 bawod ug pilok, silhag og kalimutaw, mora'g diwata.
 Iyang hawak baling gamitoya. Wow legs, kandilaon ang porma.
 Wa ko'y Barbie sa gamay pa ko, akong monyika arang bug-ata,
 mangihi, malibang, motiyabaw kung akong ibutang—
 mao na si inyong Iyo Ponso, manghod nako—kay si Nanay
 kanunay sa darohan, o nanginhas para itindahay sa taboan.
 Adtong panahona akong Tatay, kun di mangisda,
 tua sa iyang bulanting hiniktan, maghapyod-hapyod,
 magtugpo-tugpo, magpabuga'g aso. Maayo pa mo,
 may Barbing tinuod, gasa ni Tita Penny gikan sa Canada.
 Tan-awa, o, kadagha niya'g ilisan, may pangkatulog,
 pangsimba, pang-ballroom dancing pa.
 Dagha'g sapatos, ariyos, kwintas, may kotse pa gyud.

Apan ngano mang mura'g wa mo'y gana niya?
 Aw, hinuon, tingali'g nangigi ra mo sa iyang kagwapa
 (labi na adtong siya bag-o pa). Iyang ilong taliwtiw,
 panit hamis, lawas kokakola. Kamo, pislal, itomon,
 lawas pandak, panit kagiron, wa'y itsura gyud intawon.
 Unsaon, naa ra man inyong nawong sa kamaisan,
 mangguna, mamanggi, magpugas, mamanglin og gabi,
 mopas-an og sako, angat sa bakilid, lukdo'g tubig
 para ilung-ag. Na, hinuon, naa, lig-o'g abaga,

kusga'g liog, tul-id og likod, dasok og manga bat-ang.
mga paa tigson, daw batang sa hamurawon.
Wa sad si Barbie ana. Porbida, kitang mga Pinay,
di gyud ta hitupngan sa pagpanlimbasog.

Mag-unsang si Barbie, 'sa no, kun anhi siya sa atoa?
Lagmit mapaign sad sa init, kublan sad iyang panit.
Hayan gutomon kay di makamaong mobayo, motil-ag,
mangalayo. Kun tinuod pa siya nga tawo, ug unya,
simba ko, anhi sa atoa mahitipon pagpuyo, gawas nato
mutsatsa niya, "Paypayi ko bi, init kaayo."
"Kawsi'g tubig kay maligo ko." "Kuhiti'g luto, mokaon ko.
Ham en eggs akong gusto, batir en tos', orens dyus."

Ay, tara! Pinisting dako, asa gud tawon na pangahoya?
lawlaw'g bahaw ra man gyud atong nailhang pamahaw.
Kun gabii lugaw'g asin, pamira ra sa habol ba.
Hah, katawa man mo. Ay na, wa ko maglagot, uy!
Pananglitan ra man ba. Ay' kataw-I ninyo lagi..
Hisgot-hisgot ra man ning ato.. Bitaw, no,
og maingon, kadakong dimalas intawon, di ba?

Oy, 'Day, si Barbie, 'Day, si Barbie.
'Day, lagi, dali, gitangag ni Tarzan atong Barbie.
Si Tarzan ba, kadtong iro ni Hulyan Dumpol,
atong silingang hugador.

Hoy, hoy, Tarzan, hoy! Tarzan, hoy, balik ngari!
Matigbak kang iroa ka! Balik! Balik!
Ibalik among Barbie!

Ay, pastilan! Tua,
mingsutoy man hinuon.
Da, mirisi, uy.

###

BARBIE EN' TARZAN

Why I fin' dis Barbie Doll all ove' de place?
 Under the sofa sometimes playing de mouse
 with dat wild cat Catullus.
 Sometimes all bundle up with dirty laundry.
 Why you jus' kick her aroun' or put wit' de garbage.
 Der she is now in de veranda, poor raggedy thing.

Amirkano, no? Jus' look at that face
 (but wipe it up a bit first), that yello' hair,
 curly lashes, eyes like glass, fairy eyes, I say.
 Her waist, ay, so tiny. An' she got legs, huh,
 smooth as candles. No Barbie for me when I was young,
 my doll, too heavy, pee' and crap for real, an' yell
 w'en I put 'im down—that's your Tatay Ponso,
 he my younger broder—because Nanay, was always
 in the fields, or looking for clams to sell in the *taboan*.
 In dos days, my father always fishing, or playing
 wit' his *bulanting*—the grey cock, you know,
 massage it, exercise, blowing tobacco smoke
 to make it brave. Lucky you to have a real Barbie,
 Tita Penny send her from Canada. I envy you, I do.
 See dis Barbie? She got plenty of clothes—for sleeping,
 for going to de church, for ballroom dancing.
 Ay, also lots of shoes, earrings, necklace.
 And a car, too, wow!

Why you not like her?
 'Cause she more pretty than you?
 Yah, she got that cute pointy nose, smooth skin,
 a coca-cola body. On de oder hand, you flat-nose,
 black skin wit' scales like de fish, eh-eh,
 your body, ay, like de beer bottle, big, big,
 not sexy, like Barbie. *Nah*, but that's 'cause
 you weeding the cornfields all de time, or harvesting,
 digging for yams, or carrying sacks on your head,
 climb up de hill wit' a pail of water for de kitchen—
 so your shoulders wide, your neck strong,

your spine straight, hips tight, your thighs
 firm like de branch of de *hamurawon*.
 None of dos for Barbie, you bet.
Porbida, we Pinays, no one like us, huh,
 we work, work, work, all de time.

Now if Barbie liv' wit' us,
Na, she'll burn in our sun, her skin become thick.
 Maybe she become hungry, *eh*, 'cause she not know
 how to pound rice, to winnow, to cook in wood fire.
 If she real and liv' here, Oh, pity us, God, we become
 her slaves, she be asking us, "Please fan me, so hot,"
 or "Get me some water, for my bath,"
 or "Only rice for brekfas'? But I wan' ham en eggs,
 butter en toast, orens juice."

Ay tara! Curse de luck, where to get that stuff, eh,
 when all we know to eat for brekfas' is
 salt fish and cold rice. At night, a little *lugaw* en salt.
 y'know, jus' enough food to pull up de blanket.
 Huh, why you laugh? *Na*, I'm not angry, *uy!*
 Example only, y' know. You quit laughing there.
 Jus' talking plain. Haie, you agree,
 if dat is so, worse luck for us, truly.

Oy, *Day*, der goes our Barbie, *Day*,
 Der's our Barbie, *Day*, quick,
 Tarzan, he got our Barbie.
 You know, Tarzan, that dog
 of de neighbor, de cut-prick Julian.

Hoy, hoy, Tarzan, *hoy!* Tarzan!
 Come back here, come back wit' our Barbie!
 Back, back, giv' us back our Barbie, *hoy!*
Uy, pastilan, he make off wit' her *na*,
 bye bye, Barbie—

ISTORYA NI CARMELITANG KUTOON

Bisan unsaon pa nako'g ingon, “Nay, sakto na, ‘Nay. Kapoy na ko. Hawoy na akong liog. ‘Tuogon na ko,” birahon lang nuon ni Nanay akong buhok, di gyud ko undangag panghinguto. “Hilom, bataa ka, ay’ gani’g langas diha, ay. Umm! Umm! Ummm! Da, dakop lagi. Sus, labihan gyung busoga uroy!”

Wa’y dag-anan ang mga kuto kang Nanay. Bisag unsaon pa nila’g pahipi sa kabugangan sa akong buhok nga way sudlay, mga kuyamad pula’g tiyan sa kabusog, mga butol nga itom-itom na sa kalagas, mura’s mga kabawng gagmitoy—way lusot. Igpat iyang mga mata. Iyang mga kukong tag-ason, napaskan sa buling sa kulon, abtik gyud kaayo.

Irok diri, irok didto, irok, irok, hugot sa mga lusa, hangtod manghalang akong anit, mangluha akong mata, si Nanay way pasaylo, sikopon gyud mga kuto. Magyawyaw, “Ay, Carmelita, sa kadaghan aning imong binuhi, hayon dayongan ka gyud ani nila ngadto sa lawis tuktok sa kawayan, unya didto tabangan ka gyud nila’g ingkib, paak, pahit, hangtod...”

Unsa kaha to, usa ana ka higayon, ang tingog sa akong mga kaduwa, nanglusot man sa silhag sa among bongbong nipis, nilala lang sa dahong lubi. Ibog na gyud ko nila, reklamo ko, “Nay, apil ko siyatom nila Boying ug Pidot.” Apan adtong higayona si Nanay wa na motubag, kalit mitindog, yabo ko sa iyang sabak, hagtok akong bagol-bagol sa sawog, unya si Nanay nipiliit, kusog nityabaw, “*Apin, Ginoo ko, Apin! Apin!*” Dalagan si Nanay, ambak dali-dali

sa among mubong hagdanan, nagsiyagit, “*Apin, Apin.*”
 Akong ‘kit-an si Tatay—Serafin iyang ngalan—
 gibaklid og pisi, gisumpay sa kutay sa mga kalalakin-ang
 nanggimartsa. Apas kong Nanay. Naa, nagbakho,
 sa balilihan nagkisaykisay, nag-iyagak sa tingog
 nga kadto pa gyud nako hibatian, “Apin, asa ka nila dad-a,
 Oooy, maluoy mo, ay’ tawon ninyo dad-a akong bana...”
 Akong gibira si Nanay sa kamot, akong gipabarog.

Hilak pud ko, uy! Nagkayagaw pod tong uban
 mga kababayin-an, gipanangpit ilang mga bana, itay, anak,
 igsuon, ang uban mga bayong-bayong pa, mumagulang
 ra nako’g gamay, gipangdagit sa mga ‘Mirkanong
 diin kaha salta, unsay tuyo dinhi, way makaingon.
 “Bandoy.” “Ulding.” “Manoy.” “Itay.” “Oooy! Oooy!”
 Udto adlaw sa akong alimpatakan, hinay-hinay nanggimok
 akong mga kuto. Wa ko’y nahimo, kundi nangalot na lang.

Nahauli ra man hinuon si Itay, pila ‘to ka semana.
 Pagbalik niya among kamaisan nahimo nang kasagbotan
 kay wa masurko. Daghang giabot og gutom adtong panahona.
 Wa magdugay, nakabalos sad mi, no? Amo silang gipamatay,
 mura sad sila’g mga kutong way dag-anan dihang amo silang
 nasakpan. Gipanadtad, gipangluba sa among mga kalalakin-an,
 gipang-irok bisa’g kinsay hing-agian sa kadalanan.
 Mga banyagang puti, ambot asa to sila gikan?
 Unsa’y ilang katuyoan, wa gyud mi ato’y kabangkaagan,
 labi na ang Balangiga hilit man lagi sa nga tanan.

Sukad adto, si Nanay di na gyud manghinguto nako.
 Tingali’g nalubog ang mata sa tantong paghinilak.
 Apan wa magdugay nadalaga na man hinuon sad ko.
 Manudlay na, nakat-on na’g panghiso sa gata sinagla’g
 biyasong, hangtod akong buhok ning-itom,ningtaas,
 ningbaga’g maayo, ningsinaw pa gyud, wan’ay kutong
 musalir. Hangtod karon, gulang na ko.

Apan tinuod, pait tong panahona.
 Kanunay kalot-kaloton sa huna-huna.
 Lisod gyung hikalimtan. Bisa’g nakatulog
 kalit mutimbakuwas kapait, kahadlok, kayugot,

Uy, bisan gani hisgotan ra'y kuto...

###

CARMELITA, THE COOTIE GIRL

“Nay, stop it, *na*, ‘Nay,” I complain,
 “I tired *na*. Stiff *na*, my neck. Sleepy *na*.”
 Nanay, she pull my hair ‘stead, she not stop
 hunting for de cooties. “You shut up, gi’l,
 no fussing now. Umm! Umm! Ummm!
 Got it! *Sus*, dat was a fat one, *no!*”

De cooties, no way fo’ dem to get ‘scape
 from Nanay’s eyes. Hiding in the fores’
 of my uncomb’ hair, red-belly baby lice
 bloody full, the ole ones black
 like little carabaos—fo’ sure no escape fo’ dem.
 Her eyes sharp. Her nails long, black
 with soot from de pot, very fas’.
 She crush dem w’ her nails, here, der,
 pulling off the cootie eggs ‘til my scalp sting,
 tears come to my eyes. Oh, no pity when Nanay,
 hunting fo’ de lice. She say to me, “*Ay*, Carmelita,
 all dis cooties on your head, they carry you
 to top top of bamboo pole, there they be free
 to bite bite, chew chew until you all bones...”

Well, one day, my playmates call
 fo’ me to play downst’r, our house very poor,
 de walls only of de coconut leaf. Dey all playing,
 an’ der I was, Nanay hunting de cooties ag’in
 So I beg, “Nay, please, le’ me play *siyatom*
 wi’ Boying an’ Pidot.” But Nanay, she not answer,
 she stan’ up quick quick, I fall, hit my head on de floor,
 an’ den Nanay shouting, “*Apin, ginoo ko,*
Apin! Apin!” Nanay ran, fas’ fas’ down de ladder,
 shouting, crying, “*Apin, Apin.*”

I see my fader—his name Serapin—

dey tie his han's at de back wi' de rope,
 all roped togeder wi' de oder men, marching
 marching pas' our house. Nanay running,
 I running after her. Now she crying loud,
 Rolling on de grass, shouting like I never heard befo',
 "Apin, where dey teking you? *Ooooy* have pity,
 don' tek away my husban'..."
 I pull up Nanay by de han', I made her stan'.

Uy, I also crying. Like all the oder women,
 calling out the names of husban', fader, son,
 broders, some o' dem still little, jus' like me,
 all taken away by the 'Merkanos. Dey come here
 for no good reason, *no?* No one know for sure
 why dey come. Everyone call de names,
 "Bandy." "Ulding." "Manoy." "Itay." "*Oooy! Oooy!*"
 Sun hot hot on my head, slowly de cooties,
 dey crawl an' bite. I can only scratch myself.

Tatay come home after few weeks.
 By den, weeds are plenty in de cornfield.
 Hunger that season in Balangiga.
 But soon we make de revenge.
 We also kill dem, like de cooties, one morning
 we had de chance, we cut dem down
 our men crushing anyone they meet.
 Dos white men not-like-us,
 where dey come from, who know?
 Why dey come here, who could say?
 Balangiga so small, so far away.

After dat, Nanay stop de louse-hunting.
 Mebbe her eyes go bad for crying so much.
 I grown up now, I already a young woman.
 I know how to comb my hair now, put coconut milk
 mix with wild lime. My hair become very black,
 it grow long, shiny-smooth. No more cooties.
 Up to now, I old woman *na*.

Oy, dos bitter bitter times,
 dey keep scratching in my mind.

Hard to forget. Even in sleep,
de fear, de anger still rise.
Uy, eben now, jus' talking 'bout lice—

January 14, 2008

End Notes

1. The bulalakaw was figured as a beast, a dragon maybe, who swallowed up the moon or the sun in a lunar or solar eclipse. People make noise on these occasions by beating drums and tin cans, calling out *Iuli ang among adlaw, iuli ang among adlaw*, "Return our sun! Return our sun."
2. The full title of this work is "Escrito en Sangre: Written in Blood Balangiga Interface." Interfacing poetry, art and history, the book is an innovative collage about the Balangiga incident. Fifty soldiers of the 9th Infantry Division of the US Army were killed by the natives after three months of occupation. The Americans responded by an orgy of killings that lasted for two years and reduced the population of Samar by about 15,000. The book is part of the UPV Centennial Project and is slated to come out in 2008.
3. Corruption of the word *muchacha*, *atsay*, in local parlance, a female househelp. The *atsay* is very often a young girl, and is usually of Visayan origin. She is often figured as ignorant, uncouth, and crude, but is often plagued with a desire to be like her mistress.