

The bonsai

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Bonsai All that I love I fold over once And once again And keep in a box Or a slit in a hollow post Or in my shoe. All that I love? Why, yes, but for the moment --- And for all time, both. Something that folds and keeps easy, Son's note or Dad's one gaudy tie, A roto picture of a young queen, A blue Indian shawl, even A moneybill. It's utter sublimation A feat, this heart's control Moment to moment To scale all love down To a cupped hand's size, Till seashells are broken pieces From God's own bright teeth. And life and love are real Things you can run and Breathless hand over

To the merest child. - Edith L. Tiempo * * * A first reading of Edith L. Tiempo's signature poem is a tad confounding, for the first lady of Philippine poetry in English deploys the centripetal-centrifugal-centripetal (or inward-outward-inward) motion in expressing her profoundest thoughts and deepest feelings about love. The title itself, " Bonsai," is a bit misleading, since nowhere else in the poem are there any further references to plant life or the ancient Japanese technique of cultivating miniature trees or shrubs through dwarfing by selective pruning.

Some might even argue that " Origami" is the better title choice, for at least the persona's act of folding objects is a bit analogous to the Japanese art of paper folding to make complicated shapes. But this reader will prove at the end of this essay that " Bonsai" is the most appropriate title for the poem, something that is not quite obvious to most people after their perfunctory appraisal of this often misread literary masterpiece. However, despite the false lead, even a cursory perusal of the poem reveals to the sensitive and sensible reader that " Bonsai" is about love, if only because the four-letter word is mentioned in all four stanzas.

In the first stanza, the persona declares that she folds everything that she loves and keeps them hidden in secret places: “ a box,/ Or a slit in a hollow post,/ Or in my shoe. //” What then are the things she considers imperative enough to keep? At first glance, the catalogue of her beloved objects in the second stanza appears to be disparate, unrelated, almost random, if not completely aleatory. But since a literary sorceress like Tiempo seldom commits mistakes in conjuring appropriate images, then there must be a reason for singling out these particular items and not others.

The more important query therefore is this: What do “ Son’s note or Dad’s one gaudy tie,/ A roto[i] picture of a young queen,/ A blue Indian shawl, even/ A money bill. //” share in common? Besides being foldable and thus easy to keep, they must symbolize for the loving female persona important individuals and incidents in her life. For as the semiotician Roland Barthes correctly observes in *A Lover’s Discourse*: “ Every object touched by the loved being’s body becomes part of that body, and the subject eagerly attaches himself to it. [ii] If we are to assume that the speaking voice of “ Bonsai” closely resembles the poet’s own, then the first three objects must represent members of her immediate family: son Maldon; husband Edilberto (It is a well-known fact among writing fellows and panelists of the Silliman Writers’ Workshop that Edith fondly called the late fictionist and literary critic “ Dad,” while being addressed by her husband as “ Mom,” which is a common practice among Filipino couples. ; and daughter Rowena (Unknown to many, the current Program Administrator of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop is a former winner of the Miss Negros Oriental beauty contest sometime in the 1970s, another indicator of the Filipino flavor of the poem, since the

Philippines is a pageant-obsessed Third World country.). The referents of the last two items are more covert and thereby more difficult to decipher. At best, we can only speculate on the persons and/or events that make the two things significant: blue Indian shawl (Edith's engagement date with Edilberto, her first winter in Iowa, her last autumn in Denver? ; money bill (Her initial salary from Silliman University, cash prize from the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature?). In the long run though the indeterminacy of the allusions does not really matter, for the opaqueness of the symbols leads not to generic obscurity and obfuscation, but to personal mythology and mystery. Perhaps part of the poem's message is that the things a person considers memorable and therefore valuable most other people might think of as debris, detritus or dirt. Note that the adverb " even" modifying " money bill" is used to indicate something unexpected or unusual, which in the context of the poem seems to suggest that a money bill is not a conventional object to collect and treasure even by the most sentimental of persons.) Suffice it to say that all five objects, which are outwardly ordinary and nondescript, acquire associative significations because they serve for the poetic persona as conduits of recall, like mementoes, souvenirs and keepsakes.

Interestingly, the second stanza commences with what appears to be a rhetorical question (" All that I love? "), which the persona answers with a paradox: " Why, yes, but for the moment ---/ And for all time, both. " The significance of these seemingly self- contradictory lines will be discussed towards the end of this essay, but for now this reader will focus on the fact that the persona pauses to contemplate on the germane issue of the scope

of her love, before she proceeds to enumerate her loved ones' memorabilia that she has decided to vouchsafe.

Love for the female persona therefore is a conscious choice, a cognitive act not only an affective one, a motif that recurs in various degrees in most of her other love poems. In the third stanza, the persona explains the rationale behind her action: It's utter sublimation A feat, this heart's control Moment to moment To scale all love down To a cupped hand's size, The keyword here is sublimation, which in psychology is the deflection of sexual energy or other atavistic biological impulse from its immediate goal to one of a higher social, moral or aesthetic nature or use.

In chemistry, on the other hand, sublimation is the process of transforming a solid substance by heat into a vapor, which on cooling condenses again to solid form without apparent liquefaction. Inherent in both definitions is the act of refinement and purification through fire, since to sublimate in a sense is to make something sublime out of something sordid. In the latter a literal fire dissolves through a crucible the dross from the precious metal, while in the former it is furnace of the mind that burns away the superfluous from the crucial experiences.

The second most important idea in this stanza is the procedure of scaling love down, which Tiempo asserts is a feat by itself, an exceptional accomplishment of the female persona's sentimental heart which is achieved through utmost discipline and restraint. But aside from mere manageability, why is it necessary to miniaturize love, to whittle it down to the size of "a cupped hand"? The answer to this pertinent question is given, albeit in a tangential fashion, in the fourth and last stanza: "And life and love are real/

Things you can run and/ Breathless hand over/ To the merest child. Love as “ real things” or concrete objects rather than as abstract concepts is easier to pass on, since it has become more tangible and thus more comprehensible to most everyone else, including children and one’s beloved offspring. It also underscores the importance of bequeathing the legacy of love to the next generation, since as the cliché goes “ children are the future of the world,” which makes “ the merest child,” and not the wisest woman nor the strongest man, the ideal recipient of such a wonderful gift.

The image of the cupped hand also emphasizes the idea that in the act of giving the one offering the bequest is also a beggar of sorts, since the beneficiary can always refuse to accept the heirlooms being proffered. But another important element is introduced in the ultimate stanza, for the persona by some extraordinary leap of the imagination perceives the seashells on the beach as “ broken pieces/ From God’s own bright teeth,” which for a better understanding of “ Bonsai” must be elaborated on, so that readers of Philippine poetry from English can fully appreciate the tight structural organization of the poem.

Gemino H. Abad in his remarkable essay “ Mapping Our Poetic Terrain: Filipino Poetry in English from 1905 to the Present”^[iii] connects this image to the paradoxical lines of the second stanza “ for the moment ---/ And for all time, both. ” This reader cannot help but agree, since indeed the five objects mentioned by the persona being mementoes of the people she loves are metonyms of memory, shattered but shimmering fragments of chronology, captured important moments immortalized in the heart and mind, if we are to visualize Time itself as a manifestation of God.

Of greater consequence, thought, is that this divine figure completes Tiempo's poetic picture about love and remembrance by adding the spiritual detail, for love like the unmentionable Hebrew name of the Almighty is also a Tetragrammaton, a four-letter word, which has probably engendered the often-quoted adage that " God is Love, and Love is God. " Structurally speaking, her most famous poem can thus be diagrammed in this manner:
 TREE/SHRUB ----- bonsai LOVE ----- son's note, Dad's one gaudy tie,
 etc.

GOD ----- seashells MAN/WOMAN ----- merest child
 On the left side of the chart are the huge objects, concepts or people: full-size flora (Tree/Shrub), big abstract words (Love, God) and grownups (Man/Woman). Their miniature analogues, in contrast, are found on the right side of the chart. However, these diminutive parallels, especially the mementoes, retain the spirit of their larger versions, since the process of sublimation reduces things only in terms of size but not in essence.

Ultimately, this makes " Bonsai" the perfect title of the poem, for a bonsai has all the necessary parts that make a tree or a shrub what it is: roots, a trunk, branches, leaves and flowers, albeit in smaller portions; in the same manner that love even if sublimated by the heart and the mind still preserves its sum and substance, its lifeblood in the truest sense of the written word and the word made flesh.