

Exodus 15

Exodus

i.

Being suspended in 35,000 feet of uncertainty
isn't what scares an immigrant,

not the ocean that parted for us,
waiting to collapse at any moment

at our passing, it isn't the cold, or the lack
of sun, or the white person asking

what our business was in coming here,
the interrogation, as we silently ate *currywurst und pommes*

by the harbor, the seagulls waiting for our scraps.
It isn't that we couldn't speak their language,

or the rise of the far right and their fear
of the *Ausländer*; marked as other.

ii.

You must look back at your homeland
as a bird dissolving into a half-cloud,

the longer you look at it,
the uglier it can get—like a mirror,

another typhoon displacing thousands, another
journalist killed, another bombing

that modern-day Gomorrah where rain is sulfur,
brimstone infinite

look away, like Lot,
before your face, like your new life turns to salt.

iii.

“Where do you come from,” asked
the taxi driver, the front desk, shopkeeper, the waiter.

I might as well have told them that we were grains
of sand from the coffers of seafaring warriors

arriving in waves, fertilizing an archipelago
of bivalves,

enslaved for 400 years to *mi madre*
España, garroted by their silken cross,

bayonets went through us in a Japanese Death
March that lasted for days,

we kissed the boots of American soldiers, who burned
down our villages while they taught us English,

the clay we carried all the way here,
that today we place in a jar of poetry

to show to those who ask, but where,
but where, but where ...

inside the jar, the Sybil earth that binds
our future, the roots that weigh us down

iv.

We were forged in pyres, squabbling
over the last peso on Earth, until we leave

the blistering oven, what a wonderful feeling
for once, to begrudge a snowy trip

to the dumpster, or bemoan a flimsy
scarf like it was the end of the world!

we welcome the cold, especially when it stabs
at our bone, nips at our cheek, like rock

metamorphic numb our faces, the familiar, magical,
tingling of pain

v.

Here, the robin sings and through the trees
sashays like a breeze, shepherding

these soft souls
from their bleached shells,

and through the eaves, God watches
the lupin, lavender and the spreading moss,

he tends the silver rivulet
unaware of another life, miles away,

with nothing but chaos —
workers, children, waking the engine

of their bodies, hostage to hunger and heat,
selling, shouting—so that there is nothing,

nothing that scares us than the silence
that will come when the song ends.

Hauling sand through the San Juanico

There is a bridge that still connects me
to my father in June, alive and driving a six-wheeler,
through the Pan Pacific Highway,
on a job hauling sand to some construction site.
My brother is still ten years old, and I
am six, sitting in the middle, so that I shift
my leg every time my father shifts gears,
my only contribution to the entire trip. Bored,
I count the suns passing through the triangle
trusses of the suspended highway like they
were yellow-breasted orioles, ready for rescue.

There is a bridge that still connects me
to Elton John playing in full blast
on the radio and my father and brother
are singing, so I join in, the waves
and the road rolling with the flock of birds
in my ribcage. Today
is a good day. Today, my father
will not beat me. Today, we will stop
by a small eatery and feast on *humba*, *rice*
and *fish tinola*, passing plates of food
to each other, like three comrades taking
a break from work.

There is a bridge that still connects me
to the clouds of dirt inside my throat, rising
as my father dumps all that sand,
I remember wishing the bridge
to be longer, to turn up Elton's piano,
to wend slower through the backbone
of the country, vertebrae by vertebrae, to sit
there longer with my father who would not see
his boys grow up: one who stays and one
in search of something more than dirt,
to take that dirt and form new continents,
a family of his own, but even when I find myself
on the snowy ends of the earth,
I am still on that bridge.

Haibun for Eurydice

In another time, Orpheus led Eurydice toward the threshold, inches from rebirth, towards the door where the light was ready to shine on her uncloaked shoulders. From the bowels of that hell, he brought her all the way there. Didn't he know not to look back? Did he forget about the refugees of Gomorrah that turned into salt? She didn't make it, we know, with a glance she was banished to the infinite half-light of somewhere that's half real, like the last moments of a dream where you're there and not there, Euridice, the first immigrant ghost, suspended in a square foot cathedral half blessed with light from two different moons, half home, half memory.

We walk through these doors
through her body that hung like
an echo somewhere.

Grinding cacao

From calico pods, my mouth had cleaved
sweet earthy pearls, heirloom cacao beans

I spat like fusillade seeds, saving them for my weekend
mother I also called, *Nanay*, the nanny who took

care of my father as a boy, who also took care of me
when my real mother would work shifts in hospital.

When she was alive, her hands would coax life
from droughts, her body, a furnace that fed three generations

with homecooked cassava. *Nanay* guzzled down
the fermented wine and kissed immaculate her Marian

scapular, then began to roast the beans on volcanic pan,
with arms that pulled from the skies, folding back

into the air the spicy scent of wild chocolates. With what's left
of her wings, she flipped the beans to God, while I waited

for the best part—the milling. Her mother talons
funneled the nibs into the grinder's small mouth. 'Go on,'

she said, 'Things may not happen at once...' It was my turn
to turn the wheel, so I churned and churned, until

the *tablea* revealed itself, brown as her camphoric
skin, rich as inherited soil. With a knife

she shaped the velvet, showing me
how to cut constellations.

How we eat

The milkfish has 214 bones,
eight more than our bodies can hold,
the osseous armor of a fish
beneath its silver scales.

At the market,
ask the fishmonger
to slice the belly and clean
it whole, carving carefully,
make it safe to eat.

You can't rush
the ritual of hunting
each barb, one by one,
thumb tracing along the grain,
pulling prickly thorns.

Still some slip silent, waiting
to stab at the throat.

Meanwhile, the world whirls,
each day dawns, drawing us back
to the table

to risk it all,
where fathers, sons,
mothers, workers, and lovers
scanning each bite,
raising our forks, searching
the light for a ghost
of a bone. Still we swallow,
not sure of the pain,
but surrender for a taste
of something sweet.

Invoice

Qty	Description
1	Country Breakdown:
195	Languages, vernacular scripts, tongues passed down from the throats of mothers, <i>Tagbanwa</i> , <i>T'boli</i> , <i>Talaandig</i> , whole tongues like rivers. May be civilized with English.
7,641	Philippine islands, cradles of myth and folklore, from the peaks of Batanes, across the sacred highlands of Mindoro, to the bone-lined shores of the Sulu Peninsula slaked by the sacrifice of warriors, paradise ready to be parceled.
52, 177	Wildlife species, from the <i>haribon</i> to the tarsier that guard the holy gateway to the dead, specimens for cataloged and study.
300,000 km ²	Fertile land, where the first Filipinos were pulled from split bamboo, a birth of light and song turned bastion of nickel, silver, and gold to be drained.
10 million	Filipino men, women and children, bodies accounted for the sale, prone to insurrection, additional force required.

Total: \$20 Million (USD)

Date of Transaction: December 10, 1898

Items may be returned even if heavily used, altered and damaged.

Sorting Glass

On weekends,
I bring bottles to the bins,
bronzed and clear,
emptied of strawberry,
sarsa, champignon, soy,
bottles for sorting crates
labeled white, brown.
In Germany,
the sun is gentler,
the sky never trembles.
We still call our children *anak*,
even when their tongues have shifted,
even when they forget
what *anak* means.
I peeled a mango
in the kitchen.
It smelled like home
and something already leaving.
I raise each bottle to the light,
to see which belongs to their kind.
Liebe meine Kinder,
how clear should clear be?
How dark is dark?

Reverse balikbayan

Every year, 7 million care packages are sent by Filipino workers abroad to loved ones back home. These boxes are called 'balikbayan,' the Filipino word that means 'to return home.'

When friends and family would visit Hamburg
they would bring for us potions for homesickness,

tuyo, fish dried by the sun, salted by the sea
that burned our skin when we were kids

bagoong, a fountain of youth
fermenting in our *Lola*'s house

sinigang packets, as sour as miso-dreched napes
after a day of tree-climbing

caldereta & kare-kare, sauces that bubble
with the joy of birthdays, everything

that Bratwurst and Brötchen
made us forget. What would our *Lola*

think now of our acquired taste? In another time,
we would be the ones sending home

boxes packed with our bodies
alongside Spam and Colgate

as if we were still there on game nights,
as if we never left the dinner table,

our bubble wrap cushioning the eggshell
of our absence, corrugated cardboard packing up the sorrow

of their grief. Meanwhile, we survive
on a country stuffed in a 5-kilogram box, so that we plant

on our tongues its familiar, yet estranged taste,
so that the frayed anchor we set down on this lumbering

voyage stays firm for just a bit longer.

Fishing

We'd been fishing,
my cousins and I,
waiting for the faintest flicker
from the floaters we'd cut
from old flip flops. The week before,
we buried our grandfather,
our first death. He'd let me sit
on his sturdy lap. I could smell
the salty flesh, sharp with iodine,
mingling with the moist earth
from his heart hammering
through the hollow wound
they never sealed. One night,
my father came back from the hospital
and whispered to my mother that he
was gone. That was the only time
I saw him cry. I thought the earth
was damp. The worms were weaving
nearer the surface. We dug a few up
and skewered them on our slender
hooks. I felt a nibble, so I tugged
at the bamboo pole I'd plucked
from a thicket. And there it was,
a silver gourami, flopping and flailing,
its mouth open, brushing whiskers
against my cheek. I held it
by the gills, unhooked it
from its cheek, and set it free.
It vanished into the dark,
as if it had never been. I don't know
why I felt heavier running home,
like something else slipped silently away.

Krill

The drifters that had arrived here
 swam though the columns of the sea,

foreign bodies with antennae, searching for sweet
 algae. Around them, fish and beluga whales

sift through the water, besieging entire colonies.
 To survive, they turn invisible, their shells

like ghosts, the unseen. Nobody knows
 that they control the warming of the sea,

taming the algae that blooms too quickly,
 restoring the balance. In the shallow

water, even the red snapping crab couldn't see,
 not even the boy swimming beside them,

and by accident inhales them. Back home,
 he flushes it out of his ear, down the sink,

through the pipes and its kinks, and into
 the sewers underground, where others

had been, all these outcasts cleaning
 the detritus of the world,

while people celebrate in restaurants, laugh
 in shopping malls, fall in love.

They wait for welcome, for the current to dance,
 for the tide to return, for their turn.

Delivery room

Over the phone, the nurse told me to wait.
My mother was still delivering

someone's baby. When I was eight, I was always
waiting. Waiting, I learned how silent
a school can be. Waiting, I learned
the silence inside of a page. I was always
the last one in the library, save
for the librarian, waiting too,
for me to leave,

but I was still wading
in words I had never tasted. I'd write
those words on my notebook—
phosphorus, indivisible, helix,
bony-legged, devouring, dislocation—
my pen cutting into my boyhood vocabulary,
a needle suturing life from different lives.

The librarian whispered, "You can take
The book home," but I wanted to stay

not because I had nowhere to go,
but because I wanted to wait in that silence,
to the way I waited

for my two kids to be born,
pacing outside delivery rooms, waiting
for the world, waiting
for life to come next.

What came next—my mother, finally
picking me up, her brown hair shining,
helmetless on her Vespa, satisfied after pulling
a psalm from someone's womb,
and me, marching out,
cradling the wait of my new words.

Night walk

On winter nights, I take the trash out
as an excuse

to be an owl. The world
is more generous

at night, everything
is an offering, thoughts

tucked in the day's eraser dust—
light from closed bookstores,

shops empty of purpose, Tibetan masks
glowing by a window, monstera

deliciouosa, monstera
obliqua.

At night, people abandon their lives
on the pavement

boxes labeled "*Zu verschenken,*"
to give away. I convince

myself I needed a serving
tray. Meanwhile, beyond the lamppost,

two blonde figures approach. I realize
I was hunched by the dumpster,

unblonde, unwhite, half
in shadow. I do not flee.

My people were once called savages
of the Orient, Magellanic

monsters, brown and godless in the night, free
for the picking, steel tweaking

like treasure under the moon
that was stealing its glow.

Tonight, I
will do the taking.

Homecoming

Exile is a phone call with my

grandmother on the other line slipping

in and out

to chat with names

that rattle the dust

it is autumn inside her mind

which exists outside of time we all knew

she was gone

before the last leaf fell I still can't imagine

how felt to be expatriated from yourself

like home

the farther away you go the more it becomes

a face

a scent a taste

a name a silence

an endless

fabric

of hallways

the final throes of dementia

a diaspora

of the mind living

remembering

forgetting

and still

Tricks

and my children became ghouls
flitting between the veil of night,
that year, they haunted Betelgeuse,
handing out candy to the unabsolved,
the vampires, the crones, the aliens,
warlocks who sang in German
for a treat, and by our balcony standing
guard, the pumpkins we carved, gourds
glowing with ungodly smiles
that turn away the travelling souls,
and my mother, miles away
is lighting candles for the real dead,
my cousins shuffling memories
of our other cousins, uncles, grandparents,
in a card game by their graves,
our aunts clutching the rosary
let beads of prayer drip into that day
when they were children gathered by a fire,
roasting pork on the 40th day
after their father died, the elders
stirring stories into pots,
our mouths drank from the broth,
the souls, and the cup
from all those years when the world
was still real—the dirt, and the storms,
and the sickness, and the ghosts, and the sea,
and the fire, and the people, and the tears.

Owed to fireflies

Fireflies are bioindicators of environmental health. Their populations worldwide have been decreasing due to light pollution and climate change – National Institutes of Health

I was standing on a field of pampas in the mist of childhood
sprinkled by a steppe of stars called by many names
say lightning child say candle light
say lantern spirit say lamp creature
our elders said they were *Santelmo* lost
ancestral souls of unbaptized babies
turned fire seeking
vengeance in the night they were more
than just streaking tonophants of light

I caught one
a furnace in my palm fluctuating
alive like an ancient bonfire

I never saw one since that night in early June
when the world was young
what's done is done
they are lost now
like dead stars
we have desecrated the rhythm of their light
our cities disrupting their calls headlamps blinding
so that they may never
find their peace