

Stalking the Great Heron

(for Telly, who asked me for a story of how I write)

By Marjorie Evasco



I.

Last Easter, my friend and publisher Ross Camara, received from her Tia Carmen a copy of the Taoist meditation “Positioning” by Deng Ming Dao. She read it out to me and I stored, among the many talismans of our 18 years of friendship, the grace of the Great Heron standing still in the water:

Heron stands in the blue estuary,
Solitary, white, unmoving for hours.
A fish! Quick avian darting;
The prey captured...
Heron moves when it must;
It does not move when stillness
Is appropriate.

Writing the image now brings me back to a long bus trip I once took with my parents from Tagbilaran City to the town of Ubay to visit my grandparents for the

summer vacation. I was barely 10 years old then and I had just won my school's annual declamation contest with the verse "The Six Blind Men of Hindustan." Even if I hated those bus rides, I was excited to tell my grandparents about my victory and about my teacher Miss Peñaranda, who patiently coached me through long hours of practice, to make sure I understood by heart what the words of the poem meant. I also wanted to relive the victory without the contestant's fear of failure, by reciting the poem in front of my grandparents.

The reason I hated those bus rides was that too many people were crushed together in row after row of seats, and under the seats were all sorts of odds and ends — *camote*, bananas, dried fish, corn grits, and those poor chickens tied at the feet, ready to be sold at the *tabo* in some town plaza. Kilometer after kilometer, we breathed white lime dust which swirled and stuck onto everything, especially to sweaty children.

There were fewer buses in Bohol then, and when the one we were in had a flat, it meant a tedious wait in the middle of nowhere while the driver went to the nearest vulcanizing shop. Our bus stopped in San Pascual, a barrio just 25 kilometers away from our destination. And because it was way past lunchtime and we had been travelling since early morning, I couldn't help but think of the lunch my grandparents must have prepared to welcome us, my favorite steamed crabs rich with *aligui*, chicken *tinola* with crushed ginger and lemongrass, fresh fish *sinugba* wrapped in banana leaves, and the red aromatic *milagrosa* rice.

I was hungry, hot-tempered, and testy from the heat and dust. But my father, Papa Tinoy, hoisted me down from the bus, brushed my hair with his hands, and led me up a hill where the cogon grass swayed to a slight breeze. From this lookout point, I saw the paddies with rice grain ready to be harvested. "Watch," my father instructed, pointing to a pond where two carabaos were enjoying the water. Suddenly, my father clapped his hands, and as if by magic a flock of white birds flew out of the water from behind the tall cogon grass. The birds circled above us and took my heart with them as they flew away. "Hérons," my father named them, his eyes on the span of their wings and the color of their beaks.



They were perfect in flight, and as the child I was, I must have associated beauty with motion. In my mind, I would spread my arms in imitation of the sweep and soundless glide of the herons. I must also have associated magic with the way the hands can call forth things, and the way names can fix in memory a moment of transient wonder. Many summers later, far from my family and away from Bohol, I began to learn the language of flight, dream, and memory I now call poetry.

Much like the herons, I have had to move from place to place in the varying seasons of my life. And it has taken several arduous journeys to learn how to conjure wings with words, how to make the magic happen. I have had to endure the mistakes I made and continue to make, and learn from the few attempts that seem to succeed. The herons, as you know, follow their inner signals and never tire of constantly moving back and forth along the path they know for their survival.

In mid-April, I flew from Manila to Cebu City to teach a course in creative writing as visiting writer at the graduate school of the University of San Carlos. And among the materials I brought with me was the meditation on “Positioning.” Before the summer course started, three of my women friends — Erma Cuizon, Ruby Enario, and Reina Bernaldez, all of whom were enrolled in the writing course— invited me to

visit with them a bird sanctuary on Olango Island. They had heard from the Philippine Wetlands Conservation Foundation that April was the best time to watch the migratory birds rest and refuel at Olango, before continuing the long journey to Northern China or Siberia for the mating season.

Thus, on an early, bright Saturday morning, we took a pumpboat from Maribago, Mactan Island, and crossed the Hilutangan Channel to Santa Rosa, Olango. We set up camp on the western side of the island and secured, first thing, a big drum of fresh, clean water to last us for the weekend. Our guide Homer Gonzales, a marine biologist at the Philippine Wetlands Conservation Foundation, informed us that the birds would come to feed at low tide, and we could watch them from a coral outcrop facing the intertidal flats. By sunset, he had set up the field telescope and given each of us a pair of binoculars.

Erma was peering through her binoculars when I heard her make a quick adaptation of a verse we all had memorized in grade school: “Of all the queer birds I ever did see, poets are by far the queerest to me.” I decided to focus my binoculars on Reina, who stood behind the field telescope. She had her walkman on, and she was describing to us her grand synesthetic experience of watching the birds fly into the mangrove to Mozart’s Concerto for Oboe in D major. Then, I focused on Ruby, playing out a mimetic urge, both arms outstretched, right leg up against her left inner thigh, like a little egret poised for immediate take-off. We were all mesmerized by the sight of thousands of birds — Chinese egrets, herons, dowitchers, redshanks, curlews, and plovers — coming into the wetlands at sunset. We were far from the concerns of city life and the dreary routines of survival, and Olango allowed us to experience again the joy of open-eyed seeing.

That evening, we sat around the bonfire on the beach, engaged in the old human ritual of storytelling. Homer told us about the bird-banding project of the Philippine Wetlands Conservation Foundation, and how the birds were caught with mist nests strung across the intertidal flats. He also noted that some of the birds die when there is a sudden summer storm and there isn’t enough time to release them from the nets. When I questioned the cost (in terms of bird lives) of the bird-banding

method, he justified that this was one of the best scientific ways of tracking the birds. I felt sad when I thought about the birds trying frantically to free themselves from the mist nets, and about our limited human ways of protecting the wild.

Later, by the dying light of the bonfire, I pointed out to my companions the stars and constellations I knew: Cassiopeia, Draco, Arcturus, Procyon, Polaris. In my study of star maps, I had become acquainted with the names and configurations of these volatile giants by which humans and birds take their temporal bearing as they journey across this earth. It was half-past midnight when I finally crawled into the small yellow tent I shared with Ruby. Cygnus, the constellation of the swan, had reached the horizon.

I came back to Manila by the end of May, sufficiently restored after spending a month and a half near the sea. I had soaked up enough sun and saltwater to last me for another season of living in the big city. And in my heart, I carried the memory of wings.

When the monsoon rains of June and July started, I was teaching another creative writing class at De La Salle University. Little did I know when I first sat down with 15 young writers that one among them would teach me a different way of seeing the Great Heron and help me complete its journey into a poem.

II.

Kiyoshi, a Filipino-Japanese student, submitted for our writing worksop a children's story about Ken, the kite who wanted to fly and who learned that he could do it only with the help of other people, especially children full of faith in their own inventiveness. Many weeks after the end of the course, he gave me the gift of a story. He retold the old Japanese folktale of the twilight heron which his mother had told him when he was a child. It had been made into a play entitled "Yuzeru and the Twilight Heron," and when it was staged at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, he had gone to see it with his mother and brother.

This is the way I remember the story:

Once, a poor fisherman saved a wounded bird from dying in winter. The kind fisherman took care of her until her broken wing mended. Throughout the time of healing, the bird came to trust the fisherman's pure and simple heart. When she could finally move her wings to fly, she decided to transform herself into a woman. She came back to his hut and offered to stay by his side as his wife. The unsuspecting fisherman was overjoyed by his great fortune, but being poor, he soon found having two mouths to feed a problem.

One day, the woman offered to weave a cloth that he could sell in the village market. But she made him promise that he would never ever look in on her while she wove. The fisherman gave his word, and after many days, the woman handed him a bolt of fine silk. The cloth fetched a good price; for a while the fisherman and the woman were happy.

Soon, their food ran out and the woman offered to weave for one last time a cloth he could sell to the daimyo's household for a very good price. Again, she wove for days and afterwards handed him a second bolt of fine silk. But she had grown pale and thin for the work of weaving had taken so much out of her. He gave her his word that this was the last bolt of silk she would weave. He went to the castle to sell to the noble household the finest cloth anyone had ever seen. The lord of the castle was pleased and paid him enough money to provide for him and his wife throughout their lives.

But on his way home, one of the merchants who had seen the exceptional quality of the weaving whispered to him that if the weaver wove another bolt of cloth, he would help the poor fisherman sell it for a much higher prize to the emperor's household. The fisherman, dazzled by the idea of having more money than he could imagine, told his wife to weave another bolt of silk fit for the emperor.

She was astonished and asked him what he would do with more money than they would ever need in their lifetime. But the fisherman insisted; she could not dissuade him from his obsession. She sadly closed the door of her weaving room and spent many days and nights working on the third bolt of cloth.

As it was taking longer than usual, the fisherman decided to find out what was happening. Forgetting his promise, he opened the door and saw instead of his wife a Great Heron plucking out of her own body her fine feathers that she used for weaving at the loom. It was a horrifying sight and the fisherman fainted from witnessing magic.

When he came to, he heard the Great Heron beside him sing her true story. She sang her sadness at leaving, but because he did not honor his promise and had looked in on her pain, she would now fly back to the wild and be free.

The third bolt of silk was the finest any human hand or eye had ever touched or seen. It was delicate as snow and stained with flecks of crimson.

I stayed with that story for many weeks after its telling. In early August, I began weaving the poem “Heron-Woman,” and the threads I used stretched back to my own childhood, there on that magical hill at noon when my father cued my eye and ear to the momentary shimmer of wings.

The drafts of the poem will perhaps show the work I have done to shape the material I had in my hands, to give it its best possible hearing. But for the life of me, I truly cannot recall in exact chronological detail the process of making the poem “Heron-Woman.” One necessarily resorts to reconstructions of the process, or what poet-novelist Bienvenido N. Santos calls “memory’s fictions.” I know only this: that the materials of the poem were taken from the haphazard paddies of my dreams and memories. The poem had fed on whatever it needed.

III.

In November, three months after the first draft was written, Erma invited me back to Cebu City to join the poetry reading entitled “Birdwatch,” sponsored by the Women in Literary Arts (WILA). Ruby read my first draft of the heron poem, while I read “Animasola” from *Dreamweavers*, because a friend in Japan had written that it was his favorite poem in the collection. After the program, I copied in my journal a passage Erma had read from *Refuge*, a book by American naturalist poet

Terry Tempest Williams. This passage made me see again the image of the heron in Kiyoshi's story, this time from a different angle of light:

A heron stands on the edge of the lake, solitary and serene. The wind shimmies up her back, raising a few feathers, but her focus remains steady. This is a bird who knows how to protect herself. She has weathered the changes well. Perhaps this is a generational stance. The legacy of her lineage. I would like to believe she is reclusive at heart, in spite of the communal nesting of her species. I would like to wade along the edges with her, this great blue heron. She belongs to the meditation of water.



By then, I was distant enough in time and place to come back to the poem I had started to compose in August, to look at it anew, as if it were not my own (and yet remaining fully so), in order to do the conscious fine-tuning of all the elements I had used for the poem's utterance. Years of apprenticeship with the Tiempos in Silliman University and a firm grounding on formalist aesthetics ingrained in me the habit of revisioning the poem as part of the conscious craft of poetry. I was taught that the poet needs to develop the critical eye with which to establish the workable

distance, a different space from the poem's initial urges, in order to apprehend and appreciate the integrity of the poem's articulation and performance.

When I was a graduate student in creative writing in Silliman, part of this critical process was the act of letting a very small community of writer-friends read the poem, the way they would in a writing workshop. They were readers whose critical judgement I trusted and who were willing to lend me another pair of eyes with which to see the inner-works of the poem. Eventually, as a poet-apprentice, I learned to develop an inner mechanism which enabled me to reread drafts of my poems carefully, and practice with uncompromising honesty the critic's duty of knowing here a line begins to sag or where the chosen word quibbles, hesitates, or blurs. And because rereading and revision are conscious processes, these are perhaps the only processes of the poem's making about which one can write more usefully. I shall then try as much as possible to backtrack to the very first draft in August and describe what I tried to do.

The shaping of "Heron-Woman" can be seen in many drafts which were written at various intervals in four notebooks which I used from August 1993 to June 1994. The first drafts were attempts at making the story of the heron-turned-woman-turned-heron on my own. The appropriation was a pleasurable process in itself because in my apprenticeship, I had enjoyed learning from Japanese and Chinese poets who knew the art of direct seeing and wielded the power of evoking the stillness within the word.

I also found inspiration in the Japanese folktale because it offered a different view of women. In the Western fairytales I grew up on, magical powers of transformation were usually held by characters other than the heroine, i.e. the fairy godmother, the prince charming, the evil stepmother. However, in this folktale, the heron as sentient being, responds to the care and kindness of the fisherman and decided, of her own compassionate and free will, to come back to the fisherman after the necessary period of healing her wounded wing. She then transforms herself into a woman and goes to his house to become his wife. She assumes part of the poor fisherman's burden of survival by using her art. And as we have seen in the story, the

materials she used for weaving came from her very own body — blood and wing. It is also by the power of her own decision that she turns into a bird again. She chooses to leave the realm of human companionship, not out of spite, but out of an honorable sense of self-preservation and the courage to go back into the wild (and her own wildness) and be free.

Aside from the theme of female freedom and inner power which I love in the story, there is a remarkable earthiness and spirituality in it which appeal to my imagination. Heron-woman engaged in the daily concerns of survival which the poor have to face, and tackles these concerns with her skills and practical, sensible values. And even when the business of earning a living puts these values into serious compromise, she stretches her capacity to trust the fisherman's good intentions. However, when it came to the issue of one's word of honor, she knew her position and took the only right action. This is also the heron's secret of gracefulness. "It moves when it must; it does not move when stillness is appropriate."

Thus, in the first draft of the poem, I sought to establish the connections between Kiyoshi's story and my responses to the telling. The working title "The Heron and Kiyoshi's Story," expresses the rawness of the materials I was working with and the elements I was trying to bring together. The first draft hewed closely to Kiyoshi's story, and it was also written in a prose-like manner. This stage of the writing is the most autobiographical since it is nearest the circumstances of the poem's genesis:

This is how your mother must have told you
The remembered folktale from the old country
The way your fingers tell the skin behind my ears
To unfurl white wings of the gReat Heron,
Brings me home to the poor fisherman's hut
Where he sleeps now, dreaming of the women
Who flies alone, beautiful in the moonlight.

In the second draft, I made changes in the speaking voice, using in the last four lines of the poem the first person pronoun "I" in order to bring the poem to a

more intimate level. I knew after reading the first draft that I did not merely want to retell in poetic form Kiyoshi's story, but to explore the insight that was beginning to surface: *every story transforms every good listener*. The listener gives the story this power by attending to it fully. The second draft thus ends differently:

I become this same woman whose snow feathers
I weave for his cape and clanked, to keep him
Warm on his evening watch, while I go about
This magical task of transforming your mother's story
Into a warm meal to feed our spirits on.

By August 29, I had finished the version of the poem with the title "Heron in Kiyoshi's Story" which was sent for publication to the New Straits Times, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I had revised the form to make the lines shorter and in order for the poem to look more slender — to evoke the elegant stance of the heron standing by the water's edge. I also felt that the shorter lines made the stanza breaks necessary. But the major change was in the last three lines of the poem:

Even as your story's end
Transforms me back
To this birdlike stillness,
There will be other
Rising moons for flying.

Every story ends and each storyteller has to come to the story's end. I wanted the persona to go back to her identity as listener, but this time with the vivid memory of the story. The story is hers now, and she can retrieve it whenever she needs. Thus, in the fifth draft, the responsibility of carrying the poem's truth shifted from Kiyoshi the storyteller, to the persona, the listener of stories. I changed the title of the poem at this point into "Heron-Woman," giving the speaking voice full ownership of the story. The draft now begins:

This gift of story
From your mother's old country
Tells the songs behind my ears
To unfurl white wings
Of the Great Heron.

The change is caused, not by the story, but by the listener's quality of stillness. The dream of transformation is evoked by the specific colors, textures, and shapes of the moment in time and place:

In the stillness of attention,
I am Heron-Woman,
Weaving her feathers into silk,
Shimmering like the waters
Of the blue estuary.

When I re-read the drafts, I heard heron-woman's voice begin to sing more clearly. It had now become her story, her poem. The self-transformation occurs in the persona's imagination and she grounds this in a place and time where a similar magical experience once happened. It is a child's memory of wings which now becomes the woman's "meditation of water":

Water has the texture of memory:
A child, quiet in wonder
Listens to her father
Calling the herons at noontide
From the green paddies.

And yet, this was also the most difficult point in the writing because the poem had to deal with the analogical problem of dramatizing the transformation from woman back to heron. In the draft, the last part of the poem was written thus:

In the story I now weave,
There is a woman who flies
Alone, beautiful in song
When she rests her wings
In the wild sanctuary

I could see that the persona would have to bring the logic of the poem effortlessly into the image of the bird feeding peacefully, alone, at the water's edge. The persona had already asserted that she was heron-woman by virtue of her attention and her memory. Thus, her voice must suggest the analogy of bird and woman— the way both feed, rest, or fly into the sanctuary of evening.

She dreams
While she stands
Slender
Silent
Waiting
For fish
To feed
On.

The stanzas in the next draft had to be reworked, the speaking voice evoking the final transformation from women to bird:

I glide to shore at twilight,
Fold my body into
The sheath of solitude
Slender in vigil
Catching the quick
Flash of silver
To feed on.

Once I reach what seems to me the last stanza of a poem that has found its stillness, I make the piece rest for a month. When I come back to it again, I begin to work in earnest on the form of the poem, changing a crucial word here and there, tightening and cutting a line or two, cleaning up the grammar and punctuations.

Prosody, the art of cutting the lines to make the sense and musical arrangement clear, is part of the conscious process of the making of a poem. I revised the last stanza several times to evoke the action of the heron as it darts for fish and then goes back to its easy vigil. I also played with the words “quick,” “flash,” and “silver” to suggest the color of water and the motion of fish. However, the last line “To feed the evening on” sounded weak. I wanted the poem to suggest the bird’s going back to its powerful meditative stance. Here, the technique of spatial poetry which I first learned from the emblem poems of the 17th century, helped me find the form with which to evoke the shape and silence of the heron. Thus, the final draft of the poem ends:

Slender in vigil
I dream of light
Catch the quick
Flash of silver
In water.
And I
Am still
Once
More.

From where I am now, almost a year away from the first time I sat down to write the initial lines of the poem, I already know that the rich black loam of time and space, lived outside and inside the self, had nurtured the creative process. The poems’ making was a way of focusing the inner sight, making particular moments come alive with sounds, movements, tastes, textures, and shaped which brought me back to things as they were when I named them for the first time.

These living experienced are seemingly random and arbitrary. It is ultimately a mystery how the remembering mind and heart connect them: the Taoist meditation on the Great Heron Ross received and then shared with me; the long bus ride and the walk up a hill with my father; the flight of a flock of herons seen for the first time; the verse about the six blind men of learning who went to see the elephant; the migratory birds of Olango; the story of birds in the storm struggling to free themselves from the mist nets and breaking their wings in the process; star maps and the names of stars and constellations; a bonfire of dried driftwood on a beach; the smell and rhythms of sea in a yellow tent of drams; the dance of hermit crabs on a beach at Bantayan Island; the music of the long monsoon rains in my bamboo garden in Manila; the ink-dark landscape of Kyoto under Ono No Komachi's moonlight; a temple bell morning in Arashiyama during an autumnal equinox.

Once the poem is written, the poet, if she wants to, can become invisible until the time she decides to sing the rattlesnake, blue moon grasshopper, centipede, cow dung, or buddha. The making of a poem is thus an eccentric act of conjuring for oneself and others something magical which makes its presence felt in the everyday. Ultimately, making a poem is an act of faith: that the conjured as well as the living thing will someday work its magic in another person's body of memories and dreams.
