

EILEEN R. TABIOS



# IMMIGRANT

HAY(NA)KU & OTHER POEMS

IN A NEW LAND

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## **Hay(na)ku & Other Poems In A New Land**

**Eileen R. Tabios**

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Front Cover Image: The author as a young child in Baguio City, Philippines. The photograph lies within a frame chosen by her bibliophile-mother.

Back Cover Image: The author at her 2011 reading at U.S. Library of Congress.

The first four poems were written during the author's first year as a poet, and previously appeared in her first and now out-of-print chapbook, *After the Egyptians Determined the Shape of the World is a Circle* (Pometaphysics Publishing, Maryland, 1996). Some of the other poems first appeared, sometimes in earlier versions, in *OCHO* (editor Didi Menendez) and *OurOwnVoice* (editor Reme Grefalda), as well as the author's prior books *147 Million Orphans: A Haybun* (gradient books, 2014), and *YOUR FATHER IS BALD: Selected Hay(na)ku Poems* (Pim Publishing's Bibliotheca Universalis, 2017).

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Note on the Hay(na)ku

**South of \_\_\_\_\_(fill in the blank)**

I know the back alleys of this neighborhood  
where beggars make their beds,  
whose cats steal their food,  
why lovers rip apart seams in the universal  
canvas to depart,  
which doorways provide for or take  
the unguarded into a hold of cruelty.  
I have seen the glint from the fang  
of a wild boar as he lurks  
behind even the most infinitesimal of shadows  
in a land where it only takes one domino  
to fall  
and what was civilization  
quickly disappears as would the shoreline  
from an oil spill  
birthed from a twist of the wrist  
by a drunk vomiting over the helm.  
All around the border of this place  
The desert is a forever  
with no mountains, no trees, no tomb markers  
interrupting the horizon. The horizon  
is far, is near, is what you wish  
But always in front of you.  
All these provide no reason  
to hold my hand as the day unfolds.

To hold my hand  
simply offer an uplifted palm  
and trust in my response.

## **Talk-Story Poem**

*—for the clan*

*The poet's husband says about the poet's latest effort, "Pretty dry—you're writing like a lawyer."*

*The poet replies to her lawyer-husband, "Precisely. The goal is merely to get the facts straight."*

My grandfather, Apong\* Andres, was 24 years old when he emigrated in 1929 to the United States. He wanted to earn money to feed his family. He spent his first year as a sugarcane worker in Oahu. Then he moved to California where he spent his working decades tilling the fields in the Salinas and San Joaquin Valleys. At the time Apong Andres left the Philippines, his youngest daughter, my Auntie Mameng, was about one month old in the womb of my grandmother, Apong Faustina.

In 1970—41 years later—Apong Faustina arrived in the United States to be reunited with Apong Andres. Auntie Mameng arrived in the United States in 1973, but was months too late to meet her father as Apong Andres died in 1972.

After Apong Andres died, Apong Faustina would come to marry Tata Gus who had been my grandfather's best friend.

While Apong Andres was alive, he and Apong Faustina bought a combination burial plot designed to accommodate two corpses. When Apong Faustina re-married, she and Tata Gus bought their own combination burial plot.

Therefore, when Auntie Mameng died, she was buried with Apong Andres, the father she never knew, because he had space available in his burial plot.

My father recounted this tale during the eulogy at Auntie Mameng's funeral. My father was Auntie Mameng's only brother and Apong Andres' first-born. But when my mother recalls Auntie Mameng's funeral, my mother says she doubts that the mourners understood what my father was trying to say. My father, says my mother, could not communicate clearly that day.

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\* *"Apong" is Ilocano for "Grandparent"*

## **The Conductor**

*(New York City)*

You have become familiar in my neighborhood  
like the lady with a gold turban  
staring fixedly, silently, desperately  
through the window of *Twin Donuts*:  
trays of dough glazed with honey,  
sprinkled with pastel candies, blanketed by  
chocolate  
and, consistently, punched through the middle.

You have become as familiar as the man  
with a face of wrinkled black velvet  
picking at mismatched sneakers, one with laces,  
as he hugs his knees bent over the bench  
in front of *Haagen Daaz* from which he battles  
10-foot demons whose horns and fire-breathing  
only he can see.

What are you thinking behind your eternally-  
smiling face  
as you walk in and out of the stores of our  
shared boulevard  
with the wind chimes you hawk, bunched  
together  
like so many dead chickens a farmer would carry  
to market?  
What are you thinking as the figurines which  
need only wind to cry their music are  
rejected again and again?

When the sun is a red orb kissing the ground  
at the end of Broadway,



do you begrudge housing these malnourished  
musicians  
for yet another night in—where you do you  
live?—  
a narrow studio of a seven-story, walk-up  
building crumbling in its corners  
far from the safety of the mainstream path?

Or does your smile fail to slip as you enter the  
doorway to your home  
because you will hang them one by one  
by your single window opened to catch the  
breezes of this important metropolis;  
and with night you come to monopolize  
an orchestra whose members play for your  
listening pleasure?

Do you sometimes conduct?

## Cracking

*“How the world now was being slowed  
down and opened up and all you’d never  
looked at and never thought of was  
revealed as there, waiting all along.”*

*—Joyce Carol Oates*

How, before you crack the egg pinched softly by  
your fingertips / there are darker shades within  
the same white porcelain shell, / dark because  
they map where the barriers / are at their most  
fragile between the liquid stillbirth / and the  
devastation of the surrounding universe: the  
boiling // water, sizzling grease or overflowing  
flour with a whisk nearby / to quicken the  
yellow eye’s disappearance into the white  
mountain / until only the pale tinge of gold on  
the subsequent batter signifies / that, once, there  
was a separate being safely cradled within / a  
paper-thin shell that, / even with shades of  
darkness threatening / a sunder, protected  
successfully against the taking by your hand

—know this first:

To crack, then widen the breach, is no small  
matter.



*Eileen R. Tabios reading at the United States  
Library of Congress, Washington D.C.,  
October 24, 2011*

**Dear Mama,**

You said it again when you watched me read poems at the United States Library of Congress. *Not bad for an immigrant.* I wished thought ceased there. But you said it again as you relished inhaling that Washington air, *I am the goose that laid the golden egg!*

Mama, I remember that first summer when your Master's Degree in English qualified you to pick oranges in Fresno.

Mama, I remember you coming home appalled at how schoolchildren had so little resources—yes, Mama, we are in a country where many public schoolteachers buy school supplies with their own salaries. I remember you saying our family could not afford your beloved occupation as teacher—my brothers and I totaled four to feed.

Mama, I remember you coming home after another day of being “secretary to someone young enough to be your son.” I remember you both weepy and infuriated at having to take orders “from someone whose letters you’d have to re-write into correct English”—was it the same person who advised you to guide your daughter into becoming his future secretary for that would be the “pinnacle of success” for someone like me?

Mama, I remember how you transformed “government cheese” into delicious tortillas and burritos—a food new to you but convenient for their affordability.

Mama, I remember how you and Dad bought me a piano, though I never made music on it in our new country. We could not recover what we had left behind.

Mama, I remember your broken heart when I left because I could not behave by what our new country taught you: *Be careful, be careful, be careful ...*

Mama, I remember so much. I am grateful to Poetry for being an art of minimalism—I don’t have to confront everything by listing all of the memories.

But I will remember just one more thing. I am glad, Mama, for the last six years of your life that we spent together *...recovering...* so that my very last words to you were: *You are not the goose that laid the golden egg. Mama, you are the Golden Egg.*

## The Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon

The socialite-wife—  
The nanny—  
La profesora—  
The CEO—

The student—  
The soldier—  
The orphan—  
The fruit-vendor—

The artist—  
The politician!—  
The prostitute—  
The nun—

The poet—  
The high-school drop-out—  
The visitor from Rome—  
The one who stayed—

Manila Bay rose  
to flood through the palace—  
in its wake floated

broken diamond rosaries  
German guns, American ammo  
camouflage wear crafted from thickened silk  
seven-inch heels, both ribboned and strapless  
tins of caviar, strongboxes for deceit  
Etcetera, etcetera...Bahala na...—

The sea brought its salt—

The political dissident in New York City—

The pole-dancer in Tokyo—

The hotel receptionist in Tuscany—

The fictionist in Hawai'i—

The grocery owner in Chicago—

The plumber in Los Angeles—

The orange grower in Fresno—

The child-care worker in Singapore—

The janitor in Bahrain—

The cook in London—

The teacher in Washington—

The next generation in Iowa City—

Wake up on a Boston bed  
with sheets askew and wet—

Once, a snow-haired grandmother  
arranged her carefully-preserved malong  
with slow, deliberate strokes  
and began to share her story—

The nearby sea was calm  
its clear water  
mirroring distant mangroves and islets  
to transform them into clouds  
floating in the vast, pale blue—

In her slow and lilting voice  
U'po Majiling chanted

*Everything begins with a dream—*

## Sacred Time

Dear  
*Apong* who  
with measured movements

and utmost care  
takes her  
time

smoothing  
and folding  
such an insignificant

object, this very  
crumpled plastic  
bag—

she raises the  
tiny folded  
object

to me so  
I can  
store

it for ~~her~~ us  
in kitchen  
drawer.

As the polyethylene  
passes between  
us



I suddenly see  
my favorite  
photograph

of myself—I  
was 21-years-old,  
face

still dewy with  
an innocence  
(protected

by a college  
sweetheart), still  
unlined

by knowledge, still  
open from  
days

and days of  
touching sunlit  
sky...



*...still / open from/ days*  
*and days of / touching sunlit / sky...*

## Hay(na)ku with Ducktail

—for Leny M. Strobel

The body counts.

“Remember” is

“member”

becoming plural through

Re-\_\_\_\_, thus

*Community.*

You can fill

yourself by

filling

in the blank:

*Say*, relationship,

recovery,

revelation, redress, rebellion, red, restoration,

renaissance, redrawing, review, re\_\_\_\_\_

**from 147 Million Orphans**  
**Haybun MMXIV**

*regurgitate*

*bake jargon*

*laconic nefarious dainty*

She remained grateful, even when the celebrity couple edited the only gift she could give her child: a name. The darkness revealed a stench of copper and dirt—it worsened to form a man. The darkness revealed a dagger. The darkness revealed a hand duct-taping her lips as her body was invaded as if it contained missiles. The darkness lifted to reveal Awasa, a town in southern Ethiopia, seemingly as it was before a night began and ended into someone else's story. She named the consequence, "Yemsrach"—she named the consequence as if the infant was always intended. She named the baby "Good News." She became the gift renamed "Zahara." Her name is Mentwabe Dawit—she will kiss tabloid pictures of Angelina Jolie. Her child who bears the names of two different stories is no longer malnourished. Her child has ceased dying. Her child is now *proactively* living, with laughter no stranger. Her name is Mentwabe Dawit—the daughter of another woman who defied their culture where rape is taboo for *all* participants. Certain details must be named to be plucked out of the silence camouflaged as background to someone else's story. What is the name of the mother who continued to love her daughter after

a rape? ~~The mother who counseled her daughter to continue living despite the world they inherited versus chose~~—what is her name? (Someday, Zahara will want to know.) The mother who would not let Mentwabe Dawit's body become a civil war—what is her name!

## From “The Ineffability of Mushrooms”

We watched F\_\_\_\_  
slice mushrooms  
delicately

then spread thin  
segments on  
wood

planks to dry  
under the  
sun.

Afterwards, they were  
stored in  
muslin

or calico bags  
near the  
kitchen

fireplace. Later in  
London, I  
received

each Autumn one  
precious, single  
bag

of dried mushrooms  
and memories  
then

lingering like smoke.  
The last  
arrived

in 1939, shortly  
after the  
outbreak

of war.

## On a TRAPPIST-1 Planet

*Astronomers have discovered not one, not two, but seven Earth-sized planets orbiting a star called TRAPPIST-1.  
—from “7 new Earth-like exoplanets discovered, NASA announces,”  
foxnews.com, Feb. 22, 2017*

When you land

how will the color of your skin matter?  
the slant of your eyes?  
your height?  
the texture of your hair?  
the flatness of your nose?  
your clothes?  
your crooked teeth?  
what accents your voice?  
your belief (or not) in gods?  
the history that bows an *Other's* spine?

Earthling, how have you treated immigrants?

Do you know the difference between “space travel” and “colonialism”?

Have you heard of karma?





*Immigrant*

## Note on the Hay(na)ku

Four poems in this chap (“Sacred Time,” “Hay(na)ku with Ducktail,” “from *147 Million Orphans: Haybun MMXIV*,” and “From ‘The Ineffability of Mushrooms’”) are “hay(na)ku,” a tercet-based poetic form invented by Pilipinx-American immigrant Eileen R. Tabios, and named by Vince Gotera. The basic tercet presents the first line as one word, the second line as two words, and the third line as three words. The words can be as long or short as desired by the poet.

Notwithstanding its defined tercet form, the hay(na)ku is open to variations. Since the form was publicly announced in 2003, poets from around the world have written hay(na)ku in its original form as well as in its numerous variations. The form has generated three anthologies as well as appeared in nearly 100 single-author poetry collections (including an all-Finnish collection), *Best American Poetry*, and numerous literary journals.

As explained in “The History of the Hay(na)ku” at <http://haynakupoetry.blogspot.com/2005/07/hay-naku-history.html>, the hay(na)ku is a “Diasporic Poetic” form. It is an immigrant’s contribution to Poetry which has blessed the poet, held her close, and always *had her back*.

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