

THE BLIND CHATELAINE'S KEYS

Her Biography Through Your Poetics

**Begun by Eileen R. Tabios
Completed by Others**

BlazeVOX [books]

Buffalo, New York

I. THE MODEST CHATELAINES KEYS

A SELECTION OF KEYS

Poetry

After The Egyptians Determined The Shape of the World is a Circle, 1996
Beyond Life Sentences, 1998
The Empty Flagpole (CD with guest artist Mei-mei Berssenbrugge), 2000
Ecstatic Mutations, 2001 (with short stories and essays)
Reproductions of The Empty Flagpole, 2002
Enheduanna in the 21st Century, 2002
There, Where the Pages Would End, 2003
Menage a Trois With the 21st Century, 2004
Crucial Bliss Epilogues, 2004
The Estrus Gaze(s), 2005
POST BLING BLING, 2005
I Take Thee, English, For My Beloved, 2005
The Secret Lives of Punctuations, Vol. I, 2006
Dredging for Atlantis, 2006
It's Curtains, 2006
SILENCES: The Autobiography of Loss, 2007
The Singer and Others: Flamenco Hay(na)ku, 2007
The Light Sang As It Left Your Eyes: Our Autobiography, 2007

Novel

Novel Chatelaine, 2008-09

Short Story Collection

Behind The Blue Canvas, 2004

Essay Collections

Black Lightning, 1998 (poetry essays/interviews)
My Romance, 2002 (art essays with poems)

Editor

Asian Pacific American Journal (with Eric Gamalinda), 1996-1999
The Anchored Angel: Selected Writings by Jose Garcia Villa, 1999
Bridgeable Shores: Selected Poems (1969-2001) by Luis Cabalquinto, 2001
Gravities of Center: Poems by Barbara Jane Reyes, 2002
Babaylan: An Anthology of Filipina and Filipino American Writers (with Nick Carbo), 2002
INTERLOPE #8: Innovative Writing by Filipino/a Americans, 2002
Screaming Monkeys (with Evelina M. Galang, Jordan Isip, Sunaina Maira, and Anida Yoeu Esguerra), 2004
Galatea Resurrects (A Poetry Engagement), 2006-Present

Images From A Waking Dream

By Juaniyo Arcellana

Review of Reproductions of the Empty Flagpole (*Marsh Hawk Press, New York, 2002*)
The Philippine Star, November 25, 2002

One might be hard-pressed to review a book like Eileen R. Tabios' *Reproductions of the Empty Flagpole*, a collection of prose poems published by the New York-based Marsh Hawk Press, without the risk of intellectualizing too much its chimeric contents. For the most part Tabios herself admits that her compositions are sculpted poems, complementary to a suggestion that they are in a manner poem-paintings, effectively betraying the strong visual stylist the poet is throughout her prose meanderings.

But these reproductions may only be difficult on the surface of things, for in the day to day business of living one's somewhat ordinary life, they come across like images from a waking dream, or better still, excerpts from a short film in progress.

It matters little that Tabios was a devout student of the late [Philippine] National Artist Jose Garcia Villa, who in his lifetime held that poetry was different from prose and never the twain shall meet, because in Tabios' own inexhaustible experiments in the written word all schools and philosophies and deconstructivist axioms can go hang, not that the old master would be turning in his grave because of it.

Villa anyway shocked a good number of readers too while he was at it, and what could be a lasting influence on his student was the same dogged persistence to stick to the artist's vision, like a kind of faith.

Reproductions then is not your conventional book that must be read from beginning to end, for in the spatial order of things the lines can shimmer and roll like distant flashes of lightning in the horizon.

But maybe we are already intellectualizing too much Tabios' poetry, which is prose only in form but is poetry in all other aspects, not the least of which is its ability to reinvent the language, any language. We see familiar themes of the exile forever searching for the long road home, relationships between elusive and/or evasive lovers, as well the mother-daughter dichotomy and journeys into the soul's dark night, both actual and metaphorical and in real time approximating 12-bar blues.

We've mentioned sculpture and Tabios' natural affinity with the visual if not spatial arts, but if her poems were music, which they are too in any case, then they would be closer to the jazz phrasings of, say, Joni Mitchell in her Hejira phase, forever on the run while the ghost of Jaco Pastorius' bass colored the background like a shade of magenta.

There are references in her poems to the Greeks and the feminists, though her words skirt around the classics or any thong-wearing postmodern woman. At times the language may induce a kind of dizziness in the casual reader, but *Reproductions* as reproductions go do not require full

concentration to be appreciated; again it is as if we've walked into a movie house during the middle of a screening, while perhaps the heroine is about to disrobe or slash her wrists or something, which leaves us gawking and wondering and trying to make heads or tails what all this life and death drama is about.

We feel like rambling in our minds as we peruse through the book and read familiar names like Eric Gamalinda, Joey Ayala, guys who we were in the same writers workshop with in the late 1970s, when Tabios herself was somewhere in the US of A, growing up western nonetheless, yet feeling occasionally the tug and pull of the homeland, as inevitable as balut and sinigang and the design of weavers up north from where the poet's ancestors hail.

Reproductions is quite modern too if you get right down to it, landing right smack in the cyber age where love can be lost and found in a click of a mouse or sent via e-mail to the inconsolable void.

Some detractors may label Tabios' work pretentious but that may be just another way of saying it is way ahead of its time and so would understandably make many a new critic uncomfortable.

Or that she has a big ego which is true of many a controversial and ground-breaking artist. But only in the sense that Mallarme and Valery and the rest of those weird, turn of the last century French poets were ground-breaking and whose very poetry was a way of life.

In her "Lies," which is just the other side of the truth, the persona imagines having kids, and that one of them would surely grow up to be president of the United States. Then she realizes she is fooling herself and admits that she'll end up alone, alone, alone.

But for her art Tabios too is alone, which in the end could be one and the same not altogether sad thing.

On *POST BLING BLING*

By Andrea Baker

Engagement with POST BLING BLING (Moria Poetry, Chicago, 2005)
Spoke to the World on the Phone Blog by Andrea Baker, Dec. 18 & 19, 2006

Dec. 18, 2006

Christmas is stressing me out. It feels like a heavy tax. Business is stressful. Getting ready to leave is stressful. We bumped up our car today. And I just don't agree with so much of society and that's so present with me this time of year. And buying perfect gifts is hard. It's so easy to make people feel misunderstood with gifts. I hate consumer values. Realstate grubbers are tearing down my neighborhood all around me. Walter and I testified in a court case recently. The transcripts came back and the reporter put "punched" when he said "pinched." BUT I've just opened Eileen Tabios' *POST BLING BLING* and it feels like a pressure release valve for all my woe:

This is the second poem:

WELCOME TO THE LUXURY HYBRID

It's not just the debut of a new car, but of a new category.

Lexus engineers have combined the attribute of a luxury sedan with the remarkable fuel economy and low emissions that only hybrid technology can provide.

The result is a vehicle that offers you the best of both, without asking you to sacrifice anything.

A V6 engine delivers the power of a V8 while producing only a fraction of the emissions associated with a standard SUV.

Yet this hybrid is also every inch a Lexus, sparing nothing in the way of your comforts and conveniences.

Making it what may indeed be the first vehicle of its kind.

One that treats you, and the world you live in, with equal respect.

There are certain moods when I won't connect to this writing but one of my favorite things about poetry is allowing myself to be such a fickle reader. For right now nothing could beat a little hard liquor and *POST BLING BLING*. I love the line breaks in that poem—I don't know why but feel them as outrageously successful.

Dec. 19, 2006

I do want to talk. Was glued to *POST BLING BLING* this morning. It's really brilliant. The second 1/2 is a list-serv conversation about "balikbayan boxes"—the boxes of American consumer crap that Filipinos are expected to

send home. How politically complicated. This book would be a perfect pre-xmas gift for any stressed and demoralized shopper. The first 1/2 of the book (the two halves work together brilliantly) remind me of the boy in *Equus* (an all-time favorite play—and I'll settle for the movie)... Don't recall his name right now. But— he's blinded some horses and is in an institution. He won't talk but sings advertising jingles. Which reminds me of the mindless way there is xmas music everywhere I go and I take it in without noticing it and then find myself singing it to myself as I walk around the house, which is creepy. Also, by reacting against all the xmas stuff I'm more engaged with it than I would be if I reacted less—but that would also be complacency. This seems to be the type of complacency that grows as people get older. Equus was the only word with two 'U's. My playwrighting class got very mad at me because I was thrilled about dissecting it beat by beat. The psychiatrist used to just annoy me—I could only see that boy but my playwrighting teacher said she identified with the judge. I now identify most with the psychiatrist. It's very good art that can sustain and change for you with time.

Eileen Tabios and the upturning of codified needs

By Anny Ballardini

*Review of I Take Thee, English, For My Beloved (Marsh Hawk Press, New York, 2005)
Jacket Magazine, 2008, Eds. John Tranter and Pam Brown*

*To bring the poem into the world
is to bring the world into the poem
—from **Conjuration #3, Eileen Tabios***

In his "Discourse in the novel" Mikhail M. Bakhtin writes:

"The poet must assume a complete single-personed hegemony over his own language, he must assume equal responsibility for each one of its aspects and subordinate them to his own, and only his own, intentions. Each word must express the poet's meaning directly and without mediation: there must be no distance between the poet and his word.

[...] To achieve this, the poet strips the word of others' intentions, he uses only such words and forms (and only in such a way) that they lose their link with concrete intentional levels of language and their connection with specific contexts."

Bakhtin's description of the poet approaches Eileen Tabios's active involvement. *I Take Thee, English, for My Beloved* (2005) is a phantasmagoric journey of 504 pages into one of the most interesting embodiments of contemporary poetry. Tabios' uprooting literary strength finds an unusual background. Born in Ilocos Sur, Philippines, her family moves to the United States when she is ten. With an M.B.A. in economics and international business, after having worked as an economist, a journalist, a stock market analyst, and finally as a banker for a decade, in 1996 she decides to move to a castle in California to dedicate her life to poetry. She founded and edits the poetry review *Galatea Resurrects*, and is the founder of Meritage Press, a multidisciplinary literary and arts press based in St. Helena, Ca. Her publications are numerous and she has many imminent projects to which she is at present committed. Her dedication to art, artistic actions, joi de vivre, untiring creative presence make her one of the most interesting and well known poets on the net, and internationally.

A critical approach to a collection like *I Take Thee, English, for My Beloved* could entice a critic into a labyrinth without escape. An Aristotelian taxonomic method might initially be adopted to find leading patterns, but it is soon to be discarded out of necessity. Any symbol, allusion, sign, style, tone by which the reader thinks he has recognized a safe sequence in terms of interpretation, will be soon overthrown. Tabios' words and continuous twists catch the reader with their luring beauty to flee as soon as they have reached him. She slides elegantly in and out of stylistic rules with breath-taking acrobatic moves. Her compositions are a feast for the "poetic intellect" as defined by our distant Coleridge where the development of his "Imagination" has topped to:

Ebony eyes

stunned sunlight, *stunned light*

(from The Piano Keys)

The equilibrist of opposites enters and exits plastic sceneries from unexpected perspectives:

Sunrays coating gray rocks
offer a sheen, pretty
but false as a repentance
also in hiding
for what is rational is not what serves the day:
right = negative X (wrong)

*(from [R-Factors]
for Jukka-Pekka Kervinen)*

A passionate "love-hate" bondage with the English language develops in nuances that reach both extremes: passionate eroticism and annihilation by alternating supplications and requests, the indescribable need to forge the "lover" as much as the need of forging oneself to the expectations of the lover, within moral, intellectual, emotional rules the "I" has set as the parameters of a relationship, with guilty feelings, tensions out of the entwining, clashing, crashing of feelings.

what I meant to say.
What I mean to say is

have I truthfully
truthfully loved you?

(from PERSPECTIVES BEFORE EARTH FALLS)

[...] nothing less than osmosis and agonizing over the compromise.

(from A COAGULATION OF PIXELS)

Tabios keeps on surprising in a whirl of unannounced and unanticipated associations, courageous in her faith, delimited as in Ex-Faith, with vocatives in Italics, rhetorical questions, objects taken from the nearest proximity, as much as the use of a most tropical-exotic language: "jasmine; jacaranda; vines; mango; amethyst; ginger; orange rinds; Sri Lankan grass; corral pink sapphires; garnet; carmine; crimson; Vases overflow with magenta;

—a flamenco dancer stamps her feet and red velvet skirt whirls-
muscled thighs glistening

(from On Looking Back at the Unborn)

the sweetness of the Filipino kayumangi color

(from "Poems Form/From The Six Directions" interview by Nick Carbo)

melons, harvesting melons, eating
melons: canary, cantaloupe, honeydew..."

(from Honeydew, Chapter eighty; III. The Definitive History of Fallen Angels: An Autobiography).

What unifies the present collection, what is the idea behind the red cover of the book with Eileen Tabios and her husband at their wedding in an oval picture framed by the alphabet? It is the marriage of the poet with the English language and the list of Contents can sketch an outline of the structure that far from being comprehensive can at least convey in broad lines the complexity of the present tome. Divided into five main blocks, a series of distinct sub-sections are used to complete and integrate the guiding segment of investigation:

I. ENGLISH: THE COURTSHIP
LUCIFER'S ATTEMPTS AT NARRATIVE
(Followed by a longer section of poems:)

YES, I DO

CRUCIAL BLISS

DEFINITIONS
(concrete images, thick tough language, prose poems. "Play and write stringently-want that. Want.")

CLYFFORD STILL STUDIES
(Eileen Tabios' quotation is taken from *Wandering* by Arthur Rimbaud: "I made up rhymes in dark and scary places, /And like a lyre I plucked the tired laces /Of my worn-out shoes, one foot beneath my heart.")

CONJURATIONS

OBVIATING THE PROSCENIUM'S EDGE (I)
(the surreal staging of Eileen with her double /"But Seriously, When I Was Jasper Johns' Filipino Lover...")

HAY(NA)KU: OBVIATING THE PROSCENIUM'S EDGE(II)
(Eileen Tabios is the inventor of the Hay(na)ku: in this section, several Hay(na)kus are collected, and the Official History of Hay(na)ku; born on June 10, 2003, is described. The new poetic composition that wants stanzas of three lines: the first of one word, the second of two, the third of three, was inaugurated on Philippine Independence Day at the Pinoy Haiku, on June 12 of the same year. The present section is used by Tabios to glimpse at Philippines' history. Mention is given to their first independence from Spain in 1898, followed soon after by the United States invasion. "Despite the material improvement brought about by the American Government, they still considered themselves unjustly deprived of their right to manage their own affairs; and when the first Philippine Assembly met in 1901, it made the solemn declaration that American rule in

the Philippines remained unsanctioned by the people whose great desire, as ever, was their complete political emancipation.")

BLACK HOLE BEATITUDES

EPILOGUE POEMS

II. POEMS FORM/FROM THE SIX DIRECTIONS

SCULPTED POEMS

III. AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

(Ten chapters with Footnotes; starting from Chapter Eleven to Chapter Ninety-nine only the Footnotes are reproduced; finally Chapter One Hundred is a prose poem that retraces the story from the beginning.)

IV. THERE, WHERE THE PAGES WOULD END

(Footnotes to "Paroles" by Jacques Prevert, translation by Harriet Zinnes; Footnotes to "Forces of Imagination" by Barbara Guest; Selected Footnotes to "Opera" by Barry Schwabsky; Footnotes to "Volume V of The Diary of Samuel Pepys, M.A., F.R.S."; Footnotes to "The Virgin's Knot" by Holly Payne.)

V. ONE POEM, ONE READING

(review by Ron Silliman of one poem by Eileen Tabios: "Helen" and his extremely positive evaluation of her work.)

SELECTED NOTES TO POEMS

(an interesting reading by itself)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In II. POEMS FORM/FROM THE SIX DIRECTIONS, Eileen Tabios introduces her "Marriage to "Mr/s Poetry" with the description of her performance/exhibition of "Poem Tree" held in March, August and September, 2002, at Sonoma State University; Berkeley; and in San Francisco. Photos of Eileen Tabios' original marriage are mixed with the ones of the happenings. We see the poet and students, or friends, wearing Eileen's bridal dress. The supporting notion of the various actions, as Tabios states, is "modeled after a rite in Filipino and Latino weddings wherein guests pin money on the bride's and groom's outfits. The ritual symbolizes how guests offer financial aid to the couple beginning a new life together. For 'Poem Tree,' poems are pinned onto the dress to symbolize how poetry, too, feeds the world."

It is the same Poet to give directions: "For me, living as a poet requires maximizing awareness of the world [...]. I refer to my hope that my poems

create spaces for experiences that readers find meaningful, if not pleasurable." Within the same context Tabios adds: "Poetry is not words but what lies between words, between the lines."

An interview by poet Nick Carbo with the poet follows; then the transcription of an E-mail by Eileen Tabios to Paolo Javier to introduce her first poem-sculpture, and finally the section dedicated to the SCULPTED POEMS.

From an interview that appeared on *Readme*, by Purvi Shah, Tabios explains: "Some might call my approach a brand of surrealism but I use the phrase 'subverting the dictionary' for political reasons related to the use of English as an imperialist tool in the Philippines..."

The variety of poetic forms, the different styles, the use of prose, interviews, E-mails, the writing of a fiction story by chapters and footnotes, pages and pages of intuitions and comments to other Author's poetry collections, the insertion of Ron Silliman's review, the same formatting of the book, subvert not only the dictionary but the same idea of a book. There where Roland Barthes talked of the 'Death of the Author,' and Michel Foucault asked the question: "What matter who's speaking?" after having buried the Author under a series of definitions and questions, Eileen Tabios stands out in her being alive, here, unique, and present.

Speaking ab absurdo, the inherent abstraction inserted in surreal contexts creates stability and consistency. The tension that obliges the reader under a continuous strain establishes the parameters of intelligence. If patterns are to be found, her Filipino indigenous culture-and in detail an opening to all suffering peoples, together with the piercing observation of facts, situations, events, can be highlighted as leading threads.

Ole, Lucentum
City of light

Algerians cluster on the quay
amidst suitcases stuffed

with carpets and breakfast cereals
waiting for the boat to Oran

(from Alicante)

If I write a poem
about you Manila,

will your politicians respond
with more civility

than a man who never learned
post-coital manners?

Manila, I am asking,