



## TLC SHOWCASE

### LERAH MAE BARCENILLA

Introduction to the manuscript	2
Extract from <i>Selected Poems</i>	3
About the Writer	7

## Introduction to *Selected Poems*

Winning the Platinum Award for Poetry at the 2022 Creative Future Writers Award was truly a turning point in my poetry. Part of the prize was a Chapter and Verse Mentoring through The Literary Consultancy with mentor Rishi Dastidar. Up until this point, I'd spent more time working on prose and have been meaning to dedicate the same amount of time to my poetry. I was extremely grateful that this award gave me just that and to The Literary Consultancy for matching me with such an inspiring mentor.

I pitched this pamphlet as a love letter of sorts, drawing from my favourite untranslatable word in the Hiligaynon language of the Philippines. "*Palangga*" signifies a degree and kind of loving that includes cherishing, affection and concern. It can be used between old and young, mother and child, friends and lovers. But I've also heard the word used to refer to my hometown. In these poems, you will find the mythologies, folklore, superstitions, memories and stories that made up my childhood growing up in rural Philippines alongside life in the UK.

The first thing I learned was that the rules for prose may not necessarily apply for poetry. "Disregard any rules you might be familiar with from other modes of writing," was what my initial notes said. Although that didn't stop me from writing prose poems, it did encourage me to approach writing poems *differently*. I always felt like I used a different part of my brain when writing poetry and this was validated when Rishi called it "a different mode of thinking".

I wasn't letting the poetry breathe. I was leading the reader rather than letting them do the wandering. My prose-brain's desire for logic was overpowering the freedom, the mystery, the unexpected magic in poetry. That first mentoring session gave me permission to write with the handbrake off. "Trust that the language will tell you what it wants to do, and where it wants to go."

I think that summarises my whole mentoring experience quite succinctly. It encouraged me to look at writing poetry and my own poetic interests differently. It reminded me of what drew me into writing in the first place. Playing with words and the thrill when they fall into place. The unexpected magic.

The poet I was when we started these mentoring sessions is completely different to how I am now. It's been a few months since our last session and I can't wait to write more. I can't wait to see where the language will lead me. I'm sure, this time, I have enough confidence to simply follow.

## Extract from *Selected Poems* by Lerah Mae Barcenilla

### Sulad

You don't see this kind of rain back in England, I think, following each staccato-drop as they slip off the petals of a hummingbird orchid blooming in ceramic pots by the window. The peeling ocean door, with its water-lines just below my heart, creaks open. I skip onto the same tiled floors, ignoring the reds, step onto cracked green lily-pads now too small for my shoes, the same leather-bound encyclopaedias lining the shelves like staves of my favourite rondalla. Laughter slinks through the open kitchen door alongside the warm smell of kare-kare and freshly-cooked rice.

On the worn blue sofa that I've napped on so many times before under the afternoon heat, Magwayen sits wearing the familiar lines of my grandmother's face, pats the space beside her with a smile.

## Palette

After Nina Mingya Powles' *Colour Fragments*

#901C14

cluster of six-petalled santan in the town plaza

Even in my dreams she wears the same lipstick shade and matching manicured nails. When I wake, the memory is sour-sweet, sticky ripe rambutan spilling onto scarlet sea glass, paper cuts on fingertips from trying to remember. We went back there last year. Plucked bloodied flowers from the plaza, counted six petals and held our luck close to heart.

#0C3A29

monsoon rain on balete leaves

I asked my little sister what her favourite colour was, she said: "viridian", voice curling around the syllables like makahiya leaves. I think of the anonang trees standing tall around our ancestral house, how I used to believe that what lay beyond the kitchen and the animal pens behind it was a forest full of enchantment. The elders in our barangay called it *salamangka*.

#FAF5F0

carving lyrics on bone

When I was six, our whole class attended a funeral. Now, a whole ocean away, I smell lilies and think: polished casket, incense, freshly carved marble, death. In a church somewhere in Faro, Corfu, Rome we leave a row of wax candles lit with the same wish, prayer, incantation, inked across my wrist, my palms, again and again and again until I can never forget.

#239AA9

boracay waters on a stormy day

An hour's drive from the place we call home with only an endless field of gurgling rice and sleepy carabao for company, we catch the first wink of sea. Here, beside the lazy waves lapping on rocky shores, with salt in the air and fresh-tilapia and sour seagrass served on painted plastic plates, I realise: this is why this colour is our Mama's favourite.

#FFB947

a pitcher of melon tang with ice

The last time I saw her she wore a dress stitched with burnt gumamelas, and asked “Are you the maid’s daughter?” Before I could choke out that “No, I’m your granddaughter” I excused myself from the dining room table, still the same one as in my dreams. Ran up the creaking staircase two at a time, wooden panels now too small for my shoes, up the familiar corridor where condensation fell down opaque glass windows like stars.

#0B0C08

smudged ink on Indian paper

I could watch her for hours, meticulously tracing every line, every contour, fingers pressed against the page with the gentleness of a feather in flight until a leaf, a flower, a forest blooms. The first time I tried to write I crossed out the same phrase again and again and again. *I remember when...* Scratching out the words until the paper is torn, an archipelago with the night peeking through.

#E9C46A

margarine spread on bread in elementary school lunchboxes

We stop by the side of summer road and buy sweet lansones sold by smiling strangers who know us by name. Mama carefully peels the thin skin and hands out pieces of the moon between us, two equal parts for each sister. We sit side by side as the sun falls, point at glossy star fruits in the sky, humming *And it was all—*

## Fairies

I will never stop believing in *fairies*  
but we don't call them *fairies* where I'm from.  
We call them *gods*.

They're the type to guard mountains  
or just a small hill in the forest  
and that's why every time we walk  
through the trees we say *excuse me*.

Well, not *excuse me*.

We say:

*Tabi tabi po*

which means

*Please move aside*

*I'm only passing through*

But also

*I mean no harm*

but really

what harm

can a human do

to a god?

## About the Writer

Lerah Mae Barcenilla grew up in Cuartero, Capiz in the Philippines full of magic, superstition and tradition before moving to the UK. Her work explores Filipino history, mythologies and folklore, the unreliability of memory and the violence and delight in transformation.

Her poetry can be found in **Harana Poetry**, with **Verve Poetry Press** and won the **Creative Future Writers Award–Platinum Poetry** (2022), while her fantasy novel was Highly Commended in **The Literary Consultancy’s PEN Factor Award–Novel** (2021) and placed Second Place for Text in the **FAB Prize** (2023). She has a short story forthcoming in **Fly On The Wall Press’ *Modern Gothic*** anthology (2024).

She is currently working on her debut poetry pamphlet and fantasy novels inspired by Western Visayan mythology and folklore.

When she is not writing, she works as a marketing officer for the charity responsible for two of Birmingham’s iconic concert halls or collecting and researching resources on the cultures, customs and beliefs of pre-colonial Philippines.

You can find out more about her work at [lerah-mae.com](http://lerah-mae.com)



Photograph by Ibi Keita