

## ACCIDENTS OF COMPOSITION

**Entry to the 2016 Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature**

**Poetry Category: English Division**

Entry collection includes 15 poems:

After the Grand Canyon

This is the Man

Musings of a Calf with a Mountain

After Reming

The Lost Notebook

Cassandra After Yolanda

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Napupungaw Ako

On a Slow Train From Albuquerque

Double-Crossed

Love is Planetary

Lucy Afloat

## After the Grand Canyon

*Photograph: 17 October 2014*

It's an accident  
of composition: sun, sky, bird.  
White orb on storm grey  
punctuated by a raven —  
but which composes which,  
and which is accidental?  
Is it the sun  
a hole  
sucking in a bird,  
or Icarus about  
to singe the sun?  
Against the grey  
both soft and sinister,  
anything is possible.  
Look: barely a thumbspan  
between  
sun and bird  
before the answer is given.  
Enough to fit  
the fingerprint of God.

This is the Man

*Photograph: Grand Canyon, 17 October 2014*

This is the man I love  
caught between sky  
and earth — and histories  
and homes.

A Hopi house, a canyon grand enough to last us a lifetime and a dream.

This is the man I love  
tucked between desert scrub and the cares that come  
with an impending storm. One may read it  
in the sky, just as he reads the sign:

‘The houses of the Hopi are used for shelter, work, storage and ceremonial practices ... this building technique allowed the Hopi to disassemble or expand upon the existing structure.’

How were the Hopi disassembled  
by the storm of Spanish conquistadores or  
of white America, before and after they were United?

This is the man I love  
born in Riga, Latvia  
stormed by the Germans, then the Russians,  
and at two years old in World War II,  
held by his mother reassembling  
her heart, his home —  
later, at six,

a refugee camp in Oldenburg,  
at eight,  
a migrant camp in Bathurst, Australia.

On and beyond these histories, how do we expand existence —  
yours, mine, his, the Hopi's?

Burrowed among the roots  
of the desert scrub  
and disassembling-reassembling hearts  
before and now  
is a scorpion,  
the sting  
of provenance:  
where we came from, how we got here.

We who look at these —  
the Hopi house, the canyon grand,  
the man I love —  
we do not feel the sting.  
Or the urge  
of the bud of a bud.  
Will it be a yellow flower, like a star  
disassembling a storm?  
Or a pink cup  
small enough to tuck into a heart yet  
large enough to hold  
our histories combined?

This is the man I love:  
look with him

look into him  
and read the signs

not just of storms weathered  
or storms heralded  
but of the burrowed life.

Musings of a Calf with a Mountain

*Photograph: Legazpi, 16 November 2005*

See, I'm nothing less  
than postcard pretty,  
an accident of composition.

I happen to have turned  
around these banana trees  
for a lustier feed,  
and there you are  
freezing me  
with such intent,  
even if I'm not yet ready  
for the slaughter or the yoke.

So here we are  
nothing less  
than right for the taking  
amidst this verdant idyll  
right-smack in the middle of the city:  
a little farm on public land.

Banana trees, a patch of cassava and sweet potatoes,  
and among the foliage greener than your dreams,  
a coconut or two as young as  
adolescent me flicking my tail this way and that —  
and oh behind us, *her* of course,  
the nearly perfect cone  
ogled at and taken  
again and again.

We are postcard pretty

with her serene and cloudless,  
perfect in your eyes  
(and we the frame, the foil or frippery).

Good thing, old Pay Nito  
who raised me from  
my mother's breast  
did not follow me  
around these bananas  
from his makeshift  
hut hidden by these trees  
greener than your dreams.  
His dreams are makeshift too  
like the washing line from tree to tree  
and his blue blanket hung  
nothing less  
than perfect accent  
for your rural composition  
in a city.

We are postcard pretty  
fringe dwellers,  
we are contraband:  
this farm untitled, his hut unregistered  
like him, nonexistent  
in the city books.  
But *she* knows,  
she knows us, yes she does.  
Three years ago  
we were on *her*, I mean,  
the farm was on her slope,  
my mother too

and old Pay Nito  
younger then with a wife, a son, a hut unhidden,  
until she could no longer  
bear perfection.  
See, her mouth is chipped  
against the sky —  
old Pay Nito's ancient (real) wife.  
Wedded still: farmer and volcano  
and so I'm here, grazing at her foot,  
like Pay Nito in his hut empty still  
since the burning  
river from her mouth.

Take us then,  
for we are postcard pretty.

After Reming

‘Purple.

Unlike any that I’ve seen,’  
mother says.

‘Behind an iron gate  
beside an immense hole  
on the ground,  
but no house.’

She pauses,  
and I’m suddenly  
beside *the* purple  
behind *the* gate  
in *the* hole  
in *the* house,  
led by the definite article,  
thus definitively placed:

it is no accident,  
this urge of composition,  
as in the writing  
of a poem  
when I compose myself  
into the loss of strangers —  
as if there was this hole,  
this space reserved for me.

Around it,  
the presuming poet builds:

it's the purple of bruises  
after the boulders  
the purple of the drowned  
after the mudflow  
the purple of death

after the storm conspired  
with the surge from the Pacific  
the lahar from the volcano  
after the earth became a whirlpool  
that smelled of sulphur.  
And so I fill the hole,

I frame it,  
lay out the scene,  
line by line,  
body by body  
in that disappeared house:  
a father, a mother, a daughter, a son  
turning purple underground —

but I am halted,  
as mother resumes  
her awe: 'A purple  
gumamela, a new bud  
behind a gate beside a hole  
that used to be a house.'  
Her whisper is deep,  
unreachable.

Then she returns,

frames me in the evening light:

‘I doubt if you’d believe it —  
you were not here.’

She pauses again and smiles,

‘But I’m glad you had a safe  
trip from Australia.’

The Lost Notebook

He found it.  
Ballpen ink weeping  
on the cover page  
but still readable:  
*English Composition.*

But inside  
it's waterlogged, unfinished.  
Only the notebook knows  
Nenita's final gift —

*Reming, Reming*  
*Shut your eye*  
*Shut your mouth*

An incantation  
found in the hole  
that used to be a house.

A poem  
still composing itself  
a week after the storm.

Like him now  
walking round and round  
the hole — composing limbs,  
faces of his wife Gloria  
and Roberto, fourteen  
Nenita, twelve

like when he  
composed himself  
at work in LA,  
composed his ear  
locked to his iPhone

to the howl  
of rain and wind  
as he listened to  
his daughter say, 'Ay, Papa — '  
before the line was cut.

Cassandra After Yolanda

*For Cassandra Fate B. Merin  
10 years old*

Your composition:

A Christmas tree with six stick figures holding hands.

Your caption:

‘Gusto ko sama-sama kaming pamilya.’

Drawn in crayons

and labeled ‘First’:

first light

after the storm

first sight

after the dark.

Two-dimensional on Manila paper: a still  
born from the frequency of storms.

But there are movements,  
other dimensions.

What clarity of vision, Cassandra.

You round up your wish,  
its logic in the next frame:  
stick figure named ‘Papa’  
at the foot of a ladder raised  
hinged to the wind  
and at the top rung  
a bucket  
unfurling a rope  
tied to a foot vanishing  
into the water labeled ‘dagat.’

How efficient: Papa, ladder, bucket, rope.

How simple your mechanics  
of salvation.

Then just above  
his head,  
again the Christmas tree  
like an arrow  
guiding the eye  
to a house with two figures:  
'Bunso' and 'Mama.'  
Lest we forget:  
Salvation is completed  
in a house.

But the eye unwittingly  
moves to the next house.  
'Paaralan': inside, three figures  
also captioned, named  
lest we miss them.  
'Ate, Kuya, Ate.'  
What clarity of vision, Cassandra.  
No child is safe  
without a family a house a school.

Such is your eye  
for detail — the logic  
of your first sight:  
a Christmas tree with six stick figures holding hands  
(‘Gusto ko sama-sama kaming pamilya.’).

But who believes Cassandra?

Yolanda: landfall, 8 November 2013.

2016: Cassandra and more than a hundred children still  
living in fragile, tiny houses  
labeled 'transitional shelter'  
by the Department of Social Welfare,  
its pledge of permanent housing  
composed and re-composed  
month after month  
storm after storm.

Cassandra turns her sight  
away from the rationed crayons  
and looks in the eye  
another incoming  
landfall.

## An Argument in Glass

*For Jenni Martiniello,  
Aboriginal glassmaker*

As you hold me,  
you think your fingers know  
it's glass magic,  
this slip and slide on cool satin,  
then suddenly it's water  
and an eternity of greens —  
O song of sea flowers,  
you make drowning  
beautiful.  
Or so you say.

But what of other shades  
or shadows?

From umber to gumnut brown,  
we are the ancient corals  
that you presume are dead.  
But look: our eyes are open,  
our mouths are open.  
Do not forget us.  
Do not resist us.  
We are the dead that refuse to die  
surging through  
the eternal greens underwater:  
emerald, seaweed, pine, juniper,  
moss, crocodile, olive, lime,  
chartreuse with tufts of yellow

like light flickering  
and red  
like blood insisting:  
We are here.

Look deeply.  
It's glass magic  
only when you see us.

## The Glassmakers

*Canberra Glassworks*  
*25 February 2016*

The stage is set.

Brian, Sharon, Jenni  
and desire.

Spinning now  
could be an orange lollipop on a stick.  
No, a sunset turning and turning

then plunged into water  
and retrieved as if from a bath,  
a baby laid on a wooden cradle.

No, a new planet,  
a blown egg veined with flowers  
or a crystal ball

that cannot tell its own fortune or fate:  
what it will become  
in the fire womb

or in the water,  
or in Brian's hands, with Sharon's breath,  
or Jenni's dream.

See the little wings rising slowly  
like sharp hillocks  
testing the air,

its own creature now  
pitting wills with  
the magic makers.

Because glass is  
its own desire  
in its own good time and space,

suddenly a fish scaled  
in seaweed, anemone and coral  
all at once, tendrils of its own song,

or about to be —  
is that a stingray —  
no, look at its mouth,

an O  
in awe  
of its own becomings,

as in this  
mouth to mouth,  
magic makers both,

the blower and the blown  
become stranger  
than themselves

spinning and spun  
like accidental omens:

mouth oracular

ever on the verge  
of something else —  
O look, the mouth

is now an eye  
of a storm  
not of wind and water

but wind and fire,  
spinning round  
suddenly a telescope

to peek through  
for underwater constellations —  
Andromeda, Orion, Crux

or simply  
the iris of my eye,  
a sunburst.

Pied Fantail

*Palago,*

Ning reckons.

*Tagbaya,*

Father insists.

Listen,

Mother hushes

us all

trying to name you,

fix you

darting from

branch to branch,

black tail

white-rimmed

opening

closing

fan flirting

with our awe

and wish to catch

you white-throated

singer

but how nimbly

you slip

from words,

your notes deft

as your wings

beak  
eyes  
uncatchable  
in any tongue —  
listen, mother  
says again,

finger to mouth,  
knowing how  
no wit or will,  
not even  
the word itself,  
can catch joy.

## How to Spin

### 1. On tilted earth

we revolve with the flowers,  
balance heel and toe  
with the seasons.

At each turn,  
here's hoping  
our roots are firmer  
yet friendlier  
even with the stones.

### 2. O littlest fish

teach us how  
the tiniest ripple  
consumes you  
head to tail,  
throws your life  
on the line —  
and so we mind  
even our little finger  
tickling the water.

### 3. Dancer

of mine,  
I cannot love  
your knees enough.

Such efficiency  
unseen,  
unlauded.

Art  
must not betray  
its labor.

Keep  
the pirouette  
clean.

But those  
unlovely bumps  
are the miracle:

two little worlds  
holding you  
as you spin.

#### 4. Father

spins long ago  
because it's all  
that he remembers:  
the birds whose  
names have even gone  
extinct yet how bright  
their plumage  
in his memory.  
(But not our names

unrecalled, unsayable.)

The boy plowing  
the ricepaddies  
with the carabao  
that broke his arm.

Its name too  
rings clear as the day

he met his sweetheart  
in the green dress  
but her name  
is not my mother's.

#### 5. Grandmother

behind the wheel  
knows how fabric  
comes to being:  
the margins hold the centre  
the margins shape the whole.

How she cares  
for the edges,  
the invisible threads,  
their bond.

How she knows  
that each must breathe  
in the push-and-pull,  
the give-and-take  
of kinship.

How I hope

we know as much:  
that hands and heart and will  
can spin governments  
that do not fray.

#### 6. The Senator

also spins, mind you,  
conspiracies, battles,  
visions, epics  
streamlined into Truth  
that holds us  
at the edge  
of our seats 24/7  
before the TV.

O Mesmer extraordinaire,  
suddenly we are lifted  
like Chagall's lovers,  
flown out of our houses,  
over roofs and birds  
into some secret  
cubicle called  
the polling booth  
where we check your name,  
affirm your Truth.

This is no  
accident of composition:  
how we keep you  
in your Seat

ensconced and still  
spinning.

## 7. Planetary

is the will of birds  
and typhoons.

Always the circular intent:  
the flight from north to south and back,  
the whirlpool becoming an eye  
bent on completion  
like the revolution of the earth  
around the sun.

All know how to turn  
from the first urge,  
so each can go  
visiting in space  
only to return  
where it all began,  
thus the ellipse the orb  
come full circle.

But not strangely  
birds and typhoons  
wear a tail,  
a stray dash  
in the geometry  
to propel the initial lift  
of will or the exit lash  
at those left behind:

the flowers, the stones,  
the littlest fish, the dancer,  
Father, Grandmother  
and the Senator  
in mid-spin.

Rarely do we have  
the luxury to unspin  
before all is halted.

## Napupungaw Ako

‘Napupungaw ako.’  
On the verge of tears  
in her pink top and pants  
a-swirl with red flowers,  
my little sister whispers,

but no one hears.

‘Napupungaw ako,’  
a little louder now,  
a little more insistent,  
and tears almost  
fully formed,

still no one hears.

Napupungaw ako  
for a train about to leave.  
Napupungaw ako  
for that trip from home:  
Legazpi to Manila.

I hear it now  
four decades or so later.  
Napupungaw: untranslatable.  
Intransitive verb: without an object.  
Present tense: it’s ongoing

like a train of thought

that never quite arrives  
or departs, because the pink  
is too pink, the red  
too swirly when one remembers.

How does the old train  
go again — how the sound  
of its heave and sway,  
or of a five-year old's  
quiet weeping?

How the scene?

I'm almost fifteen,  
my brother, twelve,  
and we're bursting out of our skin  
for summer holiday  
in Manila, oh what a dream!

It is time.  
Auntie Aden urges  
my sister to wave  
at father waving  
at the window, bereft.

Too much urgings and urgencies.

Like a halo,  
loss surrounds him:  
three children off  
for a month.

‘Napupungaw ako.’

Whose voice then,  
whose train of thought,  
and what is it about  
remembering that leaves  
us all bereft?

Recall is loss  
turned inside out.  
We think we get it back,  
that moment  
when my sister, only five,

stops our train on its tracks.

‘Napupungaw ako  
kay Boboy.’  
She finds her voice,  
she finds the object  
of her verb,

our little grammarian.

It’s transitive now,  
in-transit like her  
standing up, tugging  
at Auntie’s hem,  
needing to get off.

*She’s homesick for Boboy,*

our baby brother left  
at home — homesick before  
the train leaves the station,  
homesick before departure.

Dismayed, my brother and I return  
to our skin — it stings  
as father, urgently recalled  
from his waving post, jumps  
on board to rescue

my little sister and her tears.

The train heaves,  
pulls out of Legazpi,  
pulls out all stops  
to this departure — listen  
to it sing, we're off, we're off

as our sister becomes a tiny dot beside our father.

Our baby bother  
is now forty or so  
and none of us three  
has seen him  
for seven years or so.

Napupungaw ako  
for a moment, a memory  
of how to miss,  
of how to love as unabashedly

as a five-year old.

The train,  
oh, the train  
of thought, of heart,  
this thing that will never arrive  
or depart.

## On a Slow Train From Albuquerque

Could be rust, or blood  
between boulders as red,  
this river coming through.  
She thinks of age, of hurt,  
how sharp the edge,  
how deep the drop.  
And how sudden this rain,  
the sun stolen  
(too quickly before she can shield her eyes),  
the river too, by rocks as high as God.  
Now the window's streaked,  
first drops like salvation.  
Not in the forecast.  
Just sneaks up on you,  
the edge, the drop,  
rust blood river  
again  
behind those junipers.  
And then  
again  
the sun.

## Double-Crossed

We almost  
met — me  
with my son,  
you with yours.  
Both crying:  
mine with hunger,  
yours with loss  
but the tears  
fell on  
the same  
earth.

But no  
moisture  
or even flood  
could soak  
it through.  
Our grief  
just sizzled  
in the heat.  
Besides,  
there are no  
more seeds  
to water.

Your life  
like mine  
is the driest  
country

but we don't  
know because  
there's a wall  
so high  
between us,  
we are both  
invisible.

Only  
the border guard  
sees us both,  
two women under  
the shadow  
of the wall  
to-ing and fro-ing:  
after our village  
was sieged,  
after your husband's  
car was bombed.

To keep  
us safe and free,  
they said.

Through the border,  
we almost met  
and caught  
each other's eye  
and saw in there  
how safe we are,  
how free.

## Love is Planetary

from the first urge,  
no, from the inkling  
of an urge — perhaps  
way before time  
before the big bang  
when black holes,  
matter and antimatter  
and space were yet  
light years unknown  
to each other.

This is the astronomy  
of our chance to meet  
even with the most  
strange, most distant  
and evolve  
by accident something  
even stranger:  
a ringed planet,  
a newborn star  
or this thing  
called earth.

So sweetheart  
from the other side  
of the globe, ocean,  
river, field, mountain,  
wall, barbed wire or  
the border of tanks and guns,

faceless yet to each other  
there is hope for us.

Lucy Afloat

*After the scattering of ashes  
Pulpit Rock, 26 November 2014*

And then the light  
on these layers of grief,  
grit, glow  
that make a rock.

From blinding white  
to ochre soft, then rust  
and pink  
running into each other —  
who knows which color came first  
or if the glow came  
before the grit  
before the grief?

Not even the rock knows  
the secrets of its chronology.

It is we who look  
who think we know,  
or wish to know  
as we stand on it  
to steady our feet,  
steady our own running  
into each other  
and into grief  
or grit  
or glow.