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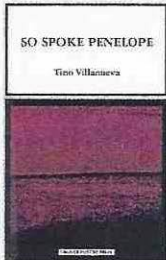
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So Spoke Penelope

Tino Villanueva (GRS'81)

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"WHAT WE HAVE IN *So Spoke Penelope*," writes Nigerian poet Ifeanyi Menkiti in his introduction to Villanueva's incandescent collection, "is a work many years in the making, a work indicative of hard-worn recog-



nition on the poet's part that the whole range of human experience is contained in Penelope at Ithaca." The 32 poems in this slim volume spill from one to the next and invite a second or third reading. That we come to these poems already

sympathetic to the long-suffering, noble Penelope of Homer's perpetually retold and reinvented epic *The Odyssey* only enhances their tenderness and power.

Penelope's desolation, rage, and resourcefulness in her 20 years of waiting for her beloved husband's return from the Trojan War reflect all the complications and agonies of enduring love. In the beginning her words are suffused with hope, and she finds release in "sweet sleep." The first poems have a dreamy quality:

*I'm a woman waiting, in love
with a man,
and in love with the love we had.*

Over time, although no less love-sick, Penelope bares her pragmatic

side. Villanueva's restrained Penelope, who has "grown stubborn all these years," finally ignites in her account of the persistent suitors, "those blasted blustery brutes, the crudest of the crude...befouling the air with the rough language of their praise."

Weaving by day and unraveling by night to keep the brutes at bay, this is a Penelope who could exist among us, a feisty, independent woman consistent in her affections. When her maidservants—"those tarts"—sell her out, she wearily declares:

*Here and now I say: I've done no ill.
No ill to crass and boorish men
who know
Nothing about weaving anyway.*

When Odysseus finally "washes ashore," and Penelope, desire "washing over" her and melting at the knees, pulls him into "a claiming embrace, teary-eyed," Villanueva offers a meditation on transcendent love that reads like the most lyrical and inspired of wedding vows:

*wrapped in each other's arms,
Odysseus and I, wordless,
in the wisdom that love, as ever,
is the light we live by.*

[Susan Seligson]