



No Wild Iris

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Abstract

The Philippines, as a tropical archipelago, is “concurrently a country of premodern, modern, and postmodern societies[:] our rural areas, small communities, and villages, while we may sweepingly characterize them as premodern, possess at the same time some of the trappings of postmodern cities like Manila, Los Angeles, or Paris” (Cruz-Lucero, 2007, p. 7). And yet, as a nation, this concurrence of temporalities is ultimately flattened, so as to turn it into “a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time” (Anderson, 2006, p. 26). What emerges, therefore, is a Philippine time that is also a disjuncture: multiplicities that insist on a singularity, or a singularity that insists on being multiple. Keeping time with this contradiction between the diverse temporalities in the archipelagic tropics (see Carter, 2013) and the adamant dream toward a nation-state, this poem meditates on the concurrence of various events that happen in the archipelago nation during the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic. Taking cues from the 1992 poem “The Wild Iris” penned by the 2020 Nobel Prize for Literature recipient Louise Glück, “No Wild Iris” attempts to interrogate the experience of homogenous and empty time in the longest lockdown in world history. By interweaving the personal, the political, and the ecological, it harnesses the lyrical while also disclosing its limits, if not outrightly refusing the tendency to sentimentality and universality as a poem.

Keywords: Philippine poetry, global pandemic, COVID-19, lockdown, tropical archipelago, homogenous time, Louise Glück

*At the end of my suffering
there was a door.*

—Louise Glück, *The Wild Iris*

At the end of the world, there was barely a window.
In fact, there weren't many holes.
For the longest time, we've learned how to stay in-doors, shut ourselves
from ourselves. Our noses & mouths our newest private parts
we wouldn't even dare scratch a sudden itch.
The world went on: Louise Glück won the Nobel Prize, the year's strongest
typhoon ravaged the Philippine archipelago, the tropical year
remained the same. At first, there weren't many cars, & then
there were cars, & so road constructions
resumed. We could hardly trust our hands, but we had to
keep earning a living. Children would cry, saying they missed
their teachers; their parents would post videos of them crying, captioned
with variations of *Look, look, how
adorable!* People learned to love plants more, & as how love usually goes,
they made them their hottest, & of course greenest,
business venture. Our president still slept until noon, woke up
in the afternoons, went missing
during national emergencies. We made motorcycle drivers
our avatars-for-hire whenever we craved
for burgers. Raindrops still fell downwards, which was a comfort
until there were too many of them, filling up
the dams. Meanwhile, the tropical year remained the same,
except the seasonal allergies became a bit more
alarming. Democracy was supposedly restored in the U.S.
& my countrymen here were suddenly excited to vote themselves:
It's our turn, they said, then proceeded
to pretend, forgetting how broken everything really was.
Cooking the latest fad recipe wasn't much of a help.
A few times, people tried gathering in the state university grounds—spaces
between them always minded, just to be safe—as they chanted
against the latest excuse for the government
to shoot whoever they felt like shooting. Poets acted
like they cared, then continued writing their latest critical *interventions*
we'd click Like to then scroll past.

A pot of pothos went up as much as a thousand pesos
I think; it certainly cost much, much more now than when it was all just free to take
from roadside gutters. Somehow, Thai dramas became a big hit
& suddenly young queers were so thankful, represented as they felt they were
by these subtitled skinny boys. Every month was an occasion
for another online sale. We covered our faces with thin plastic film
we looked like low-budget astronaut wannabes.
For a time, they didn't allow husbands & wives to ride the same motorcycle
until they realized the economy had to go on. Elsewhere
you could receive around fifty million pesos, if you had
an unmistakable poetic voice. The presidential spokesperson was once caught
on a vacation up the mountains, singing
videoke; experts said it was the easiest way to spread the virus.
Somewhere, children began hanging themselves because they all felt
too much. In the middle of it all, for everyone to admire
through their screens, the government covered Manila Bay in fake white sand, until
this, too, got slowly washed away by the storms.
There were sufferings, & countless farmers still had no land to till.
The literacy rate—let's not go there.
Our palms grew rough, either from washing with soap too often
or working too hard for something so little. In Hong Kong,
a Filipina domestic helper's hour still paid
more than an entire day here in the archipelago. We hadn't heard much
about those outside the capital, & even if we have, as if we could
listen intently enough. We covered half our faces
like we were muzzled, just like the tamed animals we've become
lest we receive a subpoena. For the braver among us
we hoped there would be more of us. We took care
of plants, speechless as they were, just so we'd somehow feel
we were needed. More people started biking to work, more people
got their bikes stolen while at work. The tropical year remained the same &
in churches, for what remained of the so-called ordinary time, people
sang "Our Father" touchless for the first time.
Water, as ever, was a commodity. We soon realized we learned
nothing from the yearly zombie films. Meanwhile, another polar cap
is melting; & *glacial pace* became obsolete
an idiom, & more so a joke. A fat national artist said something stupid again, while fat
policemen were featured sitting down happily doing some sort of
morning exercise. There still wasn't much of a door anywhere here,
or some hole we could've pushed ourselves into.
Days were long, & then were short, & then were long again

as sex became more difficult. We devised methods.
China forbade us from going there, & for a while we were no different
from poultry imported from Brazil. Whenever someone cried, we gave them time
& paid them no attention. On entering the grocery store
they'd hold up to our foreheads an infrared thermometer
which looked like a gun, & felt like a gun; the only thing stopping us from playing
dead was the long queue behind us.
There was suffering & as much as we felt we needed
a vaccine, we could've also used another pair
of lungs. Shoes, those of a baby's
or otherwise, were now hardly worn. We stopped seeing newspapers
in print, we bought more books we knew we'd never read anyway.
Much of our bodies became squares on our screens, & we were grateful
because we couldn't be thankless. Typhoons were still the venue for photo-ops.
Another whale died from ingesting tons of plastic garbage.
Walls became too thin, our families too familiar, & English
another accent we faked to pass time. Military men, with their big guns & all,
were stationed at almost every border. Yes, we could speak
again, but only because we stuttered, & not because we've been to oblivion
& back. A TV station was shut down. Nurses & doctors left
their shoes out in the sun. We slept in the afternoons only
to emerge three years wearier. Sometimes, we wished
to fly; oftentimes, we failed to wish
hard enough. Vegetables dropped price, but for some reason not
in supermarkets. K-Pop was still a big thing, & it went on
saving many of my friends' lives. Coughing outside
felt like being caught in a witch hunt. For some reason, there was music,
& for no reason, they stopped playing. We mourned
& we mourned much more, until our hearts became accustomed to grief
I think we also almost forgot how to laugh
or cry. A baby was stolen from her mother
by men in camouflage; a poet wrote about this photo, then screamed,
Art. The president, meanwhile, made another joke,
then called it a day, repeated the process for days & days & days &
there was still suffering, & there still wasn't
a door. We wondered where the stray dogs went. The tropical year
remained the same, & when days were hot, men still took
off their shirts, while women, they could just go without
their brassieres for a day, careful
not to be whistled at. Rice was still our main food.
A judge was shot in the face by an assistant.

We couldn't throw a party, unless you were an army general. Fifty million pesos could buy you a really good house, & Louise on winning the Nobel, thought so too, but this individual purchase won't ever be universal. Every morning, we gargled lukewarm water with salt; every evening, we hoped for nothing. Universities went on feigning care, but not enough. It's terrible to survive as consciousness buried in the dark earth, but it's more terrible to live above ground, among the persistent ruined dreams of a so-called nation. We couldn't cry to movies, there weren't any good enough to cry to. We played with our shadows on the wall & it was lonely; we sang to our potted seedlings, & they never sang back. Edgelords kept pulling epiphanies, kept saying, *Maybe we are the virus*. We were suffering from tired metaphors of empty wars. Dancing became a habit; filters became a life. In Argentina, they called this *quaranternity* & nothing has ever felt so right. There was barely a window, meaning we were afraid of even taking a peek at strangers outside. We left our shoes by the door. Vitamins with zinc were sold-out. Oranges were just as easy to peel, our mangoes were just as yellow as sweet as sometimes-still-sour. People tried their hardest, drying their face masks for reuse, inhaling steam from boiling water with a pinch of salt & drops of lemon juice. Meanwhile, of course, typhoons—the tropical year remained the same, & professors hurried to predict the next big culture thing in jargoned papers no one would probably read, unless they get through the paywall. Coins became too deviously dirty, but we kept them regardless. More women became pregnant, more women were hurt, children were born. As for the traffic outside, it was as if nothing really happened, business as usual, & soon it was Christmas time, & then it was over. Another mountain flattened by quarrying, as countries reopened again to one another except for us. Still no one could remember death because still no one survived the journey, which is perhaps saying health-care remains as bad as it was before. Fishermen were bullied just like vendors elsewhere. Pimples became more & more common especially on the lower face, where our masks covered our already dried skins. Flings somehow became the norm, as all calendars became useless. One webinar after another, yet none of us were smart enough to finally figure out why we were all here in shambles. Poets laid out incoherent government memos then called them *poems*, & then *critique*, however lacking they'd also politely admit. No one was allowed to visit cemeteries,

maybe mocking how everywhere now was practically a cemetery. We laid on our beds & did nothing; we still felt exhausted so we laid in bed some more, did nothing more, felt guilty more; we ignored how we felt. As for earthquakes, fortunately, they weren't too strong, knock-on-wood. There was suffering, we knew it of course, & in itself this knowledge caused us more suffering. We couldn't even burn effigies no matter how much we wanted to. There was no word for the year, because they said a word wouldn't do justice—as if in previous years, words were enough. Sunlight still fell at the same slant. The son of a dictator demanded a ballot recount for the six-year term vice-presidency from an election held four years ago. The tropical year, obviously, remained the same. Fortunately, there were restored old movies made available online. When Louise won, a handful of Filipino poets went salty, as if the judges would ever get to see their tweets. People started fermenting cabbage, carrots, radish, papaya, & even lemons, I think. There were too many stories of retrenchment one wouldn't even know where to start counting. If angels were true, we wondered, from where would they be coming to be this late. Death remained a possibility, only worsened by the reported images of intubation & bills not everyone could pay, not even after this lifetime. Some fish vendors went cashless. We waited, & we waited some more. An average day in Manila still roughly cost around three hundred pesos—that is, if one's single & not too picky about food. Typhoons destroyed houses. Despite having more bikers on the road, car drivers were still reckless. We were left to fend for ourselves, even mentally. Teachers became cyborgs of sorts, if not call-centre agents. Carbon dioxide emissions were still high somehow, despite the reduction in individual car-use. Whether sunflowers bloomed in places we knew, we were uncertain because we weren't able to see them stand tall. Mothers had nightmares; fathers felt useless, except the more arrogant ones; children had to keep answering their learning modules. Meanwhile, twenty-one billion pesos worth of funds went missing. In Pasig City, the mayor included Pocky in the citizens' essential kit. The dead had to be cremated immediately, unless they didn't have to. We still couldn't seem to find a door. Our minds, we felt, were becoming a lost cause. Poets released their newest titles. The tropical year remained the same

as if nothing really cared for us
suffering. Transgenders still weren't given the peace of mind to dress however
they wanted. Restaurant & fast food chains opened
again, with Perspex in-between. We washed ourselves too much
& it still felt like it wasn't enough. People stopped wearing jeans so often,
difficult as they were to wash and dry. Pawnshops were crowded
just like courier centres. Teachers crossed bridges to hand out learning materials,
some of them even going for a dip. People made coffee with milk
& called it some other name. We needed passes just to go
where we used to go every day. Branches of pines weren't shifting in Manila
as there weren't any pines here to begin with; in Baguio,
they just kept cutting them down
to build another mall or whatever. There was a liquor ban
& it was a pain for many, & then it was over. The mailman never arrived again.
We suffered & our souls were unable to speak,
assuming we still had them under all
our personal protective equipment. We couldn't be bothered to trust each other, so
we kept filling our needs with whatever we could
want, granted we could buy it online.
Students went on strike, asking the president to step down; some of them
admitted to join just to go along with their peers. Just like the old days
we lost friends, we made new friends, it was
the necessary work. We stared and sighed at our ceilings.
Thirst traps went back to the gym, then went on complaining about each other
which was also, really, about themselves. A tote bag
became more useful. People went missing, more people went missing,
more & more people went missing. We soon forgot
that a dormant volcano had erupted just barely
a year ago. Some of us thought, maybe the revolution
would already be too late; some of us believed, maybe the revolution had to be
late. In Indonesia, to keep people from going out, teams dressed
as *pocong* were deployed. We couldn't seem to pray
hard enough, we couldn't find ourselves
some fountain of deep blue shadows, some fountain of azure
seawater or whatever; a lot of us couldn't even remember how
the ocean sounds. We made pasta
to pass time, ate pasta to pass time, washed the dishes to pass time;
time still felt too much. Our memories began to fail us
until this too we forgot & soon we started trusting our heads
again. The class war still went on, only with the internet
it got so much worse. We were empathic

when it was most convenient, like letting the person ahead of us
in line quickly go back to the soap aisle to pick up
whatever whatnot they'd missed. The tropical year remained
the same, but the storms were getting more & more
violent & the citizens were starting to run out of money
for donation drives. It was an open secret
that some people on the internet wanted the president
to die; some people kept praising his life.
Hard work felt futile, & love too, except the latter was more palatable to miss
for the bourgeoisie. We kept peeing at night.
The killings went on, bullets were showered, if not here
then someplace else a lot of us couldn't even be bothered to know.
Meanwhile, poetry never stopped. We lost
count at two hundred days in quarantine, & still
there was barely a window. The weak sun flickered over the dry surface
of our weaker selves. We talked & we talked
in our hunger to be heard. Birds darted overhead, which was the usual,
which could've meant all of this
was just a dream, only that it wasn't, & we were suffering
all the more because we didn't see the usual enough, see
each other enough. Intimacy now meant so much more & became
less about sex, as it should have really been, a long time
ago. We couldn't imagine going to the movies anymore
without the liberty to laugh or to cry
minus our face masks on. Senegal did better than our country
but we barely heard about it. People started stealing
plants from forests, to sell them downtown for a price.
The president told us stories of some magic pill, & called it
a day. Couples still got married. Plastic drawers
were still selling. Another swamp dies, & then another.
Time went by quickly, & still we felt like nothing. We couldn't even
rely on our hands anymore. Black cats were still looked at with suspicion
but not as much as a cough or a sneeze. There was no one to blame
it seemed, which felt more like someone must've been
behind it all, if only we could find
the door at the end of it. We wrote poems, but only a handful
were anthologised. We fell in love, & we fell out of it.
We kept dreaming of other places, & I, for one, kept dreaming
of this particular supermarket in Davao del Sur. Two ostriches ran amok
in the heart of a city, one of which was found days later
dead from stress. We fell in love again. The tropical year remained the same

to my frustration, which was also the frustration felt by many others,
only I didn't know to whom I could talk, without us
ending up feeling helpless. Wherever god was, we didn't even bother
to ask, it was already too late, & they'd probably say that anyway
they gave us free will, so all this suffering should really be
on us. For a time, people thought banana was the cure, so they began
hoarding the fruit, eating them more than once
a day. *Viral* became too different a word in a span of a year
& young adults still kept going, still kept thinking that becoming an influencer is
it. Only a number of us have probably ever seen a wild iris, only
a handful have read a poem about it.
We earned money, only to lose it, so we earned some more.
Still nowhere was a door.
Another lecture on mindfulness, & we were still too far from becoming
enlightened ourselves. For a lot of us who now work
at home, suddenly home wasn't home anymore
but work. We took showers, we bleached our hair, we
cried a little, we ate. It was unfair, but as the national anthem goes, the people
would supposedly be happy
to die for this country's sake: disasters were nothing,
people thought, but a test of the divinities. The queers kept calling it *queering
the quarantine*. Meanwhile we all dreamed of flying
to Taiwan or New Zealand, that
or just magically transport us, fast-forward to when
this is all over. A vlogger promised to donate her revenue to the victims of the flood
which was only rightful, considering her family was responsible
for much of the deforestation & quarrying in the region. It was embarrassing then
to ask the cashier to take out some grocery items
because you didn't have enough cash with you; it was still embarrassing to ask now.
We swore on our plants' lives, & we were still selfish in that way.
The tropical year remained the same
& at some point, it was already getting
old. Breakdowns, acknowledged now as part of productivity itself, had to be
scheduled. We couldn't surprise each other anymore.
Grace arrived every two weeks, presenting as
asymptomatic. Suffering was everywhere we couldn't even
call it that anymore. Masks burned
tan lines on our cheeks. When asked about testing kits, the president
just reminded us that the medieval ages had it
worse than us, so why can't we be thankful. We had difficulty sleeping, but somehow
we slept anyway. We wanted to die, but maybe we cared

for each other more than we thought, & this wasn't necessarily a happy ending, since it was certainly more difficult. It was terrible to survive then, and it was still terrible to survive now. Museums were still closed, poetry still felt worthless, & more so poetry about flowers, which we couldn't give now, & possibly ever, to our dead. Meanwhile, vermin were still vermin, & perhaps more peaceful these days than we humans had been all year. At some point, stocks for oil went negative. Masks with printed smiles became a running joke, until we realized it was all the smile we could ever smile at one another for some time. Medical interns were still required to render their hours while the tropical year remained the same. It was tiring although there was never a need to run. We needed signs, so we stopped cutting grass. We cursed politicians but couldn't curse them enough. There were no doors. Nurses barely had hazard pay; imagine even less for construction workers. For a time, people could only buy five packs of noodles at a time. The show must go on, so they went on casting straight actors for queer roles. We were all bored. Our ears hurt from wearing masks all day long, but we were all too hurt anyway to even bother anymore. There was nothing to write in our diaries: there were sunny days, & there were stormy days, & sometimes, there were days that were both; we didn't know ourselves then, & we didn't know ourselves now, so we weren't really in the best place to question the whims of the weather. Meditation worked for some, & for some, it didn't. Come to think of it, it was rather simple, except we couldn't trust our bodies, no matter how hard we scrubbed the outside off our skin. It was hell on earth. In an ideal setting, our country wouldn't be under fascism, but some of my friends were now settling for a handsome dictator at least. Monuments gathered dust. The tropical year remained the same, merciless only because we weren't prepared by our government. Meanwhile, all things considered, the world was still vast although we could barely make out the next corner. We lost our internet connection, & we made such a fuss we aged by almost a year over the customer hotline. At the end of our suffering, perhaps we could imagine, was another

suffering. Soon it would be summer again, & it would ache—
how come it was already so, & then it was all over
again. We cut our hair on our own
until barbers & salons were opened again. & then another
scandal, & then another scandal forgotten.
Historians were already taking down notes about the year
but the year would always remain a dream
in hindsight. There was barely a window, & we were barely in
our heads. Pigs were being slaughtered
& so were chickens; people had to go on eating. Some of us
wore amulets, some of us threw them away. We blabbered about discourse
but never really reached each other.
Soils eroded, rivers became shallower; somewhere
was a siren, but this too became white noise.
A naturally immune baby was born in Singapore. At the end of our suffering
there would probably be a door
locked. Airplanes hardly hovered above us now.
Emergency was everyday, & we didn't want anything
to do with it. The tropical year remained the same,
the tropical year remained the same. We threw out our garbage,
& the garbage men were happy to pick it up.
We cut the sleeves off our shirts. We hurriedly stuffed receipts into our wallets.
Another bridge was built over another river. No one knew
who had the key, and no one knew anyway
where the door was that Louise had told us to find. Riots would ensue soon
enough, we hoped at the back of our minds, afraid as we were of actually
becoming the first one to cast stones. Our birthdays still counted
this year, with or without a sad cake, despite
what could practically amount to an abyss in time—it was all
for legal matters. We picked out backgrounds for our videocalls.
The earth couldn't care less about us, the typhoon
belt is still in place, but expanding, so unlike our hearts. Universities went on
out-ranking each other, another face mask elastic
snapped, hitting another cheek. Poetry still felt useless, & we suffered
still; we're still making it through, & there is still hardly
a door. We've been feeling the floor; we could barely find our voice.

Notes

Inspired by Louise Glück's "The Wild Iris," "No Wild Iris" echoes her themes of the door and suffering mentioned in the epigraph. Other lines recast from Glück's same poem can be found on pages 46, 47, 49, 50, and 52. Lines from pages 46 and 47 echo the citation for Glück upon the announcement of her being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature 2020: "for her unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal". The term *pocong*, found on page 48, refers to an Indonesian or Malay ghost that is still in its white shroud. Other inspirations for this poem were drawn from various news articles and, of course, personal anecdotes gathered during the year 2020.

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