

Poems

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Abstract

This collection of eight original poems focus on the theme "Environmental artistic practices and indigeneity: In(ter)ventions, recycling, sovereignty". The first group of three poems, "Age of Plastic," "Rings of Fire," and "Halloween in the Anthropocene" address issues of climate change, waste, and capitalist exploitation. The second group of three poems, "Chanting the Waters," "One Fish, Two Fish," and "Praise Song for Oceania" address issues of water and the ocean from an indigenous Pacific perspective. The final group of two poems, "Family Trees," and "Tronkon Niyok (Coconut Tree)" address issues of militarization and its impact on Guam's trees.

Keywords: Poetry, Guam, Pacific Islands, Literature, Ecocriticism, Indigeneity

Age of Plastic

~

The doctor presses the probe
onto my wife's belly. Ultrasound waves
pulse between fluid, tissue, and bone
until the embryo echoes. *Plastic makes this possible.* At home, she labors in an inflatable
tub. *Plastic leaches estrogenic and toxic chemicals,*
disrupts hormonal systems. After delivery,

she places her placenta in a Ziploc
and stores it in the freezer. *Plastic is the perfect
creation because it never dies.* Our daughter
sucks a pacifier and sleeps in a crib.
*Whales, plankton, shrimp, and birds confuse
plastic for food.* My wife turns on
the breast pump: milk drips.

*Plastic labors to keep food fresh, delivers
medicine and clean water.* How empty
it must feel: birthed, used, then
disposed by us. *In the oceans,*
*there exists one ton of plastic for every three
tons of fish.* How free it must feel
when it finally arrives to the paradise

of the Pacific gyre—far from us,
its degrading makers. *Will plastic
make life impossible?* I press the bottle
to our daughter's lips and wish
she, too, was made of plastic, so that she
will survive our wasteful hands. So that
she, too, will inherit "a great future."

Rings of Fire

Honolulu, Hawai'i

~

We host a family party to celebrate our daughter's birthday.
This summer is the hottest in history, breaking the record set

when she was born. Outside, my dad grills meat over charcoal
and watches the smoke crawl through air like the spirits

of sacrificial animals. Inside, my mom steams rice and roasts
vegetables. They've traveled here from California,

where millions of trees have become tinder after years
of drought, fueling catastrophe. "Paradise is on fire."

When our daughter first hosted fever, the doctor said,
"it's a sign she's fighting infection." Bloodshed rises

with global temperatures, which know no borders.
Airstrikes detonate hospitals in countries whose names

are burnt fossils: Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Iraq...
When we can't control fire, we name it "wild" and pray to gods for rain.

*When we can't control our gods, we name it "war" and pray to votives
for peace.* "If her fever doesn't break," the doctor said, "take her

to the Emergency Room." Volcanoes erupt along fault lines.
Garment factories in Bangladesh char and collapse.

Refugees self-immolate at a detention center on Nauru.
Forests across Indonesia are razed for palm oil plantations—

their plumes flock, like the ashen ghosts of birds,
to our distant rib cages. "When she crowned," my wife

said, "it felt like rings of fire." A cleansing birth. Still,
I crave a cigarette, even after quitting five years ago,

even after my clothes no longer smell like my grandpa's
tobacco breath (his oxygen tank still scratches the floor

of memory and denial). When our daughter can't breathe,
we give her an asthma inhaler. But tonight we sing,

"Happy Birthday," and blow out the candles together.
The smoke trembles, as if we all exhaled the same

flammable wish.

Halloween in the Anthropocene

~

Darkness spills across the sky like an oil plume.
The moon reflects bleached coral. Tonight, let us
praise the sacrificed. Praise the souls of black
boys, enslaved by supply chains, who carry
bags of cacao under west African heat. "Trick

or treat, smell my feet, give me something good
to eat," sings a girl dressed as a Disney princess.
Tonight, let us praise the souls of brown girls
who sew our clothes as fire unthreads sweatshops
into smoke and ash. "Trick or treat, smell my feet,

give me something good," whisper kids disguised
as ninjas. Tonight, let us praise the souls of Asian
children who manufacture toys and tech until gravity
sharpens their bodies enough to cut through suicide
nets. "Trick or treat, smell my feet, give me," chant

kids masquerading as cowboys and Indians. Tonight,
let us praise the souls of native youth, whose eyes
are open-pit uranium mines, veins are poisoned
rivers, hearts are tar sands tailings ponds. Tonight,
let us praise our mothers of asthma, mothers

of cancer clusters, mothers of slow violence, *pray*
for us, because our costumes won't hide the true cost
of our greed. Tonight, let us praise our mothers of lost
habitats, mothers of miscarriage, mothers of cheap nature,
pray for us, because even tomorrow will be haunted—

Chanting the Waters

for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and water protectors around the world

Say: "Water is life!"

because our bodies are 60 percent water—because my wife labored for 24 hours through contracting waves—because water breaks forth from shifting tectonic plates

Say: "Water is life!"

because amniotic fluid is 90 percent water—because she breathed and breathed and breathed—because our lungs are 80 percent water—because our daughter crowned like a new island

Say: "Water is life!"

because we tell stories about how our gods created water—because even our language flows from water—because even our words are islands writ on water—because it takes more than three gallons of water to make a single sheet of paper—

Say: "Water is life!"

because water is the next oil—because 185,000 miles of U.S. oil pipelines leak everyday—because we wage war over gods and water and oil

Say: "Water is life!"

because our planet is 70 percent water—because only 3 percent of global water is freshwater—because it takes 2 gallons of water to refine one gallon of gasoline—because it takes 22 gallons of water to make a pound of plastic—because it takes 660 gallons of water to make one hamburger—because it takes 3,000 gallons to make one smart phone—because the American water footprint is 2,000 gallons a day

Say: "Water is life!"

because a billion people lack access to drinking water—because women and children walk 4 miles every day to gather clean water and carry it home

Say: "Water is life!"

because our bones are 30 percent water—because if you lose 5 percent of your body's water you will become feverish—because if you lose 10 percent of your body's water you will become immobile—because our bodies won't survive a week without water

Say: "Water is life!"

because corporations privatize, dam, and bottle our waters—because plantations divert our waters—because animal slaughterhouses consume our waters—because pesticides, chemicals, lead, and waste poison our waters

Say: "Water is life!"

because we say stop! keep the oil in the ground—because they bring their bulldozers and drills and drones—because we bring our feathers and lei and sage and shells and canoes and hashtags and totems—because they call us savage and primitive and riot—because we bring our treaties and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—because they bring their banks and politicians and dogs and paychecks and pepper spray and bullets—because we bring our songs and schools and prayers and chants and ceremonies—because they say shut up! and vanish—because we are not moving—because they bring their police and private militia—because we bring all our relations and all our generations and all our livestreams

Say: "Water is life!"

because our drumming sounds like rain after drought echoing against taut skin
because our skin is 60 percent water

Say: "Water is life!"

because every year millions of children die from water-borne diseases—because every day thousands of children die from water-borne diseases—because, by the end of this poem, 5 children will die from water-borne diseases

Say: "Water is life!"

because our daughter loves playing in the ocean— because someday she'll ask us, "where does the ocean end?"—because we'll point to the dilating horizon—because our eyes are 95 percent water—

Say: "Water is life!"

because we'll tell her the ocean has no end—because the sky and clouds carry the ocean—because the mountains embrace the ocean into a blessing of rain—because the ocean-sky-rain fills aquifers and lakes—because the ocean-sky-rain-lake flows into the Missouri River—because the ocean-sky-rain-lake-river returns to the ocean and connects us to our cousins at Standing Rock—because our blood is 90 percent water

Say: *"Water is life!"*

because our hearts are 75 percent water—because, while our daughter is sleeping,
I'll chant to her, my people's word for water: "hanom, hanom, hanom"—so her
dreams of water will always protect us

Say: *"Water is life! Water is life! Water is life!"*

One Fish, Two Fish

One fish, Two fish, Plastics, Dead fish

Some fish are sold for sashimi,
some are sold to canneries,
and some are caught by hungry slaves
to feed what wealthy tourists crave!

Farmed fish, Fish sticks, Frankenfish, Collapse

From the Pacific to the Atlantic,
from the Indian to the Arctic,
from here to there,
dead zones are everywhere!

Overfishing, Purse seine, Ghost fishing, Bycatch

This one has a little radiation.
This one has a little mercury.
O me! O my! What schools
of bloated fish float by!

Here are fish that used to spawn, but now the water is too warm

Some are predators and some are prey,
Who will survive? I can't say.
Say! Look at its tumors! One, two, three...
How many tumors do *you* see?

Two fish, One fish, Filet-o-Fish, No fish

Praise Song for Oceania

for World Oceans Day, June 8th

~

praise
your capacity
for birth your fluid
currents and trenchant
darkness praise
your contracting waves
and dilating horizons
praise our briny
beginning, the source
of every breath praise
your endless bio-
diversity praise

your capacity
for renewal your rise
into clouds and descent
into rain praise your underground
aquifers your rivers and lakes
ice sheets and glaciers praise
your watersheds and
hydrologic cycles praise

your capacity
to endure the violation
of those who name you
who claim dominion
over you who map you
empty ocean to pillage
who divide you into
latitudes and longitudes
who scar your middle
passages who carve
shipping lanes who exploit
your economy praise

your capacity
to survive our trawling

boats breaching
your open body
and taking from your
collapsing depths praise

your capacity
to dilute our sewage
and radioactive waste
our pollutants and plastics
our heavy metals
and greenhouse gases praise

your capacity
to bury our shipwrecks
our soldiers and terrorists
slaves and refugees to bury
our lost cities every
last breath of despair
to bury the ashes of
of those we love praise

your capacity
to remember praise
your library of drowned
stories praise your museum
of lost treasures your archive
of desire your repository
of deep secrets praise
your uncontainable mystery
praise your tidalectic theory
praise our migrant routes
and submarine roots praise

your capacity to penetrate
your rising tides and
relentless storms
and towering tsunamis
and feverish floods praise

your capacity
to smother whales

and schools of fish
to wash them ashore
to save them from our cruelty
to show us what we're
no longer allowed to take
to starve us like your corals
are being starved and bleached
like your liquid lungs
choked of oxygen praise

your capacity to forgive please
forgive our territorial hands
and acidic breath please
forgive our nuclear arms
and naval bodies please
forgive our concrete dams
and cabling veins please
forgive our deafening sonar
and lustful tourisms please
forgive our invasive drilling
and deep sea mining please
forgive our extractions
and trespasses praise

your capacity for mercy please
let our grandfathers and fathers
catch just one more fish please
make it stop raining soon please
make it rain soon please
spare our fragile farms
and fruit trees please
spare our low-lying islands
and atolls please
spare our coastal villages
and cities please
let us cross safely to a land
without war praise

your capacity for hope
praise your rainbow
warrior and peace

boat your Hokule'a
and sea shepherd praise
your arctic sunrise and freedom
flotillas praise your nuclear free
and independent pacific movement
praise your marine stewardship
councils and sustainable
fisheries praise your radical
seafarers and native navigators
praise your sacred water walkers
praise your activist kayaks
and canoes praise your ocean
conservancies and surfrider foundations
praise your aquanauts and hydrolabs
praise your Ocean Cleanup
and Google Oceans
praise your whale hunting
and shark finning bans
praise your sanctuaries
and no take zones praise
your pharmacopeia of new
antibiotics praise your wave
and tidal energy praise your
#oceanoptimism and Ocean
Elders praise your blue
humanities praise

your capacity for echo
location our words for you
that translate into creation
stories and song maps
tasi and kai and tai and moana nui
and vasa and tahi and lik and wai tui
and daob and wonsolwara

praise your capacity
for communion praise
our common heritage praise
our pathway and promise
to each other praise our
endless saga praise our most



powerful metaphor praise
your vision of belonging
praise your blue planet
one world ocean praise
our trans-oceanic
past present and future
flowing through
our blood

Family Trees

~

Hasso : before we enter i halom tano
my dad asks permission
of i taotamo'na *the spirits* who dwell
within.

He walks slowly, with care,
to teach me *respectu*.

Then he stops. Closes his eyes.
Ekungok : *listen* :

trade winds billow
the canopy, tremble
the understory &

conduct the wild
ensemble of all things.

~

"Niyok, Lemmai, Ifit, Yoga', Nunu," he says

calling forth the names
of each tree, each elder,

who has provided us
with food and âmot,
clothes and tools,
canoes and shelter.

Like us, they grew
in dark wombs, sprouted

from seeds,
nourished by light.

Like us, they survived
storms & conquest.

Like us, roots anchor
to *this*

island.

~

"When you take," my dad says,
"Take with gratitude,
& never more than
what you need."

He translates "eminent domain,"
as "theft,"
as "to turn a place of abundance
into a base of destruction."

The military uprooted
trees with bulldozers,
paved fertile earth with concrete,
& planted toxic chemicals
& ordnances in i tano. Barbed
wire fences spread
like invasive
vines,

whose only fruit

are cancerous
tumors
that bloom
on every branch
of our family
tree

~

Today, the military invites us
to collect plants and trees
within areas of Litekyan*
slated to be cleared
for construction.

Fill out appropriate forms
and wait 14 business days
for background and security check. If
we receive *their* permission,
they'll escort us to the site
to mark and claim
what trees we want delivered to us
after removal.

They say this is a benevolent gesture,

why

does it feel like a cruel

reaping?

\sim

my dad never showed me the endangered
hayun lågu : *fire tree*

the last
struggling to survive in Litekyan
its only home.

The military plans to clear the surrounding area for a live firing range complex, making the tree even more vulnerable to winds, pests, stray bullets.

“Don’t worry,” they say.
“We’ll build a fence around the tree.”

They say this is an act
of mitigation,

why

does it feel like the disturbed edge

of extinction?

~

Ekungok, ancient whispers rouse the jungle
Listen, oceanic waves stir against the rocks

Ekungok, i taotao'mona call us to rise
Listen, i tronkon Yoga' calls us to stand tall

Ekungok, i tronkon Lemmai calls us to spread our arms wide
Listen, i tronkon Nunu calls us to link our hands

Ekungok, i tronkon Ifit calls us to be firm
Listen, i tronkon Niyok calls us to never break

Ekungok, i halom tano' calls us to surround
i hayun lågu and chant: "We are the seeds

of the last fire tree. We are the seeds of the last
fire tree. We are the seeds of the last fire tree!

Ahe'! No! We do not give you permission."

Ritidian is an ancestral Chamorro village in northern Guam. The US first classified Ritidian as a restricted military site, and then it became a wildlife preserve covering 371 acres of coral reefs and 832 acres of terrestrial habitats. Ritidian is home to endangered species and archaeological remains. Today, the US military is turning Ritidian into a live firing range complex. "Ritidian" comes from the word "Litekyan" which translates as to stir, or a stirring place, referring to waters off the coast [hanom hanom hanom].

Tronkon Niyok (coconut tree)

~

Once, I bought a can of coconut water
for my dad because he felt homesick.
After the first taste, he can't stop talking story
about the tropical past.

The invasive coconut rhinoceros beetle (CRB), a large scarab beetle native to southeast Asia, is detected on Guam in Lower Tumon on September 11, 2007.

He claims, as a barefoot child, he climbed
coconut trees that touched the clouds,
and his grandpa would remove the husk with his teeth
and crack the shell with his knuckles,
and his grandma would grate the meat with her fingernails
and squeeze it into milk and oil
with her bare hands.

A female rhino beetle lays 100 eggs during her lifetime. With a 50% sex ratio and 100% survival, there will be a population increase of 5,000% during each generation.

~

These products are trendy and expensive now, I tell him, imported from plantations
in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Thailand.

He laughs and says his great-aunties
sat in a circle weaving coconut leaves,
and if you pressed your ear
to their woven mats, you could still hear
their gossip and singing even after
they died.

2007: An eradication program using sanitation, an island wide network of 2,000 pheromone traps, quarantine, and pesticides fail to stop CRB spread and growth.

And because circles make memory seem less broken,
he recalls how his great-uncles, too, sat in a circle braiding
dried coconut fibers into rope, used to lash canoes
and thatched houses, just as our veins
bind our genealogies.

2010: All parts of Guam are infested by CRB. Most breeding sites are currently inaccessible for application of eradication tactics, being in the deep jungle and/or on military property which includes about one third of the island.

~

I read aloud the nutrition facts label:
45 calories, 30mg sodium, 470mg potassium, and 11g sugar.
Fat and cholesterol free.

*2011: Attempts to control CRB with biological control agents using the virus, *Oryctes rhinoceros*, and the fungus, *Metarhizium majus*, fail.*

He responds with this origin tale: once, a young girl, beloved by our entire island,
dies during a time of drought.

The family buries her and weeps upon the grave,
from which an unfamiliar tree sprouts.

They watch it grow and bloom
until its hard, strange fruit falls and

2014: Local fishermen use a small fish gill net called tekken, which capture 65% of CRB adults emerging from compost or green-waste piles.

opens on impact. The girl's mother braves the first sip,
then smiles for the first time in years,
as if her body, after having been completely emptied,

is finally replenished.

~

From that harvest, we planted a sapling whenever a child
was born.

As generations passed, the trees became kin,
teaching us how to bend without breaking,
how to create without wasting,
and how to take without depleting.

*2015: Typhoon Dolphin generates abundant CRB breeding sites throughout the
island, triggering a self-sustaining island-wide outbreak.*

"So many of the trees back home
are dying," my dad says.
"The beetles bore into the crown
and eat the heart."

2016: The CRB have destroyed half of the coconut trees on Guam.

We discard
the empty aluminum cans in the recycling bin
and swallow the bitter aftertaste.

Dr Craig Santos Perez is an indigenous Chamorro poet from the Pacific Island of Guam. He is the author of five books of poetry, the co-editor of five anthologies of Pacific literature, and the co-founder of Ala Press. He is a professor in the English department at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa, where he teaches Pacific literature, eco-poetry, and creative writing.