

### Abstract

Florian, a PLHIV born and raised in Baguio only to have become a foreigner upon his return after several years, wrestles with what it means to be healthy and alive with the virus. Nature uses him as a conduit to violently reclaim the flattened, commercialized City of Pines. “Eye of the Petalstorm” is a bittersweet love letter to Baguio, as well as a polemic against having to live under generation upon generation of oppressive and constrictive structures.

### Keywords

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nature reckoning,  
everlasting

# EYE OF THE PETALSTORM

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—Baguio in bloom, what a time to be breathing! Florian exclaims, virile and brimming, as the flowers, smooth on his skin, for now, to himself, adrift without Darien, by himself, and at the mercy of the crowd, footfalls on brick on asphalt on concrete over stripped earth, body after body after restless body, all under the same sky, not a cottony cloud in view, blue on blue on resplendent blue, ideal Panagbenga weather, Rosalie might remark, but really, fêting a flora fantasy of the summer capital, a marketing ploy, burying the reality of what it is, the ailing mountain city, place of his birth, home bitter home, until he departed then ultimately returned, and Florian knows he must take part, yet rooted to the spot, as he reconsiders, very much alive against the odds, though for how much longer, the persistent question weighing on his mind, and his answer? The remainder of a lifetime, the only true measure, time enough to transform.

Still, in the same spot, yet every body must pass, swaying Florian to and fro as everybody does; he ignores them, for the flowers alone beguile, and a dawning burgeons.

Indeed he was once moved by what he sees, this spectacle of nature and commerce surrounding him, and now, exalts in his mind, only the flowers in kaleidoscopic walls along the florid pathways of the park on yet another warmer morning despite the last gasps of amihan.

—Life! Nature! Foliorum in excelsis!—Until reaped then sold or left to rot by the dozen in pails of dingy water, the flowers accuse in response to Florian’s hollow veneration, barbed ultrasonic squeals that scratch at his skin—Cut to the very last and your fault! For what? A parade? To promote a lie? This city stinks of waste and exhaust and dirty money. O, the florality!

Guilty, he feels an itch, the many-hued garland of Everlasting flowers tattooed around his neck, now like a noose, prickle, pulse, and he flinches. Uprooted from his complicity, he flees.

—What’s wrong with him? one tourist wonders, a child to their parent.

—He must be sick! locals opine aloud to the shrubs they have in stock.

And Florian wanders Burnham Park and right into the memory of the previous night. All the while, the blooms inked on his skin throb and raise themselves up.

—Is that real? Or is it temporary? asked the first, a liminal lover, pointing at Florian’s Everlasting blossoms while supine on the bed, in the near-dark, the incandescence of the nightlight glowing on his naked body, lumpy and spread-eagle, with his lengthy uncut shaft, a loyyup half-hard, foreskin like a crown of tissuey petals around the bulbous head, a peeking bud.

Florian nodded, not in the mood for clean conversation, empty talk: how withering. Best to rebound right into the action and using his mouth to engulf Loyyup Bud’s cock, Florian nipped any budding exchange. The man’s girth gradually tumesced down then up and down his throat, stiff and thick as the trunk of a pine, and he nearly choked, yet made of sturdier stuff, he resolved, and was rewarded with euphoric moans. Ecstasy in stasis, until

—I have one too, interrupted the second, the younger, completing the ménage à trois, from the darker corner of the bare room, watching the other two who paused to consider.

Extending his arm to show them: tattooed on his skin, a trail of vines and leaves and sampaguita blossoms, small clusters of the night-blooming jasmine from inner wrist to elbow. Florian reached out to feel and to his mild curiosity they were bumpy to the touch.

—Keloid, Jasmine Tattoo explained, and Florian traced the black outlines shaping each corolla, the borders between smooth skin and raised flesh, and felt to him like real petals.

So, he gripped the younger man's arm tight and jerked him closer for a sloppy kiss. Loyyup Bud joined in and three tongues intertwined, sliding in and out and licking down and around, slobbering and wet, yet still thirsty for more, the two men, and Florian. Their lips left his as they licked across his jawline and from behind his ears down to his neck and around his nape and collarbone, until finally tonguing the colorful flowers, a marked trail on his skin. Florian pushed the two men down on the bed and took turns on each as they kissed and caressed each other and pulled his hair and pushed his head down, and then

—Think he's from around here? Loyyup Bud asked Jasmine Tattoo in Ilocano.

—Not sure, haven't heard him speak, the reply peppered with Kankana-ey.

—Are you a local? addressed to Florian, in English, then once more in Tagalog, and Florian hummed, but with his teeth scraped Loyyup Bud's unprotected frenulum.

—Careful! he yelped, cursing under his breath. Florian looked up and at them both.

—Shut up and suck each other's tongues, he ordered in a mix of English and Ibaloi. They obeyed and Florian kept on, with his mouth, breathing through his nose – but back in the present the scent is no longer sweat or iron or earth, more like bergamot and ylang-ylang, the particular blend of Darien's cologne, so the taste, like his musk – until salty and sticky sweet release.

—Do you have foreign blood? Loyyup Bud inquired, still in between breaths.

—You must have been a model, Jasmine Tattoo surmised, already recovered.

—What do you do?—Where are you from?

—I should go, Florian said and reached for his clothes. Shirt first, then shorts, then socks, trousers, and sweater; rushing at first and then, steadily, slower, much slower.

The two men still lying on the bed resumed: round two, just the two of them, with Florian as transitory voyeur, but in his mind, him and Darien, again, touching himself, entranced.

With his larger frame, Loyyup Bud wrestled Jasmine Tattoo down to all fours on the bed, the fitted sheet snapping out to expose the springy mattress squeaking underneath. He spread the younger's cheeks, and buried his face in the crack and his tongue deep into the exposed hole.

With one arm to keep himself steady on the bed, Jasmine Tattoo used his other, the adorned free one, to reach around and behind and push Loyyup Bud's face deeper in, and moaned, the native tongue of pleasure, looking Florian straight in the eye, inviting: rejoin, and live.

Florian inched closer, already undressing once more, but his eyes were drawn to the younger's arm as the tattooed vines grew longer, up and around, to the shoulder and further up to the neck and the face and unfurling even in the whites of the eyes and the irises fixed on Florian and blooming with petals full of life; down as well and around to the hand and to every finger and nail, blossoming new flowers; longer and living the vines like veins flowing blood into the very heart of desire, and too, onto the older, larger man's neck and down his back, and sprouting, a lush garden, and more buds, opening into many more petalous corollas then

Loyyup Bud lifted his face, spat once into Jasmine Tattoo, gripped his veiny shaft in his fist, teased the opening, prepping, to penetrate the entrance, and untranced Florian.

—Are you sure that's a good idea?

—I'm clean, Loyyup Bud assured.

—I am too, Jasmine Tattoo echoed. Are you?

—He looks clean.—You are, right?

—Clean, Florian hisses, then repeats the word in a snarl—Clean? What a devious insult, reinforcing an insidious dichotomy, with dirty as the opposite and dirty meaning sick; clean, therefore, well, and so dirty, therefore, unwell; diseased being dirty, and diseased inevitably leading to deceased. Is that all I can be? Clean-looking, ergo well; looking well, therefore free of this condition; and so, quantifiably alive? No room for living with what I have? Florian demands louder than he intends, punctuating the crescendo of his polemical soliloquy obliquely chastising the bustling cacophony all around: pedantic tourists from the lowlands or from abroad, on their rented bicycles and tricycles and sidecars close to falling apart, pedal away from him and toward the peddlers with the bright petals of their wares littered on the ground, and not just, but charred meat turning on vertical spits and dumplings in metal or bamboo steamers, smoke and steam overpowering the scent of flowers, with merchants hailing: buy, buy, buy.

And the perianths around Florian's neck grow brighter and fuller.

—Sir Florian! Rosalie, his eager protégé, calls out to him from across the street and rushes over. We've been looking everywhere for you. We need your final go-signal for the float.

—My go-signal? he responds nonplussed. Right. Right. No then.

—Excuse me? What do you mean?

—I mean let's not. Let's forget about the float and the parade and all this noise.

—Are you all right? she asks. Our client . . . We finally got . . . Plus the candidates will be there. This is a huge opportunity, and they're expecting us to deliver. We have to.

—What for? Florian asks, glancing at the megastore on its hill and hearing faint jingles.

—For the business. Or the city. And if neither of those, then for me, she argues.

—Right, he concedes, for she has worked so hard for it, they both have. Fine.

—Your car? she asks, and he laughs, spreading his arms at the crowds and the congestion of streets, busy as ever, over decades, over profit, busier and busier. She groans. Then let's run!

—Lead the way.

She does not move, however, and stares at his collar.

—Did someone give you a lei?

—A lay? What are you talking about?

—Around your neck. Everlasting isn't on-brand, we don't want to insult the clients, she says, and for the first time, Florian looks. His tattoo has erupted through his skin and sweater into full blooms, contracting and expanding with every breath. He should be afraid, but he believes

—It looks good on me, doesn't it?

—The palette is strictly perennials: white and blue, with yellow accents. You should remove that before the parade, she says and reaches to pluck. Florian swats her hand away.

—I'm the boss, I like it, it stays on. Got it?

—Our client won't like it, Rosalie counters, but eventually concedes, too concerned with more pressing matters. Good thing the colors pop against your skin.

—They really do, Florian beams. They make me look good. No, even better. Healed.

—What's wrong with your skin? Darien asked Florian just out of the shower, pointing to below his collarbone, a cluster of symptomatic red spots. How long have you had that rash?

—Buy us virgin coconut oil, and they'll disappear, Florian deflected. Or skin relief body wash. Moisturizing, the hypoallergenic kind. And no pine-scented shit that smells nothing like.

—Yan, don't be that way. Were they there during your last checkup? Did your doctor see them? Darien went on, home from work and worked up, question after question – Florian recalls this torrent, one humid afternoon, with him as recalcitrant suspect – and he replied in kind.

—Quit it, Dare. I'm not in the mood.

—Well, neither am I. How were your last results? What did your doctor tell you?

Silence between them then, in their rented apartment above Florian's stall, but from below, on the streets of Dangwa, the calls from other merchants still hawking flowers by the fistful, wafted through the open window, along with the stench of ephemeral bloom, filling the room, and the space between the lovers, together, and so many years, in that moment, already drifting apart.

Averting his eyes, avoiding Darien's, yet there was no escaping, everywhere around him, on frames, on shelves, on surfaces, on a still unmade bed and the smells that lingered, was them.

—Please, Yan, just tell me, Darien implored, pulling Florian by the hand and ambling to their bed, worry on his young face – O, how Florian misses that beautiful face, especially the concern that creased it; that love, and what a love it was – as they sat next to each other.

—Tell me yours, I'll tell you mine, Florian attempted, a defiant mask for his fear.

—CD4's the same and viral load's still undetectable. Creatinine's fine, liver's fine. Lost weight, but it's because of exercise. Only real change is the cost of the tests. Staying alive is only getting more expensive, he sighed. At least viral load is fully covered. Your turn.

—Connect the dots. Florian spoke, tracing the bumps on his skin. You already know.

—What do I always say? I won't know until you tell me. I don't want to assume.

—Don't treat me like one of your counselees from the hub . . . My viral load shot up.

—By how much? Since when?

—Not by a lot, but it did. Probably some time between last year and now. If it weren't so expensive, I'd get tested every quarter, but our

contributions can only subsidize an annual. In the US they're free, so they can monitor their levels better. We need regular testing.

—Of course. Why did it go up?

—Doc suspects an immunity to one of my meds. I got extracted for HIV genotyping, to check if I developed a resistance. That was an additional payout. Had to go to UP NIH for it.

—What were the results?

—Just had the test a few days ago. Have to wait three weeks, maybe more, and then go back to Pedro Gil to get them, he said, and with the admission complete, he laid his head on the man's shoulder, and Darien embraced him, warm and comforting, and he relaxed into it until

—Is that why you have that rash? Why your skin's been so dry? Darien demanded, and Florian recoiled, and uncoiled himself from the grasp, a gesture that became, immediately, glib.

—Are you serious? That's your concern?

—Shouldn't it be? Rosalie counters as they arrive at Panagbenga Park and face the float, more a love of labor than a labor of love. Sir Florian, look at the skirt. The forget-me-nots are wilting. And there's a gap in the white heliotropes of the logo, between the S and the M.

—But is the engine running?

—Yes.

—And the wheels will turn?

—They will, but—

—Then I see no problem. Really, Rosalie, the clients will have to get over it.

—They paid us to present a float that reflects their brand.

—Exactly. In fact, this is already too kind. And flowers wilt. That's what happens when you snatch them from the soil and you snip the blossoms from their stems.

—I already know that, she asserts in English then Tagalog, Ilocano, and Kankana-ey.

—The earth feeds them: raw organic matter returned to the ground and broken down by bacteria, microfauna, and fungi into compost rich with nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus. Water nourishes them; they drink, from their roots up to their stems and to their leaves and flowers, long molecular chains making them turgid. And the sun energizes them to convert that water, and carbon dioxide, into sugar. And oxygen. Air we breathe for as long as we live. A perfect ecosystem. Uprooted from what

sustains them, naturally they wither, Florian lectures despite his right-hand woman's knowledge. She was hired for her skill as well as for her association with the land, and he trained her well, too well perhaps, and so to push his point, he shows her.

He shows everyone gathered, natives, migrants, transients, and as if anticipating what is to come, the dancers pause, the mechanics rise, the gongs are un-hit, every body in the park, still.

Blooms erupt from the skin of his chest and torso and back, his shoulders and arms, and through the thick cotton of his sweater, joining the garland, creating a garment, entirely of Everlasting, nourished by his blood, crimson and scarlet coloring the petal tips of each corolla, radiating from orange, then yellow, or pink, or deep purple into deeper red of the bloodiest shades. The flowers feed from his blood, from his cells, rich with hemoglobin, and as if indifferent to any taint, and breathing from it, swelling larger, and a scent so sorely missed wafts from him. Everyone takes a breath and their lungs fill, with fragrant, with fresh, with alive.

These growths hurt him, but less than before, and soon enough he grows familiar, to the pain, as he does, now part of him, and he grows from it, continues living by it.

—You're beautiful, Rosalie admits in all the languages she knows.

—Not me, he smiles, admiring the life on him, but falling deeper in his past. The flowers.

—Flowers, boy? his father boomed, home from work, another day at city hall, of permit applications for businesses and buildings, payolas from collusion, and stumbling out of the car in fury, startling a young Florian who rose from the patch of land he tended, planting a garden.

His father stomped toward him, then raised his foot high and, with the sole of his boot, trampled the young blooms just transplanted, snapping stems and crushing petals, merciless, murderous thuds, cutting life short under the weight of prejudice that twisted his face, frightful and unrecognizable. Several short breaths: fear from the junior, release for the senior, and then

—Stop being a sissy. Be like me. Be a man. Men construct. Men make.

Still the flowers bloomed – replanted by Florian once more, but then cut for bouquets, or taken from their biomes and stunted in pots, sold to make a living, like father like son, taint runs in their blood – and the petals floated upward, lifted by their own force, and grew, more resilient.



—Yes, men build from land they make barren, Florian says, glaring in the direction of the mall on the hill that it claimed and around the frenetic city. All of us will reap from salted earth.

—But, that is progress. Our job. That is the nature of people, Rosalie tries, faltering as she breathes in the sight of the flowers swelling on Florian's skin. It's how we stay alive.

—No. It's how we die. By razing. We make ourselves unwell.

—You're looking well, my son, his father whispered, pathetic on the bed, needles on his skin connected to tubes, more tubes attached to his nostrils, and unable to even lift himself up.

Florian remained at the doorway, taking in the sight: terminal cancer and his father, forgotten after distance and years, all alone in the suburban house he once proudly built.

—I'm glad to see you. My boy. You came back. My blood.

—I didn't want to, he replied, sharp and cutting, but he found himself rooted between the door and the bed, unable to move and leaning on the wall for support.

He watched his father, as good as dead, and who lived to pave land for more roads, more structures, and more people, stare at him. This return was a mistake, Florian thought – but now, he knows, it was providential, and it frightens him – then he truly looked, recognizing a familiar face, at what could be his own, in a few more decades or sooner yet, if the virus overcame him again; at his face that could be: the same bump of the brow bone, angle of the nose, and curve of the lip, but not the mouth, still hungry for memorialization, desperate for legacy, deteriorating with age, with disease, fleeting mortality, the terrible realization of a brief time on earth.

—I don't want to, Florian whispers, fighting against an inevitable force.

—This isn't a solution, Rosalie insists, fighting as well, with fading conviction.

—I can't, he attempts, but from a distance, megaphones announce the arrival of dynastic senatorial hopefuls, crashing to campaign and breaking the spell, then the clients descend from the hill, in matching logo-embroidered polo shirts, reflecting the brand, for this celebration is all for the promotion of a manmade construct. Not the city. Not even its people. And never the land.

—What's wrong here?—Our logo is wilting.—We paid you to deliver.—It looks dead, they drone, on and on, an incessant, terrible, entitled buzzing, and Florian has had enough, inhales their hot air, and exhales

a loud and life-giving breath from inside him, and the forget-me-nots become bluer, and the white heliotropes multiply, fully revived, no longer cut for garish display, but rooted and coiled and feeding once more, and all around, on everyone, blooms

And silence.

—I like that on you, Darien opened, olive branching for the time that had passed.

—The new ink? It is nice, isn't it? Florian returned, hesitant still, but a start.

They met again, just two days prior, in this city: Darien on a sporadic pilgrimage and Florian resettling after his father passed on. Florian, budding with hope they could once more, and in his mind, Darien, still with the same spark in spite of the time that had passed.

—Yan, I'm really sorry. About your dad. I should've been there with you.

—You didn't know. Nothing to be sorry for. He left me a lot of debt, but also his house.

—At least. Glad to hear, and see, you've been doing well. Handsome as ever.

—You say that now. Suppose it took too long to heal inside and out.

—I worried about the cause, Yan. Not the symptoms. It was never about your looks.

—I know. I constantly worry about viral load spikes now. I'm very fortunate I recovered.

—It's not just luck. You did the work. Only fair to take some of the credit.

—Sure, but I wish I could gather all my tainted cells and expel them, be free of disease.

—You and me both. That's the dream. Until then we keep on. And keep healthy.

—Here's something for your counselees: It's just a virus. We won't let it kill us.

—Didn't you hear that from me? Darien laughed, a familiar sound sorely missed.

—Maybe, Florian smiled, and to close their gap: Dare, I want you, us, to live.

—Good, he smiled back, with a fragrance nearly filling the space between them, ylang-ylang and bergamot, and Everlasting, but all faded soon enough. Then silence again, and the city.

—Lead the way, Rosalie says, heeding her own roots.

And everyone trails behind Florian on the road like petals tossed by the wind: the parade. The flowers have overrun his whole body, now a long robe he bears with every steadfast step along Session, from the decrepit Hotel Veniz and upward, past chain establishments brought from the lowlands and from abroad, built upon the small stores of locals, and built upon rocks covered with the *bag-iw* from which the Americans renamed the colonized village of Kafagway.

Onlookers gasp at the spectacle, a procession of flora, and colors, and the sweetest scents, blanketing the stench of piss and garbage, and piercing their senses, molecules of smell diffusing in the air and permeating skin, for more to take root and from the inside of their bodies, arise and blossom and grow, until every person present is a fusion of flesh and vine and vein and bloom.

And upward Florian marches, resolute as the flowers that infect every cell, renewing from the outside to inside and back, life of its own, him on his own, but still, more life, bringing a frosty breeze in the yearned for smell of pine, plucking the petals off of him, the floats, and every body, and carried by wind the petals fly, swirl in the air, propelled by a far stronger force, toward the politicians who value only power, now facing real power, and strip them of their meat, reduce them to their rot, and then further toward the mall on the hill to shred the edifice to its foundations until that too is gone, and on the land it had claimed a forest rises, restored to its true beauty, and the petals soar upward and color the sky, leaving Florian on the bare bones of the flowerless float, naked, still breathing, with the tattoo of Everlasting smooth on his skin