

Crucial Bliss Epilogues

a collection of poems
by Eileen Tabios

Crucial Bliss Epilogues

a collection of poems
by Eileen Tabios

copyright 2004 Eileen Tabios

duplication of this collection of poems or any individual poem of this collection is granted under the following conditions

1. the copy is a single personal copy to read away from the computer
2. the copy is for a school course or educational workshop

any other duplication of this collection or individual poem(s) may not take place without the written consent of Eileen Tabios

Silliman's Blog, copyright 2003 Ron Silliman and used here with his permission.

produced in cooperation with



Tamafyhr Mountain Poetry
tmpoetry.com

Acknowledgements

Four people were crucial to the development of this collection: Namaste to my yoga teacher Liza Chapman whose lessons helped form the poems in "Crucial Bliss"; Heart's Deep Gratitude to Barry Schwabsky whose friendship helped inform the poems in the "Epilogue Poems"; Maraming Salamat to Ron Silliman for his very generous and deep reading of the poem "Helen"; and Thank You Very Much to Kenneth Gurney who, as poet-publisher, has been with me from the earliest days.

My thanks to the editors of the following publications which first published, or accepted for forthcoming publication, some of the poems in this collection:

Ambit. Editor Christophe Cassamasima & Guest Editor kari edwards:

"Tannin," "Pink Lemonade," "Dear Antique Mirror,"

A Very Small Tiger. Editor James Meetze:

"Litotes," "Fly Luminously"

MELUS: Editor Veronica Makowsky & Guest Editor Rocio Davis:

"Epilogue Poem (No. 9): Venus Rising For The First Time in the 21st Century"

NthPosition. Poetry Editor Todd Swift:

"Epilogue Poem (No. 9): Venus Rising For The First Time in the 21st Century"

Rife. Editor Geneva Chao:

"Epilogue Poem (No. 1)"

Sands & Coral (Silliman University). Editor Ian Casocot Rosales:

"Tannin," "Litotes"

The Shijin-Kaigi (Poets' Congress, monthly magazine). Trans. into Japanese

by Toshio Yamakoshi as "Epirogu 18": "Epilogue Poem (No. 18)"

Tamafhyr Mountain Poetry. Editor Kenneth Gurney:

"Epilogue Poem (No. 2)"

Van Gogh's Ear. Editor Ian Ayres:

"Helen"

xStream. Editor Jukka-Pekka Kervinen:

"Epilogue Poem (No. 14): Painting: 'Light's Pregnancy',"

"Epilogue Poem (No. 16)," "Epilogue Poem (No. 17),"

"Epilogue Poem (No. 20): Tapas"

Selected Notes:

"Epilogue Poem (No. 4)": Barthes quote is from Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, tr. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975).

"Epilogue Poem (No.18): (Heliotrope)": Written after "Opera" by Barry Schwabsky, *OPERA: Poems 1981-2002* (San Francisco & St. Helena: Meritage Press, 2003).

Biography

EILEEN TABIOS majored in political science at Barnard College and received an M.B.A. in economics and international business from New York University's Graduate School of Business. In 1996, she traded in a finance career for poetry.

Her awards include the Philippines' Manila Critics Circle National Book Award for Poetry, the Potrero Nuevo Fund Prize, the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles National Literary Award, a Witter Bynner Poetry Grant, a PEN Open Book Award, POET Magazine's Iva Mary Williams Award, and the Judds Hill Winery Annual Poetry Award.



Her poems have been interpreted into other media by other artists including dancer-choreographers Pearl Ubungen and Johanna Almiron, quiltmaker Alice Brody, kali martial arts practitioner Gura Michelle Bautista, painter Thomas Fink, poet-jazz lyricist Cristina Querrer, jazz composer and pianist Don Profitt, and non-linear poet and composer Jukka-Pekka Kervinen.

She is the author of the infamous poetics blog, "The Chatelaine's Poetics" at:
<http://chatelaine-poet.blogspot.com>.

She also founded Meritage Press (<http://meritagepress.com>), a multidisciplinary literary and arts press based in St. Helena, CA where, as a farmer, she arduously researches the poetry of wine. She feels it is part of her fate to make books — authored by her and others — partly because, as a two-year-old, she once folded a piece of paper and proclaimed it a "book." According to her mother's recounting, she pointed to a green crayola slash on the bottom of the first page and read it as, "The grass is green." She then turned the page to point at a yellow crayola slash at the page's upper left corner and read it as "The sun is out." Then she pointed to a brown crayola slash at the bottom of the third page and read it as, "The sun browned the grass." To date, her books are:

POETRY

After The Egyptians Determined The Shape of the World is a Circle, 1996

Beyond Life Sentences, 1998

Black Lightning, 1998 (essays and interviews about poetry)

Ecstatic Mutations, 2001 (with short stories and essays)

Reproductions of The Empty Flagpole, 2002

Menage a Trois With the 21st Century, 2004
I Take Thee, English, For My Beloved, 2005

E-POETRY

Enheduanna in the 21st Century, 2002
There, Where the Pages Would End, 2003
Crucial Bliss Epilogues, 2004

SHORT STORY

Behind The Blue Canvas, 2004

ESSAY

My Romance, 2002 (with poems)

EDITOR

The Anchored Angel: Selected Writings by Jose Garcia Villa, 1999
Bridgeable Shores: Selected Poems by Luis Cabalquinto, 2001
Gravities of Center: Poems by Barbara Jane Reyes, 2002

CO-EDITOR OR POETRY EDITOR

Babaylan: Filipina American Writers (with Nick Carbo), 2002
Screaming Monkeys (with Evelina M. Galang, Jordan Isip, Sunaina Maira, and Anida Yoeu Esguerra), 2004

Contents

Crucial Bliss

2. Pleasantly Plump
3. My Decision
4. "Idea Violet"
5. Rinzai Poem
6. Fly Luminously, Please
7. Ars Poetica #10,002: Namaste
8. Dear Antique Mirror
9. TANNIN
10. Pink Lemonade
11. Helen
12. Litotes

Epilogue Poems

14. Epilogue Poems (Introduction)
15. Epilogue Poem (No. 1)
16. Epilogue Poem (No. 2)
17. Epilogue Poem (No. 3)
18. Epilogue Poem (No. 4)
19. Epilogue Poem (No. 5)
20. Epilogue Poem (No. 6)
21. Epilogue Poem (No. 7)
22. Epilogue Poem (No. 8)
23. Epilogue Poem (No. 9) Venus Rising For The First Time in the 21st Century
26. Epilogue Poem (No. 10)
27. Epilogue Poem (No. 11)
28. Epilogue Poem (No. 12)
29. Epilogue Poem (No. 13)
30. Epilogue Poem (No. 14) Painting: "Light's Pregnancy"
31. Epilogue Poem (No. 15)
32. Epilogue Poem (No. 16)
33. Epilogue Poem (No. 17)
34. Epilogue Poem (No. 18) (Heliotrope)
35. Epilogue Poem (No. 19)
37. Epilogue Poem (No. 20)
39. Epilogue Poem (Epilogue)

A STUDY: Ron Silliman on Eileen Tabios and her poem "Helen"

41. From SILLIMAN'S BLOG (<http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/>)

CRUCIAL BLISS

I wrestled with my bed sheets What I was looking for was this,
 Innocent and tremulous like a vineyard
Deep and unscarred like the sky's other face,
 A drop of soul amidst the clay

—from "The Genesis" by Odysseus Elytis

Pleasantly Plump

Suddenly I have no debts.

Suddenly the facade loses vagrancy. Shake that boot free of irritating grit.

No, dear, the sky is not an onion. Watching blue layers peel will not make you cry. You may even clap your hands, round your eyes and whisper, "I just realized, my Love, that you have always been here for me!"

With joy, I forego the vocabulary found in margins.

Tonight the pantry is pregnant with soups based on heavy cream and portobellos thicker than buffalo steaks.

I am as pliant as Sri Lankan grass. Kiss me.

Procedure is the Eden where we need not cover our bodies with leaves.

A "torn skirt" is a torn skirt, not a camellia ruptured by the wind before its blooming can be immortalized in, say, a tourist's photograph...that becomes a painting within a gilded frame.

Jessamine wafts over paddock.

Impending denouement of yellow diamonds smuggled between buxom breasts.

Soon, I shall stop holding press conferences.

Depart, all ye with cruel eyes!

Aum Mani Padme Hum, Aum Mani Padme Hum, Aum Mani Padme Hum...

The thought of helping you makes me smile — shall we spill vermouth on the sky?

Let us lose the language of scars — let us shake those lanterns to bestow myrrh and frankincense.

My Decision

I suppose I, too, am sympathetic to that "tender hour."

It could be dusk wafting down Park Avenue, thus, beginning the blinking of a red neon sign shaped as "666."

In the beginning was the Word?

Ah, but come now, no one tapped my shoulder with a sword to assign me the Tagalog "*ma-drama*" — the "dramatic privilege" — of whining over a midget's *je ne sais quoi*.

Yesterday, I saw your profile in a cafe gnawing a Madeleine for consolation.

Aikido would have proffered a better way.

As for that virgin moon, it is pretty, yes, in pink.

Which is not to say, one can avoid gutting one's innards if one is to hear gospel directly from God.

No, Sweetheart, I have stopped choosing words for their shock value: God, not "God."

There, a bee in prison garb interrupts its escape to pollinate the trillium with its *ma-drama* leaves.

Like the neighbor hiding behind a curtain as he wrote a haiku about a thief pausing to tango with his shadow when the moon appeared, I see things I wish to articulate.

"Ideal Violet"

Asato Ma Sat Gamayo. Lead me from the unreal to the Real, chants the yogi.

How easy it can be to capitalize a letter when one is not concerned with poetry.

I, for one, rely on ancient manners — thank you, Dear, for my dropped handkerchief.

Once, a friend of my son flung his leather jacket over a puddle intersecting my path in crossing Bluemner Street.

Yes: all college sophomores are sophomoric, thus, erotic.

You, however, flung down the steel grate to divide us.

I, too, thought I'd lurk forever in the red phone booth looking up at your window.

Yellow light, yellow light — how many stars have you mugged?

How many stars sought to emulate dark angels by grabbing the tail of a comet dropping into a blind alley?

Don't let me change the subject again.

As I have insisted numerous times, the wind bouncing from the lake-trampoline need not be sub-zero.

I am grateful to anyone who holds open the door.

That I cannot capitalize "real" is not synonymous with polite applause.

Someone has been smart enough to identify "Ideal Violet" as a perennial hybrid with bright green leaves that bear clusters of fringed, 5-petalled blooms whose petals redden during the lemonade days of summer.

Rinzai Poem

Dew lingers on the corsage left on a bench in the empty ferry.

Worst sightings are possible.

Day looks to be wet and gray — evoking window panes perpetually weeping in London.

But we all possess a memory of crucial bliss, though the majority of poets may write otherwise.

Similarly, each war someday will end (ignore the rants of lazy philosophers).

In a dark theater, spilt popcorn recall nuggets of gold.

Or island vacations in Greece.

Sunlit.

Smile by considering this: the face of laughter is different each time.

Like a poem which cannot be rehearsed.

"What would you like to talk about today?"

Fly Luminously, Please

C'mon.

Don't lapse into "one tiptoe at a time."

That hunchback might be an angel hiding wings under a trench coat.

Sometimes the world should be veiled.

How else would you realize the exquisite craft that enabled an anonymous seamstress to stitch silver lilies on tissue-thin silk without rupturing the bolt of material that arrived through a needle's eye?

Sometimes the world *should* be veiled.

One can camouflage without conceding any diminishment of light from someone's halo.

Have I told you of the Arab boy who wove a rug now hanging above the Spanish Queen's bed?

At age six, he could see his future grid-locked within a grid formed by a factory room replete with looms and the harshness of raw wool.

The boy has never chewed gum while folding silver foil into an eagle — but that is not why he appears in this poem.

Ars Poetica #10,002: Namaste

I heard myself all through these years, as a century changed its name, so that I bow now before what lurks behind the sky as I realize: I have started to say things I have not said before.

Dear Antique Mirror,

Perhaps you shouldn't use the dust of your ancestors as a solder in the aftermath.

An omen can be ascribed instead to a benign bit of amber.

May I offer tea from these leaves I brought back from a tiny stall in Kathmandu?

I am searching for a charm bracelet that requires only one charm (perhaps a silver sea horse, perhaps a silver horseshoe).

Notice that no one here is turning into a salt statue.

Those oversized safety-pins fail to mask commendable years of Ashtanga (linear hollow sculpted along a thigh bared by the rip of a leather skirt).

But the practice is supposed to be spiritual, not physical.

TANNIN

Scabs immigrate from fingers that peeled them off scars: imitating shriveled rose petals,
scabs caress the bottom of emptied cabernet bottles.

After turning useless things into metaphors and still finding them useless, I lapse into a
post-midnight visitation.

Abject in my transparency.

Unlatch buttons on my scarlet (& stained) silk blouse.

"Prevarication" becomes a Martian word.

Damp eyes are mine.

Until, I recall a kind neighbor who built a corral for an old, bowlegged horse.

Equine eyes as kind as yours.

Pink Lemonade

I predicted your indifference, and I say it now as if articulation provides comfort.

Call an island "Isla Mujeres" and half of the population will always be sad, and half of that sad half will always be bitter.

Still, light finds a dance floor against this field of abandoned stones.

Some pillow still shields a stray tooth because a mother's fairy tale was believed.

We say, there's no need to limit your search for comfort among the footnotes.

On Isla Mujeres, 25% of the population may be sad but no acid scrawls graffiti against the walls of their bellies.

Women may be like fireflies — they constellate and then, for a moment, they all go dark at once.

But, inevitably, one will go shopping for a pink clochard.

A pink coyote with an extra cherry.

Circlet of pink sapphires to dangle (insouciantly) from a wrist.

More than one will proclaim, "Hell, it'll take more than that for me to stop wearing red high heels!"

Helen

Part of mortality's significance is that wars end.

Yesterday, I determined to stop watering down my perfumes.

Insomnia consistently leads me to a window overlooking silvery green foliage — *tanacetum argenteum* — whose species include the tansy which Ganymede drank to achieve immortality.

Once, I could have been tempted.

But to be human is to be forgiven.

The man in my bed shifts, flings an arm across the empty sheet — gladly, I witness him avoid an encounter with desolation.

Soon, summer shall bring a snowfall of daisies across these leaves whose mottles under a brightening moonlight begin to twinkle like a saddhu's eyes.

I can feel my hand reaching to stroke the white blooms as gently as I long to touch a newborn's brow.

By then, I swear my hand shall lack trembling.

I am nearly done with homesickness for Year Zero.

This is my second-to-last pledge: insomniac thoughts understate my capacity for milk.

This is my last pledge: I will not drink until all — all of you — have quenched your thirst.

Litotes

Like the path of a poem, she turns her face away from yours but you notice her eyes peek at your lips.

I describe the rapture of facing July 4 firecrackers just inches from glass smoked by my breath, and realize Twin Towers still hold up the stars in the New York City of my memory.

Another way to describe the taste of your mouth is "song of licorice."

Once, a soldier laughed as he swiped a sponge of vinegar against the cracked tongue of a crucified God.

I have always longed for the ability to lick the sensual syllables of the Gallic.

You conclude: "Do you want to kiss me?"

I turn my face away while my eyes furtively peek at your lips.

Many alternatives exist, but what occurs is the song of licorice.

It has been repeated through the ages: to be dead to one's self is to maximize delight in the tiniest of enchantments.

Let me release breath for the purpose of describing your scent.

EPILOGUE POEMS

I'd invent a woman who said to me "Do you know what?"
fingers wedged in your mouth
living so far away — perhaps in Denmark — that I was obliged to invent her.
I can hear you panting
And I'd be surprised to wake up one day and realize I'm missing her.
your body opens sweetly to me

— from "Priority" by Iselin C. Hermann

Epilogue Poems (Introduction)

She tried to obviate my "Nos." She was already lying across me. (The scene a bed in a hotel room, a garish bedspread whose orange color she had foretold in a dream. *Stage Left and Stage Right melted into shadows.*) My tongue already had penetrated the interior of her left ear. Cinnamon along the edges of the shell. Within the interior, quince.

But.

"No," I said. Reluctantly. Her history of other men proved how premature consummation would have turned me into a blank page.

Jasmine limning each strand of her long, dark hair.

Still. I uttered "No." Years later, I would not be surprised that the memory of my "No" still caused her to wake in the middle of the night, quivering, frightened. Once, she called the effect "a loss of confidence."

Still.

I did not want to be a blank page.

Epilogue Poem (No. 1)

Behind her shoulders flared asymmetrical wings. One wing couldn't heal perfectly after a break.

She was noble
precisely because she was damaged.

Epilogue Poem (No. 2)

There had been the time she picked up my copy of Joyce's *Ulysses*. From the way she held it on her left palm as her right index finger lovingly traced each letter in the title, I realized she had never read the book. With astonishment, I also realized concurrently: It's all right.

I have mastered philosophy. I *teach* philosophy.

Once, over dinner, I whispered to her, "It will be okay. Everything will be just fine."

I have mastered philosophy by knowing to bend it before *Acceptance*.

Epilogue Poem (No. 3)

I do regret how I never told her certain things.

E.g., I wouldn't have minded being in a painting with her: a place where time stood still to make permanent my hands on her waist, her tongue licking my parted lips, her fingers blissfully lost in their own rapturous love-making with the tendrils of my hair.

My hands on the flesh between the edges of her black sweater and blue jeans. Once, in a poem, she quoted me quoting Barthes: "Which Frenchman said the most erotic span is where a breach reveals female flesh?"

My hands warming against the flesh flushing between the edges of her black sweater and blue jeans.

...then her skin burning mine...

As well, heat between her lips. Enchanting, enchanting smoke.

"white, throbbing"

Epilogue Poem (No. 4)

She could not remember Barthes' name. But she finds it impossible (she said) to forget that he said, "The most erotic span is where a breach reveals female flesh."

Actually, Barthes said, "Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes?...It is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance."

But still.

A selective memory.

She remembers meeting me when I had stopped writing poems. She conjures a story that ends with one of my poems.

She remembers what she thought Barthes said as, somehow, she knew it was a fore-telling for my hands and her body.

With utmost (and rare) fortitude, she once proclaimed: "The best poems conjure."

Epilogue Poem (No. 5)

Our first glass together was a Vouvray. I arrived first and placed the order. When she arrived, she asked for the same thing goldening my goblet. Later, she explained, "I wanted the scent and taste of your tongue."

Epilogue Poem (No. 6)

The first glass of wine I witnessed her drink bore the color of molten gold.

And light, generously spilled into her glass as if the bar had dimmed itself just to concentrate all light into the space cupped between her hands.

O, yellow light...

...her hands that, thrice, grasped my collar to pull me closer...

Epilogue Poem (No. 7)

I am at a wordless space when I consider how urgently she once turned her face to me.
A crowd, ignored, drifted around us. I watched her lips say, "It's urgent."

What was urgent, she said, is that she felt the need to correct something she'd said. She
had said I wanted the "impossible."

"No, No," she corrected herself then, urgency a wind howling around us to bring us to a
space where darkness formed a void in which our two bodies leaned towards each other.

"What I meant to say is not that you want the impossible but that you simply want a cer-
tain possibility."

Within the void, warm light. White light in which everything can be seen most clearly.
Warm light.

Epilogue Poem (No. 8)

If this is an "epilogue"

perhaps
I
should
stop
talking
about
her.
Once,
she
said,
"This
story
is
not
about
me.
It's
about
you"

*

I am writing poems now

Epilogue Poem (No. 9)
Venus Rising For The First Time in the 21st Century

To see is this other torture, atoned for
in the pain of being seen

—from "Spokes" by Paul Auster

You want to see
her seeing
herself. You want

her seeing
her wanting
you behind the wave

foaming
when you become
the sea seeing

her eyes form
(above a body you
dreamt into salt water)

to see you
through strands
of dark seaweed

you see as her wet
hair rising from the sea
you become to see

her peeking from behind
hair of ink you want
to part from her breasts

you have felt
without seeing
yet (oh yet!)

to commence
a vision you
have shared with her

in her (lurking unknowingly)
through her
seeing you

as the sea
seeing her float
within your arms

trustingly as
she cannot swim
and your currents run deep

as deep as
the desire to be seen
she once forgot behind

a habit of hiding
until she saw you
seeing her

see(d)ing you
sea-ing her
seeing you

elicit pain
(the demanded pain!)
for surfacing the dark

fleshed creature
once hiding
in a sea's dim depths

towards a sun
in whose light
scars reveal themselves

to be healed
when you foam
upon seeing her form

seeing you sea
-ing her not drown
even as you deepen

your vision
's penetration to see
what others could not

behind her breasts
and thighs
now rising from the sea

towards the sun
so you can see
even more clearly

to see why you
foamed at the thought
of her form

returning to your
sea of seeing
whose fortitude

demands
nothing less than
the noonday sun as your lamp

Epilogue Poem (No. 10)

&
&
&

I, too, refuse

to live constrained

by deprivation narratives

&
&
&

Epilogue Poem (No. 12)

Poems. But it's not easy.
Should I have been
a plumber worsening water
beneath your sink?
Today I shook off her hand
from my typing fingers typing:
O moon in hiding. O shivering sky.
O scent of jasmine evaporating.
Geese of the world: forgive
me. <I na or< ifs ten cro><I ra sr<
nfs oen iro><I fa er< rfs sen nro>
er>tar icee off Reveal the song
within your cacophony.
The Muse — *O Muse* — is <I na or<
<I ra sr< nfs oen iro><I fa er<
rfs sen r> icee off never Anonymous.

Epilogue Poem (No. 13)

And if the Muse
Is never Anonymous?
O Life: why the sudden
difficulty in accepting
the existence of angels?
How to survive their strangle-
hold when they wish
only to scaffold my spine-
that inadvertent but
inevitable asphyxiation
~~<I na or< ifs ten ero><I ra—~~
~~nfs oen iro><I fa er< rfs sen nro>~~
~~er> tar ice of sr< sr< sr<~~
from wings hiding the
required muscles for
flights penetrating the sky?
O bone, O sinew, O blood
O Muse who is too human
If I must treat you as mortal
why do I fight ~~rfs sen nro>~~
~~er> tar ice of sr< sr<~~ *Love?*

Epilogue Poem (#14) Painting: "Light's Pregnancy"

Sunlight
on canvas
as primary material

Nature
industriously bending
verdant landscapes
for light to change color

~~er> tar ice of sr< sr< sr<~~

As for the fractured
~~<I na or< ifs ten ero><I ra—~~
~~fs oen iro><I fa er< rfs se nro>~~
sheen of "immoderate
water"?

The bird humming
transfers pollen
to correct stigma

All this
(and always more)
soothing
your intent watch
over my lips
stubbornly humming

All this
before and after
you listened
~~ifs ten ero><I ra—~~
~~fs sen nro>~~
~~r ice of sr< sr< sr<~~
to lips suckling
generous light

Epilogue Poem (#15)

rs o a<n ers te< if> orr nac sef
rtr cia foe rnt asi

e<o trn ies of< nr> sarree etf fir
roa anc est t eer

Just when I thought I understood
her fragility

I found myself soothing her:
"Sweetheart,

when I said 'No'
I was not rejecting you."

Epilogue Poem (No. 19)

But I didn't know

forcing her to be strong

would loosen the grasp

of her arms belting my waist

*

Once, her eyes pleaded

"Define Desire"

*

Why am I a mask

blinding her now

hands on a keyboard—

these slaves to *Vision*

pleading for translation

*

Whose plea

requires translation

*

Whose plea now

requires translation now

when this poem is the second-to-last

hum to comprise

a series defined as *Aftermath*

beyond which lights

Om shanti

Om shanti

Om shanti

A STUDY:
Ron Silliman on Eileen Tabios
and her poem "Helen"

Thursday, June 19, 2003

Another writer whose poetry appears in *Van Gogh's Ear 2*, as it seems to be doing virtually everywhere of late, is Eileen Tabios. On top of her work as an editor, publisher, blogger, vintner, Filipina activist, art critic, conceptual artist & promoter of hay(na)ku, Tabios either has a mountain of writing tucked away from her days as an executive in the financial services industry or else she must be the hardest working person on the planet. I have a hunch that we're dealing with a serious Type A personality here.

Tabios' prose poem "Helen" consists of twelve single-sentence paragraphs, although one of the paragraphs resorts to a favorite device of mine — the em dash — to create the typographic impression of being a single unit. The poem at heart is a dramatic monolog, although one written with such discipline that you can read it, as I did more than once, with total interest & pleasure without even thinking in terms of the theater of a projected persona.

Part of what makes the text work is that it has a killer first sentence:

Part of mortality's significance is that wars end.

That's one of those lines you can mull over for days, knowing you'll never exhaust it. The lines that follow for the most part likewise stand on their own. Moreover, there is enough conceptual distance between them that the reader, in order to render it into a dramatic monolog, has serious work to do. The line / sentence / paragraph, for example, that follows the one above, reads:

Yesterday, I determined to stop watering down my perfumes.

The third paragraph connects with the second principally by referring to the first person:

*Insomnia consistently leads me to a window overlooking silvery green foliage — *tanacetum argenteum* — whose species include the tansy which Ganymede drank to achieve immortality.*

If the first thing that "holds" this text "together" is the two references to the first person, the second is the binary *mortality/immortality*, although they are not presented as though we were discussing a paradigm at all. Third, the title "Helen" & the reference here to Ganymede, classic ideals of heterosexual & homosexual beauty, project a similar semantic field. Yet at this moment in the text, none of these connections are intrinsic or necessary, but rather are accumulating through what may appear to be incidental details.

There is a care & specificity here that is fascinating to watch, for example the choice of

the Latin name, *tanacetum argenteum*, a European plant. The reason Ganymede — a.k.a. Aquarius — might have been given a tansy is that, as a plant that grows in dry soil, it could retain water in an otherwise parched climate. Tabios takes considerable care with her diction — there is an ever so slightly elevated solemnity to words such as *deter-mined & consistently* being deployed precisely as they are here. As a textural, as well as textual, strategy, it's close to the prosodic restraint that another author of a poem entitled "Helen," Hilda Doolittle, used to employ.

Just as Tabios has already set up one schema (*insomnia*) as a metaphor for another (*immortality*) that may at first seem rather at odds with it, this poem will be constructed around details that operate counter-intuitively on multiple levels, even as it will turn out in the final moments to be "about" nourishment — that tansy is not incidental. Against the discursive formality, however, the reader is presented with language that operates at different extremes, from the bathetic — But to be human is to be forgiven — to over-the-top depiction:

Soon, summer shall bring a snowfall of daisies across these leaves whose mottles under a brightening moonlight begin to twinkle like a saddhu's eyes.

Summer always makes me think of snowfalls too.

Reading the poem over, as I have now a dozen times, my sense is that Tabios wanted to structure a narrative with an extraordinary degree of tension — it is as though she wanted to see just how far she could pull it apart without having the sense of its unity dissolve, to approach without crossing some intuitive breaking point. That's not unlike the strategy in Zen gardening of pulling one stone out of place in order to create a "circle" with far more cognitive power than it could have were it, in fact, perfectly round. Thus, in the third sentence of "Helen" quoted above, the tansy is *silvery green*. This gives it a dynamic it could never have if it were merely silver or green alone.

Narration at the limits of cohesion is an especially challenging project. I remember once trying to read a novel in which every single scene was constructed by focusing initially on some detail — a lampshade, a wall socket, a crack in a windowpane — entirely extraneous to the narrative "action." But it was in translation & you could tell that the translator really didn't grasp what the writer was doing, so the process felt like trying to focus through a film of molasses & I gave up. Faulkner much more successfully does something similar in the Benjamin chapters of *The Sound and the Fury*, presenting "the story" in part (but only in part) from the p.o.v. of a developmentally disabled member of the family, incapable of comprehending the significance of anything. Unlike Faulkner, I don't think that Tabios grounds what she does in "Helen" in psychology, which literally

is why it's poetry & not, say, fiction. Like Faulkner, though, she's obsessed with surface & texture — they are what a reader experiences directly when confronting a text.

I like writers who take risks — taking responsibility for the whole of the text is for me the primary test of a poem. Tabios tries for more in one page than many other poets would attempt in 20. And she pulls it off.