look with your eyes, not your mouth

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*no history, no self*

scrambled poem pulsing

staccato incubation

time overwhelmed ache

--*fill in the forgotten chapters*

SELF PORTRAIT AS POTENTIAL ANSWER

Dreaming one day of being perfectly still

even the silence swirls around me,

respecting me as a superior

tenderness personified, burning. Bruising because

tenderness always breaks/me.

My mom says "you're too trusting"

but what is trust, anyway, when we can't tell what truth is.

I am a conjunction and not but. Tired trying tormented by tininess. Tinniness

in my ears. It rings. I am the voicemail for people to wake up to in the morning.

The sway, left, right, middle. Pink purple blue all over

even though you asked for brown I gave you bi. Gave you not.

I am swaddled into a lumpia, huddling next to the wall,

too many shells pasted into a mosaic and

none of them say doctor.

Torn immigrant dream, that's me,

meeting expectations, my sister and I know

we are multitudes of maybes buried under a no,

asking at Toys R Us -- "maybe next time" -- and unbroken underlying neglect.

Six-year-old she lectures me on fearlessness and

nestled in my bones is a future yes.

ELEMENTARY ARITHMETIC

i sit by the ocean and draw lines in the sand

trying to solve speed drills but i can't get past

god as the sum of all things then

tell me

why

i/we only saw him/her in

unspoken questions, stuck behind locked lips

commandments never adding up to logic listening lacking lingering

in the silence where curiosity should be,

pushed into sitting/standing in the back of a church

where it is so silent you can/not hear god speak,

no i/we learned to see god in differences,

the emptiness echoing early morning knees to the floor

screaming for invincibility watching everyone slip away, invisibly

"pray the gay/problem/sickness/worry away" clutched fists claiming family chanting free your spirit

find your soul in the hail mary

but it just felt old/owned

hypocrisy hollowed hurting us/you/me rainbow relishing the secrets hiding behind closed doors wanting

it (them/him/her)

"question your faith"

silence is our only communion

this is my body

i swallow the spaces settling in the nooks of my mouth

this is the blood

i taste the rusted want, all the questions flayed out, their edges forking my tongue

that i have given up for you

dive away from the ocean,

breathe

REDEFINITION

When my mom found a job, my best friends, confidantes, my Pokémon figures,

imports from the Philippines, smuggled their way into my parents' hearts by way of bruising

mine. Lots of money toward those Filipino import-exports, flying through the ocean in cages.

My parents flew before I knew my mom's stomach, glass eyes letting them watch their country die

in the distance. Fade into specks of lint flicked away by Ikea lint rollers, inscribed

on the walls of Tracy, suburbia deep.

They wanted me to fly too, offered me pizza topped with Tagalog. Instead my desire deepened

for just the pizza, no toppings, whitewashed into something I figured

was me. Blending in like Jamba Juice, chopped up identity, banana bruised

until outside and inside both bled white, if you color-caged

me, Barbie doll fanatic, bookworm hiding under Apple laptop dyed

us -- now that I think of it, that was my first fruit. After *saba* it described

our almosts. Banana leaf ceiling we thought we could surpass by inscribing,

branding our arms. White, the ending burn. Sit down one side sit up on another we balance the deep

tip-toe seesaw back and forth, sliding (rule) between maybe only math figuring

is okay. No such thing as "finding yourself" except when finding extra coupons for the family, bruise

us with financial success so fast/hard/heavy it burns. Museum where we're all in cages

labeled scientist/lawyer/doctor/engineer. We’re unsure whether we put ourselves there. Desire died

in the Philippines and came back in the guise of the American dream. If you're a dyke

you can't have that. Or if you like boys and girls. You're confused, describe

yourself again with that adjective, unbiased. Pray deeply

and your problems will be solved. Figure

out what's wrong with you, that you can't be satisfied within framework of the family, bruising

against standards meant to help, not harm, standards trapping you in a cage

of too-lates and as-ifs, what-if – Luis/Steve both proclaim it the number one answer, Nicholas Cage

couldn't steal our Declaration of Independence. How could it die

if it never existed? First amendment: You are only right to remain silent, scribe

wrote. Scribe equals parents. Equals debt and growth and power. Equals deep

gap between who I or my parents want, a Pollyanna / mom's best friend's daughter / not-me figure.

Too late, they brought me here and drowned me in words and now I'm bruised,

soul colored deep hodge-podge of blue / white / red, wondering what cage the gold belongs to.

Heartbeat thrums in two continents, inscribed with word want dyed programming and "I'm still figuring it out".

THIS LAND IS/’NT

This land isn't your land, this land is my land

From the California to the New York island

Brown immigrants/"Native" Americans ingrates we must teach

This land was made for us to receive

­­

As I went walking that ribbon of highway

I saw above me that broken I-Hotel, near-skeletons scattered

And saw below me Pomos battered, golden Bloody Island

This land was never yours, you're deceived

I roamed and rambled and I enacted manifest destiny

In search of the best and brightest gold

And all around me, I ignored the native, the immigrant voices crying

Claiming this land was made for you and me

When the fireworks appear in Watsonville, we vilified Pinoys

Annoyed by the persistence of missing mules,

the California Blades kept Nisenans at bay

This land was made for peoples who respect our name

This land is your land and this land is my land

Take my hand, we promise you peace

From the Redwood Forest, to the gulf stream waters

This land was made for you listening to our truths

When the sun comes shining, I see the places we named after enablers & killers

Fremont, Carson City, McCarthy, Watsonville, Exeter

The places we played with murder

This land was made for our taking,

EPITAPH / ELEGY TO HEALTH

Maybe if I had sipped less boba,

stopped swallowing those chewy hunks of dubious quality,

possibly carcinogenic and definitively unhealthy,

Life is taken best when taken by surprise.

(eaten whole)

I would be the same. maybe taller, unstooped, less weighed down by undissolved questions.

Does anyone know who god is? Is S/he there? Is it better to be white? Mental hypochondriac.

Stretched out, I feel skin where ribs used to protrude. You’ve always been  
 at the losing end.

(floating world)

Stuffing stories into silent corners of my mind, worried about parental disapproval.

Just ask the priest, Dad says. Just don't go in the sun, Mom says. Just ask me, is what I want to hear.

Just listen, is what I want them to say. Instead I run circles in my head, downing milk tea. Drowning. You count every breath you spend staring,

(spoken sorrow)

Instead I lean down to the grass. The dew drops are confused when my tears sit next to them,

memorials to gashes, gore internalized, instant recoil at "Do I know you?",

used to being the wallflower. Bloom. Socialize with self, the luxury of being alone.

crackling in the past tense.

(novel growth)

The years blink at me.

I am

am I?

MEAL SYNTAX

I grew up with English for dinner.

Every Asian family lucky enough to make it to the States knows

English means Stanford means money means winner,

nerd to the general population.

Finding solace and adulation on the steps of the stairs

the words cling to my hair like ivy, school a tool I used to collect stories;

more importantly I became addicted to the sound of glory,

sentences sculpted into adoring praise,

acknowledgement that you raised the bar, set the curve, your writing struck a nerve,

reverberating down my spine, pineapples on pizza never as sweet a combo as cheesy compliments,

never gleaned from my parents –

We show love by showing we can pay rent,

nothing's wrecked by that

just me caving in,

intimate with a language, a currency currently cursed in non-native tongues,

I wanted to hoard a ton of things I’ve heard.

There's a reason words scar me the worst,

never been good at scaring myself away with actions,

just shun my soul with scathing statements synonymous with

"you're not good enough" searching for someone to tell me "I am" but

my parents didn't know what I wanted to hear,

I don't even know what I want to hear.

I wish I could tell people "I just want you here"

and sometimes I do, nearness not needy when mutual, a common creed that became a religion,

but our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come

doesn't do it justice and my parents say pray but I talk to myself

when no one's listening, treat my ears like a temple

but my body is frozen, glistening ice, taking in the world with eyes solemn

stating please talk to me –

Stick it to the fridge, that's how we show love.

Stick the A up to say that we're proud.

To me that never spoke as loud,

never quenched my thirst or sated my hunger,

as "I love you"

"You are beautiful"

"I am proud of you and all that you've learned", but.

No wonder I live in the city. I would've been a horrible forager,

every syllable I find never sounds like I can put it into writing

forging words out of nothing, pretending these affirmations and me are self-sustaining

I only want what I can't have and I’ve been starving for years

SKIN

*Sayang ang kutis mo*,

Mom says, picturing aesthetically pleasing angles, slim white lines,

lying when she thinks of dark as beautiful,

full-fledged addiction to the belief, the feeling that

*kutis*? It isn't valuable when it looks like *chicharron*,

red brown yellow

strip them of color to avoid being hollow,

run like the wind

book it as fast as you can

candidly plant my feet on the dinosaur skin ground hoping for a land before time

when mind and mime mattered more than the way my skin shines in the sun

starving for color ravenous lore-consumer

because the sun is the greatest teller of stories

the catalyst for growth whether it's sprout or wither

With or without you I want to tell her

I will bloom into brown

In my mind I see her frown

I see the whitening lotion supposed to burn my skin's hunger, calm it down

but hunger is a verb not just a noun

and the yearning yanks me into yawning summer nights

nihilistic nothing matters

just running just step after step after step after tanner and tanner and I run away from remember,

they asked if you were your sister's nanny because you were too dark.

"What a waste of your complexion."

HOLES / LIGHT

back in the Philippines, waking

i could not sleep

we could place the memory of my sister

Death

will gamble with everyone

everything from this world could vanish

what unworthy soul --

where bullets entered

we will always become those we have ever judged or condemned

& cover her in sunlight,

stand up here with me in the sunlight and watch the battle,

bullets frozen there in his mind,

i found myself first there.

imagination engraved lowercase-g-god's invasion, surprising?

guardians' funeral. philippines drowned. earth language, flaring

sermons ghosting our "savage" history.  
--*burial sounds like a hymn*

*know history, know self*

conversations for adults, *palanggay*, shh--

*ayaw'g pangutana*, we're busy, ten years later

i am still a child

--*i will never speak my/the mother/'s tongue*

ALMANAC

*Nonoy* stories, he called them.

I was curled up like a pea in an oversize pod.

tell me more, daddy, I begged, eyes full of wonder.

He opens his mouth and paints me pictures

of rugged land, chapped feet, windy world

war-word-torn, radio restrictions, curfewed childhood,

single-file-line not just school but supermarket.

Yet his voice soothes the ache of after-dark roamers,

smoothes the creases of unspoken history,

and I listen.

DECLARATION   
  
Walk toward remembering,

we are not Latinos of Asia,

we are the Filipinxs of Asia,

we are ourselves.

We are not great value versions of another country's people.

There is history in our breaths,

dulled perhaps by deities settling comfortably into a "God" coalition.

Have you heard of the goddess of fire,

*Mangkukulam* --

not everyone's goddess,

we do not force the same gods down everyone's throats, do not scorch and call the burn “restorative”,

but listen. Listen to her, whose name means witch.

She is power. Heat. Passion

burning, burning, burning,

and the white men stole her.

Turned her into their weapon,

sixteenth hundredth birthday post-Christ onward

they struck.

Now, they say, she cries in warmth,

earth turning molten.

Filipinos are generous, the tourism ads say.

Both with their help

and their harm.

HOME AS DECADES

I was determined to leave that environment and all its crushing forces.

My past and future merge in the dark, still air.

I almost died within myself.

No matter where we want to go, it's slow going.

"Please don't change me in America!"

Put your hand on this bible, this blade, this pen, this oil derrick, this gun and you will gain trust and respect with us.

"They often shoot Pinoys like that," he said.

The American soldiers trampled the white flag in the blood of the peacemakers.

I knew there was nothing better than life, even a hard life, even a frustrated life.

We asked for forgiveness.

All of us, from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate -- We are America!

I had no place else to go, but home.

I would go back to give significance to all that was starved and thwarted in my life.

This is what it means to be restored, she whispered.

The wind was soothing and the sky was clear.

I remember, she says.

NATIONAL FISH / LONG WEEKEND

i look forward to sea weekends,

seeing the days elongated,

filleted fragments of stop motion.

skeleton crunching down curated words,

milking every syllable of every tale,

tailing pages, tallying memories,

fishing for words in foreign waters.

a fish by any other name wouldn't taste as milky.

murky search for nationality in

little women. pride & prejudice. persuasion.

persuade me these writers look like me,

taste like a soul i can call home.

don't see the brown on the inside,

emotion stir-fried, crisped into

crunch.

starving for thirst in the middle of the ocean.

*Bangus*, bang us against the wall with the stories i memorized,

middle school,

splayed on the grass,

starting a new breath, new book, new

not me.

imagination uncolored my skin but inside,

still golden. still national. color of you sautéed from island gourmet.

FILM ROLL

*remembered all my years in the Philippines*

the shadow years sit in my soul, leaden, demanding respect

*my father fighting for his inherited land,*

*my mother selling baggoong to the impoverished peasants*

my father fighting for control of the camote from his brother running blithely in the fields,

my mother walking to school in caspered flip-flops for a chance to learn

*I remembered all my brothers and their bitter fight for a place in the sun,*

the clawing for breath, emergence through math/science/coding,

breaking through the bamboo ceiling by being the smart kid

nursing outside desires into submission

tasting the debt - the main act and climax, not the intermission

*their tragic fear that they might not live long enough*

*to contribute something vital to the world*

these words do not sprout painlessly

each letter another breath gone, another moment running away,

never to be recaptured

*I remembered my own swift and dangerous life in America*

open-closed mouth

they are scared of any motion untitled sitting down

promises that rocking the boat means you drown in chaos

dishonor pervading your hope-talk

but i want to reach for the speech

*and I cried, recalling all the years that had come and gone*

before it is too late

before the baseline shifts to gray, culture another buzzword on a resume

veers away from baked lechon on a summer day

to hot dogs and hamburgers and "let me look up that filipino dessert on google"

CONSTELLATION CULTURE

mother repeated

Neil Armstrong’s words, like a prayer:

it is the stars

we do not let own us.

electronically conveyed,

the act

of being human

is not easy knowledge

& all summer we had waited for it,

our faces off-blue in front of the TV screen and the stone wall Manila   
 would be blank ether

only the half-moon and stars,

only mere men

the future a religion we could believe in

we are measured

by vastness beyond ourselves

reckless

in our need for the possible, we knew

there was no turning back

to the reach of stars.

CONDENSED CHILDHOOD

The dew drops nestle on the lid of the saucepan.

Our kitchen is saturated in the smell of simmering sinigang,

condensation collecting calmly atop glass.

It's been a long day, filled with worksheets, admonishments

adding up to aim for A+, and timbark romps with my best friend.

I sit down at the dinner island, feet dangling,

enjoying the air beneath my feet.

It feels like Soaring: Tracy, and I close my eyes,

let the heat of newly birthed fall seeping in through the windows

and the aroma of freshly cooked rice, the sour smoke from sinigang,

my parents' constant presence as they bustle around the kitchen,

overlapping each other in *Visaya*,

help me fly.

If I opened my eyes, I could be in the islands,

toes nestled in warm sand,

fingers brushing against beaches,

surrounded by my grandparents and parents

enclosed by wooden walls coated in years of memories,

years of financial and familial struggle condensed into photographs

lining their house's mantle.

"*Kain na*," my mom urges me.

The clatter of the plate on the jolts me into the present,

the family surrounding me, and I swallow sinigang and rice,

gold and white, Philippines and America. Both mine. Our family.

SEA VISION

When I close my eyes I see my father,

small skinny brown boy.

Gathering seashells like stories by the seashore

comic book / black / white / only one way out

no hero but his,

voice bleeding through the radio,

controlled patriotism.

The tones he clung onto,

parents and him saw only one way out:

dreaming of more than the *kadiwa*,

wanting boundless food,

thoughts bounding to a limitless frontier across

the beaches he loved. Law couldn't lessen his dreams.

Gathering dialect like language could lighten the lack.

Welcoming neighboring news, varied vernacular,

*Cebuano, Waray, Bicolano, Ilonggo,*

writing his thesaurus

(no place for English)

no word for "disappear."

Synonym, death.

just there, then gone. Marcos marked the unworthy,

sent them, maybe,

to that boundless.

I imagine him, imagining them,

floating in *Pulang Bato*,

face up. Face to the sky,

hoping.

STORY AS MEMORY AS TIME

every human being’s story starts with a

push, a ferocious desire to live

*only some remember that desire*

*once they wake* --

can't imagine the pain.

reverberates, the wanting, ricochets wily

through future present past. in that order,

your future self is writing. you-not-you.

time swirls a blindfold around you. ribbon, wrapping paper.

pass it on, telephone. kindergarten. kind garden growing kids.

remember criss-cross apple-sauce. oceans of polyester hooks.

time suspended.

eyes closed. warm breath, cold shoulder, windy words.

hoping when i spoke it was the right phrase.

right, mom said. go right,

not left. what was left,

i never asked. too used to time settling the answer.

time is the worst jury. never reliable.

past hurts heal. mom lied.

still feel the pulsing. layering smiles. no sadness, she warned.

that's embarrassing. tears are a social construct.

still feel the flush. push the tears toward tummy.

first grade pick up line. didn't meet expectations. walk toward car.

safe. hidden. no one knows you there.

funny how thick skin is. how thin spirit becomes.

how easy it is to scar.

car brings grandma and grandpa. they're from far away. lonely.

we are islands to them. they exist only across oceans.

tinny voices, flesh now. i don't know how to react.

time flips, somersaulting. i lay on my back. ask grandpa to play restaurant.

when he dies five years later mom asks me to remember.

dad says write a card. use your words.

i didn't know. how do you describe slipping through air. ground falling.

guilt from time as bubblegum pink eraser. scrubbing clean.

leaving smudges of gray. but even those you can't understand.

mom leaves for the philippines. i don't go.

school's more important. family in grades. they can't silence you. speak for yourself.

clutching papers. writing my dictionary. under time, not enough.

under philippines, not mine. second generation immigrant.

somehow number two means american. home in a different redwhiteblue.

solace in white. not about who you know. what you know.

wrong, dad says.

reverse. i don't understand.

i do. i see now.

wrinkled nose at mccormick's steakhouse. san francisco.

extra long wait. tables open. slitted eyes asking.

commercials uncolored. teachers reach out to me last.

you don't need help, they say. i think i do. i don't say that.

remember digging feet into ground. helpless. stubborn.

wanting to disappear. looking at world moving.

still.

we are pregnant, mom announces.

new sister. old goods. traded in.

responsibilities ringing in my ears.

time releases. freedom from old self. welcome role model.

freedom in that now you can look at it in a museum. thrift shop you.

see everything you used to through vintage eyes. call your old habits vintage.

quirky. eccentric. odd. change shame into awe.

automatic reaction. respect how you resculpted.

how time became the yes i fed myself.

instead of the no.

starting to write my story outside of the confines of parental want.

outside of the beauty i thought i wanted. snow chicharron. not snow white.

inside my now. there are words. broken expectations. hope. littered.

time is the pen and life is the story. memory the ink.

slow time carves splintering stars,

their half-life mercy,

abrasive right to wonder.

*--infinite marveling loop*