

**"The Secret Language"**  
**Luisa A. Igloria**

I have learned your speech,  
Fair stranger; for you  
I have oiled my hair  
And coiled it tight  
Into a braid as thick  
And beautiful as the serpent  
In your story of Eden.

For you, I have covered  
My breasts and hidden,  
Among the folds of my surrendered  
Inheritance, the beads  
I have worn since girlhood.

It is fifty years now  
Since the day my father  
Took me to the school in Bua,  
A headman's terrified  
Peace-gift. In the doorway,  
The teacher stood, her hair  
The bleached color of corn,  
Watching with bird-eyes.

Now, I am Christina.  
I am told I can make lace  
Fine enough to lay upon the altar  
Of a cathedral in Europe.  
But this is a place  
That I will never see.

I cook for tourists at an inn;  
They praise my lemon pie  
And my English, which they say  
Is faultless. I smile  
And look past the window,  
Imagining father's and grandfather's cattle  
Grazing by the smoke trees.  
But it is evening, and these  
Are ghosts.

In the night,  
When I am alone at last,  
I lie uncorseted

Upon the iron bed,  
Composing my lost beads  
Over my chest, dreaming back  
Each flecked and opalescent  
Color, crooning the names,  
Along with mine:  
*Binaay, Binaay*

*Binaay - goodness or kindness in the Filipino Tagalog language*

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**Luisa A. Igloria** grew up in Baguio City, in the northern Cordillera, Philippines. She earned her doctorate from the University of Illinois at Chicago, her M.A. in Literature from Ateneo de Manila University (where she wrote a thesis on Foucault and the discourse of power in colonial texts pertaining to the Igorot), and her B.A. Humanities from the University of the Philippines, Baguio. Since November 20, 2010, she has written (at least) a poem a day, and these are archived at Dave Bonta's *Via Negativa* site. Luisa is the author of *Ode to the Heart Smaller than a Pencil Eraser* (Utah State University Press, 2014); *Night Willow* (Phoenicia Publishing, 2014); *Juan Luna's Revolver* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2009); *Trill & Mordent* (WordTech Editions, 2005); and eight other books. Her work has been recognized by several literary prizes. She currently directs the M.F.A. Creative Writing Program at Old Dominion University. In 2020 she was named Poet Laureate of the state of Virginia.