

**Vincen Gregory Yu**

An  
Ecological  
Disaster

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When my father starts his prayers,  
it is an ecological disaster:  
a boulder tumbling on the face  
of a naked mountain, baked  
to a perfect brown by the sun.  
His words, needle-thin and ripe  
with intention, plummet like acid rain  
at the end of a drought.  
*Boys must be boys*, he says,  
to no particular name.  
In my head, the rain gains strength,  
scalding the sandy surface  
of sinful dreams. It isn't normal,  
is what he means, like snow  
that falls on the desert floor  
and stays. When I leave  
the house, it is a nightmare  
for my father, who must think  
I tumble from one bar to the next,  
from one lover to another,  
and so he spends the night  
staring out the window, while I  
spend my money on keys  
to rooms I'd never own.  
What's natural is preordained:  
This, my father does not know.  
The fall of a drop on parched soil,  
or a boy's heart into another's arms,  
is a story as ancient as *amen*,  
and the storm that crumbles  
rocks into grains of dirt  
is as true and pure as his oldest  
wish.

## *Men in the Woods*

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I remember Julio: scar beneath a mournful  
eye, and scowl on a face of china white.  
A lighter peeking from his pocket the night  
we met. Soaked shirts and sharp breaths  
in a glade of leaves and fallen fruit.  
Dante, too, and the dandelion fluff  
on his crown of silver hair. His panting,  
I can't forget, gray-maned animal  
in leather pants, and shower of spit  
with each thrust. Most of all, Gael,  
flat on a stretcher, half-conscious, his leg  
spurting blood, his head all blues  
and crusting red. Took a shortcut that led  
to brittle earth, then a ten-foot drop  
on logs and rocks. His scream I heard,  
but who called the ambulance, I don't recall.

At break of dawn, they let us go, but not  
before a round of questions, fired  
at breakneck speed. Took our names,  
but not what games we'd played, then sirens  
breaking the silence. Nobody offered us  
a ride, but we didn't mind. Better to walk  
and shake off the night, embrace the cold  
spring morning all the way to the nearest  
bus stop. Sunshine, soft as angels, fell  
on our faces, casting our devils aside.  
Nobody spoke; we only listened  
to one another's breathing, counting  
our blessings. Jangle of coins in our pants,  
hastily buttoned, caked with mud.

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# *To Build a House*

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we first build a ship. My father points  
to the slow unmasking of the night sky,  
shedding its cape of stars over parabolas  
of mountains. He tells me the story

I've heard many times, how the king  
of Athens sent his army to the woods  
to bring home all the trees, each log  
skinned of bark, flattened and polished

to rectangular planks. The hour too early  
for breakfast or tired stories, there's no  
telling what he knows, but I know he smells  
the whiskey and weed on my jacket.

Yet he chooses to say nothing, as do I,  
our mutual silence as cobwebbed  
as the ship on Theseus's port, welcoming  
a new plank to its soggy skeleton

until nothing remained of its old frame,  
letting the builders strip it naked  
rather than complain. I think of words  
that hurt, like seawater feasting

on the hull of a tethered ship, and sip  
my coffee instead. What does one say  
to weathered kings, to fathers whose lives  
are built on pretense? He points to a stain

on the linoleum, and I nod, shifting  
my gaze downwards, guided by the ring  
on his crooked finger: the rusting toaster,  
the threadbare curtains, the staircase

in need of replacing, every surface  
of this house torn apart in his mind  
with the speed of one getting rid  
of a sinking ship, our most sacred parts

so willfully effaced. Might as well  
begin with *How have you been?*  
*Tell me everything.* Tell me of your days  
in prison, and I'll tell you today

it's been three years since I buried  
my mother. And maybe we can skip  
the more somber parts, the years  
marked by your cold absence.

We begin with small things, words  
light as feathers, maybe a smile,  
maybe pardon for remembered sins.  
Until gradually our vessel takes form,

its stern gilded with the faces of future  
kings, its mast soaring to the ether.  
Until finally, we set sail, wordless,  
toward a home we no longer know.

## *Gallbladder*

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First, fix on the valley beneath  
the ribs. Know the weakest spot,  
where flesh will most likely give.  
The skin is thin and breaks once  
pricked by nail or blade or pick.

Pick his frame, framed between  
metal bars. Memorize his outline  
in the dark. Often, the lights  
are dimmed, if not out. Often  
the others are down, if not high.

Aim the shiv, whittled from the edge  
of a toothbrush, like a dart practiced  
and hurled. Anticipate the hushed  
thud of the stab—muscle pierced  
as fish speared in a shrinking pond.

Your part is done, now play  
the clueless one. Turn in bed,  
facing the wall, and heed the lure  
of sleep, as war spreads from  
cell to cell, con versus con.

Watch as circles multiply on bodies  
in the showers. Listen at night  
to screams muffled by a shirt or a palm  
pressed against the lips, then see  
next morning who walks with a limp.

See to it they do not stop until  
they've come for him: the whole  
of him, the bits of him, his heart  
and lungs and liver, his gallbladder  
and the intestines coiled in his gut.

Make more shivs. Nick your neighbor's  
razor. Bribe the lout above your bunk  
to do the nicking for you. Fifteen years  
means a wife all wrinkled, and a son  
all grown and smart, who'll look you

in the eyes with no hint of recognition,  
and he bought that for you—a decade  
and a half wasted in this ten-by-ten  
with three other men. So return to him  
what is owed: Keep him high, adrift

in some make-believe cloud, thinking  
you'll still run for him when both of you  
get out. Wait until the dead of night,  
when he's dead asleep and can't run  
from you. Then take your aim.

Four in the morning, a man begins  
a hymn on a harp. Blanket of snow

on the pavement, basket of blooms,  
pink and white, in the absence of light

shapeless, like a newborn melody  
from way back when the hour

was slow, the ether pink and white,  
the air thick with his wife's perfume.

Notes pricking on his open wounds,  
bleeding a minute trail of words.

*Children*, for one, though they had  
none. Now a note folding

into a syllable landing square  
on his tongue. Must be the taste

of warmth, bubbles in an evening  
bath, a rubber duck between

slippery legs, fists of inch-long fingers.  
Must be nice, this sight in a tub,

tiny bodies to rub afterwards.  
If only she had more patience,

waited for this song now breaking  
loose from the back of his throat,

now more croak than croon.  
Old tune, older than the sky

on his forehead, the lines inscribed  
beneath his eyes, the quiver in his bones.

*Pink  
and  
White*

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*After Mookie Katigbak-Lacuesta*

## Cul-de-sac

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There's logic to this place: how these slender streets  
bleed into one another, concrete weaving into concrete,  
the way nerves entwine within layers of tissue,  
the way familiar structures disappear in plain sight.

*Turn right* doesn't mean that time we stood under  
the lamppost's amber glow, wishing the rain would end  
that row over something small. The chip on the china,  
perhaps, the sunflower wilting on the terrace.

*Turn right* means ten shots of whiskey without ice,  
humming something slow and dark and glum,  
like smoke trails at day's end, like an old house  
stricken with insomnia, wooden doors creaking

even with the gentlest wind. So when I told you  
I was never leaving, I was hoping you would get  
the smallness of my aim, not to confuse desire  
with devotion, the way night lights obscure details

of a face, a dress, the faded colors on street signs.  
Hoping you'd turn around, turn into the city  
I'd learned to love like our own child, this city  
of barren women, scarred, a free-for-all nursery.



On the way home, we passed the house with the red gate,  
the carved Virgin weeping upfront. While I whispered  
another prayer, plucked at random from my childhood,  
you said we were past reason. Then you turned left,

which made me think you had left for good.  
But you only wanted to see our old house  
one last time, at the cul-de-sac where nothing good  
ever happened. Where days were hard to recall,

they blended into one another, the way buildings start  
to look the same after so many years, the way, waking  
in the middle of the night, I can no longer tell our faces  
apart, or if you've already vanished, perhaps for good.