

WA(O)NDER: SONGS FROM THE HEART

by Elvi C. Tamayo

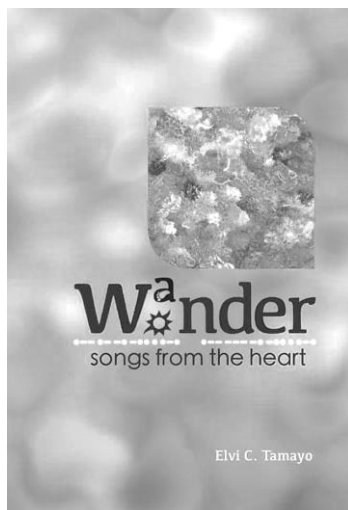
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In Davao City, an urban center that is teeming with artists in various fields (literature, visual arts, theatre, music, and songwriting), Elvi C. Tamayo stands out as one of the most accomplished with a body of work that can stand the test of time.

Tamayo is a philosopher, visual artist, poet (writing both in English and Cebuano-Bisaya) and spiritual guru. He has had five solo painting exhibitions (from *Isang Pasasalamat kay Inang Maria* in 2001 to *Sparking Joy* in 2022). He has participated in seven group exhibitions and in the last five years, he has published three books including *Leading Lives*, *Heartfelt Hues: Homeward Bound with Elvi C. Tamayo* (a mindful adventure in art) and *Gahandolansay: Tinigom nga mga Garay, Handomanan, Pamalandong ug Saysay* (a richly illustrated poetry collection).

Now comes Tamayo's fourth published work - *Wa(o)nder: songs from the heart*, a 58-page poetry book richly illustrated in color by the paintings of six visual artists, most of whom were former students of the poet.



Expectedly, even from just scanning through the poems, the reader is immediately caught up with a mix of emotions. For indeed, the pages flow with deep emotional current. Two distinguished poets have long ago remarked the direct connection between poetry and emotions. From Robert Frost words: “Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words!” William Wordsworth adds: “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of feelings. It takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.”

There are forty-one poems in this anthology, most of them quite short constituted only from three to six lines. There are but a few that have more than twenty lines. Precisely because the poems are short, each word is carefully chosen by the poet.

The tradition of writing short poems go back a long way in humanity’s literature history. There are various forms that evolved which celebrate short poetry including sonnets, haikus and limericks. The poems in *Wa(o)nder*, however do not fit into these various forms; instead, these are free flowing.

The most esteemed poets whose works are taught in many poetry classes have their own share of short poems including – a few excerpts – from those of Robert Frost’s *Fire and Ice* (“Some say the world will end in fire/Some say in ice./From what I’ve tasted of desire/I hold with those who favor fire.”); W. B. Yeats’ *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven* (“I would spread the cloths under your feet:/But I, being poor, have only my dreams;/I have spread my dreams under your feet;/Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.); Elizabeth B. Browning, *How Do I Love Thee?* (“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways./I love

thee to the depth and breadth and height/ My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight/ For the ends of being and ideal grace”) and Walt Whitman’s *I Hear America Singing* (“So be it when I shall grow old,/ Or let me die!/ The Child is father of the Man;/ And I could wish my days to be/ Bound each to each by natural piety.”)

This book is easy reading which makes it ideal to read each poem slowly, then take a pause for a long reflection on the meaning the reader perceives or intuitively. The ideal places then to bring this book and enjoy its pages are those where one can sit on a bench in a quiet park, or by the side of a river or the sea or in some secluded forested area. The best moments are naturally when nature is just waking up to the beauty of a new day or at moments when the soul finds time to rest just as shadows are deepening and the first cicadas begin to sing their chorus.

The book is made up of three sections under these headings: Memories; Feeling States and Transitions, Transformations, Transcendence. The poems celebrate all that is good in the world, nature and humanity. It takes a poet like Tamayo to take notice of everyday sights, interactions, and revelations that can just arise in a moment and then be gone forever. An advocate of taking on an *alingat* (literally meaning caution, but also indicates a sense of being alert) frame of mind, his poems indicate his sense of being alert to what is taking place at a moment’s notice or what is present right under one’s nose.

Thus a sample of his short poems indicate how he commune with a rosebud (“Does one see/The ray that beams/The rosebud that yawns?”), when blended sounds are heard (“My daily morning bears/The blend of manifold sounds/Of humming air conditioners/Rushing, roaring

motorcycles/And soft sweet chirping of birds from afar.”), when he notices a couple (“I saw a couple/Tending each soul, their glow/ Pales my gloom.”), a yearning for songs (“When a day’s toil/ Drains my frame/My heart pants for/ Your soothing songs.”) and a deep gratitude for gifts (“You tread on the lush glades/Comb undefiled caves/ Chase the tails of treasures/To come home giving gifts.”)

For a while, Tamayo served as both teacher and administrator at the Ateneo de Davao University. But having finished a master’s degree in Theology and having served Director of Ignatian Spirituality and Formation Office), it is not a surprise that one can sense a deep spirituality embedded in a number of the poems in this anthology.

One can easily resonate to the lines of a few of these poems e.g. *Canvas of Life* (“When the canvas of your life unveils/what can one gleam?” An arrow piercing its mark/A garden tendering blooms/A pilgrim on the road/A mirror for a seeker/A hunter soaking in a hot spring.”), or in *Healing* (“When the heart heals/ It can no longer hear/The murmurs/Of flowing tears.”), and *Unfurling Graces* (“I hope to see and catch/ The unfurling of graces/ When I traverse/ From sunrise to sunset.”)

As befits a book rich with emotions, there is a book on *Love* (“When love grows roots/ Compassion sprouts/Scatters the grains of good/Like rain with sunshine/Unfurling colors of light.”) Tamayo’s poems echo some of the themes of those written by Gerard Manley Hopkins who also wrote a short poem on Love, he entitled *Love Preparing to Fly* (“He play’d his wings as tho’ for flight;/They webb’d the sky with glassy light./His body

sway'd upon tiptoes,/ Like a wind-perplexed rose;/In eddies of the wind he went/At last up the blue element.)

The pleasure of reading the poems of this anthology is to realize that the poet, in the words of Rita Dove, has found “the language at its most distilled and most powerful.” And yet one does not have to immediately struggle to seek an understanding of what the poet is trying to communicate to his reader. For as T.S. Eliot writes: “Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.” Besides each person who reads the text can eventually seek the meaning of the words encountered in the pages of this book in the context of one’s own time and space.

What adds to the fabulous look of this book are the ten paintings that accompany the poems by visual artists Jearvy R. Lañoban, Krishna Mie C. Zabate, Miyen Lim, Kristin Gaid, Fides Baddongon and Jessica Cordova. Thankfully, they are reprinted in color so the reader can see the richness and texture of the art works. They vary in style; each one being a distinct art work. However, the visual art also in a way illustrate the text and thus image and words inter-act to complete the whole. Tamayo’s own impressionist painting appears on the front and back cover. Igy Castrillo (as book and cover designer) with the assistance of Pam Castrillo did a wonderful job in designing the look and design of this book.

(Those interested in buying a copy of the book, contact La Herencia, F. Torres St.; Jade Bookstore, C.M. Recto and ADDE Multipurpose Cooperative [ADDEMC]. It is sold at P350/copy.)

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N.B. This review has also been published in MindaNews (the news service arm of the Mindanao Institute of Journalism) on February 10, 2024.