

**Tando-Huni Ug Uban Pang Balak | Treading Softly: Review of
Marjorie Evasco's It is Time to Come Home**

Ester Tapia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://animorepository.dlsu.edu.ph/akda>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#), [Translation Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

REVIEW

“Tando-Huni Ug Uban pang Mga Balak” | Treading Softly

Review of Marjorie Evasco’s *It is Time to Come Home* (Milflores Publishing and De La Salle University Publishing House, Inc., 2023)

Ester T. Tapia
Women in Literary Arts, Cebu Inc., Philippines
ester.tapia55@gmail.com

Dr. Resil Mojares in his introduction to the first volume of *Sugbuanong Balak* writes about how the Cebuano balak thrives in social interactions. “Poetry permeated local life: there were verses for practically for every occasion and everyone was a poet... the genuine impulses within native poetry include the values of play, fancy, incantation, and orality. To be poetic means “purple speech, ‘sentimental,’ declamatory and biased in favor of certain modes of diction and sentiment” (Mojares in Alburo, et. al. 1988. Vol. 2.4). Consequently is the occurrence of “flamboyant metaphors in stock phrases within the culture. They are taken from the popular reservoir and are familiar to performers as well as their audiences.”

In her work “Tagay Tagay Poetics and Gender in Cebuano Poetry,” Merlie Alunan points out that social activities such as *tagay*, a social activity of sharing liquor among largely male Cebuano writers, engenders male dominance in Cebuano writing and is the “precursor to the lushness and floridity of the traditional balak. Other elements may be mentioned too. One is the blown up or hortatory tone common to the balak. The persona never just speaks; he declaims or

orates in the most emphatic fashion. The poem might be addressed to one person, yet the tone is more suited to public delivery. The diction strives for elevation in keeping with the tone.” Stock phrases within a culture prompts the usage of flamboyant metaphors. As part of the popular reservoir, audiences are familiar with them and relate instantaneously to poets or performers on stage. Alunan suggests that power play, amoral, bugal-bugal, shallow worship of female persona, and male fantasy of female desire are the associated strategies that the predominantly male Cebuano poetry spawns.

Alunan proposes “it is important to note how women writing brought in new dimensions of thought and feeling to complement the literature of the canon as we might refer to it in general. More women have entered the literary mainstream over the last 50 years. Predictably the women have their own things to say at last. The silent or silenced woman has broken through and discovered that she has something to say of her own—thoughts, feelings and experiences that had been ignored or set aside as unimportant because they dealt only with the private and intimate world of domesticity and childbearing. After centuries of modeling after

the men, the women might be coming into a usage of language distinctively their own. Thus, women writing has broadened the contemporary literary terrain in both style and content." One such woman is Marjorie Evasco.

When I had decided to take on the pleasure of writing about Marjorie Evasco's poetry, I aimed to navigate the world of her Cebuano poetry—contained in a section of her collection *It is Time to Come Home*. This section is titled "Tando-Huni," a translation of her works in English in the collection *Ochre Tones*, published in 1999. I had access to the entire collection but being Cebuano poet myself, I gave myself the luxury of focusing on the Cebuano poems, and, consciously uncoupling them from their original pieces in English. I spent a couple of months, unreading and intending to forget the English poems so that I may savor the Cebuano poems as they are, learn from them, and discover the freshness of poetic strategies the poet has created in Cebuano. At the back of my mind is the awareness that these Cebuano balak are transformations of what may have been essentially English poetry in Philippine literature. It is critical that the poet had decided to transmute the poems in the mother tongue in a collection that aptly titled *It is Time to Come Home*. I am convinced that what the poet says in the poems are boundless signals of mind and spirit, and their boundaries are not the language in which they are written be it in English, Cebuano, or Tagalog for that matter.

The root of the poems is not language but human experience. Language is the instrument by which human experience is distilled by the experiencing human—naming it is understanding it and making it part of oneself, hence; enhancing survival and life itself. Language is the instrument by which human experience is shared and communicated—sounds and images are conveyed by the senses to other humans—feelings, acts, and modes of interactions with the outside world. Evasco is able to speak of these experiences, be they through English or Cebuano poetry.

The objective of this essay is to present features in Evasco's poetry which enlarge contemporary Cebuano poetry. Cebuano poetry follows the trajectory of writing in the tradition of flamboyant, rhetorical, and didactic techniques styles. Of late, wit and humor assume center stage. Cebuano poetry's appeal moves towards the performance arts, geared towards more optimized audience relational, theatrical and stage

effects. In contrast Evasco's poetry are gentler, appeals to the mind and imagination of the readers.

The Structure of the Collection

The structure is divided into four parts: Yuta, Tubig, Kayo, and Hangin. Underlying the connectedness of the four elements, is the connectedness of the poet's inner world with the outside world—which readily offers to the poet patterns of reality which are presented by not just the different personas in the poems, but by the voices of others, of men and women, dead and living, of nature, and the shared knowledge, thoughts and art forms existing out there. It is quite difficult for me to use the word "persona" of the poems, as the poet distinctly inhabits the poems which she writes.

Treading Softly

The first thing that one notices when reading Evasco is the gentleness. She is a poet who treads softly between the lines, that line after line is like walking through hallowed rooms, full of silences bearing witness, that the reader is able to relish the walk between the words. One can not help but take note of the breath, inhalation and exhalations, as one goes through the poems. This enables the reader to discover those silences, the moments when s/he finds her/his own words. For Evasco is a poet who indelibly connects with her readers, so that the "I" in one poem easily transitions to a "we," a "you, and I" and inevitably enfolds the reader herself/himself. The "I" is no longer the "I" but a "we,"—the shift imperceptible. The transition is smooth and light that the reader assents to being part of the "we" in the poem. This technique in organizing the lines in the poems is pervasive from page to page, but it is not intrusive or jarring. The poet is clearly a master of soft footfalls, beguiling and seducing the reader, who invariably, nods her/his head in Tando—yes, yes, and takes the poet's proffered hands.

from "Tando-Huni"

Kinsa may moingon nga kinaiyahan lang kini,
O nga ang kauhaw sa lawas mao day nagmangno
kanato
nga mokamang ug moyukbo sa yuta
aron ihawok ang atong mga ngabil kaniya?

Naghapyod ang dulom sa atong kainit
 ug adunay kalipay kining hingpit nga
 paghigugma.
 Ngani karon, nagsingsing og mutyaong-yamog
 ang tumoy sa kadahonan sa Kawayan.
 Gihandom ko si Grasya diha sa kahanginan
 samtang usa ka Tuko naghuni sa iyang
 Tando. Tando. Tando.¹

In the lines above the “we and us,” do not only refer to the I and you addressed in the poem, but to us, the readers as well. True, we could only say.

Silences

In “Pagsayaw sa Pulong Gamhanan,” the poet implores her soul to be silent. The devotion to silence is as exacting as the exigencies of art forms including dancing and singing as well as that of life-sustaining endeavors such as fishing. “Sa kinalawmang dapit niining lanaw, adunay nag-inusarang manangat nga nagbugsay.” In engaging at his task, the fisher, is immersed in silence and in solitude, much like nurturing the writing craft. In the third stanza “Dinhi sa tinubdan sa mga pu’ong / ang kahilom maoy atong kumpas sa awit. / Dihang ang dulom nga tono sa imong tingog mopahiluna sa apog ug bato, ang akong awit motubo’g kuyamoy, / molala ang akong lagsik nga tiil sa kinakaraanang sugilanon, magtamod nga di ipahibawo sa mga namati/nga kamao tang molitok sa mga pu’ong gamhanan iyang ngalan nga atong gihalaran.”² The weaver of words knows that at the focal of silence is the heartbeat of the song.

The silences are well-defined in the poem “Laylay”—between the seven stanzas, made up of two lines each. The silences create in the reader an expectation of sounds and images cohesive in the words “kalasangan” (forest), “sanga” (branch), “kaugatan” and “ihaás” (wild). The exhalations upon reading the words and syllables, enable the reader to form in her/his mind, images of her own forest, trees, wild animals, and interactions which are made sacral as time goes by. The lines “Kaniadto sa akong pagtubo imo kong gitudloan sa kahibulongang gahum pagsul-ob / sa kahilom, dala lamang ang suga sa mga mata” speak of the power of silence which renders things knowable.

“Hulagway sa Sagada sa Kalibotang Naglutaw-lutaw” (“Sagada Stills in a Floating World”) speaks of the way by which the Sagada photographer

Masferre reveals Silence: aron makat-onan ang paagi / pagpadayag / sa Kahilom. This method is equivalent to the way by which Shikibu, a master of poetry, stains the Voice: “ang paagi / sa pagtina sa Tingog.” For Evasco, silence is inextricably linked to the process of creation.

Persona and Poetic Voice

“Ang Tikarol ba Kadto?” is for me, the most beautiful poem in the collection (one which I had attempted to translate to German in 1994). The Cebuano balak highly succeeds in the tone and fluidity of its language, and in the translucence of its diction, a quality that is not easy to find in characteristic features of Cebuano poems which are florid and splashy. In this poem as in many others in this collection, the persona and Evasco’s singular poetic voice are inseparable; the reader has a sense of moving into the poet’s universe which is rooted not in language but in elemental signs and symbols. The reader can only walk lightly when going through. The line “manihag-sihag ang atong kalag”—a very delicate description of the soul echoes the Cebuano’s or Visayan’s sense of the reality of the spirit, the anima, in aspects of nature, including that of man.

from “Ang Tikarol ba Kadto?”

Dinhi sa atong gilingkorang bato nga gitabonan
 og sagbot sa dagat,
 natagamtaman ko’g kalit ang asul nga migakos
 kanato,
 kining bato, isla, nausob nga hangin,
 ang atong gilay-on ug ang panaghiusa
 sa kaugalingon nga atong gipangandoy.
 Mikaylap
 sa akong utok ang asul nga kilat nga nagka’yo,
 naghatag sa tubag nga atong gigukod niining
 tibuok adlaw:
 nag-awit niini ang mga bawod; naglupad-lupad
 dinhi ang Tikarol,
 migamot niini kining isla. Ang pagpangandoy
 sa Bathala asul nga tin-aw—ang bulok
 diin manihag-sihag ang atong kalag.³

A poet’s poem, “Ang Tikarol ba Kadto?” uses the pronouns you, we, and I wove together seamlessly that the shift is unnoticeable. The longing for the Divine and the desire for love are discernable in the vastness of space, sea and island, and in the profusion of the blue of

bird and minuscule seaweeds. There is no flamboyance here, but humility before birds, and seaweeds, before even the smallest of creations. Boundaries are thin, made evanescent and blurred by wind. The reader is in accord: Tando-Huni, yes, yes.

Unity of the Self and Non-Self: the Secret Self

Since the poetic voice is discreet in many of the poems in this collection, the welding of the self with "an other" —a stranger, different but powerful enough to subsume the "I" occurs. The effacement of the "I" and the melting into the "non-I" is consistent with the over-all tone of the collection—not a seeming loss; rather, unambiguously a gain. The secret self is after all, the more potent, and the fountain of strength and grace. Consider the two poems "Uwang sa Milô" and "Babayeng Talabon."

In both poems, the speaker readily gives up a self for another self that is different, but one which possesses traits of strength, vitality, fearlessness in darkness, and filled with solitude. In "Uwang sa Milô" (Wolverine's Song), the "I" eventually exchanged places, names and faces with the other. What do these disparate beings have in common? One word: Solitude.

In "Babayeng Talabon," the speaker declares: "I will fold my body in the solitude's shell / Thin in my wakefulness / dreaming of light / catching in a flash / the asogi / of the water." In both poems the "I" is diminished and effaced, when the other manifests.

Quiet Sensuousness

Evasco's poems exude a quiet sensuousness—solicitous of the silences and the gentleness—which dwell in them. There is awareness of the pleasures of the senses; but pleasure is akin to pain, even death. The present however is replete with images of mouth, throat, layers of clouds, tongues, earth, river currents and flowers. This is evident in this stanza in the poem "Yuta-Tubig-Kaño-Hangin": giunsa pagbuak ang panit sa Mangga / Dhang imo kining giingkib; giunsa nimo / pagtu'n ang way pilo nga panganod / sa Siquijor, ang imong lawas nahimong / tibuok nga kalibotan diin ako nakahimamat / og patayng buwan, nakatilaw'g yuta, / su'g sa suba, alimyon sa hangin sa di pa / mouwan, pagbuskad sa kabuwakan / nga gamhanan og mga nga'n.⁴

The poem "Ang Tikarol ba Kadto?" demonstrates Evasco's quiet sensuousness where the longing for God is as passionate as a lover's desire (clearly a woman) to be one with her beloved. In this poem, love is sung by the waves, celebrated by the flight dance of the kingfisher, reveled by the island taking root. God is visible in the union of the lovers—in sheer souls.

The poems which have clear sexual allusions "Paghidlawas" (Making Love) and "Sa Barlovento" are more of paeans to the human existence and less of homages to sensuality. Referring to the sexual act underlines the temporality and the finiteness of the physical body. Love and passion are but passages between the moments of living and dying.

from "Paghidlawas"

Ang atong unod daling madugta, duol sa ginhawa.

Matag yugto nga di ta makatagamtam og pag-amoma,

masamdan ta ug sa hilom madugta.

Kinalanglan tang mahigugma, uban ang lawas bisan og kita mapukan gyod.⁵

In the poem "Sa Barlovento," words and stories ignite fire in bodies, curse want and deprivation, and for some moments the world revolves around blue flames. The fire of passion is eventually tempered in the recognition that what once caught desire are, sooner than not, turned into cinders. There is no hint of floridity in the poem, that even turning into ashes is an occurrence that is quiet and distant.

Ars Poetica

In Evasco's "Tando-Huni," the elements represent the cycle of creation, destruction, and re-creation. The same cycle governs art and poetry. Silence leads to words but inescapably back to silence and emptiness. This infinite cycle is prodigious in the poems. The personas I, you, and we, merged and woven together, one and the same—the poet and the reader. Evasco's poetics of the concord between temporality and immortality pervades throughout the entire collection and she tells us that being alive is to take part in the birthing, in the growth and changes, in destruction, decay, and nothingness. The state of nothingness is a tabula rasa in which the poet can begin again.

from "Origami"

Gilalang ko kining balak
gikan sa papel, gipilo-pilo
ang gilay-on sa atong panahon.
Kining balak usa ka Grulya.
Inig bukhad sa iyang mga pako,
ang papel motin-aw ug mahawan.⁶

Evasco lays claim to the title poet in the poem "Utlanan sa Canada" as a matter of fact. The poet suffers from the cold, her fingers are trembling, lips bleeding. A poet suffers for her craft. What matters is at her far destination someone knows her, for the poet that she is, and partakes of her words.

from "Utlanan sa Canada"

Maghuwat kong tagboon nimo
dinhi, da' ang imong lampara sa ting-unos
nga gisug'an alang sa mga langyaw. Kon
makadungog na ko
sa imong tawag: Magbabalak! Magbabalak!⁷

Evasco's "Tando-Huni ug Uban pang Mga Balak" offers the readers a walk into the poet's mind, her thoughts and images in the various cycles in which they occur, recur, and occur again. This may be said of many art forms and many artists' works, but Evasco's Cebuano balak offers the reader a wide range of the yet unexplored mindscapes which are indelibly hers, but arrives at the readers finding their own. Evasco shows a robust corpus of poetry about life and art through an assembly of techniques which deviates from the characteristic ornate, often exhortative manner of writing in Cebuano poetry. Evasco's "Tando-Huni ug Uban pang Mga Balak" will leave its mark on contemporary Cebuano poetry.

Endnotes

¹ From "Ochre Tones"

Who is to say it is instinct, merely, / Or moisture-need, that makes us / Crawl or bend our Lizard lips / Unto the ground? Dusk cools our fevers / And there is joy in this surrender.

Even now, the tips of Bamboo leaves / Hold watergems. In the early evening air / I remember Grace, and somewhere, / An old gecko clicks its rhythmic / Yes yes yes.

² At this watershed of words / Silence is our breath and base for music. / When the dark tones of your voice / Lay the gravel, my song will grow limbs. / Weave the oldest story with nimble feet, / Without letting the listening ones know / We know the spellbinding name / Of the one we worship.

³ From "Is it the Kingfisher?"

Where we sit on this rock covered with seaweeds, / I suddenly feel the blueness embrace us, / This rock, this island, this changed air, / The distance between us and the Self

We have longed to be. A bolt of burning blue / Lights in my brain, gives the answer / We've pursued this whole day: / Seawaves sing it, the Kingfisher flies in it, / This island is rooted in it. Desiring God is transparent blue—the color / Which makes our souls visible.

⁴ From "Earth-Water-Fire-Air"

How the golden skin of mango / broke between your teeth; how / you swallowed the seamless sky / over Siquijor, your body becoming / an entire land I could intimate / black moons from, taste of earth, / rush of river songs, smell of air / before rain, spray of flowers / with strange names. Yes, there is / Reason for this ripening. / You are goldened by my tongue.

⁵ From "Jouissance"

Flesh is fragile, intimate. / Any moment touchlessness / Can rend us fatal to festering. / We must love, with body / Even as sure decay sets in.

⁶ From "Origami"

I am shaping this poem / Out of paper, folding / Distances between our seasons. / This poem is a Crane. / When its wings unfold, / The paper will be pure and empty.

⁷ From "The Canadian Border"

To fetch me with your storm lamp / Lit for pilgrims. And when I hear / You call: Poet! Poet!