

Decolonial Exhumation, or the Future Where No One Is Home: Writing Abuse at the Trans-Queer-Feminist Intersection of Tropical Archipelagic Thinking

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Abstract

These poems are taken from an autobiographical book project on same-sex intimate partner abuse entitled *SUNNY* that interrogates how the conjoint forces of heterosexualism, racial classification, and capitalism—understood as Eurocentric—position the lives of queer people at the margins, or what Maria Lugones calls “coloniality of gender.” In these poems, the future is maternal, “the streaming touch of oil on burnt skin,” hopeful, yet is “still about our body, except only its ruination” or “a hill’s destruction.” Written at the trans-queer-feminist intersection of tropical archipelagic thinking, the future here is a metaphor of “elsewhere” or, in the words of Paul Carter, “a place not here but consisting of many (incommensurable) places reached from here...in the archipelago” (2019, p. 117; 2013). By interweaving a fictionalised version of my own victimisation and that of other victims of gendered violence, this archipelagic poetics of wounding not only carves out a space for a queer narrative of victimisation that is systematically erased and insufficiently represented in mainstream analyses of gender-based violence, but also maps out linkages of grief and solidarity amongst tropical bodies at the margins. In writing these poems, I framed a method of writing called “decolonial exhumation,” which is a creative practice of writing and experimentation that struggles for a narration of the pained and miserable present, but one that does not evade histories of multiple and intersectional oppressions. Inspired by Saidiya Hartman’s concept of “critical fabulation” and also informed by the work of plant evolutionary biologist Banu Subramaniam, decolonial exhumation is a creative mission to develop an epistemology and aesthetics that celebrates the fragmentary, lost, partial, incomplete, and perpetually unrecoverable. It is a trans-queer-feminist political response to the legacies of colonialism and empire, and the durable inequalities that cannot otherwise be fully understood without any reckoning of the colonial past and striving for a tropical future “elsewhere.”

Keywords: archipelagic thinking, decolonial exhumation, gender-based violence, queer poetry, same-sex intimate partner abuse, tropical future

What If This Is All There Is in the World We Are Making

Why can we imagine the ending of the world,
yet not the ending of colonialism?

KLEE BENALLY | *Rethinking the Apocalypse*

what if birds stop telling us the deaths they carry with them
and somehow we forget we cannot finish mourning—

what if there is nothing
next to hurt—

what if this unending walk, this death march is a chair next to a telephone
and he calls me and he tells me to bring him a magazine.

so i bring him *The Daily Jang*, nothing written on it,
just some independence myths.

he tells me to bring him an apple,
so i look for the peeler.

then he throws a pot of boiling water at me
for forgetting to close the lid, my back catches the fire that made a way to the afterlife—

but you know as you know unreciprocated labour
i do what day is given, greens grow out of a cracked stone,

a newspaper names another body found in the river banks—
burst mouth, a deep slit in the wrist, not suicide—

a person in us is constantly finding a chair
between what we see and how we can breathe,

my partner says sorry again this time, work was tough last week—
he holds no awareness of his everyday cruelty nobody else sees,

a view from the window pins a hill's destruction,
the fence is set, cages walling the four-legged blowing wailing into air,

a man looks at his business plan on grass that moans,
the architecture of the future is one that evades the question of why—

why do leaves fall from the roof of a child's dream,
why can't bulldozers consume gas without erasing the maps of our lives—

i long for mother in the wilderness we are making,
the streaming touch of oil on burnt skin,

blink is the only movement i can make,
blister and *the time my partner returns* make the same meaning,

marigolds printed on the wall wear the colour of charred,
the clock has the steps of a ghost who bewilderingly escapes the house and can't,

water soils the throat and the throat wards the anger of silence,
my painkiller erases a few letters of my name,

the face of my mother when she was twenty-one,
the year she never thought a heartbeat would mean everything—

from the memory of a blood clot somewhere in my skull
the present of the future is why animals are running away from sound.

Methodologies of Survival

first, i wake without looking for the morning. i clear the windows
of my eye glass. three past twelve before sunrise, clothes to hang,

my partner's breakfast. what did i do the last time he hit me?
i nailed it in my mind—how my mother is the only sunshine that builds a future.

no, that's not it. what did i do the last time he hit me?
i told myself to dance with cruelty, if i can't escape it.

to a birthmark that lives in a transgressed body,
the future is a storm without a name,

watching every move i make.
so i fix a table that broke on my body. replace the mirror.

quiet my anger.
i have to do these things over and over

until they forget what sunshine means.
in the future i will wake up knowing i will never be there.

i carry ninety-six two-litre bottles of water
from the first to our apartment in the third floor, six bottles each hand per hike.

i move without waiting for wounds to make their healing. i scrub the floor,
from the toilet to the small storage room, the ridges, the oily deep edges

till the outer skin of my fingers peels off, pill bug remains stuck
in the bristles of the brush. sweat slides beside my nostrils.

cleaning like this is a way of bending swords. i debone a fish
in the dark. i conserve energy, or more like i cut down on utility bills.

i dice tomatoes, season the shank. i run to the convenience store
for lemon juice—a brown young man, perhaps a student blinks his red eyes

and hands me a receipt. i knead the dough. i tell my hands they don't live
in their own house when they tremble in the steam of a boiling beef stock.

i should be done when everyone else is just starting.
before he rises, i lit a cigarette

at the back of our apartment building where trash is collected.
in that quiet is a chair beside a tree, the most precious room i know.

i hum to the child in me. i say their name just to hear it. i say it very gently.
in my mouth i plant the miracles that did not become time.

the meaningful expressions
that cruelty had suppressed. i see my father,

if he were here, praying,
strumming a guitar, speaking in different tongues. but i have to iron clothes.

unclog the pipes. pull the wires of light from my sleeves.
i don't think about the past and don't talk

about floods, coercion, killings.
of course, i know that i now belong to nightmares.

he pulls what he wants to wear from the closet. he sits to eat.
i tell him by lowering my eyes

that milk is warm, always warm
even if i'm thinking of killing myself.

i take a morning bus to go to work. i fall asleep to the sound of tinnitus.
i take a night bus

to do more work. i bleach curtains and socks. i soak his gym pants
in water with vinegar and baking soda. he should be back soon.

i fry the chicken.
i mix yogurt and spices. i will never need to remind myself

how i tried to be the most human i could ever be.
he opens the door and i see

in his face what's so familiar, something that threw my head

into that pit of animal cries. my chest thickens like smoke above a house on fire.

i breathe through my mouth.

i watch him untie his shoelace like i'm a boy surrounded by wolves.

i am liquid.

i am fluid,

poured and slowly moving,

oil in the colour of oak,

my throat a tasteless stream

a burbling sound without sleep

for how do you unshackle water in chains?

when do you say that all is over?

Chrome Incognito Searches in the Last Forty-Eight Hours

- ☐ the kind of pot steadily resistant to extreme heat
- ☐ how to make an authentic Pakistani dish if you are non-Pakistani and not in Pakistan to please your Pakistani partner
- ☐ where to buy basmati rice in Korea
- ☐ number of boiling hours needed to tenderise beef
- ☐ number of typhoons in the Philippines the year i left the country
- ☐ number of children immediately bereaved, fatherless when American ships left the base
- ☐ lordship as American legacy in our collective feeling of spurn
- ☐ is it true: white supremacy is normally disguised as aide in the global south
- ☐ if white people built classrooms in rural Philippines, how can you convince yourself schools are safe
- ☐ words meaning inconsolable lamentation in Philippine languages no English will capture
- ☐ is it abuse when my partner secretly installed a spyware in my phone
- ☐ monuments of slave-owners we didn't know patrolling in our minds
- ☐ how to rid the body of ancient poisons it tirelessly serves for
- ☐ is it true: domestic helper is another term used to insult Filipinos since Spanish colonialism
- ☐ how many people watched the first execution of a Filipina on death row overseas in 1995
- ☐ how is my alien registration card number invisibly tattooed across my mouth

- what is the polite way of saying *i live here, in this floor, in the silver lining of this fatigue*
- how to read “Sold into Syrian servitude, Filipina workers tell of abuse, rape and imprisonment” without paid subscription to The Washington Post
- name of the Filipina found dead in a Saudi hotel
- is it still a joke when my partner has likened me to a dog the fourth time
- is it true: as of 2011 there are 7, 550 marriage immigrants from the Philippines in Korea
- how much is a Filipina bride today according to Gwijunghan Mail-Order Bride Catalogue
- how sex has changed the face of empires, how labour of love swells the power above me
- how the hand i give whilst kneeling, my partner’s bile dripping on my lips, running down the misty cleft in my chest is prodigiously complicit to the continuation of slavery
- when carotid arteries broke loose after a neck blow
- when you have a strong feeling you’re going to die in the hands of your partner
- how to teach kindness
- how to teach revolution
- how to bring ourselves to some future
- how the future is still about our body, except only its ruination
- how much coldness can fit in us
- Joanna Demafelis
- Filipina maid found dead inside a freezer more than a year since she was reported missing

- a crate for a coffin unloaded by a windlass from a plane to the ground in 49 recurring seconds
- the summary of the first-person singular if brown, ribs kibbled from torture, kidneys flat said the autopsy as if once they were spinning on a turnpike and squashed by moving cars
- if i died the same way how could i let the officials know i have my own savings account they must hand to my sister so my family would know i've always thought of them

Future in My Sleep Where the First Filipina Domestic Helper Was Hanged

In memory of Flor Contemplacion—

hushing rain from a looped video deliquesced in chill at twelve degrees enveloping
a body at the bed's comfort centre, sandwiched by two goose feather pillows—

that's how it should be said my online shrink to help me sleep. it's time to change
your environment as much as possible. it's time to control what you can.

as i close my eyes i whisper the names of people who didn't have the life to live
with me. Faith. River. Bien, the Spanish for *good*, but in Vietnamese it means *sea*.

many years ago i went out with friends to swim. a boy out of school as young as
nine approached me to sell his pearls. Samael, the boy who sailed on a small boat

with his brothers from the other end of the world, taught us two ways to know
if a pearl is authentic: one by fire, the other by scratching it against human teeth.

i take the smallest from his plastic box, about the size of a Barramundi eye and
scratch it against my teeth, which means i'm sleeping and far from a few i trust.

my hands have surrendered to currents i could not stop. horizons fell over sharp
mountains even wild boars couldn't have ever reached. friends disappeared

fast as birds that had no chance against modern weapons. lands are still slaves.
i'm so worn of looking for resolve in a breaking planet. the past cracks into air.

a sound reveals a shadow. a shadow welds a wall. a wall extends a thick handgrip
around my neck pushing me through a long corridor and pins me to bed for hours,

tightening and tightening until i wake.

The Farthest

In memory of Ebeng Mayor, a transman who lived in Quezon City, Philippines. His body was discovered on 20 May 2021. He was raped, mutilated, and murdered.

a year later in August, a man was found dead, crushed pebbles stuffed in his mouth, clothes ripped off, soaking in his own blood the way we found the Philippines in the hands of white men.

/

body, both ends of you were ruined. o how the dead are still thirsty.

/

future, when you wake up, if you wake up, i will speak of nothing but how your hands were put away from you. future, you could have never been more wronged.

/

the autopsy report detailed the depth of every stab wound, unimaginable constellations of stabs, the deepest ran from the chest, severing internal organs like a litter hacked in half on their sleep.

/

death in violence is a queer body's name spelt as ebeng or norivie. but oh—voice slashed from breath, pull your burst mouth from the past slithering away and say your name again.

/

i curse the men who folded you in half and tied your neck to the void that swallowed you whole. a spider roams in their head, grief-possessed, pulling threads into a wild forest that traps them.

/

if you want a chair, you can take the lake. sit upon the waters and let our
tongues know where you are.

/

your mother still awake, dialling your number everyday. she stands on a
table to be closer to the sky, head pulled behind, face swollen in tears,
arms in the air to catch you again.

/

when the news ends without mentioning what happened to you, she smells
the clothes you've left behind, sinks her face upon them, listening to the
voluminous rain inside your body leaking like a house that has gone
through storms beyond repair.

/

fill my memory with the words you never have not once abandoned, how
to live with your own hands—to hold on to something the way a child would
not let go of a mother's finger—and how in that solitude to find earth.

/

clip your shadow to trees. whisper to us at night so we dream of your voice.
teach crows the undecipherable songs made up of dead names so we are
always disturbed.

/

point us to whom we have lost. look at us as we eat the darkness that puts
crackles in our head. point us to what we have lost in you.

/

forget about your shoes. walk with me and let us hope it is a real door
we will reach elsewhere.

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