



Abstract

“Country Underwater,” a short collection of three poems, is my own little attempt at approximating and coming to terms with my own feelings of anger, grief, injustice, and isolation amidst a pandemic. Through this project, I commit to permanence my own abstract meditations on survival, a matter that is often eclipsed by the harrowing state of our collective material precarity. With this, I acknowledge the powerlessness of things like literature and art in a time of crisis, resigning to the belief that while there is transformative power in it, poetry alone cannot catalyze actual material change.

Keywords:

Anger, grief, injustice, isolation, precarity

COUNTRY UNDERWATER

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And on the 100th Anniversary of the Pandemic

there shall be no law to govern us
other than human urgencies, no
urgency other than desire,
and no object of desire other than
desire itself.

Our last surviving descendants
shall excavate like relics
filmy images of people
lining up for food in single files
from old spreadsheets
and data banks floating
in some primitive technology, the hunger
they emanate reduced
into a faint, familiar feeling,
which isn't to say
hunger no longer exists in this time
only that there are no more
lines to follow.

With no hands to tend the fields,
to shepherd the cattle,
to stock the shelves,
to hunt nor gather, our last
remaining source of sustenance
shall be the residual grief
of our accumulated loss,
pooling and ever giving
as saltwater does
to the earth's parched mouth.

All over the cities, the outskirts,
and the unchartered stretches
between them,
corpses shall lay almost completely bare
if not for the motley cardboard
above them, perched
in a specific manner

as if to mean *look away*—which
we do often these days
whether by instinct or by decree.
Like the hard exterior
shell of a throbbing newborn,
the surface world shall be
engulfed in smoke.
All our failed attempts
to rid the air of the virus
shall yield science's greatest
dereliction: the hubris
of man to cleanse
what it cannot own.
To watch people swallowed
whole by their own stomachs,
gobble down grains
from fields sullied
with the blood of workers,
witness with both eyes
as those who resist
are gagged, bruised, and beaten,
and still claim purity
over the very air
which will outlive us.

Digital Ghosts

By the time the news of your passing breaks out,
there will still be enough grief from the last death
in the family to carry over to yours. Remnants or remains,

I can never tell the difference. They will discuss
in strict detail all the things you did right: the stillness,
the isolation, grocery bags reeking with hospital

grade solutions, etc. The hard part always comes
after: *What went wrong? Who did they go out to see?*
There will be lengthy debates and medical bills,

more than enough bureaucracy to wash over
one's sorrow until the next shocking news comes along.
Another death in the family, maybe. A close call.

Do not expect open casket funerals peopled
by those whose lives you are genuinely convinced
you've changed. There will be none. Funerals,

I mean. From hushed prayers, you shall saunter your way
to dreams like spectral light—luminous and formless,
nothing to resemble you other than the crooked,

fading image in people's heads, your name
only a name until you are a number flashing on the screen
where, across TV sets, an audience sits and gawks in awe.

Facts about the Philippines

“Already facing one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in Asia, the Philippines has seen a second wave of infections that is stretching health care workers in the capital like never before.”

—Reuters, April 2021

The Philippines is made up of 7,641 islands. Only 2,000 of these islands are inhabited. Of these 7,000 islands, there are 24 active volcanoes, including the world’s most perfectly cone-shaped. The country is also home to one of the deepest ocean trenches in the world, one of the longest subterranean rivers in the world, and one of the richest marine ecosystems in the world. None of these things is able to afford us healthcare. In 2020, super typhoon Rolly surpassed super typhoon Yolanda as the world’s strongest land-falling tropical cyclone in recorded history. Both typhoons made landfall in the Philippines. There are approximately 500 species of corals in the coastal waters of the Philippine Sea. Of the eight known species of giant clams in the world, seven are found in the Philippines. The pearl of Lao Tzu was discovered in the Palawan Sea. It is said to weigh 6.4 kilograms. It was discovered by an unnamed Filipino diver and was owned by an affluent American whose name appears in all of the pearl’s official records. It does not appear in this poem. In 1944, a large naval battle between Japan and the United States occurred in our very oceans. This happened at the height of the second world war. A tectonic plate covering an area of 5.5 million kilometers sits beneath the country. This is the reason why earthquakes are common in the region. The Philippine Sea is inhabited by several territories including the Philippines, Taiwan, Palau, The Mariana Islands, Japan, Indonesia, Guam, and Micronesia. Like the country, it was named in honor of the Spanish king Philip who has never set foot in any of our 7,641 islands. In 2021, the Philippines saw a second wave of infections amidst the global pandemic. At the rate of things, it is likely that we will experience a third wave. A fourth wave. A fifth. We are a country underwater, people walking around with gills. The very act of

drowning encoded in our DNA. When the local surfers of Siargao taught me many years ago that the secret to surviving a wave is to dive under its current instead of against it, I learned to do this in one try. This is a fact. I have been holding my breath all my life. I do not know how else to move but swim.