

### **Abstract**

*Archive Pelagic* collects poems recounting how the desire for containment and cohesion materializes in unforeseen and unsettling ways at the convergence of the Pacific and the Visayan Philippine. Dwelling upon this zone where the binding of humans and nonhumans most strongly pivots on the drive and drag of the sea, the suite experiments on (archi) pelagic figurations that attempt to articulate the continuities between stories and histories across scales of body, place, and planet.

### **Keywords**

island, sea, Leyte and Samar, planet, disaster, human-nonhuman histories

# ARCHIVE PELAGIC

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## SEAFLOOR TREMBLING

Terráqueo, quea. *adj.* Tuna ug dagat, calibutan.  
*Diccionario Español-Bisaya para las*  
*Provincias de Samar y Leyte*

A faint glow below  
urges Dang to let go of  
the outrigger  
and glide toward  
the light, now scintillating.

He takes one breath  
as deep as he dives  
in a single stroke  
swiftly darting through  
a sea of sardines.  
Silvery shoal suddenly  
scatters, turns  
iridescent, before  
regathering.

Bubbles slide across  
his patterned face  
as he slowly exhales  
to fall and drift closer to  
the seabed.

In an instant  
out of rocks and coral  
reefs spring things fizzy,  
fishes flitting just in time to flee  
the billow of sand, powdery  
cloudy blue  
—a temblor  
underwater.

Dang flings his arms  
and legs, finding his  
bearings, treading  
fluid, turned turbid,  
but things settle  
faster than he  
reaches the surface.

Gazing at the  
seafloor, he discerns  
a new terrain, rotund  
fringed with limbs  
embryonic, emerging  
from the floor  
a mound, a figure,  
a gargantuan  
crab.

Heading for the  
surface, he wonders  
how to have  
that cosmic catch.

## FIGURATIONS

Where you can see  
the sun soar  
and sink  
out of and into  
the sea.

Where you can amble  
from one side,  
feet buried in wet sand,  
then to the other where  
you can perch on the pier  
—all within less  
than half  
a day's time.

Where you can  
within a day or less  
walk all the way round  
collecting clams and cowries  
glances and utterances  
amid seaweed-  
entangled flotsam turned  
bricolage, wave-woven  
with barnacles and mesh  
and bottle cap and sea foam  
alongside a washed-up  
oarfish.

Here gather  
ships and shells,  
bare at times, at others filled,  
like the tide's ebb and flow  
that leave littoral lines  
ever shifting, and the body  
of land seeming  
to pulsate through

the body of water.

There lie  
other such bodies  
as if undulating, too,  
accordingly  
through a shared  
tentacular, aqueous  
embrace.

Or are they blotches  
on the face?  
*"Porô ha nawong,"*  
my sister says.

What islands are  
what islands do

AT SEA / ARCHIPELAGIC / RECOLLECTION

“Watch the waves come,” you say,  
 “face the sea, not the shore.”  
 Turning, I oblige, bouncing thrice  
 as water now is neck-deep for me.  
 Far from the caustics on the bright coast,  
 we feel the cold seafloor with our feet.  
 A wave approaches, and I jump as it hits like  
 a wall of water on my throat. I look at  
 you laughing, your hair wet and reaching  
 your lashes, teeth lustrous like seashells.  
 How unnerving to hear this blithe chortle and  
 be a noob in the presence of a stellar swimmer.  
 We feel the water’s pull as the next wave comes.  
 Breathing in sharply, this time I sink instead of springing  
 and catch a glimpse of you in a kaleidoscope  
 of light, bubbles, blue.  
 Back on the surface I feel the water’s sting on my eyes  
 fading as you grow clearer and we  
 slide into another swell.

In my mind you stay  
 not like the heft of thoughts that weigh one down  
 unlike the tinge of envy your calm face effects, not even  
 like lucid daydreams manipulable to the heart’s content.  
 You speak things the way rain pellets the skin  
 only instead of dissipating  
 the words splinter and break through  
 the flesh, lingering there like the spines of urchins  
 that make a dwelling of  
 the swelling sole.  
 In my mind  
 you stay as fragments  
 diasporic  
 taking root  
 —pieces I can enumerate  
 and palpate  
 but never  
 bring together.

## UNFURLING

“The geography of disaster is an *archipelago* of isolated misfortunes.”

After days of gathering  
strength from heated high sea  
spiraling wind and water  
meet solid ground.

Letting sea swell  
with oceanic weight  
higher and higher from  
the gulf to the bays scouring  
seabed corals stones rocks seagrass  
jetsam mollusks fishes all welter  
with the waves weaving their fingers into  
coves crevices estuaries streets cities designed  
for destruction oblivious to their terraqueous  
histories while wind and water keep  
memory of where to flow through  
the ways the turn of this world  
and the lay of this land  
lead them

As the spiral is spun elsewhere by this  
spinning planet everything thrown  
together everywhere from one coast  
to another all mangled rubble entangled  
with bodies of friends of strangers of  
boats of families of pigs of cables of  
snakes of neighbors of trees of dogs all  
rinsed and filled with water  
briny like blood

Pelagic heritage unfurled  
in a sudden filigree of worlds.

## MECHANICS

### Step 1:

Examine your body for any gash or fracture. If in fatal condition, call out for help from anyone in the household. If able, search for members of said household. If you find them alive, plan a safe way out together. If trapped, find the most secure location. And wait.

### Step 2:

If able, wade through the flood; watch out for debris. Make your way to the main road.

Clue: It is the area where the tallest mounds of wreckage sit.

Climb and sift through the rubble and rubbish, taking hold of things that could be of use, e.g., food items and tools.

### Step 3:

Seek shelter in a structure that is stable or only partially damaged. This may be the house of relatives, friends, or strangers. At this point, mutual support and cooperation are crucial for gathering provisions. Collect critical information about the arrival and distribution of aid. And wait.

Important: Looting is forbidden and punishable by law and shame.

Optional: Head to the airport for possible evacuation flights. Line up and wait.

### Step 4:

Once roads become more passable, walk to search for relatives residing in the next towns. Start as soon as sunrise, and bring water and food for the journey. Expect extreme weather conditions and exhaustion. Pay attention to your surroundings. Always make thorough risk calculations before taking any action. Be careful not to step on blunt objects and unclaimed bodies. If able, help others who may be in need. If in need, seek help from others. If you reach your relatives' house and find them



alive, stay the night to exchange updates and discuss plans. If you find their remains, gather them in one place and cover them with blankets. Then immediately plan your way back.

Optional: Stay the night and grieve.

Step 5:

If you made your way back, provide those in your company with news about what you saw. On the third week, a bit of power will be restored and you, too, will hear news about your own place on live broadcast. You might catch yourself in one footage. For the first time, you will watch streets you have treaded on national and international television. You will hear toponyms in your islands pronounced in new ways. Those in power will argue, and old alliances will grow stronger faster than when the rations come because the rations, too, will get caught in said alliances and be dispensed correspondingly or hoarded for mold to flourish or for starving rats to survive. The sky will be busy with helicopters, the ground ruled by war trucks, the sea studded with buoyant bodies, the air pregnant with miasma, and the world abuzz with reportage on all these, stirring talks on treaties, frameworks, and protocols, before giving way to the next big thing, e.g., terraforming Mars.

Step 6:

Choose your character: Survivor or victim?

If you choose to be a survivor, your resilience is inspiring and paradigmatic of your nation's indomitable spirit.

If you choose to be a victim, your victimhood results from:

- A. your own region's hazardous geography and location
- B. your own people's negligence and corruption
- C. both

POETRY

Note: It is possible to simultaneously be a survivor and a victim if you consider yourself a survivor of A or B or both.

Step 7:

Whichever you selected in Step 6, you should move to the foot of the mountain. Evacuate the city's coasts. For here will rise seawalls that shall counter future walls of water. This rough sea will be levelled and on it will rise your new city. Just wait.

Step 8:

Tell each other stories. Tell each other's stories.

Step 9:

Commemorate. Light candles along the streets. Whisper prayers.

Important: Hope your house holds.

Step 10:

Repeat Step 1 (if able).

## ARCHIVE PELAGIC

Why do you know so  
little about your place?  
How could you have  
heard more of Rushmore  
than this highland range  
that halves this island  
like a torso speaking  
two tongues—on one side  
Waray, on the other Kanâ?  
Have you thought about  
how these names try to splice  
two things through a shared  
insularity? See this facade of  
the Leyte Provincial Capitol  
flanked by Magellan and  
McArthur. Why is your  
history monumentalized  
this way? Have you heard  
of how that military leader  
walked on sea surface like  
a basilisk when he returned  
to your shores? Like your  
Christ Child that never sank  
but stayed buoyed up till  
a fisherman from an islet  
chanced upon it. Do you think  
the image of the Santo Niño  
got to lay eyes on Suluan or  
Mazaua before Magellan  
left it in Sugbu? What winds  
carried them to this speck  
on the face of the earth?  
Face the sea where the sun  
soars in Sulangan and swim  
straight along the same  
latitude, 11th parallel north,

until you reach the next shore.  
Have you arrived at an island  
or a continent? Do you tell  
the difference based on  
a map or the firmament,  
the sand in your eyes or  
the water in your lungs?  
If the world spun the  
other way, would cyclones  
and fleets on this ocean  
have drifted differently?  
Here where the sun and  
the sea take turns rising,  
Alcina and Algué, two  
centuries apart, spoke of the  
same peril—*montañas de agua*.  
Often you would read these  
things in archives mountains  
and seas away. At times  
the distance is a peculiar  
permutation of letters  
throughout which you  
fumble. Other times the  
distance is an itching  
mind. But in most cases,  
the archive is this world.  
Study the signatures it  
carries and creates.  
Can you read them?  
Ages ago how could one  
have known that storms  
take the form of one's hair  
whorl? Does intuition matter  
the way metaphor does  
as flashes across circuits  
in your head? They say the sea

does not mirror; it scatters.  
But doesn't understanding  
stand underneath? As you  
once recalled, "History  
is sub-marine"—confusing  
what Walcott says of the sea  
with where Brathwaite locates  
unity. For this constellation  
you had Glissant to blame  
or thank. And you wonder  
of the undertow of this sea  
of histories and if continents  
sit on islands all along atop  
a more viscous profundity.

## GOING BLIND

Imagine going irremediably  
blind three days from now.  
What would you do?

I would spend today  
by taking him to the beach  
at ten this morning  
to the same spot  
where we could watch  
that edge of land  
across the glittering sea  
that appears to hover  
over water and  
debate one last time  
whether it's a cliff  
or Fata Morgana.  
Then, maybe still  
without a clear winner,  
we'd walk back home,  
where we could go on  
speculating about  
other things.

The next day,  
I'd greet Monkey,  
my cat, and marvel  
at her eyes for hours.  
They would glint green, brim  
with vim, and seem riverine.  
I'd study the lines  
on her tabby fur and see  
how they're echoed  
by the variegated streaks  
on Mama's house plants.  
And she'd grumble once more  
about the cat toppling them.

## PAGTIKABUTÁ

Hunahunaa daw kun mabubúta ka na gud  
pag-abot hin tulo ka adlaw.  
Mag-aano ka man?

Yana nga adlaw  
dadad-on ko hiya ngadto ha baybayon  
hit alas-diyes hit aga  
ngadto't lugar  
nga makikit-an nam  
adto nga tumoy hit tunà  
tabok hit nag-iiringgat nga dagat  
nga baga nalutaw  
ha bawbaw hit katubigan ngan  
makausa na la magdedebáte kami  
kun pangpang ba ito nga hataas  
o Fata Morgana.  
Kahuman, bis' siguro  
waray la gihap klaro nga daog,  
magbabaktas kami tiuli,  
ngan ha balay mapadayon  
panhunahuna hin  
iba pa nga mga butang.

Kinabuwasan,  
kukumustahon ko hi Monkey,  
it ak misay, ngan pagtitinan-awon  
it iya mga mata hin pira ka oras.  
Manraranggat hin lunhaw,  
mabántad sugad hit subâ.  
Pagkikinitaon ko it mga lagda  
ha iya barahibo  
nga magpupurupareho  
hiton mga dekolór nga porma  
ha katanoman ni Mama,  
nga ginpipinantumba hin nga misay.  
Asya hi Mama maaaringit na liwat.

But I'd just grin and look  
into her eyes, too.  
And let her know  
I'm going blind and that  
she'd have to find another way  
to say "you see?"

And finally  
on the day I'd stop seeing,  
I'd go to the garden  
bringing our biggest mirror  
and sit in front of it, looking  
at my reflection surrounded  
by leaves. And wait  
for that very moment.  
To see how it happens.  
Will I slowly slip  
into my background,  
my face merging  
with foliage?  
Like optical mixing  
in viewing Seurat's  
*l'Île de la Grande Jatte*.  
Like an atoll  
amid rising sea.  
Or it might be swift.  
Like when you suddenly  
awaken from a deep sleep  
and it's pitch-black  
and you try to find  
your bearings,  
but in a world  
unfolding anew.

Pero mangisi la ak ngan makita  
gihap ha iya mata.  
Ngan susumatan ko hiya  
nga mabubuta na ak ngan nga  
kikinahanglanon liwat niya ibahón  
it iya pagsiring hin "kita ka?"

Tas hito na ngahaw  
nga adlaw nga mabubuta ako,  
makadto ak ha at garden  
bitbit it at pinakadako nga espiho  
tas malingkod ak atubang hini,  
pagkikinitaon it ak alidagiran nga  
ginsasalirungan hin katanaman.  
Tas paghuhulton it nga takna.  
Para masabtan kun paano mahihitabo.  
Madalusdos ba ak hin hinayhinay  
hit ada't ak luyo ngan  
it ak nawong masasagol  
hit kadahonan?  
Baga hit pagsagol hit kolór ha mata  
kun ginlalantaw it kan Seurat  
*l'Île de la Grande Jatte*.  
Sugad hit takot  
ha butnga hit naghihinitaas nga dagat.  
O bangin ngayan malaksi la.  
Baga hit tigda ka nagmata  
tikang hin halarom nga pagkaturog  
tas masirom  
ngan ginkakapkap mo  
it im kalugaringon nga kabutang,  
lugaring ha kalibutan  
nga mapakilala utro.

### Notes

1. The dictionary definition used as an epigraph in “Seafloor Trembling” is taken from *Diccionario Español-Bisaya para las Provincias de Sámar y Leyte*, ed. Antonio Sanchez de la Rosa (Manila: Imp. y Lit. de Santos y Bernal, 1914), s.v. “Terráqueo, quea.”
2. “Seafloor Trembling” is inspired by a detail in Dulce Cuna Anacion’s account “The Legend of Mount Danglay or How Tacloban Got Its Name,” in *Our Memory of Water: Words After Haiyan*, ed. Merlie M. Alunan (Naga City: Ateneo de Naga University Press, in collaboration with Leyte Normal University, the University of the Philippines–Visayas, and Katig Writers’ Network Inc. of Samar and Leyte, 2016), page nos. 228-29.
3. The epigraph in “Unfurling” is taken from Kenneth Hewitt’s essay “The Idea of Calamity in a Technocratic Age,” in *Interpretations of Calamity from the Viewpoint of Human Ecology*, ed. Kenneth Hewitt (Massachusetts: Allen & Unwin Inc., 1983), 29.