

FROM THE INVENTORY OF IMAGES I CANNOT UNSEE

By

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*for my family*

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## TENDERNESS IN A SHARP-EDGED WORLD

### *I. ORIGINS: “A SELF-FORGETFUL, PERFECTLY USELESS CONCENTRATION”*

At six years old, I fashioned a writing office in my bedroom closet. It wasn't a big space—a reach-in, two feet deep and six or seven feet wide, with doors that folded like wings when you pulled the handles—but I could sit cross-legged on a pillow in front of my “desk” (an upturned milk crate I'd covered with cardboard), and that was good enough for me. I found an extension cord in the garage and moved the lamp from my nightstand to my office, emptied my older sister's hand-me-down Caboodle—a toy make-up organizer from the 90s—and refilled the plastic compartments with crayons, erasers, pencils, pens. I even had a filing system for my stories: an empty Tide powder detergent box with folders I'd made from extra-large construction paper, labeled by genre—*Adventure, Horror, Love*. In that little me-sized room of my own, I had silence and solitude, and space away from my loud family to read, write, imagine, invent.

Terry Tempest Williams mused, “I write as an act of slowness... I write because you can play on the page like a child left alone in sand.” Adrienne Rich called the act of creation “a state of piercing awareness” (5). Elizabeth Bishop, reflecting in “The Darwin Letter” to Anne Stevenson in 1964, wrote, “What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration” (qtd. in Hammer). These three writers articulated something I've felt about myself since childhood: that I am most present in my body, that my sensory experience of the world is most receptive, and that I am most in tune with my emotions, when I'm submerged in my creative process. At six years old, I didn't

yet know the role that writing—poetry, specifically—would play in my life. I didn't know sexual violence or drug abuse or trauma. I had no conceptualization of syntax or imagery, no notion of how some poems could blast a mind open or unstitch a mouth or soothe a deep hurt. But I knew I loved reading books and telling stories, I loved to describe things, to explore characters, and I loved the infinite possibilities in a single sentence, on a blank sheet. I loved that I could retreat into my closet-office, lose myself in the trance of reading or writing something strange and new, and then open the door only to find hours had passed without my noticing.

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I've always been mesmerized by the way language lives inside the mouth. I remember sitting in my father's lap as a kid and counting his bulky, callused, mechanic's fingers—*isa, dalawa, tatlo*—or reciting the Filipino alphabet, rolling the sounds around on my tongue, and marveling that there could be phonemes that didn't exist in English. I remember learning words like *maliit* (little) and *malaki* (big)—and this was my first lesson, I think, in the way sound can enhance meaning: I used to confuse the two terms until I considered the way the final syllable in *ma-li-it* seemed to shrink, the vowel shortening as I pressed my tongue between my teeth, as my father had taught me; and how *ma-la-ki* grew, the last sound cracking out from the back of my throat like something heavy and solid dropped on a hard floor.

In the preface to Ellen Bryant Voigt's *The Art of Syntax*, she begins with a discussion of music: as humans start to absorb language, before we learn the semantic sense of words, we learn the rhythmic motifs of syntax. We first derive meaning from intonation, patterns of sound, and cadence. These sound clues, combined with a handful of vocabulary words I had picked up over time, were my way of deciphering what I could from Tagalog, when my parents and older siblings



would code-switch to talk about “adult matters.” This obsession with sound and the intuitive meaning behind it is one of the reasons my writing obsession focused in the direction of poetry.

At home, Tagalog was a veil that concealed a hidden world I wasn’t privy to—speaking in that unfamiliar tongue, my parents were their truest selves, more emphatic in their tone, more fluid in their speech. Growing up, I made multiple attempts to learn what I could but was easily discouraged. I tried to recount the experience of struggling with language and communication in a poem called “Tagalog,” which I wrote as a budding undergraduate poet:

K’s and C’s are hard to coax  
from the top of my throat,  
and T’s I trip over, too used to  
the snap of tongue, too impatient  
to let it sit between my teeth  
for the extra beat. I cannot  
open wide enough for vowels  
or rid myself of the Midwestern  
flattening of their roundness, or nail  
the slight glottal stop—a door  
eased shut—when they sit  
tail-end of a word.

The poem ends in exasperation: “all my R’s pitter out / like a kick-start motor / that just won’t spark.” Underneath the speaker’s awkward navigation of the language is my discomfort and self-consciousness of being Filipina-American, and the insecurity I felt when writing this poem that if I couldn’t learn to speak Tagalog, I wasn’t a “true Filipino.” This exploration of sound took on a metaphorical resonance—through it, I was beginning to ask questions that would never let me go: of identity, of belonging, and ultimately, eventually, of power.

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When you’re the first-born American child in an immigrant family, with two older siblings in ESL classes and a father who was fired from his first U.S. job due to his inability to speak

English, you learn that there is power in the English language, in being articulate, eloquent, and grammatically correct, in having the *exact* word you need *exactly* when you need it. My mother is intelligent and hardworking—it was because of her schooling, in pursuit of a master’s degree in agricultural engineering at the University of Missouri, that my family emigrated from the Philippines—but her accent slowed her speech and made white people in our town assume she, too, was slow. My father finished high school and went straight to driving jeepneys (U.S. military vehicles leftover from WWII, repurposed for public transportation) and buses in the Philippines before moving here; after a series of unsuccessful jobs, he became a diesel mechanic, learned Midwestern slang at the shop. At the bank, the grocery store, events at school, they would tiptoe through the English language as if treading carefully in a dark room, guessing their way through pronunciations; and the bank tellers, the grocery store cashiers, the teachers and school administrators spat their replies, their impatience and condescension palpable even to me.

How many times did I watch my parents silence and stifle themselves, ill-equipped with the language to defend, explain, or respond? To what extent did my role as the “translator” shape my sense of being excluded or different from my own family and the wider world? In what ways did bridging the gap between my Taglish-speaking parents and the English-speaking world locate my cultural identity as Filipina, American, both, and neither, all at the same time? These questions were, and continue to be, fuel for my writing as both inspiration and subject matter.

## ***II. INFLUENCES: “A RIPPLE WIDENING FROM A SINGLE STONE”***

In my junior year of high school, I took my first creative writing course: “Write to Publish” with Mr. Stover, notorious for his rough and blunt critiques. Despite its obvious flaws (write *to*

*publish?*), from him I learned the importance of reading contemporary American poetry. Mr. Stover insisted it was the best way to familiarize one's self with the publishing landscape—what kinds of magazines existed outside of *The New Yorker* or *The Paris Review*, whose work was getting attention and why, et cetera. For me, reading contemporary work was a revived introduction to writers of color. I'd read Phillis Wheatley and Claude McKay in English classes but, as it was framed in my mid-Missouri public high school class setting, filtered through a white gaze, we studied them because their talent and achievements were monumental *despite* their circumstances, as if they had triumphed over their experience as African Americans rather than wrote into the specific particularities of it. I was taught to appreciate poetry by people of color in terms of their representation and worth within ivory-towered academic establishment, in ways that reinforced gatekeeping, that maintained the systemic racism and sexism that enabled old, white men to dominate the publishing sphere.

Discovering poetry by women, by queer folk, by people of color, I found a living community. I found recognition, solidarity, acknowledgement, guidance. I began to understand that these writers weren't writing *despite* their marginalized origins, but *because of* or *out of* or *into* them; they were poets who insisted on making a space to share and celebrate their languages, mythologies, and histories. It also dawned on me that there were writers living and working in the world, that it was possible to piece together a life as a poet. Until then, writing was a quiet passion I kept mostly to myself—it made me less lonely, more present in the world, and helped me to understand my humanity and that of the people around me—but that was it: a passion. A hobby. Reading contemporary work was a discovery for me: at that point, I realized that even if it wouldn't bring me money or major success, there was an audience for it, and that I could build my life around being a poet.

My hunger for poetry was insatiable. I found Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, Richard Siken, Charles Simic, Louise Glück. The more I read, the more I realized there was to read: Li-Young Lee, Rita Dove, Linda Gregg. Found Ai in the public library. Found Nickole Brown at the local bookstore. In college, amongst a whole academic department of writers, I found even more: Brigit Pegeen Kelly, A. Van Jordan, Lucille Clifton, Patrick Rosal. I read as widely as I could—wanting to absorb everything—and marveled at the possibilities of what a poem could be.

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I happened upon Theodore Roethke's *The Far Field* while perusing stacks of two-dollar paperbacks in a rolling bookcase outside a shop in my college town. The penultimate poem in *North American Sequence*, entitled "The Far Field," ends with a ten-line single-sentence stanza:

All finite things reveal infinitude:  
The mountain with its singular bright shade  
Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,  
The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;  
Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,  
A scent beloved of bees;  
Silence of water above a sunken tree:  
The pure serene memory in one man,—  
A ripple widening from a single stone  
Winding around the waters of the world.

I was shook. Closed the book, walked outside (it was springtime in Chapel Hill, North Carolina), and met the sun and fresh air as if for the first time. Jane Hirshfield wrote, "Poems are made of words that act beyond words' own perimeter because what is infinite in them is not in the poem, but in what it unlocks in us" (264). The rich sensory detail transported me, it seemed, outside my own body and simultaneously deeper into myself; each image was delicious. But what really got me was the music, the syntactical construction—clause after clause building tension, widening/winding beyond the sentence itself. Roethke's work brought something I knew

instinctively to the forefront of my consciousness: that language could have texture, richness; that sentences could hold heat, and that constructing the syntax carefully was a way to control that heat, to move it around, to manage how much intensity and energy the reader felt and when.

Recently, since the summer, I've been turning toward poetry by Sharon Olds and Jack Gilbert more often. From Olds, I learn (again and again, it seems) about bravery: every one of her poems feels hard-wrought. She has, as George Orwell put it, "a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts," and she pushes through conventional sentiment so that, after reading and re-reading her poems, I feel like I've learned new ways of feeling (or, at the very least, new ways of articulating feelings and intuitions). I also marvel at her image-making. Her poems are so body-centric and vivid, her tone and language so searing and direct. One image that haunts me is from "The Eye" in her debut collection, *Satan Says*:

Today I thought about that glass eye,  
and how at night in the big double bed  
he slept facing his wife, and how the limp  
hole, where his eye had been, was open  
towards her on the pillow... (9-13)

It disgusts me, my mental image of the speaker's grandfather's puckered eyehole pointed toward his wife night after night. And yet, this is one of the things I admire most about Olds: her ability to construct visceral and detailed descriptions, and the power she derives from being direct and unadorned. She could have qualified the image with a metaphor, a simile, some comparison to make the "limp / hole" more palatable for the reader, but instead she breaks on the word "limp" and lets the awful word ring, lets the slackness of the eyeless space echo on the page. I am reminded, too, of something Marie Howe said during her craft talk at Vanderbilt in January of 2019, when she was describing the metaphoric power in the "is-ness or thinginess of things": sometimes when we turn to clichéd figurative language, we "instantly want to compare [an image]

because we don't want to stay with the thing itself," but, perhaps, that thing should be endured as it is. Olds' poetry embodies the ability to "stay with the thing itself," to me, and teaches me to be brave, to face the things that hurt.

From Jack Gilbert, I am learning how to withhold. As a narrative poet, I have a tendency to overwrite, over-describe, overexplain. This might come from my deep-seated association between language and power: as the poet, the world-maker, I have the power to make the reader see/hear/taste/feel/touch what I decide, and I get intoxicated by that power; additionally, my undergraduate creative writing professors valued narrative clarity, and so I overcompensate in my work to ensure that I'm not misconstrued. But, as Rita Dove said after accepting the position of U.S. poet laureate in 1993, comparing the genre to a bouillon cube, "Poetry is language at its most distilled and most powerful" (qtd. in Streitfeld). And, as Ocean Vuong said at a reading at Parnassus Books in June of 2019, "Poetry makes meaning out of silence and fracture." I am learning, over and over again, the first bit of writing advice I got in college, in my introduction to poetry class with Ross White: "Economize for vigor."

In Gilbert's work, two poems come to mind that, to me, best exemplify his proficiency with distillation: "Highlights and Interstices" and "Beyond Beginnings," both elegies honoring his deceased love, Michiko. In "Highlights and Interstices," the speaker suggests that the best of life "is often when nothing is happening" (4), and describes a woman picking up her child to cross a street. The poem then turns to describe the speaker's grief: "I have lost two thousand habitual / breakfasts with Michiko. What I miss most about / her is that commonplace I can no longer remember" (9-11). And in "Beyond Beginnings," the speaker muses on the grief that he has held onto for more than a year:

... Is there a happiness  
later on that is neither fierce nor reasonable?  
A time when the heart is fresh again, and a time  
after that when the heart is ripe? The Aegean  
was blue just then at the end of the valley,  
and is blue now differently. (12-17)

No matter how many times I read either of these poems, I feel the speaker's loss like a fresh wound. I feel it so strongly, I think, because they are what Jane Hirshfield might call "window moments": "recognized primarily by the experience of expansion," "a transition specific in effect, a place where something in the poem not only alters but breaks different ground" (153, 164). I feel it because the distillation, the silence, and the fracture carve a freer imaginative space where Gilbert leaves me to reckon with the immensity of the speaker's pain, with my own lost loves, and to connect our shared experiences of grief.

My poetic instinct would be to describe further—to guess at what Michiko had for breakfast or how she took her coffee, to narrow down the shade of blue or linger on a detail about the valley. But Gilbert doesn't write that in the poems. The images are specific enough to be believable, to prime the reader's imagination, and that's all—not five years of breakfasts, but two thousand breakfasts; not any sea, but the Aegean. I am struck by what he holds back, what these "windows" in his poems open inside me.

I could dive further into these passages from Roethke, Olds, and Gilbert, could attempt to discuss more of the technical elements that make their work so powerful, but there are numerous scholarly essays which have done that already. My admiration for these poets is simpler than that. As Terrance Hayes wrote, describing his connection to Etheridge Knight in *To Float in the Space Between*:

The scholar looks upon his subject as if through a window... to frame the poet's work according to things like genre, talent, culture, history... Conversely, a poet looking upon the poetry of another poet sees something of himself reflected in the

pane... A poet looks upon the work of another poet not only through a window but also through a mirror. (p. 9)

When I read the poetry of Roethke, Olds, and Gilbert, I learn about more than syntax, image-making, or narrative compression. I learn about the courage it takes to write, to make the “journey to the interior” as Roethke would say; I learn about loss, resilience, love, empathy; I learn new depths and dimensions of the heart, and my capacity for love grows. What I admire and respect about them on a technical, craft level humbles me, but at the core of that admiration is gratitude. Their poems remind me of why I love poetry.

### ***III. PROCESS: “TURN AROUND: WHAT ELSE IS TRUE?”***

In the conclusion of *A Poetry Handbook* by Mary Oliver, she asks: “How patient are you, and what is the steel of your will, and how well do you look and see the things of this world?” (121). As I put together this thesis, and patterns, images, and themes revealed themselves, I found myself thinking of this quote a lot. I’ve needed patience and determination to write these poems, to see them through long and sometimes circuitous revision processes, to arrange them. And the skill of looking and seeing—that begins every poem, for me.

Stored in my mind and scribbled in my notebooks are various sensory images I collect throughout my days—sometimes it’s just a phrase, a few words with a rhythmic pulse, a line or maybe even an entire paragraph. I always have something to write with and on so that if I’m struck by something, I won’t forget it. In her essay entitled “The Art of Finding,” Linda Gregg describes an assignment she would give students—to write six things they saw each day—and how it changed their way of moving through and receiving the world: “[W]ith practice, they begin to see carelessly and learn a kind of active passivity until after a month nearly all of them have learned



to be available to seeing—and the physical world pours in.” To see and hear well is a skill that can be sharpened. Sometimes it’s as if my poet’s eye/ear is always working in the background of my mind, like a computer program, always looking for things in the world that can be made into a poem: a bell-shaped purple dress, a grease-pocked pizza and a pinched chunk of cheese, a deer’s antlered crown.

Joan Didion, in her “Why I Write” essay, describes a similar process of collecting images, but the writing begins only once she finds “the picture that shimmered and made these other images coalesce.” For me, when the images resonate with each other—most often connected through a significant memory—that’s when the poem begins. I have a big notebook at home where I handwrite my first drafts (I like the meditative feeling of my hand across a page, of being reminded why and how I fell in love with writing as a kid). That part of the process is always difficult for me: in my poems, which have roots in the autobiographical, I’m often trying to “face unpleasant facts” or traumatic memories or things I’m ashamed of. Trying to manage the volatile landscape of my memories can be overwhelming, at times; I have to consciously work on approaching memories and images from different angles, angles that can lead to more complex and nuanced emotional terrain. I often circle back to something else Marie Howe said in her craft talk: “Look for ways to get off the bull’s-eye. Turn around: what else is true?”

Howe’s point—her angled approach, to “Tell all the truth but tell it slant,” as Emily Dickinson wrote (494)—has been especially important for the manuscript, which I see as a project of healing and survival. Although violence and trauma are the nexus of my work, I don’t want to write poems bogged down in self-pity and anger and hate, or retellings that sensationalize violent experiences. I’m trying to be careful, to avoid re-traumatizing myself or the reader. I understand the potential for growth and healing in writing and sharing those poems—self-pity, anger, and hate

are undeniable truths for survivors of trauma, and it's essential to find healthy ways to manage rather than repress these emotions: naming and articulating those truths, those feelings, can enable writers and readers to claim them, celebrate or condemn them, and/or let them go. The necessity of this work is apparent in everything from literature to the #MeToo movement: there is strength and defiance in the insistence to make space for harsh realities. But, for me, as I imagine my work in the world someday, as I think about the kind of experience I want my reader to have when encountering these poems, I hope this book can be something another survivor might look to for empowerment, nourishment, and resilience, rather than something to be endured.

What was done to me is done. That much is true. But now I have a choice: invoke this violent history that is mine and ask the reader to imagine and bear witness to it, or write poems that focus on what comes after—perseverance, vigilance, mistakes, survival, and, eventually maybe, wholeness.

Turn around: what else is true? A speaker in pain who is oriented toward gratitude. Tenderness in a sharp-edged world. Poems rooted in darkness that insist on light, on love.

#### ***IV. ARRANGEMENT: "MANY THINGS ARE TRUE AT ONCE"***

In its current arrangement, the manuscript begins with the poem "After": the speaker wakes up after being raped, rises from her bed, and steps forward, beginning her journey of trying to reclaim her body despite its new unfamiliarity. The poem's white space reflects the speaker's disjointed thoughts and incomplete memory; already she is making excuses, evading what she is unwilling to admit, trying to rationalize what has been done to her. The trauma of sexual violence isn't a plot point in the manuscript's narrative progression, but an irrefutable fact of the speaker's

emotional and psychological make-up. Rather than withhold this information for dramatic effect, I wanted to acknowledge it and move on to the tensions, circumstances, detours, relationships, and questions that enabled the speaker get up. Hopefully, the poem invites the reader, too, to step forward into the manuscript.

Section I begins with a long prose poem, “From the Inventory of Images I Cannot Unsee”—a piece I’ve been trying to write since the summer of 2009, when my mother was able, finally, after twenty years, to visit the Philippines. The occasion for this poem was my memory of her sobbing uncontrollably (a woman who, until that point, seemed to calculate what to feel and when to feel it), pulling up grass and weeds from her mother’s untended grave. To communicate and contextualize the intensity of this moment, the poem weaves together scenes from the past and present in the U.S. and the Philippines, spanning decades and thousands of miles of distance, before ending with all three women at the gravesite—mother and daughter at the grandmother’s final resting place. This poem, and others from this section, begin to explore the ways in which both pain and love can endure immense stretches of time and space; they also consider the speaker within the context of her family—the depth and tenacity of family-based communities, the inherited collective trauma of othering and isolation that so often go hand in hand with immigration, and the longevity of intergenerational influence.

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Section II of the manuscript sharpens the cultural context of the speaker’s background through the angle of mythology—folktales and legends I’ve obsessed over since childhood. Perhaps the fascination is inherited: my great-grandmother was, supposedly, a babaylan, a Filipina shaman. As a diasporic writer, a first-generation American, when I write into Filipino mythology, I’m reaching for my family: long-dead matriarchs I’ve never met, who may as well be myths to

me, aunts and uncles and cousins half a world away. I'm trying to find a pathway back to my ancestors, pre-U.S. military bases, pre-comfort women, pre-colonization. Besides the family nose, a handful of recipes, and a Tagalog-English dictionary, these myths are what connect me to Filipino culture; using mythology as an anchor, I hope my poems make space for and celebrate these cultural narratives that have existed long before anyone I have ever known was born. The myths and legends recounted here—the manananggal and the aswang Maria Labó—tell the story of villainous female characters with a more sympathetic eye: nothing is black and white, no person is fully good or evil, and these figures, perhaps, have more depth and complexity than we grant them.

This section also starts to give the reader a picture of the speaker as a young adult, navigating her trauma—or perhaps, more accurately, numbing it—through drug abuse. In some ways, these poems were the hardest for me to write. It hurts to look back on this version of myself, from when my depression and repressed traumas were so overwhelming that I chose to dull my brain and senses; a version so disgusted by my body that I poisoned it with substances I knew were harmful but felt I deserved. This detour, however, albeit masochistic and reckless, became crucial to understanding myself, my past, and my response to trauma—experiences of drug abuse and trauma are so intertwined, as the poem “Studies Show” explores, and I can't untangle myself from one without also addressing the other. I used to think these shameful versions of my past selves were haunting me but in writing these poems I've learned I can't leave them behind.

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In the manuscript's third and final section, the speaker is finding resilience in both solitude and community. In “Woman Traveling Alone Checks into Her Cheap Hotel Room,” the speaker's paranoia about being watched or videotaped prompts her to check everything—the lights, the

curtains, the bed; she even goes as far as covering the mirror, fearing it may be two-way glass. While the poem isn't explicitly about trauma, the shadow of it is still there, in the speaker's hypervigilant awareness, the measures she takes to keep herself safe. And while it doesn't explicitly proclaim self-love, it does suggest the speaker now sees her body as something worth protection.

Queerness also becomes layered into the manuscript's narrative arc, as the speaker considers her erotic pull toward women. Coming out as queer was a huge turning point for me—I became more comfortable in my physical body and felt a kind of release in my brain, a cathartic liberation from a secret I couldn't before speak aloud. At first, I wasn't sure why those poems felt so intuitively necessary to the manuscript until, in a nonfiction workshop, Daisy Hernández described the narrator of one of the essays we were discussing as someone who “couldn't imagine queer desire outside the realm of sexual violence”—that is, her earlier experiences of sexual violence involved women and, as a result, she couldn't bear her own sapphic desire. She couldn't feel attracted toward women without feeling guilty that she was somehow fetishizing the brutality she had endured. It was a stunning realization, when I turned that truth around on myself. I'm still debating whether or not to include more details about my first sexual trauma, details that might help tie this narrative thread more neatly into the manuscript; at the same time, though, it feels good to keep a little something for myself rather than bare it all on paper. Regardless, it is, I think, relevant and necessary for the speaker in this manuscript to embrace her sexuality—for any survivor of sexual trauma to embrace their sexuality—and to unpack the associations between sex and violence that trauma can create.

The final poems in the manuscript champion language as a pathway toward recovering from trauma, suggesting that language itself—the sounds of words, their many connotations, the

shapes our mouths make to hold syllables—can create possibilities for new connections, for expanded ways of perceiving and receiving the world. The poem “Papasyal,” for instance, takes the reader back to the speaker’s childhood, to her relationship with her mother. As a young girl, she mistranslates the title-word as “auction”—a fact she didn’t question until adulthood, when she learned it means “to walk or stroll.” In the poem, the new information helps her to reconsider and complicate her understanding of her mother not solely as *a mother* but as *a woman*, a separate and unknowable being, and the distance between them.

In the manuscript’s final poem, “After,” the speaker recalls interactions with men as a child, as a young woman, as a bartender, as a partner, as well as her experiences as a writer; she sees these moments as different versions of herself, some loving, some lonely, some despairing, some empowered. The poem ends with a “future version” standing up from her desk where she has just composed a poem: much like the speaker of the first poem, who rises from bed and takes her first shaky step forward into her new life, this speaker rises, feels her feet on the floor, feels her body in the world, and is, in this moment at least, content. By including these different “versions” of the self, the manuscript ends with a reminder to the reader: that healing and survival isn’t a final destination but an ongoing journey that must be tended to every day, and that this endless reacquaintance with and reshaping of one’s self can be a blessing, a particular kind of self-love. The medley of experience also connects back to the speaker’s understanding of immigrant life in the U.S.: pieces from the past, from the original culture, are joined with pieces of the new, the present, to make a full life.

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I am most my mother’s daughter when my knack for severe criticism, of myself and the world and my work, leaves me in a state of general dissatisfaction—ex-pianist, ex-gymnast, and

approval-seeking daughter that I am, my desire for exactness and perfection runs deep. This trait, I've told myself, is good for my craft: I can't imagine myself ever "retiring from" or "quitting" being a writer, therefore holding myself to impossible standards ensures my work will never stop growing. It does, however, make it difficult to dispel the myth of imposter syndrome, to finish a poem with confidence.

In her tour de force "Amistad" poems from *American Sublime*, Elizabeth Alexander wrote, "Many things are true at once" (85); the deeper I get into revising, the more I find myself holding a range of new questions, tensions, and truths. I do believe the work is as polished as I can get it, that the manuscript as a whole is a good representation of the poet I am at this point in my life. Even so, I look forward to putting it down until I can return to it with fresh eyes to decide if the poems still feel unfinished or lacking, and to determine if these tensions are still beckoning for me to follow.

#### ***V. ONWARD: "LIKE A CHILD LEFT ALONE IN SAND"***

As I think about what I hope my poetry can do in the world, I find myself coming back to a VS Podcast interview, "Paul Tran vs. the Past," in which Tran recalls something an MFA mentor, Francine J. Harris, had said:

... you do this thing where you reach for an ending that you want so desperately to be true, but it might not be. And sometimes that knowledge is that you're strong and you're powerful, or that you've overcome certain hardships, or that you have more empathy for others than you might have, or that you understand prismatically something that occurred, but you really don't... I've thought about why this is, and I wonder if it's because as a young person growing up, you've always had to have the answers for your family. As a translator, as a hard-working student, as whatever, you had to plan your life to get out of the circumstances you were born into and did not ask for or what have you. You had to pave a way, and you are doing that in your

poems and thus not inviting into the world of your art-making surprise, discovery, and honesty.

These words won't let me go. In so many of my poems, I'm writing toward an ideal version of myself: someone who has survived, endured, overcome; a version that is strong, resilient, whole. In that way, I'm perhaps trying to heal myself, or convince myself that I am healed. And while that's a narrative I would love to sell, it's just not true. If, in my poems, I insist on writing toward this unrealistic idealized self, I'm not making enough room for vulnerability or little failures or all the ugly detours that make up any journey, any triumph. I'm learning that "facing unpleasant facts" doesn't only mean recounting difficult memories. It also means facing a mirror and coming to terms with the ways I have set up roadblocks for myself along the way, forgiving and loving the versions of myself I am most ashamed of, and accepting the ways I am still (and will always be) surviving/healing.

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In an essay describing a meeting with Mary Karr, Terrance Hayes recalls asking her: "Do you think language is mostly like an animal or a machine?" (129). I think of language as an animal, at first: words and phrases are elusive—bats at twilight flickering in my peripheral vision, dense shadows muscling through the dark. In drafting, language must be calmed, tamed, corralled onto the page. It becomes machine-like to me in the later stages of the revision process—and here is where I am most my father's daughter: listening to the rhythms, the texture of the words, as Pop listens to an engine's hum and hiccup; isolating words, piece by piece, similar to the way (I think) Pop sees the different systems working beneath a hood. But then, once the poem nears a state of completion and I'm tinkering with the diction, sound, and syntax, "finishing" a poem is a process of rewilding: I have to ease up on my authority over language and let it be natural, dynamic, alive, creaturely.



In many ways, I am still the child reading by dim yellow lamplight, stretched out on a pile of pillows in my closet. I am the daughter crawling through my mother's garden, plucking tomatoes and eating them unwashed; the daughter snooping through my father's garage, flipping through exploded-view diagrams in car manuals. I am still the child with ears sharp and perky, eavesdropping as my parents slip from English to me into Tagalog with each other. When my poems live in a book in the world, I hope they lead to more hope. That would be nice. But most importantly, and perhaps selfishly so: whatever success or disappointment I may find down this path, I hope my love for language remains childlike—so my poems and I continue to expand and evolve, so my trust in this work never falters, so words never lose their mystery, their possibility.

**FROM THE INVENTORY OF IMAGES I CANNOT UNSEE**

## AFTER

The blackout curtain already haloed in light—  
light like a sheer, silken slip, curtain  
a dress for hemming. 2:06 PM.

A dull ache pulsing on my shoulder—  
keepsake from a graceless posture  
in sleep, I told no one in particular.  
Mouth the acrid wake of a truck  
blasting down a gravel road; head  
the thundering exhaust pipe.

Tried not to think  
of him— torso like a pontoon boat,  
broad brow jutting out over his  
crooked-rudder nose— him turning  
to flip the light, shutting my door  
with barely a glance back. Did the fact

of my immobilized body terrify him?  
I tried to remember his name, and then  
I didn't. One-night stand, I thought  
and nodded in agreement with myself.  
Light curtsied between the curtainfolds.

When I lifted the bedsheets, my legs  
looked the same. When I untwisted  
the bell-curve of my purple dress, I felt less  
strange to myself. One foot to the cold  
tile floor. Then the other. A new  
grinding in my body I couldn't locate  
or name. Right foot, I thought. Now left.

**I.**

## FROM THE INVENTORY OF IMAGES I CANNOT UNSEE

All around us the Caraballo Mountains rise and fall as if the land has breath, is still unfolding

In the equatorial heat, I kneel by my mother

and the sun smolders my neck, and behind me boys with flower chains shuffle in their sandals, they scratch their sweaty scalps, they hold their palms up: “Five pesos,” they say, “sampaguita for your dead”

From the inventory of images I cannot unsee: Ma on her knees at the foot of the overgrown grave, ripping grass and weeds

From the inventory of images I cannot unsee: boys shuffle in their sandals, chains of sampaguita looped around their wrists, and the boys’ palms, upturned, little cups rattling with coins

Once Ma told me of her paisley tattered dress, of holding my uncle’s hand, the one with the wide-set eyes and doughy smile, while their seven siblings played Treasure Hunt in the dump

told me of their mother with her palm-leaf basket, my Lola and her loot: mendable clothes, battery-powered alarm clock, spatula, half-empty shampoo bottle, spiral notebook, sewing kit

From the inventory of images I cannot unsee: potbellied toddler in a rusted wagon, his long-limbed sister pulling him over the rubble of soda bags and straws and cigarette butts scattered on the roadside, while she scavenged

and the old woman selling vegetables, fanning herself with her pamaypay beneath the shade of a wide umbrella—I watch her give the girl her fattest eggplant, her most golden pineapple, I watch her shoo them away

Once I couldn’t sleep, found Ma on the living room couch, rubbing her temples in the dark; I was small enough to curl my body in the warm nest of her lap and she called me her anak; I closed my eyes, and she cried quietly into my hair

From the inventory: my Lola's windworn grave, her name carved so lightly it is almost a whisper

Once my mother cried into my tangled hair, and when I fell asleep, I dreamt of blue-gold rain

From the inventory: my Lola's only picture—white cotton dress skimming her shoulders, the camera's flash in her glasses

All around the Caraballo Mountains swell as if the first gods skipped rocks across the earth's surface, rippling the grassy fields

Ma kneels at the foot of the grave, bloodies her hands on the overgrown grass, pulling, pulling

From the inventory: my Lola dies, and across the ocean, my mother cries into my hair

and twenty years of mountain wind shaves my Lola's name from her gravestone

Once Ma rushed to a taxi, Quezon City traffic already thrumming

and my Lola heaved Ma's luggage into the trunk, my Lola kissed her forehead

my Lola waved from the rusted iron gate of their house until the taxi was lost in a stream of jeepneys, tricycles, motorbikes

until the stream of traffic became an ocean, until the ocean surged between

and my Lola still waves—in a white cotton dress, on a distant shore

Once I saw the house Ma grew up in: water closet with hole sawed into the floorboards, shed out back where they locked up the rice

the duende's bower where they whispered to the trickster, tabi-tabi po

room with the thatched roof where they all slept beneath the same mosquito net

its folds shifting lightly in wind, diamond-lined if the moon was fat and ripe and sat just right

From the inventory: boys peddling chains of sampaguita, they watch as my mother kneels at the grave for the first time, as she bows to the windworn stone, and bows and bows

and the boys, they scratch their heads, look sideways at each other and shuffle in their sandals, they leave

Once Ma's paisley dress hung by a window to dry, where it billowed like a disembodied wing

From the inventory: I kneel by my mother in a graveyard and she wails in Ilocano, calls for mommy-ko, mommy-ko

we slice our palms on sunbleached grass, gather by the fistful and pull

and when we finish, she says mommy-ko, mommy-ko, until she runs out of breath

## THE BABAYLAN TAKES MY BROTHER'S BLOOD

—i.

Once Lola chased him  
down a slender path  
between the rice fields. One moment  
Kuya racing  
around the corner

and the next, Lola with teeth  
bared, hissing—  
swept him up  
with one arm,  
tore the yellow-bellied snake  
from his ankle where  
its fangs had drawn blood.

Snake's body  
a tornado, furious  
around the storm-eye  
of her fist:  
one moment, its head  
twisting beneath her heel,  
and the next,  
limp.

—ii.

From the babaylan's hut  
nestled on the mountaintop,  
the rice paddies below  
flickered, a quilt  
of square mirrors knitted  
with grass-green thread.

Lola coiled the still-warm  
snake by the bare feet



of the babaylan—silver-eyed shaman,  
withered as a sun-dried corpse.  
Lola pinned Kuya's arms  
to the ground while the babaylan  
held his ankles—he writhed,  
wild, body like a wrung rag  
with each turn  
of his torso.

The babaylan latched onto his leg—  
sucked and spat blood, spat green,  
chewed herbs  
and spat them on the wound.  
Lola cinched leaves  
around his calf.

All night, it seethed  
beneath the bandage—  
the pale, puckered holes  
like white-hot embers.  
Kuya dreamt himself a skinned snake,  
steaming on a stone  
over fire in the babaylan's hut,  
dreamt green, tasted  
vinegar, dreamt himself  
wound around her neck,

woke with Lola asleep by his bed,  
her head tipped back,  
moonlight tracing  
the curve of her throat.  
Kuya tongued the edges  
of his teeth, nervous—eager—

had they always been so sharp?

**AUDIO LETTER ADDRESSED TO MY MOTHER:  
NUEVA VIZCAYA, PHILIPPINES TO MISSOURI, USA, 1987**

Buried between letters from my dead grandmother,  
tea-stain yellow postcards, pictures from her homeland,  
I found a tape: cloudy plastic encasing a dusty magnetic strip,  
jagged-toothed reels of its compact anatomy. On it, a voice  
I didn't recognize, a woman who wheezed as she breathed,  
who spoke my parent's language—those words

I felt my way through as if in a dark room, words  
strange and familiar as the faces in the photos. My mother's  
expression inscrutable when she held it: she breathed  
out slowly, studied the cassette like a distant land's  
relic, turning it over and over. When the voice  
crackled through the old speakers again, I stripped

the sentences to pieces I could recognize, but the dull strip  
of the tape's misty whine made every other word  
sound far away. Ma strained to untie Lola's voice  
from the background noise: nag-iisa, alone; nanay, mother.  
Mabuti, fine—my father and siblings—since Ma had landed  
in the States. A long pause. There was longing in the breath

my Lola held, the low whistling away of it; she breathed  
in again, and I did too, held her silence in my lungs. Stripped  
of any chance to know her, I barely remembered the land-  
line phone calls—she spoke of weather, of work, no word  
of the sickness that had struck until it was too late, knowing Ma  
couldn't afford a ticket home. Ma told me of her voice—

how it could topple a mountain or a man, sometimes a voice  
like warm milk, until the fieldwork clotted her breath,  
knotted up her chest. *I've never seen my mother's*  
*grave*, Ma said, and I saw her as if for the first time: stripped  
away from her country, speaking foreign words,  
the years edging softness from her cheeks, in a land

she'd learned to call home. *You'll graduate, anak, and land a job, your paycheck will fly your children to you*—Lola's voice cut in and out, a handwritten letter blotted by rain, each word more muffled than the last as the tape wound to a close. Ma's breath caught at the last utterance, a blessing she wouldn't translate. The strip stopped, the stereo hushed and halted, and my mother

didn't speak. Decades-old keeper of Lola's voice, her breath— if only I could transcribe every word, line with gold the magnetic strip, this piece of our homeland, if I could archive our mother tongue.

## FIRST PAYCHECK, FIRST PIZZA

Pop preferred the unequivocal language of stop signs and turn signals, lifting two fingers from the wheel to greet a passing driver, the immediacy of tips—those strange little-somethings-extra: crumpled dollars like abandoned origami and handfuls of change he saved for Ma's garage sale money, for a soft pack of smokes for them to indulge.

With his first American paycheck warming his back pocket, he straightened his hat and entered the one-bedroom apartment. Peeled off his work shirt for Ma to wash in the sink, her rough knuckles kneading the fabric like dough. He set a pizza in the kitchen counter, unveiled it.

But this was before the kids had started school with white children, before they saw cafeteria trays—grill-marked hot dogs, fries glistening with salt and oil—before they learned their homemade lunches looked and smelled like “dead dog”—

Pop couldn't blame his daughter, who sniffed the strange grease-pocked circle steaming on the table and poked the crust; couldn't blame Ma, who plucked a pepperoni, considered it, and pursed her lips; or his boy, who pinched a piece of melted cheese, mortified as it stretched like skin from an elbow before snapping off, how he massaged it between thumb and pointer, studied it like an artifact, asked if he should heat up the rice.

## REUNION WITH RAIN AND RADIO

—i.

Rain swells Naga Street, muddles edges of the dirt road,  
floats a pair of sandals, plastic bottles, in a ditch,

skates the long backs of coconut leaves and dangles  
from their tips like bright jewels. Rain drums steel roofs,

aerial rivers slanting from eaves and rusted gutters.  
Rain spills from awnings left open like cupped palms.

The door of Auntie's house, wide open, waiting;  
her silhouette curtains the lean yellow light as she rushes

out, a large pink umbrella blossoming overhead.  
Rain stutters on the windshield. Auntie at the door

holding Ma's hand as she descends from the car,  
holding Ma's hand down the dirt path to the house—

*Twenty years, Manang, twenty years.* Rain wrung  
from the hem of Auntie's blue dress.

Inside, she holds a plastic bucket of water, a clean rag,  
isopropyl alcohol like an offering. She washes Ma's feet—

*Tomorrow I will wash your shoes,* she says.

—ii.

At the breakfast table, Uncle fiddles with his radio—  
his toothless smile, a black wedge. Ma dishes his rice,

rakes hair-thin bones from his fish, takes the water jug  
from his jittery hands and pours him a tall glass.

Uncle twists the tuner knob, fumbles headphones  
over his button ears. Later, Ma kneels by his rocking chair,

hand pressed between his winged shoulder blades.  
He's muttering in Ilocano about the radio's

shattered face and snapped antenna in his lap,  
batteries scattered at his feet like dead roaches.

The chair's crescent legs creak, bent wood glancing  
the floor, a faulty metronome. He pulls his hand

from hers, turns away. *You remember me, don't you?*  
she says. Presses her palm flat to her chest.

His eyebrows quiver. He studies her wrinkled forehead.  
His mouth sags open, hovers around a word, and shuts.

## SUPPOSE THE ASWANG

*If a woman. If a lovely, lonely woman living on the outskirts of the village. If a mother. If your neighbor. If a healer. If muted and inscrutable in the way she regards. If black irises bearing your inverted image. If bloodshot. If shy. If the babaylan's hintura oil trembles in its glass vial. If soundless in movement. If a sound like a stuttered tik-tik in the trees—the further it seems to shake through the leaves, then the nearer she is.*

One hand petal-bent around the cucumber, Ma carves a white-bellied snake, a two-toned ribbon; cuts coins into a bowl of vinegar, dusts with salt. Moisture pearls on the flesh. *Eat*, she says. Lifts a limp peel to her mouth. It hangs between her lips like a tongue.

## INHERITANCE

*The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, a.k.a. St. Louis World's Fair, featured a Filipino "living exhibit": "a 47-acre site that for seven months... became home to more than 1,000 Filipinos from at least ten different ethnic groups. The biggest crowd-drawers were the so-called primitive tribes—especially the Igorots, whose appeal lay in their custom of eating dogs."*

—Greg Allen, NPR

Ancestral blood. Anxious tics in my right eye. Anthem I never learned. Broad forehead. Callused hands, or a preference for work that grows them. Colonial rapist blood. Dual tongues. Dueling tongues. Dogtown. Errata. Fried fish slickening a paper towel. Feeling of general uneasiness. Ghosts in my peripheral. Hindi sapat ang isang wika lamang. Igorots dining on dogs. Juice from the betel nut staining my teeth. Kuya's ESL classes: *The hardest part was learning to soften the tongue.* Lexicon of slurs. Little brown brothers. Matigas ang ulo. Mother I love most from a distance. Mexico of Asia. Neither here nor there. Nation misplaced. Offensive smells from the kitchen. Pinoy nose. Primitive people. Quivering yolks of fried eggs. Quiet daughter. Rain scattered from an umbrella snapped shut. Sister craving fried Spam and soggy white bread. Sister sunning her brown legs on the deck. Strategic location. Tactical advantage. Tilled rice field. Translator since birth. Uncitizen. Very amiable. War brothers. Willing people. Xenophilic gaze. Year of the dog. Year of the Igorot. Yes-Man. Zoo of the captured. Zoo the carnivorous. Zoo of manifest destiny.



## **DRIVEWAY**

By the ninth day, the gravel driveway  
remains unmoved, each stone enduring its own  
separate cold, and a web of snow hardens  
in the space between. A tall, stripped tree shivers  
overhead, its shadow withdrawing as the sun banks  
from one end of the street to the other.

From your open window, you look for your father's  
rusted Chevy. You grip your elbows in the chill.

By the twelfth day, still no sound of shifting gravel.

The tree's dark ghost dials across the space where  
his truck is not. The room where you sleep is so cold,  
frostbit wind rustling the curtains, air sharp as glass;  
below your window, rocks still shoved aside,  
driveway still cleaved by indentations his tires left.

You grip your elbows in the cold. From your open window  
you listen for the sound of his tires in the driveway.

You look for something that might look back for you.

And then you don't anymore.

## AMONG MEN

You might've thought her mid-prayer  
    the way my mother stood, rooted  
to the cold concrete stoop, head down,  
    hands folding and unfolding  
as she breathed into them,  
    coaxing the chill  
from rough fingers, a sound like leaves  
    disturbed in their clasping,  
in their letting go.

She was listening  
    with her back to the foggy glass door:  
behind it, two men traded words—  
    one pleading, the other  
snarling—until something passed  
    between them, a sudden  
recognition that stiffened  
    them silent. Each regarded  
the other with quiet calculation  
    until it spilled  
over, a chemical fury, feral  
    and unyielding—and then  
she probably was grappling for grace,  
    a benediction: litany of apologies,  
appeals for understanding,  
    muttering, *Lord, look away.*

She stood unflinching  
    with each dull crack  
as Pop remapped  
    the other man's face—  
made a river of his nose,  
    raised mountains on his brow line,  
let blue-black contusions  
    pool the length of his jaw.  
When he opened the door,  
    the dank odor of wet caverns

and the other man's whimpers  
seeped out from behind him.  
Pop pulled a grease-pocked  
shop rag from his pocket,  
wrapped his knuckles  
and they drove home in silence.  
My mother rolled her window down  
and let the frigid wind  
lift the penny-slick scent  
of blood from Pop's shirt.

Be honest: do you pity  
the man I once called uncle,  
who lived in our basement  
his first few months in the States,  
who spent evenings to my left  
at our dinner table, belly-laughing  
with stories of strange cousins,  
of his and Pop's far-flung siblings,  
who passed me chopped tomatoes  
in patis with a pungent smile,  
who always sat too close?

Don't. A soak in salt  
water will tease blood  
from the threads of his clothes  
and his rip-raw face  
will heal. But the girl—  
so young she did not yet know  
the word for what he did—  
a doll-sized piece of her  
will never be clean again, will never  
sit still in her chest, will never  
not be eight years old.

**II.**

1999

It was the year of false flowers and decorative fruit  
arranged on the shelf at the end of the hall  
above a wood-framed mirror, waxy stems  
and painted polyester petals, year I plucked  
plastic grapes and chewed them—dusty violet  
bulbs squeaking between my teeth—before  
suctioning them to the glass, where they left  
little pocked kiss marks. It was the year “every mirror  
in the house” was added to my list of daily chores,  
the year Kuya obsessed over *Candyman*  
and locked me in the bathroom, whispered the name  
five times through the crack beneath the door,  
year I wiped every mirror in the house  
with my eyes shut tight. Year of Pokémon collections  
displayed in zip-up Five Star binders, their holographic  
shimmer in plastic sheaths, year of little auctioneers  
trading cards at recess beneath a set of monkey bars  
that spindled through the air and touched  
back down like an arced spider’s web,  
a metal-worked turtle shell, year Jordan Jones  
packed a pistol in his backpack and showed it off  
at morning recess, year he was gone  
by lunchtime.

It is 2020 and I haven’t seen Jordan Jones  
until today, when his name surfaced in my mind  
like something dislodged from the bottom of a lake  
and floating toward the light. I looked him up:  
blond hair shaved to a whisper from his scalp,  
a woman and a little girl in a few of the cover photos,  
then just the girl, then no girl. Education: “missouri  
eastern correctional center.” Bio: “if it ain’t white,  
it ain’t right.” He’s maybe 16 in his earliest  
profile picture—the camera lens captured him  
slantwise, candid: he’s looking up, cigarette smoke  
threading from his mouth, hands gripping  
a video game controller, bearing that same  
heavy-lidded glare, irises a shock of green

in the photo's flash—

It was 1999

when Mrs. Henry, our teacher, did not try to hide  
her snot-bubble nose chafed raw from the bathroom's  
single-ply toilet tissue, for that was the year  
of Columbine, of metal detectors, of Manson,  
of blue hair and black nail panic. It was the year  
Jordan wore the same shirt every day,  
when he lived in the house at the edge  
of the neighborhood with broken yellow shutters  
half-hung to the window frames, year he stole  
his dad's unloaded gun and was expelled,  
year of a beating so bad we heard it down the block.  
It was 1999 and we still had phonebooks then—  
I stacked them in a chair, pushed my makeshift  
stepladder to the hall closet, shoved blankets  
and empty shoeboxes, and found Pop's pistol  
in the farthest corner, tucked inside a leather holster.  
In 1999, I learned it was heavier than I'd imagined,  
and cold, and that I couldn't see the bullets,  
even when I investigated its hollow throat  
with one keen, open eye, and that when I shook it  
back and forth, nothing rattled or sloshed around,  
and that if I put both pointer fingers on the trigger  
and pulled, it wouldn't shoot because it was 1999,  
and I hadn't yet learned how to switch the safety off.  
I gripped it like they did in movies, wrapped both hands  
around the base and swiveled around, teetering  
on the phonebooks. I pointed the barrel down the hall  
to the mirror, squinted over the notched sights and aimed  
at the girl glaring back—crooked bangs splayed across  
her forehead, toes curled around the yellow pages.  
I said, "Candyman, Candyman, Candyman,"  
and flicked my wrists to tip the muzzle up, feigned  
the gun's sharp kick as each syllable shot  
from my lips: "Bang," I said. "Bang, bang.  
You're dead.           And you.           And you."

## MANANANGGAL

*In Filipino mythology, a woman who transforms into a vampire-like monster at night.*

Garlic skin litters the kitchen counter,  
paper-thin and brittle. Ma hung a string  
of bulbs from a nail in the window frame.  
*To keep away the manananggal, she said.*  
Cloves shrivel when exposed, sun-bruise to brown.  
When they rot she hangs more. I never  
noticed the odor, pungent cloud swelling  
in the kitchen, I guess because I grew up  
with it, I guess because it smelled like home—  
never noticed until my neighbor scrunched  
her nose, pointed to the wreath in the window:  
I wrestled with the frame ‘til it groaned open.  
Wind-whipped curtains lifted the feather-peels  
and pressed them into the folds of my shirt.

///

Kuya held me by the neck of my shirt,  
told me what she does at night—the mother  
whose body divides at the waist—how her torso  
sprouts wings, flies like a bat, how the tongue  
elongates, thread-thin and vile, finds a crack  
in the wall and pierces the slumped body.

He said she likes the young—they sleep longer,  
dream heavier, have skin smoother than still  
water. He said she’ll eat the budding hearts  
of unborn babies curled in their mama’s  
wombs, said I would barely feel her needle-  
tongue’s prick, a tiny peck, a goodnight kiss.

I sobbed. He unclamped my hands from my ears,  
hissing her name three times like a curse.

///

She would hiss the rule three times like a curse:  
*Those streetlights come on, you better come home.*

Some nights I'd sneak in after dark, bare feet  
blackened by asphalt, my fingers pinched red  
by crawdads. Ma would take both hands and slap  
them with the wire end of a flyswatter.

*I'll just let the manananggal eat you.*  
*She likes little girls.* I'd scramble to my room,

hands searing, and at night I would sleep prone,  
flat on my stomach, head beneath the sheets,  
listening to cicadas thrum their summer  
songs in the air. I knew what to look for:

beat of wings, a blackened window, shadow  
like a sheet of starlings turning in the sky.

///

A sheet of starlings unfurling above—  
proboscis tongue slithering over folds  
in my quilt—  
I'd gasp awake, heart beating  
somewhere in my stomach, sweating through  
my nightshirt. Soon as I let out a sound,  
Ma came as if she'd been waiting for it.  
If I asked, she'd take a bulb of garlic  
from the kitchen, set it by my window.

*Don't let your brother tease you, my anak,*  
*she'd say, and besides: the manananggal*  
*can't fly across the whole ocean.*

So wise,  
my Ma—she'd hum in her honeyest voice,  
rub my shoulders 'til I'd forget she was  
there, telling stories of her mother.

///



Before she passed, Lola finished the story:  
the manananggal cannot die until  
she gives the curse away—a small black chick  
clogging her throat. To kill her you must find  
the severed flesh of her lower body,  
wherever she left it, and sprinkle it  
with salt, vinegar, drops of holy water.

When she returns, the two halves refuse  
to merge back to her human form. She will  
suffer, roasting in the sunlight, smooth skin  
blistering, and the cursed black chick will rise  
like bile, shrieking from the nest of her neck.  
Even dying, she is beautiful, even  
as she turns to ash and her wet eyes dull.

///

*You'd watch me turn to ash? Watch my eyes roll  
back?* Ma jokes over the phone when I call,  
all dark humor and guilt-trip. Decades grown  
from Kuya's torturous teasing, I still  
peel garlic cloves, pop them like medicine  
to ward off the witch. I chew through the spice,  
chase it with a spoon of maple syrup.

*Only women become manananggal,  
Ma says, passed through the family, mothers to  
their daughters. You have to choose it—her curse.  
You lean down, as if to kiss. She exhales.  
You inhale.*

Ma stops, waits for me to speak.

I feel it in my throat: warm, eager. I see  
my mother's face: like water over stones.

///

Ma with that face like water over stones:  
    you see her looking back from the mirror.  
Her skin ashen, wrinkled. Her dark eyes dull.

She lives in the cavity of your chest  
    telling the same stories about her mother—  
your Lola, estuary: you, blood-knit,  
    a sheet of starlings turning in the sky.

What you'd give to bring her here, to summon  
    her by name, to love her into being,  
even kiss her blackening throat. One day

you might cradle a girl in the folds of your shirt,  
    carry her on your hip from room to room.  
Might sweep garlic skin from the kitchen counter,  
    blow it from your palm, watch her watch it fall.

## MARIA LABÓ ADDRESSES HER HUSBAND

*The Filipino urban legend of Maria Labó arose in the late 1990s: she was assaulted and gang-raped while working abroad. Upon her return, she killed, cooked, and ate her son and daughter, perhaps driven by insanity or, as some versions suggest, the curse of being an aswang. After burying what remained of their children, Maria's husband discovered her crying over their graves: he tried to kill her with a machete but only managed to wound her—a slash across her face—before she escaped.*

How could I have known he'd watch me enter the shop as I lifted the hem of my skirt / ascended the stairs & passed through glass doors / that he'd flick his thick tongue across cracked lips at the thought of my knobby bird ankles / that he'd skulk behind like a cursed shadow / as I hummed the children's lullaby on my way home // Should've turned from that narrow empty street / where spongy weeds festering the sidewalk muffled his shoes / the dirt he kicked up / where the sun's descent stretched the shadows & I found myself in the darkest one / while my evening's purchases scattered to the far side of the quiet road // Some men take because they can / my mahal / & I was only sinew & meat / wet mouth / warm thighs / & they were yellow snake-eyes that watched / unblinking at first / & / then // I'll never know how long I lay there before returning to this splintered body an echo / a new black song thrumming my fist-sized heart / nothing wet left inside me // I straightened my ripped skirt like a bedspread / wiped blood & spit from my bruised chin / each step like stones in my shoes // & every night after a thousand voices / shrill whispers in empty halls / summoned me to the milky light of our children's bedroom where I stood over them / wringing my hands & watching them breathe / stood over them / sometimes rocking sometimes still / stood over them / gnashing my teeth to the pulpy roots // Whose blood was it I smelled / staining their tiny toy smiles / their wide fisheyes / the delicate lunula of their ricepaper nails // A wailing song trilled so loud I thought it would burst my glass throat open / red-winged bird unfurling from a tree / I tasted bile / I wanted more // Mahal / if not I then who else would save them from this bloody evolution / my son a split-tongued serpent / your daughter alone on the wrong empty street // What kind of mother would I be if I didn't beckon them back from the world I bore them into / stir them from their beds / & steer them yawning into the yard / what kind of mother / if I didn't / drain them / roast them / return them to the harbor of my body

## EXPLODED VIEW

A decade later I still speed through familiar curves,  
let up on the gas as I approach each turn then accelerate  
around the bend, the orchestral pit of summer crickets  
filling my car with the sound of their wings, tuning.  
No speed traps this far north of town, this deep into  
the farmlands, where hills swell like high tides and spill  
open to fields of baled hay and cattle, where the road  
twists through trees crowding close enough to touch  
from my window, where deer watch from the woods' dark  
passages and lift their crowned heads with mild curiosity.  
On my left, the old brick house comes into view,  
quarter mile from the road, down the gravel driveway.  
I turn in, pass the pear trees, pass Pop's ancient S-10  
collecting bird nests in the cab, pass the neighbor's  
double-wide just beyond the fence—wild-haired  
Mr. Martin, what's left of his teeth yellow and slimy  
from meth and chewing tobacco, Mr. Martin who'd bathe  
outside buck naked every day when I'd come home  
from school, as if he waited for the bus to trundle along  
and for me to march up the long driveway, alone, staring  
forward while he dumped buckets of soapy water over  
himself, suds clustering around his pale, droopy penis.  
Once he said, *C'mere, girl*. Cackled as I sped into a run.  
One day I walked a beer down to Pop while he finished mowing—  
he killed the engine, stomped down from his beat-up  
tractor, face and neck reddening like rhubarb roots. The bottle  
sweated down my knuckles as I stood statue in the yard  
while he beelined to the fence, bellowing curses in two  
languages at Mr. Martin who'd taken a bucket of dog crap  
swimming in stale bathwater and tipped the sludge over  
our fence on Pop's freshly mowed grass. Another  
string of expletives, pointing down, pointing at. I heard  
my father warn, *I'm not just some \_\_\_\_\_ who'll sit down  
and let you walk all over me*, and I didn't know what to make  
of that—this ranking he invoked with his machismo strut  
and thick machinist forearms, some upper-echelon  
of lesser color, divisions within the “model minority.”

After that, Mr. Martin quit bathing outside, quit bogging our yard with his shitwater, and so I was grateful. That double-wide is empty now—sometime in the ten years since, he fucked off somewhere or died. I've never cared to find out. And today, as I inch up the driveway, I see my Pop on the front porch, a Bud Heavy in one hand and a greasy rag in the other. The garage is open, yawning, and already I catch faint whiffs of gasoline and engine exhaust, see bent nails and stripped bolts rusting in a coffee can, extension cords strung up like industrial vines, manuals stacked and dog-eared at exploded-view diagrams of an engine's interlocking parts. What would I gather from a schematic of my father, his various mechanisms suspended in relation to each other—a son, a brother, uprooted across an ocean; steel-toed work boots stinking up the house; palms like stiff leather, grease-caked cuticles; an old man who takes longer beneath the hood; old man who built a life with the junkyard scraps he was given; old man who wraps an arm around my shoulders when I step out of the car, who asks when I last changed the oil, who kisses my forehead and inhales the smell of my hair as if I am the good clean air he's been waiting ages to breathe, as if to memorize my scent, to keep what he can of me safe in his chest.

## WOMAN TRAVELING ALONE STOPS FOR GAS

in a rural town in northern Illinois,  
and all four heads turn—the store clerk  
smoking outside the locked bathroom,  
her bearded friend who looks up mid-story,  
hand still raised in some wild gesticulation,  
the two men gassing up a truck with rakes,  
shovels, garbage bags bulging in the cab,  
faded receipts discarded on the dashboard,  
smushed against the windshield.  
Insert card. Cover the pin number.  
Lift nozzle and select fuel grade.  
She cleans her windshield with  
the T-shaped sponge, scrubs away  
the splattered bug remains and bird shit,  
pulls leaves from the hoods, squeegees  
the suds with the long rubber edge  
and shakes off the excess. She has to pee  
but won't. She wants a water, some chips  
or candy, but dares not enter the store.  
The four heads have not stopped watching.  
She hears them mumbling about her tattoos,  
sees the store clerk flick a lit cigarette  
on the sidewalk; she drives her gaze  
anywhere but the two men across the lot,  
puckering their lips as they climb into the cab.  
When she pulls away from the station,  
she monitors the rearview mirror—  
the two men trundle behind her  
down the road toward the highway  
and she doesn't remember how long  
she's held this breath or that she's held  
it in at all until she turns onto the ramp  
and they swerve the other way.

## AMOR FATI

*[ and what was the distance between your apartments? ]*

One point nine miles / Thirty-six-minute walk / He would have had to cross the parking lot / with its long singular crack like the heartline in a palm / the faded yellow paint demarcating numbered spaces / He would have reached the trodden path that curved through sparse woods to the end of Henderson Street / and dug the toes of his sneakers into the dirt / leaning forward to make the uphill ascent / all this in thirteen minutes / Up Franklin to Davie Circle: nineteen minutes / From Davie to my doorstep: four minutes

*[ Why do you think the time it took is so important to you? ]*

Did his right hand tingle as he walked: / I imagine so / Did he think of the soft skin along my jaw: / I am certain / Did he know I would have woken by then and smoked my morning cigarette on the front porch / that I would have liked to let the light lean in / through the screen door / that I would have left the house unbolted / that I'd be sitting at the dining room table finishing my tea: / I am certain / Did he think of the softness of my jaw: / Did his right hand tingle: / Did it make him hard: / I am certain / I imagine so / Irrelevant, but I imagine so

*[ What happened when he came? ]*

He would pull out and come / on my stomach / He would shut his eyes so tight he seemed to forget / I was there / His mouth made such a show / of itself, all sputter and spittle above me / Primal sounds erupting from his throat / like an enormous rock rolled over the mouth of a cave / He sounded like a retching horse / It disgusted me / but / I almost always came more than twice / and we always smoked after / and didn't speak / which is how I liked it // I know this is not what you mean but it feels important: / even his ecstasy / was violent

*[ So what happened that first time? When he arrived? ]*

I was happy to see him / surprised—he walked all this way / to see me / walked thirty-six minutes to see me / I said hello / He crossed the room in three swift steps / I sat at the dining room table with my jasmine tea / And then there was no air / and the walls warped into the shape of a bell

[ ]

My eyes were open the whole time: one second / his silhouette darkening the screen door / then the creak of its hinges / Hello / And then the air ringing around me / his hand out of nowhere / my face swung sideways like a weathervane

[ ]

I blinked shades into nameable colors / I blinked colors into shapes I knew / He left as quickly as he came and said no words / I followed / I tongued a cut on the inside of my cheek where the soft / muscle had caught between my teeth / I spat copper-slick and pink / I called him names / I yelled obscenities / I stopped at the end of the driveway like a shock-collared dog who knows / the edges of her yard

[ ]

I couldn't touch myself for weeks / My clit dull as the tip of a tongue lolling / in a sleeping person's open mouth / A bruise on my chin in the shape of a tiny snow pea / My body welded shut: I touched / and touched and nothing glowed warm / nothing leaked out

*[ What do you feel when you think of him now? ]*

I palm the angle of my jaw / I run my tongue along the pink insides of my cheeks / I curl and uncurl my toes / If there is an open door within reach / I bolt it shut / I let the tea go cold / I remember / I know / I say, Look girl / Look / straight at him: / he is haunted by you too



## RITUAL

The window-blinds' ribboned shadow  
shifts across the floor.        You lean forward  
from the couch cushions, eyes settling  
to attention        on the television where a plot  
respools its mystery and your interest  
in it deepens.        You read your watch and then  
wonder about the time, roll your chin  
shoulder to shoulder in sinusoidal curves  
after your neck        re-cricks itself.  
You swallow a deep sigh

and place the metal tray on your lap.  
Two summer-blue lines,        the mushroom-  
topped pill-crusher's    smooth unwind,  
tablets clattering back into a bottle.  
A coffee mug of whiskey    which you    refill  
in tiny amber sips.    The TV shudders  
from picture    to static        to your reflection  
in the dark screen.        Observed in a particular  
light, one might mistake        your trembling  
for uncertainty—        chewing false promises  
into the frayed ends of your hair,        studying  
the mounds of your kneecaps,        the tiny maps  
in your palms,        negotiating with your hands.

## PORTRAIT OF AN ADDICT WITH TWO SPOONS

How many evenings wreathed in    silence watching  
the pot-bellied moon            undress  
Two spoons to crush how many            30mg pills  
their separate sheens    chalked like mothwings  
All those pearly minutes    swooned past the window  
I had grown to love    that grapeskin-bitter drip  
in my nose    I'd grown into the tiny armhairs  
of those couch cushions    How sweet to dissolve  
to diffuse    into untouchable    a trillion electrons  
orbiting all my ruby nuclei    Slumped on the cold  
hardwood floor    leaning against the unmade bed  
I'd lost the gravity            of knees  
I'd found a mirror but all I saw            was gold-laced light  
all I saw sizzled            like white noise

and now each passing hour    is a long stubborn winter  
wool socks damp and stiffening    curled into  
my smallest bed-bug self    I dig frosted spoons  
from the freezer to unswell            my eyes  
lashprints on the curved backs    like tiny clipped wings  
Each hour wrings me dry    Incessant hands clang  
around my watch's dial    If I clench my fists I know  
I'm still here    if I chew my wrists I know    I am still  
here    Saw a speck beneath my fingernail    tried to lift it  
with pliers had to    get that sucker out  
My last two pills ring like bells    in a cellophane wrapper  
ghosted from an empty            cigarette pack  
Who'd know    if just one more            and that's it,    that's all

Even the moon            has put her darkest clothes back on    and left

## EVOLUTION

I woke past noon uncertain if it was Saturday  
or Sunday or if I'd missed my Monday classes.  
Dress sideslung, zipper tracing sternum to hip.  
Pillows on the cold tile floor. Bra half-hooked,  
panties somewhere. New bruise bluing my shoulder  
where his thumb had commanded. A delicate  
tension in my jaw. *Et cetera, et cetera.*

I have since learned some species of female ducks  
have developed a coiled vaginal canal with dead-  
ends, detours, that some are even *barbed*—evolved  
to defend from male ducks, whose penises spiral into  
corkscrews, from a nub to the length of a man's. Amazing,  
isn't it, the lengths to which a body will go—but then  
the males develop their own anatomical response,  
*and so on and so forth.*

## STUDIES SHOW

*a correlation between sexual abuse and addiction. Coping mechanism, they say, distraction from isolation.* This is why, I am told, I once cupped pills like afternoon rain, swallowed them like vitamins or crushed them into a fine powder. “Deserve” is so easy to manufacture for almost anything we take into our bodies—mango mochi, benedictions, sunlight flaring off a river, a ribbon of cigarette smoke.

//

Ask me how it feels to be a stat: petri-dished, preventable. Ask me how she haunts, how she stares from every mirror, puddled girl I was before: jaw-sore, repentant. Studies show a path to recovery is a path to reorient the spiritual self. Bring me the good virgin, riverblue robes backlit and sublime, her soft hands templed. Let me look her eye to eye. Let her ask me how I pray.

//

Once a man said, *Isn't it big?* and shoved me down. Once I exhaled deep enough to turn my lungs inside-out before bowing to a line of triturated pills. Once a voice said, *Can you take the whole thing in?* Once I lifted my head and was in a new world, violent and tight-fisted, new world like a mildewed basement with an inexplicable hum and stale light. Once I thought the only world was this.

## CLEAN

Trust that there exists a version of you  
who has set her alarm for seven a.m.  
and wakes to it who remembers to floss  
to sweep tangles from her hair root to tip  
with a wide-toothed comb before she leaves  
the house that there exists a version  
who leaves the house Trust  
the sober tidy version who makes her bed  
keeps her appointments calls her mother  
Trust this version who trusts her therapist  
when her therapist says *There are better ways*  
*to be* Trust her who digs from the closet  
a mute-gold bottle plastic walls rattling with the last  
of her dull blue pills who lines them up in her palm  
and names each one *No Thank You*  
watches them swirl down the kitchen drain  
Believe you will find your way back home  
the porch light expectant thrumming through  
the night pinging softly with the sound of June  
bugs Believe in this version who coos  
her cravings to sleep like a sick child  
the one who scrubs the dusty residue  
of crushed pills from the coffee table  
from the kitchen counter from the nightstand  
Be this version the one who sees  
a mirror and doesn't turn away

**III.**

## WOMAN TRAVELING ALONE CHECKS INTO HER CHEAP HOTEL ROOM

hooks the laminated DO NOT DISTURB  
sign around the worn brass handle,  
bolts and chains the door, fixes  
one eye to the peephole and peers  
through the fishbowed glass  
at the dizzying 70s-style carpet pattern.  
She circles the room and flips on  
every lamp, filaments humming  
to attention—little faculae, little suns.  
Next, the curtains: she shoos light from  
the folds with a sweep of the pull rod.  
At the bed, she grasps the stiff comforter  
and waves it like a parachute, flips  
each pillow—no off-color stains  
of questionable origins, no bedbugs.  
Lifts a towel from the shelf above the toilet  
and tucks its corners behind the frame  
of the mirror hung above the dresser.  
Certain she's alone in the dim lamplight  
with only the TV's pixelated buzzing,  
she shuffles around the room in  
loose panties and an oversized shirt.  
Plucks soft fuzz above her upper lip,  
thick hairs outside her eyebrows.  
Orders a cheese pizza and signs  
the bill with the door chained.  
Smooths a creamy sheet mask over  
her nose and cheeks and lounges  
starfished on the bed, a pillow under  
each flopped-out limb. She loves her body  
most when no one else is there  
to stare, when everything her skin  
touches is starched sheets and cold air  
churning from the guttural belly  
of the slatted machine beneath  
the window. Certain she's alone,  
she sleeps diagonally, claims every

corner—naked nipples shocked  
hard toward the dappled popcorn  
ceiling, belly bluing in the light  
of the digital alarm clock. In a bed  
big enough for two, she is twin,  
full, king, and queen. Every corner  
is her country. But even in sleep,  
the knot in her chest won't slacken,  
will never sag or unspool—even  
in sleep, she shrinks toward the center  
of her body, a star gasping into  
itself, one forearm cradling both  
breasts, her fists forever clenched,  
and when she startles at the sound  
of footsteps echoing down the hotel  
hall, there is no elegant ease into  
consciousness, no luxurious morning  
stretch, but the swift whip of her head  
toward the door, dreading a shadow.  
It's only paranoia until it's not.



## WOMAN TRAVELING ALONE GETS LOST

in a city whose language  
she does not speak,  
a country that measures  
distances in unfamiliar  
terms. The view from  
the jeepney's window  
grows stranger and stranger  
with shops she's never  
seen, street signs she can't  
pronounce, combinations  
of consonants she can't  
fathom her mouth around.  
At this point she'll have to  
flag down a cab. At this point  
her gut is draining into  
a well deep inside her body  
in that way that's so familiar  
it almost feels safe—  
she steps off the jeep onto  
a bustling street, slinks  
into the crowd and walks  
whatever direction it seems  
to lead, lets herself  
be lost a while.

**PSALM FOR PHOTOS ON ZOË KRAVITZ'S INSTAGRAM AND THE BUSTED-UP WATERMELON BETWEEN HER LEGS THAT BROUGHT ME CLOSER TO GOD**

Lord, if you're up there, bless  
the floral-print chiffon shirt  
gathered in a sultry, tuggable knot  
just below her breasts. Bless  
the left one's half-moon inner curve  
jutting out between the folds,  
and bless her bare shoulder where  
thin cloth slipped off, let light kiss  
each dark mole that constellates  
the shelf of her collarbone. Most of all,  
bless the smashed watermelon  
wetting the ground between her  
and the camera, one chunk blurred  
in the foreground and a twinned split  
half nestled between her inner thighs—  
her left hand inviting a finger-  
sized piece toward her parted lips—

Bless me, O holy whoever, for I'd give  
anything to be that battered melon  
in all its shattered softness,  
red and pulpy and giving to wherever,  
whatever she wants, if she'd have me:  
I'd be that piece, pinched and lifted  
toward her mouth, I'd be the half-eaten  
wedge beside the arch of her foot,  
I'd be the pink juice puddling  
the floor beneath her smooth, perfect knee—  
whoever you are, if you're out there,  
make me the hole her thumb carves  
in the fruit's fibrous flesh, make me  
that sacrosanct space, let me wet,  
let me woman, let me be  
broken open and devoured.

## ON DISCOVERING MY PARTNER'S PORNOGRAPHY

Who wouldn't steal a second  
glance—your phone screen  
blinking open like a solitary eye  
startled in the night while I lifted it  
from the armrest to the coffee table,  
draped a fleece blanket over your knees  
as you snored, whiskey-limp, slack-jawed  
in your recliner, and there it was—  
a hard brown nipple poking between  
two manicured fingers—who'd resist  
a quick scroll, your head lolling from one  
shoulder to the other—I only meant to verify  
the sight: a dozen or so women, milk-white  
skin and teeth, some squishing their apple-  
tight breasts into swollen mounds, some  
hinging at the hips and burying three  
fingers in the slick cavity between  
thin thighs, all of them skinny with neatly  
shaved pussies, supple limbs, one so sacred  
with the altar of another's collarbone  
she might as well be in confession.  
Listen: I saw. I scrolled. I set your phone  
back down. Tucked the blanket around  
your shoulders and let you sleep. I get it—  
I, too, have drawn my tongue down a woman  
and dreamt about it after. I, too, have disappeared  
from our bed with you on top and imagined  
a different kind of body. We have so much  
in common—not least when we come  
together, blasted apart in that prism  
of untamable colors, a sudden intrusion  
of light. Where do you go when you close  
your eyes, gasping, above me? O darling,  
O only—I've never seen someone so  
completely and not loved them a little less.

## NOTES ON MY BODY IN THE SHOWER

Ankle stinging from the razor's sharp bite. Breathing to a count. Callused feet and crooked toes. Clay-brown nipples. Darling fat of inner thigh. Downy hairs above my upper lip. Each ear its own whorled chamber. Each tattoo its own winding narrative. Exhaling to a count. Fallen arches. Fact of the body, its excess and absences. Groin shaved smooth. Hair slick with conditioner. Hair to clog the drain. Hips thickened into womanhood. Irreverent posture. Inexplicable bruise. Jaw that pops unexpectedly. Knobby knees. Lucky scar. Mouth I open when I love. Musty armpit. Neck I flaunt, its arcs and hollows. Oily skin. Ordinary elbows. Pillow-chested. Quizzical look. Resting bitch face. Suds between my toes. Suds behind my ears. Thinning hair. Thick thighs. Usual stiffness in my lower back. Usual crick in my wrist. Velvety. Voluptuous. Worn-out body. Wrung-out body. Xylophone ribs. Yolk-tender tummy. Zig zag limbs. Zipper tongue.

## I WANT A MYTH ABOUT A QUEER, BROWN HELEN

threading her nimble piano fingers  
through tangles in her raven hair

as she reclines, naked on a rose-gold  
chaise lounge beneath a buoyant canopy

of silk. I want a myth in which a harem  
of middle-aged white women—guilty of clutching

their knock-off Gucci purses, of letting trigger-fingers  
hover over 9-1-1 at the sight of dark-skinned man

minding his business on the same sidewalk,  
guilty of saying “*I don’t mind gay people,*

*I just don’t want to see them \_\_\_\_\_, you know?”*  
—give me a myth in which they spoon-feed Helen

avocado that glistens with granules of sugar,  
in which they bathe her, fluff and adjust her throw

pillows. I want a myth in which mortals weep over  
the deep, velvety hues of her neck, over the rhythmic

moontide of her hips as she strolls,  
and wage bloody wars for her affection

while she watches them riot and gut  
each other from her impregnable tower,

amused and, eventually, bored.  
I want a Moroccan Procne, Eurydice

of Senegal, Prometheus of Laos. I want  
Persephone to speak Spanish and Swahili

and play the Chinese fiddle. Give me a myth  
in which she smacks the pomegranate

from Hades' pearlescent hand and struts  
up the staircase of his dank prison,

smokes a Cuban cigar while Cerberus  
bows and whines and licks her elegant ankles

before she exits to a bright field, where Demeter  
waits with clean panties and a gilded comb.

Give me a myth about invincible Black men,  
each one of them Herculean and dripping

diamonds on the banks of the River Styx,  
where they are dipped once, twice,

three times for good measure, made titans,  
made gods, made immortal on precious scrolls

instead of scrolled past in a headline.  
Give me a myth in which a cishet

pseudo-woke *"I-just-think-everyone-should-be-allowed-  
to-say-it"* white boy with ombre dreads

lifts the lid of the Forbidden Box and a bird  
unfurls from a corner, its bright hard beak

demanding liver, lung, heart, and scrotum,  
a myth in which the box contains a mirror

and he is imprisoned in his own reflection,  
is conquered by it, infected by it, shot by it,

a myth in which, just this once, he drowns  
in his democracy and the rest of us

don't have to.

## PALINODE WITH PRAYING MANTIS IN MATING SEASON

In this version, our bodies know no touch or arch we didn't choose. We never bend for a beckoning we don't desire. Never fashion weapons out of a half empty water bottle, a charger cord, a ballpoint pen, a heavy book, while walking to our car in a parking lot. We never hold umbrellas like bats or weave keys between our knuckles.

Visiting home, we don't discover our niece a young girl, her painted toes and training bra, don't pull her chair close and look her eye to eye. We never marvel at the cloudspun baby hairs still framing her forehead as she furrows her brow, incredulous, pins her hands beneath her thighs. She never asks, *Auntie, did it happen to you?* and we never have to hold her gaze and nod.

In this version, we are inviolable. When we choose it: we creature, we wild, we moontide our hips. We throw our heads back and bare our soft throats, cup our sex in sweaty palms and know no pleasure greater than our own sweet musk. And if, god forbid, if ever: we lunge like the praying mantis, our angular head a bright green cannon, we unhinge our shrieking jaw and devour, head-first. We sit back on our six spindly legs, full and satisfied, one hand across our fat belly, and pick our teeth with unclipped fingernails.

## CATCALLED WHILE RUNNING WITH MY DOG

He leans out and puckers his lips, tongue firking  
the whiskered stubble edging his mouth with one  
elbow eager on the frame of his rolled-down  
window, tanned leathery forearm walloping  
the rust-pocked door of his ancient pick-up  
as he idles in the middle of the deserted street—  
*Goddamn baby* he says *Hello* he says *Hey babygirl*.  
And if it were any other day, if I'd been alone,  
I might've shrunk my shoulders, thrust my steeliest  
gaze forward, denied him any acknowledgement,  
but she's here with me, my pink-faced pit bull bitch  
panting near my ankles, her white and black coat  
trapping the sun. She's with me, and he's blocking  
the entrance to the parking garage, empty this time  
of day on weekends, where we usually cut through  
so she can cool her calloused paws against the shaded  
concrete. She's here, and when he hounds me, it's almost  
like she understands, intuiting the anger that smolders  
on my tongue; she snarls and snaps, ignites her pace  
as we pass the building's gated threshold, and two words  
tear so forcefully from my mouth—*Fuck off!*—  
that we're all startled—me and my pup, the old perv  
in his truck. He revs the engine and lurches off  
as our voices vault through the empty garage and rise  
behind me like a storm, arcing off the walls before  
barreling back and crashing out the entryway—  
and it's as if all my pent-up silent selves, all those  
bitches I held back, bare their teeth and bark beside me.



## ELEGY

Already I'm losing track, memories receding  
like the perfect word that skirts the mouth and fades,  
like the rot-sweet leaves falling from a maple tree

where, beneath its spangled canopy, a woman slows  
and tips her head back, looks up as if to listen,

and for a second, from the opposite street corner  
where I stand, savoring the smell of rain-wet earth  
and decomposing foliage, I mistake her for you—

pale-gold hair curling toward her chin, black petticoat,  
leather purse slung over a shoulder, papers flaring out.

She adjusts her bag and resumes walking, heading  
to her car, perhaps, or her office, oblivious  
to the false relief she'd given me, to the renewed grief

spreading in my chest like a web of hoarfrost.  
I conjure you from memory on my walk home,

remembering when I was 17, and you'd slowed  
by my desk, head tilted down, eyes fixed  
where my textbook should've been—instead,

Bishop's *Complete Poems*—how I turned red  
and shrank into the desk chair, fearing you'd scold,

confiscate the book until the end of class—I'm 29  
and looking for you beneath an orange maple,  
its chattering leaves bright as molten glass.

I swallow your name like bitter medicine  
and walk home, where I pull Rilke's *Letters* down

from the shelf, snug between Rich and Roethke,  
and open to the page where you'd signed, trace  
the swooping cursive as if I can summon you.

Someday I'll visit your grave, return the book you slid  
down the bar, saying I needed it more than you—

*Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Rilke.*

Already I'm losing track, memories a decrescendo  
of ripples, flattening into the smooth glass of a dark pond:

I'm 21 and you're ordering my first chardonnay, saying  
one day I'll grow into the good, dark reds;

24 and you're waving from a table at a busy restaurant,  
hair short, face plump—the medication rounding  
your cheeks, you tell me, while I stare up

at fluorescent light fixtures, as if their hum  
and pulse were prayer, willing my eyes to dry.

A woman slows beneath a hot-bright tree  
and I wonder what poem you turned to that day  
you lifted Bishop from my desk and nodded—

you nod from across the table in the bustling  
restaurant, while I shake my head in anger

as you tell me about the tumor, the bully in your brain,  
its blind tenacity—I look for you beneath a tree  
whose leaves shock the gray-blue sky with citrus—

and you lay the book back down on my desk  
as if to say *proceed*, as if to say *carry on*.

## PAPASYAL

she would sing, the last syllable sashaying  
from her mouth, and I thought it meant  
“auction”: that epic yard sale where we’d hear  
a sharp-tongued man’s nasally voice drumming  
through the speakers as we approached,  
turned into a gravel parking lot the size  
of a football field. We’d enter the warehouse  
and I’d beeline for the concession stand,  
where all the old ladies knew my name,  
traded me a can of Diet Coke and a fudge bar  
for my fistful of quarters. We’d pace the aisles  
between long tables weighted down with dusty  
porcelain dolls, antique clocks with gilded faces,  
accordion cameras, dull kitchen knives taped  
into the slits of their faux-wood blocks.  
I’d sit on every plastic-covered couch pushed  
flush against the walls, climb wooden doors  
stacked like decks of cards, my mouth rimmed  
with sugar, fingers leaving sticky chocolate prints.  
Decades later, I learned the root word:  
*pasyal*, to walk, as in my mother’s slow stroll  
through aisles of storage-room junk and squeaky  
bicycles; as in, her steady tread with hands  
clapsed behind the low canyon of her back,  
shoulders hunched forward as she’d drag  
her gaze from the rotary dial on a telephone  
to a pocketknife collection, pausing to sip  
her Diet Coke while lifting an object and turning  
it at eye-level, inspecting every angle; as in,  
her leaving me alone to roam among strangers  
while I imagined past lives for everything  
anyone touched: a lifetime of dinners on a chipped  
China set, an electric sewing machine with  
a block pedal, its ridges worn smooth by  
the house slipper of someone else’s mother.

## ARS POETICA IN UNCLE FELICIANO'S BREEZEWAY

Once I've finished filling the water barrels  
    for the kitchen and the outhouse, my hands  
are ripe with blisters, limp fingers curling  
    of their own accord into loose fists  
from heaving ten-gallon buckets up  
    the muddy hill behind Uncle Feliciano's house.  
He sleeps early, already retreated  
    to his loft where he lies on a thin sheet  
spread over a bedframe, arranges his sore spine  
    along slats of wood.  
In the hammock, I wait for the sound of his snores  
    to steady and pull a half-smoked cigarette  
from a pack hidden in my bra. *It is not nice*  
    *to see a woman smoking*, Uncle had said,  
so here I am, not letting him see.  
    The air is lithe-bodied and cool,  
stirring with the high trill of mosquitoes,  
    moths ambling around a bare bulb hung  
above me, our singular source of artificial light.  
    I know I am not  
my uncle's ideal guest. I am not Catholic  
    or meek or particularly domesticated.  
I do not laugh quietly or lower my face  
    when men approach. But I rise when he rises.  
When he weeds the tomatoes, I weed the peppers.  
    I take the buckets from his hands and fill  
the water barrels while he tends the goats.  
    In the afternoons, I pin our damp clothes  
to lines crisscrossing the yard—our shirts  
    billow, our inside-out pants walk the wind.  
Sinking further into the breezeway hammock, its braids  
    bristle against my skin. I fold my knees  
to my chest, square my shoulders  
    to the sky, watch the blue-gray smoke  
ribbon from the ember in my hand,  
    its graceless ripple rising toward the bulb  
still humming with light before it is

dispersed by the drifting moths.  
Upstairs, my Uncle startles in his sleep,  
and I wonder if there exists any  
moving thing that isn't forever rerouted  
toward what is luminous and warm.  
I wonder what his god whispers  
when he's alone, here in this lonely house  
atop a hill, overlooking his and my mother's childhood  
village, its latticework of dim yellow lights  
galactic and glittering. Two towering  
mango trees draw their burnished leaves  
across each other in wind, then shudder  
apart and reveal a piece of Uncle's heaven  
so flooded with stars it seems to fill and fill  
the longer I look, and I can't rest my eyes  
on one bright thing for too long, or else miss  
the dozen others digging themselves  
from the night's dark velvet. Somewhere down  
the mountainside, a motorcycle is wailing  
on a dirt path down toward paved strip of road,  
gunning through the turn. From here, it sounds  
like the hushed tide that fills the whorled  
chamber of a conch shell or the water pump's  
gurgling throat—something small I could  
press my ear against, straining to unravel  
some swirling ambient noise that,  
when I curl my fingers around a pen,  
I might put a language to.

**AT THE INFORMAL PARTICIPANTS' READING I AM DRAWN  
TO THE WAY LANGUAGE LIGHTS**

off her tongue & hers & hers to the sheer skin  
    enveloping pink-muscled lips that stretch & fold  
& collapse around each syllable hers tinted  
    coral theirs magenta others fuchsia or chapsticked or bare

I am drawn to the meticulous pause she basks in  
    a slight part & sip of breath moisture dewing  
the corners of her mouth a duo of pinholed light

around our long oval table set with popcorn  
    dark chocolate cool cans of seltzer one woman passes  
a silver flask one crosses her legs in a cushioned chair  
    & balances her notebook where her shins touch

the circle stills the circle braces the circle sighs its collective  
    sigh & gives praise & repeats phrases that echo  
that won't loosen their grip *Thank you* we say

knowing *Thank you* is not enough sunlight ripens through  
    the wall of windows casts warm angles that crane  
across the carpet & illuminate the dust  
    this hour is an estuary all shadows flood into one

saltwater dark & I find our faces in the glass perfect & glowing  
    & it's as if we've breached a liminal life  
a marginal coast where we mother & sister & daughter

    each other we rise  
to meet our barest selves our  
    barely spoken selves



## AFTER

One of me leaves footprints on the dashboard  
of her car, rests an atlas on her lap to find the next  
campsite in wherever Wyoming, left hand holding the knee  
of the man she will love;

                                  one of me splashes  
demerara syrup in the bottom of a rocks glass,  
dashes bitters, pours an eight-count of bourbon, and stirs  
over ice, sweeps the rim with oil from an orange peel  
and pushes the drink across the bar, *Four bucks*  
*and please don't call me baby;*

                                  one stumbles home late,  
clutches the arm of a friend who is laughing  
and swaying too, and sees a stranger on the sidewalk  
nearby, his penis like an unholstered weapon  
in his hand—she shouts until he scrambles into his car,  
speeds away;

                                  one surfaces from a book  
like a woman out of water, a line of poetry trickling  
down her spine—*Many things are true*  
*at once*—and she walks into another room to pace,  
opening and closing both hands to awaken the blood  
in pinned-and-needled fingers, while she turns the words  
over and over on her tongue;

                                  one fumes after  
the Mardi Gras tourist who squeezed her ass in the bar  
and walked away—she throws her drink at his chest,  
gathers all her weight into her fist which she launches  
at his jaw;

                                  one is cold, her knees aching on the bedroom's  
thin carpet, and she doesn't want to kiss her friend  
there, doesn't like the way her friend's brother is pushing  
on the back of her neck;

                                  one disappears a pill  
between the bellies of two spoons like a magic trick,  
pulls a rabbit from a hat except the rabbit is powder  
that she lines with a bookmark;



one can't sleep,  
turns toward her sweetheart who faces the moon-blue wall,  
and traces constellations between moles on his back;  
one has made  
her bed in a dark room, peels off the bell-shaped  
purple dress, never wears it again;  
and one emerges  
from the poem and rises from her desk—the skyline  
of a city I don't yet know visible from her open window,  
ink drying in an open notebook—she curls her toes  
to praise the carpet, to know gravity again, to churn  
the blood, the air delicious in her lungs, to revel  
in the miracle of two feet firm on a floor and her body  
alive.

## NOTES

“Suppose the Aswang” and “Manananggal”: Of all the monstrous creatures in Filipino mythology, the aswang—a demonic shapeshifter—is the most feared. There are many countermeasures one can take to protect themselves from her, including the ingestion or display of salt, vinegar, or garlic. The manananggal is a type of aswang.

“Among Men” is for my sister.

“Amor Fati” was inspired by Blas Falconer’s poem of the same name; its form takes after Franny Choi’s “Turing Test” series.

“Portrait of an Addict with Two Spoons” as after Kaveh Akbar.

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“Catcalled while Running with My Dog” is dedicated to my dog, Sushi. It was inspired by Ada Limón’s poem, “Service.”

“Elegy” is in honor of Diana Liscum, beloved English teacher and friend, and adapts the epitaph inscribed on John Keats’ headstone: *Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.*

“At the Informal Participants’ Reading I Am Drawn to the Way Language Lights” is for the friends I found at the 2019 Minnesota Northwoods Writers Conference.

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