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Water-Earth (3 poems - Water Trail / Funeral of the River / The Flowers That Would Not Open)

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Abstract

In the house, the taps have dried I am searching for the water In the backyard, the pump has dried I am searching for the water Around the corner, the well has dried I am searching for the water Up the hill, the creek has dried

Keywords

water, earth, funeral, trail, river, poems, 3, that, flowers, would, open, not

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Water-Earth

By [Merlinda Bobis](#)

Water-Earth

Water Trail

In the house, the taps have dried
I am searching for the water
In the backyard, the pump has dried
I am searching for the water
Around the corner, the well has dried
I am searching for the water
Up the hill, the creek has dried

I am eight and it is 38
The path as dry as white bone
Cracking like my soles—but suddenly
From a distance, flowers
Large as basins and deeply pink
But I am still searching for the water

An hour later
So far away from home
A trickle from a boulder
And a catch in the throat—
An old man shades his sudden tears
From the heat, or me—but I have seen
Tubig, tubig, tubig—water, water, water

Funeral of the River

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I was not here when they buried the river
When they moved the bank with spades
The fragrant *kamya*, the unfurled *bandera española*
The bowing bamboo groves, the minty red berries, the earth
All burying the water.

But I am here now
Now this road to the rice paddies
And my feet are bone-dry
Feeling something coursing underneath
And into me, the buried river
Breaking through like blood.

The Flowers That Would Not Open

The mute child went to the doctor, because the flowers would not open. The doctor listened to his heart and sent him home. So the child returned to the flowers, tended them until he was a grown man. Still, the flowers would not open. One night, as an old man with an ailing heart, he visited the closed buds but tripped and fell face down. The buds quivered at the touch of his lips, at the last beat of his heart. 'Tierra אדמה lupa đát zeme jörð cré earth ...' it said in all tongues. And the flowers remembered how to open.



Merlinda Bobis

* * *

Writer, performer and academic Merlinda Bobis migrated to Australia in her early thirties, thus she feels that the Philippines is still the core home of her imaginary.

While she defines herself as a Filipino-Australian, having arrived in Australia as an adult, the Philippines remains "indelibly marked on



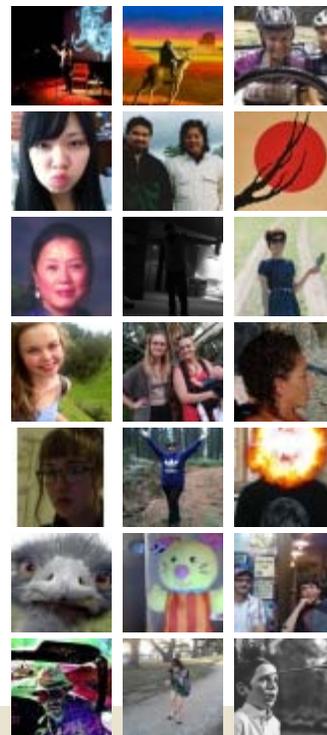
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my body and

sensibility”. For Merlinda “writing is like a homecoming, a return to embodied markings”. Against that embodied understanding of writing, she acknowledges that the more than twenty years she has spent in her new home of Australia has added a new layer of markings that have challenged and enriched her original sensibility. While she believes that she writes better because of this layered (or perhaps, hybrid) cultural sensibility, she acknowledges that this is not a “happy hybridity.” She says:

“There is always the fraught push-and-pull between these two cultures in my choice of story to tell or style to tell it with, bearing in mind that I publish in these two cultures and for two different audiences. Each might prefer something familiar, something closer to their own home rather than the other home that I inevitably bring into this telling. And of course, audience preference determines the reception of one’s work. Our imaginaries (in reading as it is in writing) are always culturally shaped.”

It is a great treasure to have Merlinda contribute poems to the Peril Map as, these days, she hardly writes poetry, preferring the novel and performance though she feels that both forms have retained the poetic voice. As a child, she started painting before moving to poetry, a move that she says is “probably a natural transition, because poetry is still very much about image”.

She wrote her first poem when she was ten, and in the Pilipino language, but most of her early readings of poetry were in English (Poe, Rosetti, Shakespeare, Longfellow, Browning, including poetry in English by Filipino writers). As she explains, at the time of growing up, all subjects including literature, were taught in English, with only one subject in Pilipino where students read literature in the national language; at that time Merlinda’s regional language, Bikol, “did not even get a look-in”. About this experience, she recounts:

“Such an ‘English language landscape’ was the remnant of American colonisation (40 years): we had ‘the full monty’ of American and British literature. But I think back to that first poem at ten years old: in Pilipino. Because of my colonial heritage, my sensibility was already ‘hybrid’ even then; or one might deduce that perhaps, I was already unconsciously decolonising in my choice of language, though after that poem I kept writing in English. Thus, to this day hybridity, border crossing, and the decolonising impetus are organic to all my works whether it is in my novel, short story, drama, or poetry. The core issue/question that occupies me most now, especially given the state of our contemporary geopolitics, is how do we negotiate alterity — how can I, as

writer and teacher, contribute alternative border interventions that address social justice issues and facilitate an empathetic border crossing towards the other, especially the marginalised other?"

Merlinda's suite of poems, "Water Trail", "Funeral of the River" and "The Flowers That Would Not Open" evokes a range of landscapes, the first two unforgiving and harsh, while in the third nature opens itself to a more reciprocal relation with its human subjects. In some senses, for those familiar with Merlinda's work, this suite of works evokes the abject poverty and harshness of the life led by the mute protagonist in *The Solemn Lantern Maker*. For Merlinda she sees these works as little parables, as is *The Solemn Lantern Maker*. She elaborates:

"Nature could be harsh and unforgiving; it mirrors how we could be as human beings. This seems such a bleak view of life. But then we are struck by a moment of profound connection (though yet uncomprehended) with another human being, or with nature itself. In the poems, the child 'sees the water' (the tears) produced by the old man, the one who has returned to the buried river feels it resonant thus resurrected in her blood, and the flowers remember how to open as the old man realises that the earth and its blooming flowers are shared by all cultures — then nature gives. As we do. For the flowers to open, we have to remember that nature gives, only if we do, if we open up to the giving/forgiving. We break the cycle of harshness, of dryness. I believe empathy, compassion, and especially love are always 'moistured', never dry."

In terms of the "pin-ability" of these works, Melinda has a mixed response. In the first two poems in the suite, which are autobiographical, she tells the story:

"When I was about eight or ten, one summer my city had the biggest drought: everything dried up. Being the eldest child, I was tasked with finding water. I can map this Water Trail very clearly in my head. Whenever our tap and pump dried up, I'd walk around the corner where there was the public faucet (I use 'well' in the poem instead; a poetic choice) where the whole community queued for water. When it dried up, I'd cross the road and go uphill to a place called Bañadero (literally meaning 'bathing place') to fetch water from a spring that trickled into a large creek where I also bathed. So I'd bathe and take home two cans of water afterwards. One day, even that spring dried up, and I couldn't really go home without any water. Someone from the crowd of 'water fetchers' said that further uphill, there was water. So I followed the crowd of mostly adults in a long trek uphill to a place I'd never been to before. The walk felt like forever. All the time, I was afraid my very strict mother would scold me for taking so long, but at the same time, I couldn't go home without water;

moreover, if I turned back on my own, I could lose my way. So I kept climbing the hill with the crowd. And this is the most wondrous image that's imprinted in me: along the way, from afar, I saw this sprawling white bungalow (a rich man's house) with a yard full of blooming pink flowers so large! Until now, I do not know what flowers they were and how in the world that house could have those blooming giant flowers in that drought. Finally, we arrived at this boulder that had a little trickle of water. All queued patiently for a long time, because it was such a thin trickle to fill up so many containers. I got my two cans of precious water and walked back home with the crowd. As expected, I was severely scolded by my mother who was so worried as I'd been away for about two to three hours. I might have cried because of this scolding, so in real life, it was not the old man in the poem that 'produced his own water' but ten-year old me."

For the final poem, however, she recollects being a child in the sixties, spending summer holidays with her grandmother in the village of Estancia.

"No electricity, no running water, but we had a well. And a few metres' walk away was a spring where my aunties and I used to bathe or do laundry. It coursed into a waterway that flowed through the rice paddies towards a river. In the nineties, when I was already living in Australia, I went home to the Philippines and, with my mother, to Estancia, when I was researching my novel *Fish-Hair Woman*. We visited the spring, but it had disappeared! 'Dinagaan na,' my mother said in Bikol: meaning, it had been filled with earth. We stood there, on earth, knowing that underneath our soles was the buried water. I remember this clearly: we stood there and faintly I heard the now faraway river roaring."

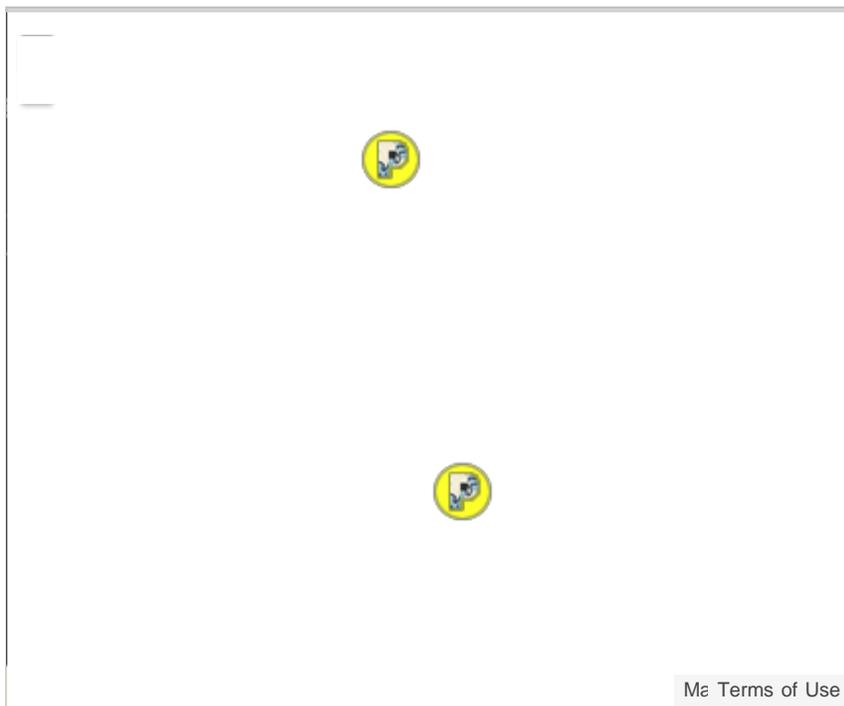
What is also roaring in the distance for Merlinda, is more stories; her practice seems rich, busy and a clear reflection of the fact that she feels "very much a multi-tasker in relation to story-making". Merlinda wants to do more than just "tell stories", she wants to facilitate others' telling of stories because "story-making keeps us grounded, keeps up those border crossings, thus keeps us connected with each other".

To that end, she is working on two novels (one in its final revision, and the other just getting started), doing small performances of *River, River*, her play adaptation of *Fish-Hair Woman*, and developing a community project on regenerating Illawarra waters and the cultures and communities around them through storytelling. Reflective also of elements of her pieces in the Peril Map, these projects, including the novels, are about water as resource and territory, and "as the lifeblood of community".

This primacy of community, and the integral role of resources and the environment in this connected system is a core concern for Merlinda. She states:

“Locally and globally, resource and territory are always sites of contestation, even violence. These human contests are harshly arid and unforgiving. In *Fish-Hair Woman*, there’s a village wake that brings out deeply seated conflicts and resentments, and one character proffers this insight: ‘... there is never any moisture in malice. Malice is always deprived.’ (p 270). But there’s always the possibility of empathy, even love — and love is always ‘moistured’, never dry. We must remember that the search for water, that often arduous water trail, leads us back to ourselves but always in relation to the other and the wider community.”

interview with Eleanor Jackson, Peril Poetry Editor



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About Merlinda Bobis



Filipino-Australian writer, performer, and academic Merlinda Bobis writes in three languages: English, Pilipino, Bikol. She has published three novels, a collection of short stories, five poetry books, a monograph on creative research, and scholarly essays on creative-critical production, militarism, migration, and the transnational imaginary. She has received various awards for her works, among them the Prix Italia (Radio Fiction) and the Australian Writers' Guild Award (Radio Play) for *Rita's Lullaby*; the Steele Rudd Award for the Best Published Collection of Australian Short Stories, the Philippine National Book Award, and the Judges' Choice Award (Bumbershoot Bookfair, Seattle Arts Festival) for *White Turtle / The Kissing* (US title); the Carlos Palanca Memorial Award for Literature for her poetry; and the Philippine Balagtas Award, a lifetime award for her fiction and poetry in English, Pilipino and Bikol. Her poetry book *Summer was a Fast Train without Terminals* was short-listed for The Age Poetry Book Award, and her novel *Banana Heart Summer*, for the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. This novel also received the Philippine Golden Book Award. Her latest novel *Fish-Hair Woman* will be adapted into a play in Pilipino by the Harlequin Theatre Company (Manila). Bobis's six plays have been performed/produced, some as her one-woman show, in Australia, Philippines, US, Spain, Canada, France, China, Thailand, and the Slovak Republic. As a multi-genre writer and a performer for stage and radio, Bobis has worked with artists from various disciplines. She teaches Creative Writing at University of Wollongong, Australia. About her creative process, she writes: 'Writing visits like grace. In an inspired moment we almost believe that anguish can be made bearable and injustice can be overturned, because they can be named. And if we're lucky, joy can even be multiplied, so we may have reserves in the cupboard for the lean times.' Author's website: <http://www.merlindabobis.com.au>

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