

*Because I love you, I become war*, Eileen R. Tabios (Marsh Hawk Press)

Some people think I'm a hyperactive writer. A reviewer in Exeter once suggested that either I was one of those names used by a group of individuals or that I had been cloned. Goodness knows what they would make of the extensive two page list of publications by Eileen R. Tabios at the start of this book! *Because I love you...* is subtitled 'Poems and Uncollected Poetics Prose' and contains an unruly mix of the experimental, the imagistic, the political, the conceptual and the explanatory; the author is very, very present throughout.

I don't mean this is confessional poetry. Tabios knows all about Kenneth Goldsmith's and others' theories of re-presentation, collage, processual writing, flarf, variations, responses to and 'translations' of work; she's invented forms (the Hay(na)ku), has an acute sense of poetics, but is adamant about how, even when using 'the potential randomness of line combinations to create new poems', the author is present in the work.

I thought it important that there be no disavowing or distancing of authorship from the work, an element I consider particularly important as a poet of color. There are enough forces (from gate-keeping to racism) and would-be aesthetic trends (e.g. 'the author is dead') that would erase the subjectivity of a poet (and any other artist) of color. Identity may ever be in flux, but the 'I' always exists. Without that 'I' the speaker does not exist. Without the speaker, the concerns of a poet of color would not exist.

'Yes, but...' I want to say. The speaker of a poem is (or can or may be) a construct by the author, a character if you like, a narrator. Yes, the author can't help but be in the poem, leave traces as the person responsible for the text, but does it need foregrounding?

The interesting thing is that Tabios makes it work. Her poetics prose explains not only how she wrote the work but also why, in both specific and general terms. So, whilst discussing her 'Murder Death Resurrection' project, which involves constructing poems, prose poems or prose using lines salvaged from earlier works, each prefaced with the phrase 'I forgot' and collected as a database, she notes that even this method of writing, which 'shifts emphasis away from author to reader in determining the poem's effectiveness', affirms what she calls 'Kapwa Poetics'. This, she explains, is 'a poetics based on the indigenous Filipino value of interconnection among all beings and things.'

This interconnection also involves time, the past and future, 'coalesced into a singular moment, a single gem with infinite expanse'. It is also 'the space in which I strive to write poems,' she declares, wishing 'for no one or nothing to be alien to me'. It is this aim, this poetics, that of course, allows Tabios to not only meet environmental damage, economic/political oligarchy, racism, inequality and colonialism head on, but to write intelligently and fluently about them. This is not right-on rhyming doggerel or militant sloganeering, it is evidence of thoughtful and playful authorial control and purpose.

So in addition to delightful emotional minimalism and self-awareness of

(Y)our Loss

Because I loved you  
As if you were a Poem

we get 'Bauang Beach', a sequence of six poems which all start with the same 14 couplets but then continue on to form different poems; a lockdown tanka and plenty of chain Hay(na)ku; and the satirical 'Spots', written in response to a quote from 'How to Spot a Communist', a 1955 pamphlet which in part discusses 'Communist Language':

Comrade, it's not a witch hunt but a mark of the vanguard to peek at the ruling class' hootenanny (after all, hooliganism has many roots), not chauvinism let alone jingoism but the appropriate recognition of bourgeois-nationalism—let's not ignore that divide between the progressive and the reactionary—not materialist but, if anything, an attempt to dilute exploitation from oppressive colonialism, and indeed is simple integrative thinking that might even be confused by book-burners as syncretic faith—note, too, the length of this sentence as dialectical proof.

The poem – and I love that phrase 'simple integrative thinking' – is signed by 'A Literary Critic For the Sake of National Security'. Elsewhere, other poems take sudden shifts or twists & turns, moving from observation to political comment. 'Flower' considers 'those seeds you kept planting' and the realization that 'what you thought was fertile earth was dumb, hard concrete', before offering a 'public service announcement' which lists a number of political figures, criminals and presidents who 'define "compromised".' The poem ends by returning to observe and praise a 'gleaming-white wildflower cracking, then blossoming, through the sidewalk' but notes that 'most curl up and die, never breaking through to attain health from the sun's ethical lucidity.'

The book ends with some recent poems written in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a postscript offering immediacy and topical writing. This immediacy, the desire to document what's going on, both the personal and social, underpins this book, as evidenced work such as 'Kindness, And Its Ease' and 'Sustenance', which precede a poem which simply documents a neighbourly exchange of fruit and vegetables over garden fences. I say simply but, as Tabois observes when discussing her Hay(na)ku form, it is 'deceptively simple', and in some ways as militant as her more politically forthright poetry. It is a poem about human interaction, about local economies and society, about how people are or can be interconnected. That said it is not a manifesto or argument, just poetic evidence about what already happens and what might be worth initiating.

I used the phrase 'unruly mix' earlier in this review. It was certainly one of my initial impressions of this book, but having lived with it for a while I can see it more as a personable mix, a snapshot perhaps of projects and poetics on the go. Part of me would still like this poet's work tidied up, different projects in different publications, poetics as a book of essays, but that would be to devalue the evident and evidenced interconnectedness of

the poetry, essays and poet. I was going to say this book suits the poet, but I don't know Eileen Tabios personally, so I will instead suggest that this book suits the texts it contains. To use a term from another culture, it has an idea of *potlach* attached to it, as well as the more English pot luck. It is a gift, a gathering of current writing and thought, which provokes and spins off ideas and thoughts in many directions. In one of her texts, discussing appropriation and re-presentation in relation to a specific work by John Bloomberg-Rissman, Tabois quietly wonders 'whether the reader will be as avant garde as the poet'. It's a good question to ask about this volume, too, as those who don't pay attention or read closely will miss just how radical and aware, how brilliantly playful and subversive, this book is.

Rupert Loydell