

The River Speaks

by Arlene Yandug

*Biray, pilot me
Dayangba, guide me
Even if this is the way it goes
Even if this is the way it flows
In the bend I might have a short cut
In the curve I might pass a short way
Like a light you illumine me
Like a torch you light my way
Like a candle with incense you guide me
Like a resin torch you light my way
In retelling a disorderly story
In narrating a disorderly tale.
Enter, all you listeners
You who eavesdrop, come nearer
To the story in my mind
To the tale I am thinking of
-from the invocation of
the epic Olaging*

My name
is Impupulangui.

My people
hunters and punters all
call me suba agos, danao.
Such names speak
for my birthright:
I gather memories
of the earth and
flow on intractable,
sliding around stones
from shadow
to shadow among the trees.

Know I am

the wind's path,
drifters find
their way through me,
their boats and rafts
loaded full with broken
bits of sea and forest:
corals, pearls
traded with porcelains
from China; gold
swapped with iron
tools from the Malay
peninsula; honey and
beeswax with
beads and goods
from Venice and India.

All rivers outlast
the dreamers
on the banks,
the waters carrying
their dreams thousands
of years away,
turning twisting
purling inside cavities,
rising rushing,
branching on forest floors:
the centuries keep
tarrying, caught up
for a moment
on tender-throated lilies.

The longest way
they say
is the only way
to the sea.

Where does
a river begin?
What is a silkweb's beginning?
Can you gather
all the silk
from the button-belly
of a spider?
Take me a mantic
enchantress then,
rambling, riddling
to the primates, the plovers,
meandering to you.

No matter
how many times
you reverse
your padded doublet,

Friend
you will be helplessly
lost here:
you're a bird behind
a field of chameleons behind
in this country.

On your map, I'm just
a tangle of lines – think
of your matted beard.
Think: brown race, its
convoluted genealogy.
But know I'm as real
as the spurt
you just scooped
from a crack of rock.
The water glitters
on your palm,
your huge nose
detecting a chill
of a faraway winter.

Look
on my surface:
I'm holding you
and the clouds
behind you captive.
But you'll acknowledge
only the dark pools
of your haunted eyes;
the fungi chewing
your elbows
as you gather
my body rippling
under your touch.
Your face will warp like
a conch shell as sounds
of water converge
inside you into
fierce
cataracts.

Ayy talo-on
sa maogyab

Stop your
merrymaking
Stop your merriment.

Here, you can never
be equal to your yearning:
I'll slip forever
through the fingers
of your love.

Pass
your sword
through my neck.
I'll be whole again and again
water on a sieve
forever
in a state of wholing,
unhurting.
When I spill into
Cabacan, I am called
Cabacan river,
when I flow into Agusan,
I become Agusan,
and now as I bleed
immensely away
from you
you call me Rio,
Rio Grande of Mindanao.

But I am Buluan,
I am Allah
I am Libungan
I am Pulangi,

I am the blues of abalone
the shimmer of gold dust
the fluids of amnions,
the veins of pith
wrapping
the citrus earth.

Your compass is
wretchedly small here.
Your map,
put away your map:
you can't chart
terror and beauty.
You won't see

the stones lying quiet
like shadows
at the bottom;

the blue crayfishes
darting through
the sad hull of a boat;
and beside that boat,
the half-sunk chests
of white men who
had come before you.
The trunks still stacked full
with remingtons,
combs and mirrors.
The glass beads will roll
with the pebbles
and there is
the sound of bones
nobody hears.

Above you, the wrens
are darting through
the leaves.
Gali gali gali.
Listen to the language
of trees.
How exactly
are you trapped here?
What are you
trapped in?
But only
the sad calls of foghorns
from faraway oceans
reach you. More than
sea-changed,
you're sea-worn:
every inch of you
pale. Frayed
like the sails of carracks
and caravels calcified only
by a conqueror's
resolve.

Tonight
I'll be beautiful.

My sprays
will froth brightly

under the moon.
The bald moon swims,
the stars gold, lilies white,
the bones below whiter.

When you see
me
remember
the sparkling sails
in the blue Pacific
of your memory,
when the world was
an endless
stretch of seas.

Tonight,
my rapids will break
into shards,
sharp as the songs
of crickets.

Under
the southern skies,
I will freely open up,
a path of quicksilver
forever ahead of you
in the coming
dawn.