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Two Voices

Merlinda Bobis

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Hintay. Hintay. Hintay.

EN DA WINER IS
Kontestang Namber X!
Plakadong palakpakan!

Pilit na ngiti. Klos ap.
Ngiti.
Ngiti.

—Komersyal ng sanitari napkin, export quality—
BOW.

MERLINDA BOBIS

Two Voices

I

At one stop-over,
I folded up my heart
into a crane
for you. A tourist wondered
where I learned *origami*.

Then at a street-stall
in the rain,
I asked for *tom-yum*,
two fragrant bowls in all—
the vendor raised her brows
and searched behind my back.

You see, I have arranged
tables for two
in cafés heavy with incense
and chatter
of the most beautiful strangeness
you sometimes have betrayed
in sleep.

Once, I dreamt your brown back
was so bare
there at China Beach,
I then hunted for you
the whitest of *ao dai's*.

Last night,
I tried your number
nine times
between swigs of *basi*
and smoothing pillows—

how come your voice remembered
dawns so much
like this murmur
of fisherfolk
hauling the night's catch?

II

Today, you span the far mountains
with an arm and say,
"This I offer you—
all this blue sweat
of eucalypt."

Then you teach me
how to startle kookaburras
in my throat,

and point me out orion
among the glowworms.

I, too, can love you
in my dialect, you know,
punctuated with cicadas
and their eternal afternoons:

Mahal kita. Mahal kita.

I can even save you monsoons,
pomelo-scented bucketfuls
to wash your hair with.

And for want of pearls,
I can string you the whitest seeds
of green papayas,

then hope that, wrist to wrist,
we might believe again
the single rhythm passing
between pulses,

even when pearls
become the glazed-white eyes
of a Bosnian child
caught in the cross-fire,

or when monsoons cannot wash
the trigger-finger clean
in East Timor,

and when Tibetans
wrap their dialect
around them like an orange robe

lest orion grazes them
from a muzzle.

Yes, even when among the Singhalese
the birds mistake the throat
for a tomb

as gunsmoke lifts
from the Tamil mountains,

my tongue will still unpetrify
to say,

"Mahal kita. Mahal kita."