

Alfonso Manalastas/FACTORY OF ALLEGED VIRTUES

Spontaneous Human Combustion

In the intersection of souls
you will find that death—languid in its process
and ephemeral in its pace—is a conquest
sought only by the living.

You will discover the last splinters
of a life half-lived, how the news
of one's birth was celebrated
by the whole barrio, feasts mounted

by the same eager hands that now push
dirt and rubble over your decaying body.
They say in death, hair and fingernails
continue to grow. What comfort

it brings me to learn that long after
our passing, some part of us will persist
to disrupt the communion of the living that
thrives and corrupts above.

If not in life, may we forfeit their dreams,
sanction their desires, may we
harpoon their deepest devotions and find
all this to be possible in death.

May we come to realize that the door
to heaven is an expressway toll gate,
clogged by the vehicles of a crowded city
emptied clean by the jubilant holidays.

If death is design, consider the car crash.
The weeping windshield. The greening
of the stoplight. Consider the coiled traffic
parting sideways for that one car

to make its way to the lamppost; its approach,
both swift and head on. Once, five friends
inside a car phoned me minutes
before they dived into a ditch

outside my hometown. All five make
it out alive. In keeping with tradition,
we celebrate the deaths that do not happen yet
(thank hospice workers, light a candle, etc.).

My mother reminds me had it been
any other circumstance, I would have wedged
my scrawny body between drunk friends
on the backseat of the same car, and who knows

if I come out as lucky. *Luck?*

Luck holds no power here. There are
no smoke alarms inside a gas chamber,
which is to say, what dies is meant to die.

In the intersection of souls
you will find that death is a skillfully crafted
chain-reaction of things. The word accident bears
no meaning to a hand that writes and revises.

The acid holes in my stomach have been written,
and so have the poison clouds in my lungs.
Among all spontaneous human combustions
recorded in history, the sixth

common characteristic is this: all bodies
leave a trail of greasy, fetid ashes
in the area of explosion.
The true tragedy of death isn't in the loss,

but in the utterances of such loss,
in the bent-backed tulips poised on our stones,
in how the living is left to clean up
what greasy, fetid mess we leave behind.

Juxtaposing Hotel Luna

1.

A blood splattered painting
hangs regally in a corridor:

increments of the artist's DNA,
some overt political message,

an antiquated brass frame,
deftness, dexterity, taste.

A woman in shiny pearl earrings
stays at the hotel, smokes Esse

along the cobblestoned streets
of Calle Crisologo, a microcosm

of Spanish occupation in rural
Ilocos where a plume of smoke

erupts from her mouth, lungs
brimming with ash and heat.

The rate goes: four thousand
pesos a night, not bad

for its middle-class occupants;
a pool, an intercontinental breakfast,

a blood splattered painting
perched outside your door

to decorate your mornings
with, as a warning, perhaps.

2.

We will stroll around this city
made of stone. We will meet

at 8:30 sharp, travel by foot past
old walls, red bricks leaking out

of concrete like gushing skin.
We will have steaming white rice

for stamina, meat in distinctly
Vigan sauté for protein, something

sumptuous that will say we are
neither of this land nor new to it;

what hybrids can find love in a city
that sells horseshit and decay

by the pound, and be so in love, still,
that we are drunk after two beers,

unperturbed by the click-clack of
the *kalesa*, how spit and sweat are traded

in gleaming currency, how we barter
for more as soon as we run out.

The hotel staff will find our sheets
disparate from their appointed beds,

a crescent yellow forming outward
from the center—nothing that good

detergent can't fix in Hotel Luna
where it's business as usual.

3.

The philosophy of forgiveness
resides not in the abandonment

of history, or the virtuous denial
of our pain, but in the cruelty

of remembering, how we preserve
the cages we were slaughtered in,

how we bend our knees in worship
of the wealth that flourished

on our hunger, how we build highways
out of stones we collected on our broken

backs, how we slice off
our tongues to learn the language

of our enemies, how we create
monuments out of bomb shelter

ruins, how thirty pesos per person
is what it costs to enter bell towers

built in the names of those who
enslaved us, how so willingly

we surrender our last change, how we take
the shape of our oppressors and sell

it back to them, complemented with
the finest hotel arrangements our

tempered sense of selves can offer,
certain that they come back for more.

Japanese Coastline

If we found a way to reverse-engineer
the bomb, to gather all its ammunition
in our cupped and careful hands until
it is small enough to airlift home, will
it also reverse-engineer the bombing?
If grazing through its wreckage was
anything like scooping sand together,
will we come up with ample particles
to rebuild the houses it dissolved?
If we round up every hand that had
anything to do with its invention, every
fleeting thought, every suggestion, will we
have enough people for the search party?
If we manage to find what we lost in the
fire, still bodies in wrecked skin pumiced
by the color of rubble, will the Soul be
able to navigate its way out of the smoke?

A Study of Anger

I.

I cannot say fully
that I understand anger

Is it the carnal form of hate
distinguished by the potent diction,
almost eloquence,
of how it wrecks

Is it a world upon the discovery of fire,
how ruthlessly and decidedly
it scorched the tongues of those
who dared lick its face

Is it the wearing off of the valium,
the violence in which the veins
protest the sober submission
eclipsing the human soul

Is it a dying language; or
a language fervent and festering
in its attempt to be alive; or
a language so alive, the gods are
hell-bent on killing it

II.

Once

I took my anger on a field trip
to the largest labor force known to man:
a factory of alleged virtues;
its business, to sanitize anger
to exhume it from, and for, the human body

No silver was to be offered,
only that anger be traded
for penance
for mercy
for gift cards

The gunfire backdrop unlearns
its coarse and callous ways,
the blaring sirens slither
through the cracks of Metro Manila traffic,
blood becomes the final coat finish
of a sturdy road

I walk home with a newly prescribed dictionary
—thick, glossy,
the word *anger* missing from its pages
I stagger toward conviction hoping
to find some semblance,
only conviction is anger's distant cousin
from New York; Milan;
somewhere First World

III.

The Bisaya word for anger is *sukô*
I live in a city whose language
desecrates my native tongue,
softens my anger inside a petri dish
and calls it giving up

Anger still sits heavy at the backs
of our throats—swollen and tangled, nuzzling
at the prim of these windpipes
we so desperately choke back at the dinner table,
that our mouths shatter
upon the saying of grace

There is no god in this city,
no benevolent one, at least
only a wasted blue collar worker of a god:
limping, middle-aged, about to lose his job

He carries the weight
of all our genocides,
our tyrannies,
and our civil wars to the doorstep,
an uninvited guest knocking for bread

The Moon Addresses her Enemies

“In 1958, at the height of the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union developed secret plans for an unprovoked nuclear strike against [the moon].”

—The Atlantic, 5 April 2017

I see you, clad in metal badges pinned to green,
a troop of the finest men marching at your
command and disposal, your finger—foolish
and condescending—pointed at my face, as if

to question my place among the stars. I see you,
donned in holy robes, scepter, staff, the body
and blood of Christ for nourishment; your impulse,
the divine will of an imagined god. I see you,

gray suit and leather, sparking trade inequities
and carving hunger in the world's most remote.
This isn't the first time I've stumbled upon your
kind: specks scrambling like wildfire around Earth's

lush foliage, you come to me in many forms, from
many dynasties, across many centuries with the
credence and conviction that you will one day
see me fall and never rise again. How unabashed

you were after setting fire to the women of your
people: witch, gypsy, harlot, whore, you aim for
me—your planet's lone companion—looking to
burn down what you cannot defeat. Or, looking to

burn down what you cannot attain. As with the soft
outer layer of an eggshell, you mistake my skin
for something decadent, brittle, can be cracked open
by force except something inside refuses to be naked.

Do you despise the lighthouse I become at night?
How it denies you the power you hold in the dark?
How it clothes your victims from the nakedness
you inflict? Do you despise

how it unrapes them?

I orbit around your seas, your valleys, your deserts,
beckoning women across six continents to bleed
in the parts you want to conceal the most.
Their bodies—diminutive in size and heedless of their

power—are vessels of a life force unbreakable, like a
rock in space whose permanence gloats boisterously
against your quiet mortality. O, how jealous you
must be that a decade from now, you will set forth

on an expedition to plant a steel rod on my surface.
You will send two of your best men to X-ray my deepest
secrets, chart my vast expanse, deface my solitude
with your star-spangled banner. Loud and liquid,

the story of your bounty will be spilled at every dinner
table, how man alone tamed and conquered the
undying beast in the sky. My vanity, to be televised
for a world that has forgotten what gravity I hold

in my navel, what light I carry in my breasts, what
succor I bring to the rising of the tides. Yours, after all,
was not the first finger to be pointed at my face.
I've seen them from kings whose crowns bleached

to rust, thrones crumbled to ash, men shriveled
to gray, and soon, you will be, too—but I will be
the same moon coasting through the night whose flight
is yours to observe only from a distant telescope.

Heritage

Mother is an artist;
spits paint on canvas from her waxed lips
and mosaic heart,
builds entire rose gardens from scratch
by way of brushstrokes
—she knew how to grow a flower
long before she discovered soil.
Nurture is imagination plus a steady hand:
sprouts but never withers,
blossoms but never wilts.
Mother,
she strokes my hair with the same hand,
the same earnestness; puts me to sleep
with a brand-new rose garden to dream of.
A new dirt to nurse and embellish
and I am no work of art.

Father is an artist;
spills music across the living room floor
like welcome floodwater
—a tall glass of Motown and French Jazz.
Drop a needle to a spinning record
and the ghost of the late Sinatra
ruptures, ravages,
then softly trickles out.

There is humming and whistling
and a dead American wailing from a turntable tube
that must lead back to the ocean.
Father,
he baptizes me with the drowning
of an old song. Every melody,
a new religion, a rebirth,
and I am no work of art.

I call my two elder siblings first and second drafts.
One was forged in a house fire
another in brimstone
and I am microwavable good,
which is to say,
I am muted and bleached
hands heavy with pristine precision.
I am still being rewritten as we speak

and what is to rewrite but to erase?
To remove components
until the rights ones stagger to their places.
Mortal as all things pulsating,
all things scientific,
I will sprout and I will wither,
I will blossom and I will wilt.

Music is liquid and lingual,
therefore the silence of a parched throat
means drought. Means thirsty.
Decades from now, when half the Earth
has evaporated bone-dry

Mother's gardens
will still sit in all the rooms of my suburban home.
Father's music, damp and humid,
sill echoing from some ocean many miles away.
And in a corner of a room,
the ink drips steady, foaming
at the mouth of a boy learning how to speak.