Division: English
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The Salt Price

"Salt is born of the purest of parents: the sun and the sea."

- Pythagoras

The salt stings my eyes. Gritty sun and dazzling sand. Greens and blues forget which shade they are. I am six years old, it is my summer holiday, and we are at the beach. "Hold onto my hand," my mother says. "Now, one, two, three."

On three I dive down. We are perched on what my grandfather calls the Big Dip. The edge of the continental shelf, where the sand and seaweed end, and blue drops down into black. I swim down and around, paddling with one hand, my mother's touch my lifeline. I see corals in colours I know no names for, and creatures too shy to come closer to shore: bright blue starfish, waving anemones, indignant clownfish, all clinging and flitting along the shelf, which vanishes endless into the deep. The ocean is silent; it is much, much bigger than what I see, framed by my mask—light pierces it one way, and disappears another. My older sister Mia clings to my mother's other hand. She is scared, a stranger in this place even stranger. I am not. For everywhere, all at once, I am being held, carried aloft, floating, caught.

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Salt:

A rock. A mineral, to be precise. Crystal, clear. There are many kinds. The chemical name of "common salt" is sodium chloride, but the word "salt" is more elementary, still. Two tongues that agreed on the same sound, the Old English "sealt" and the Latin "sal," that came from the same Proto-Indo-European origin. A root word, then; primitive, underived—except from the sea. All life came from the sea, including us. We

have left it behind, our footprints tracking into field and village, but we are still bodies made of salt and water. A tiny ocean of blood and tears, sweat and urine, semen. Salt is everywhere and in everything: a world steeped in brine. Not common; essential. The spilling of salt is unlucky, even deadly: it summons demons, steals away nutrients. Puts loved ones into the prayers of those who stand by, holding on to cold hands.

When something evaporates, disintegrates, in the waving heat of the sun, salt is what is left behind—white sheets spread on crumpled beds, crystals crusting over burnt skin. Perhaps it is to salt we shall return, not dust. There, nestled deep in the world's salt deposits, scientists have uncovered the fossils of mastodons and men.

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La Union, Philippines

Catching a last one in, I ride my surfboard all the way to the shore. I heave the hefty longboard made of foam and glass onto my head and make my way towards one of the hotels lining the beach of San Juan. Today this little town is known as the "surf capital of the North," and every weekend Scandinavian backpackers and Koreans studying English get off the bus in search of something—surfers call it "stoke," a natural high.

The sun beats down from directly overhead, sends the shadows into hiding, turns the sand into burning coals, across which I must hop to safety. It means I have once again overstayed my time in the sea—my skin stings its agreement.

Leaning my board against the stairs, I rinse off in the outdoor shower, the fresh water mingling with the salt before disappearing into the darkening sand. Water drips from my hair and beads off my skin; it has left me with much more than I started off with. Wet earth. Hot sand. Sea spray. Hawaiian Tropic. Rusty plumbing. 2-in-1 shampoo.

I enter the hotel's open-air restaurant and my two sisters Carla and Mia, one younger and one older, are already there. They've chosen a table facing the ocean, whose surface now flashes in midday like so many shards of broken glass. Today is Sunday, and we are going to have breakfast.

"You should have come out an hour ago!" my younger sister Carla scolds me.

"I know, I know," I shrug. They know me, too, so they've already ordered for me. *Tocino*, pork strips cured in salt, sugar, and soy sauce (salty, sweet), with eggs my way (over-easy), and rice the Filipino way (garlic, fried). My usual. I give them my thanks while carefully balancing *tocino*-egg-rice proportions in each spoonful. Carla chatters about one of the waves she caught; Mia sips her coffee, smiling over pictures from last night's impromptu karaoke concert.

"It's going to be hard to leave this place," says Mia, half to herself. Her winter break almost done, in less than a week it will be goodbye again. She'll be on a plane to London, alone, back to studying architecture, her second degree.

I feel afloat, as if waves are still carrying me. The sun begins to exact the rest of its penalty: my pulse creeps up my neck, along my jaw, to my skull, pulling me with a dull *thump-thump* back to earth.

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Just some of salt's 14,000 uses:

Adding flavour to food.

Treating severe dehydration.

De-icing roads.

Making mummies (intentionally or accidentally).

Drying fish.

Putting the fizz in soda.

Protecting crops from killer fungi.

Curing meats to make ham and sausage.

Treating iodine deficiencies (as in iodised salt).

Manufacturing gunpowder and explosives.

Salt is what happens when an incendiary acid meets a toxic base. Perhaps this is why its properties are so extreme. It has mastery over liquid, directing its movements through osmosis. Soluble, but also a desiccant, salt has its own cycle: dehydrate, rehydrate, repeat. A dietary requirement, it helps our cells transport oxygen, nutrients, messages. It can nourish an organism, or poison it—the difference spelled in too much or too little. Polishing copper whilst corroding steel, it cleanses, corrupts. Salt can cut time short, as in to kill, or extend it, as in to preserve. It can enable life, or prevent it entirely. A teeming ocean, a barren wasteland—both sown with salt.

Salt is a compound ever in conflict.

A mineral caught between life and death.

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Three hours past my midnight deadline:

The words dance in pairs in front of my eyes. The screen's white flickers uncertainly, suspiciously. It is not to be trusted. Nor my eyes, for that matter. I squeeze them and slap my laptop closed. Flighty creatures, these words. Stare at them for too long and they start to play tricks on you. Change places, exchange meaning. Pretend they don't know which one of them you're looking for. It's all very arbitrary.

Thump thump. The sound my head is now making. If it sounds a bit like my heart, that's because it is—more specifically, my pulse. When the two beat in time, it doesn't

mean that they've finally learned how to get along—it means pain. The heavy, throbbing kind, drumming against my right temple, caused by the pent-up pressure of pushing something outward that would rather stay inward. That, and not enough water, nor sleep. He's familiar, this pain, though he's never been much of a friend.

There's only one thing for it. Oral rehydration tablets: salty, chalky things to be swallowed, made of all the good stuff I've lost. The good stuff (a.k.a. ingredients): salt, electrolytes, coconut flavour (the tree of life). Or something. It plops into my glass of water and proceeds to dissolve with much fizzing fanfare, heralding the return of balance to my tired, dehydrated body. It works great for hangovers, too.

Once when I was young, I woke up to find that I couldn't eat anything without it all coming back up moments later. Eggs, rice, a banana, even chicken broth—it all ended up in the toilet bowl, seasoned with bile for good measure. I couldn't even swallow medicine.

But my stomach welcomed the salt like an old friend—like it does now. A better friend, this one, it quietly settled into the bottom of my belly like it belonged there. Some things are older than soup and tummy flus and deadlines—older than pain, even.

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Salary:

Derived from the Latin *salarium*, which translates to "the price of salt" or "salt-money." In the days of the Holy Roman Empire, the sword arm of a Roman legionary was paid for with salt.

Although salt is "common," it is precious, sought out, savoured. As in savoury—a taste for salt, which humans have had since we first caught fish and hunted game, developing a palate for ocean and iron.

Mankind searched for salt in the world's depths and edges, and invented the means to collect it. Neolithic man boiled it from salt springs in Poiana Slatinei, Romania, in 6000 B.C. The Chinese pulled up brine from salt wells using a system of bamboo pipes some 2,250 years ago. Before diamonds, we first mined for salt in Halstatt, Austria, 800 B.C.

When our ancestors learned how to preserve their food with the salt that formed when the oceans and lakes evaporated in the summer, it gave them a newfound sense of the future—as something that could be looked forward to, planned, even hoped for. Like any modern human would, they could now weigh their immediate needs against future wants.

We traded salt for other things that we wanted. The first commodity became the first currency—salt, the ancient equivalent of today's gold standard. *A handful for two clay pots? A summer's worth for your daughter?* Done and done. The Azalai, the last of the desert caravans, still carry salt across the Sahara on the backs of camels. All roads led to Rome—roads made of salt, not silk, pumping salted goods into the ancient world's heart in exchange for wine and gold. It became the first tax, then the first monopoly, used to unify China into the true Middle Kingdom during the Qin Dynasty. Later, salt helped India find its independence, when a man named Mahatma Gandhi led a peaceful protest against the salt tax that bound his people to Britain.

And so, civilisation itself was born out of salt. In it, our history was written, drawing a line from the ocean to the city, around countries, until the line led back to the ocean, where conquistadors and navy officers carved out trade routes and empires, setting their own lines in salt and sulfur. Tiny townships and great nations rose and fell with its

supply, or lack thereof. The human society is not so different from the human body, it seems.

Because, in its essence, in its very molecular structure, salt is exchange. The transfer of fluid from one space to another, a change in state, a world constantly seeking equilibrium.

Dehydration, rehydration. Life and death. Repeat.

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"It is such a secret place, the land of tears." – Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The moon looks at me, her blank roundness the curve of a question. Tangled in my blankets, my single bed is a desert through which I tumble, alone; my tears, an oasis, wastefully spent on a dampened pillow. I am seventeen years old.

I don't know why she looks back so silently; after all, it is her fault. Her coming roughens seas, raises lupine voices, bewitches moths, and like the tide, my despair rises with her waxing. The hole is gaping; it gives no answers, only pulls like gravity, weighs like the night on my prone form.

The tears continue their wordless oblation. They pay tribute to a center that is empty, but not hollow enough to echo. Not drops then, but streaks, stains, spilt, flowing. Leaves trace elements: flushed skin, salty snot. The salt has found a hidden wound.

I am not as silent as I think. Mia, my roommate, gets up and slips into the blankets with me. *Manang*, I call her; it means older sister. There are no hard edges, no sharp notes in her voice,

What is wrong? she asks me. *I feel so lost.*

Why? *I'm a failure.*

That's not true. *But I'm not good enough.*

My words did not matter. They were brittle, ringing hollow with a fear without shape or colour, as vast and edgeless as the darkness outside our window. I was seventeen years old, after all; in that raging sea of hormones and emotions, all is uncertain, adrift. A boy may have been involved—or not involved, as the case was.

I'm here, Nica. I'm here.

Her words did not matter. Her questions asked nothing. Her voice was a song, a lullaby; senseless, soothing. They were warmer than my blanket, less tangled, steady; a palm on my forehead, a breath on my cheek, melting the stains there, wiping away the trace. My tears mixed in her hair, became sweat, our skin stuck together as she held me, kept me from falling. Or, maybe, falling together.

Salt paid with salt.

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The Santa Maria School Massacre:

On December 21, 1907, over 2,000 people were massacred in Iquique, a port city of Chile. They called themselves *pampinos,* or plain-dwellers, workers of the world's largest saltpeter mines, who had formed their own vibrant, distinct communities in the world's driest and oldest desert, the Atacama. They had gathered to strike against inhumane conditions. But *pampinos* were not the biggest source of wealth to the country; it was saltpeter, or potassium nitrate, exported exclusively by Chile and used to make fertilizer or gunpowder, depending on one's intentions. Under orders from the government, the Chilean army opened fire on leaders, workers, women, and children alike.

Salt absorbs, crystallises, draws together. But it also dissolves, separates, breaks apart. Today, the *pampinos* are honoured with memorial days, labour laws, countless

songs and poems. Like pillars of salt, monuments erected as a promise, crystals cursed with remembering.

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A Filipino joke:

Why is salt bad for you?

Because it's *asin*.

Asin:

Tagalog word for "salt." Used regularly in Filipino cooking, along with other condiments like *toyo* (soy sauce), *patis* (fish sauce), and *suka* (vinegar). Filipinos love putting together contrasting flavours: salty and sweet, sweet and sour, sour and salty, or just plain bitter. Fruits, like pomelo or pineapple, are often enjoyed dipped in sea salt. During the Christmas season, *champorado*, a porridge made from sticky rice and tablea chocolate (unsweetened ground cacao), is often eaten for breakfast with evaporated milk and *tuyo*, a very salty dried fish.

Asin is also believed to protect one from evil spirits, such as *aswang,* a vampire-werewolf hybrid that looks like a normal person during the day but shape-shifts into an animal, usually a dog, at night; and *mananggal*, a kind of female witch-monster that detaches her torso from her body come evening and flies around on bat wings. Both often have incredibly long tongues used to suck unborn fetuses out of the bellies of sleeping pregnant women.

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"Time to eat!"

My mother calls out, and my stomach seems to answer. She's wearing the apron we surprised her with in San Gimignano, Italy. It's embroidered with the words "The best

food is Mother"—at least that's how the brisk, warm shop lady translated it from Italian, forgetting punctuation where it was needed the most.

The best food truly is Mother (*apostrophe-s*). Ever since my father renovated the family home, turning it into the kind of house that has a garden, even a pool, my mother has put together Sunday lunches for our family and friends. Some of them come for the food more than the company, I'm sure. But the word "lunch" is a bit misleading. Better: feast, smorgasbord—melee, even.

Because our senses are being assaulted in the most satisfactory way possible. Steaming paella, fragrant with saffron and heaped with shrimps, mussels, pork, peppers, and boiled egg, is served up to countless second cousins and childhood friends. A casserole sealed with three kinds of cheese is crowded by gossiping aunts, which, if one manages to get around them, opens up to a mushroom cream penne, the sauce's earthy colour and hearty scent the work of morel mushrooms and black truffle, inspired by a recent trip to Provence. One of my sisters balks at the crowd and steals a little salad, scattered with grapes, pecans, and a dark soy garlic dressing.

But my eyes and nose have found their target. I confront the big-bellied uncle currently wielding the carving knife. There are other meats to settle for: a pork crackling—its name betraying its sin, scored into modest squares as if to recommend temperance. Or my mother's curry—mild, deep, and rich with silky coconut milk, barbecued chicken, smoky eggplant, fresh lychee. The curry's flavors are culled from cooking schools in three different Southeast Asian countries: Bangkok's Blue Elephant, Hoi An's Morning Glory, Siem Reap's Sugar Palm. But it is the rib eye roast that makes the knife (my heart) sing: crackling through its seared crust, it slips on layers of hot fat

until it catches, having reached the beef's juicy, pink center. Its teeth flash, dig in; a heavy slice curls down in surrender.

The word is "chaos:" a world in overload. Simply put, the flavours are too much. Too oily and too rich and too savoury. Her cluttered kitchen counter gives her away: sea salt, minced garlic, crisped onions, olive oil, soy sauce, cracked pepper, French butter.

But "savoury" is the word my mother cooks with; it melts like salt crystals on the tongue, turning the chaos divine, the riot into a beautiful explosion. Savoury harks, as in looks back, pulls up, calls in from a distance (far away or left behind)—something: a taste, not enough, now missing; an experience, thought forgotten; a time, long gone. A memory, that alights on the tip of the tongue, crystal clear; its miniscule flakes flooding the plains, never plain; bites, and dissolves before its outline can be traced.

The too-much dissolves into the for-now—for while there is plenty, what else is there to do but savour it? For now, we are all here, together, and life is good, and, one day, too-much will turn into not-enough.

For now, there's dessert.

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Pangasinan:

A province in Luzon, the northernmost island in the Philippines. It means "the land of salt" or "the place of salt-making," but the name is in fact inaccurate. Originally, in the local language, Pangasinan referred only to the province's coastal area, while the interior region was called Kaboloan. Alas, the Spanish colonisers mistook the part for the whole—as colonisers are wont to do. It all worked out in the end, however, because Pangasinan is still known for its salt, as well as its *bagoong*, or salted shrimp paste, often eaten with unripe, green mango—the salt flavouring the sour. During the dry season,

shrimp and fish ponds are turned into salt beds, the *sugpo* shrimp giving the sea salt its natural pinkish hue. These days it's sold in Europe and America as a gourmet Philippine sea salt at inflated prices.

Pangasinan was also once the kingdom of Luyag ng Kaboloan, founded by Austronesian settlers known as the Anakbanwa. The Austronesians created an empire connected by the seas, establishing a trade network with China, India, and Japan in the 8th century A.D., navigating from Taiwan and the Malays to Hawaii and as far as Africa on their wooden outrigger boats known as *paraw*. Today, the graceful *paraw* line the powder beaches of Boracay, their sails painted with the logos of local telecom companies, offering sunset cruises and snorkeling excursions to coral reefs stripped of colour and fish.

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"Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."

- Matthew 5:13

Where the mineral ends and the metaphor begins, salt has powers beyond the chemical. Plato described it as "a substance dear to the gods," Aristotle argued that it was more like a gift from them, and Homer said that it was simply "divine." From India to England, folk tales tell of a daughter spurned by her father for saying that her love for him was like salt. In the end, he realises that salt is life's flavour, and his daughter's love is true and pure—in the early 1600s Shakespeare would name this daughter Cordelia and her father King Lear in one of his most famous plays.

Evil is summoned or banished in spilled crystals. In voodoo magic, a zombie can only be sent back to the grave if fed with salt. A pinch of salt thrown over the left shoulder, aimed at the devil's leering eye. Or maybe a circle of the stuff, to ward against sorcery. The Old Testament prescribes that new babes be rubbed with salt, to keep them always true. Given to husbands by old wives or new brides, it solves a different sort of problem: that of virility, fertility. The word "salacious," after all, emerged from the less lewd and more romantic "*salax*" ("in love" in Latin).

Like salt, God wrestles us between life and death, reward and punishment, Zion or Sodom and Gomorrah. He doesn't quite know what to do with us, at times. His people are the salt of the earth (a gift), but their wrongdoings also salt the earth, (a curse).

But as fickle as God or man may be, salt in itself is constant, essential, pure. The perfect symbol, then, of the covenant between God and man. An eternal exchange. As in all cultures, where the eating of salt is a promise of friendship, even fidelity. It is a universal oath of hospitality. A sign of faith.

Salt is our connection to the earth, to the deepest, oldest elements of our humanity. Our blood and sweat and tears: even when we forget, they remember—our briny origin, the residue of our sins. It is the salt that binds.

In Poland, deep under the earth, is a cathedral carved out of salt, where workers of the Wieliczka Salt Mine once came to worship a Mother and Child, grey and dappled as if carved from stone, not the self same salt. By the light of the flickering chandeliers, also made of salt, it seemed as if their faces were weeping.

"With all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt."

- Leviticus 2:13

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Holy Week, 2009

The Royal Free Hospital, Hampstead Heath, London

ICP (Intercranial Pressure): 45 mm Hg

My sister is laid out on a hospital bed. Eyes closed, face slack, but not asleep. In a coma. An induced one, if that makes it any better. It means she can come out of it, if they say she can; it means the doctors are in charge. Can turn it on and off, like a switch. Like the machine that is currently doing the breathing for her.

But she can't wake up, not just yet. Because she drank too much water.

If that sounds like a joke, it's because you don't know. Don't know that people can die from overhydration. *Hyponatremic encephalopathy*, affirms Dr. Google. Now you do. Now I do. Now my mother and my grandmother and my three other sisters (minus the comatose one, who doesn't know much of anything right now) and my only brother do.

I hold her pendant in my hand, knuckled, the silver and stones engraved into my palm, the scent of metal staining. Iron. Blood. It is warmer than her hand, now. I try to remember it strumming a guitar, emphasizing a point, holding mine.

I'm here, Manang, I'm here.

We were there to visit this sister, the eldest, an architecture student at University College London. Waiting at the baggage claim of the London Heathrow airport, we received a phone call from our cousins, who were already at the hospital. They knew before us.

My father knew last, 13 hours in a darkened plane, alone. Work unfinished, yesterday's suit, he entered the ICU to see my sister's carefully positioned prone form on a hospital bed, the shimmer of a metal rod protruding from her right temple, those oxygen

tubes that look like they coil uncomfortably deep in the lungs, a lot of devices that beeped or flickered. And then he knew.

You'd think we knew the second we received the call, heard the words. We didn't. Instead, I stressed over bags yet unarrived; frowned at the sounds my mother was making; thought of Paris, cancelled now, surely.

In the cab, mother's shapeless sobs were hollow in the silent spring air. Kilometers stretched into unknown miles, the minutes counted out by the blinking, pulsating taximeter. We did not know what the fare would be. *So that'll be 68 pounds or one sister. Would you be needing change, love?* But that is too melodramatic; comic, even—like my mother, falling apart in the front seat. I stop my own questions short of inflection. I am almost too afraid to pray, because that would be to ask. I do not want to know—no answer, or know the answer. Instead—in its stead (knowing)—I put my hands on her shoulders from the backseat. *Hold onto my hand. Now, one, two, three…*

We did not know—even then. Ever? How does one know, with these sorts of things?

Maybe someone did. The house my sister had booked for us was in Hampstead Heath, known for its beautiful wooded park—and its hospital, one of the leading neurological centers in London. But at the time, we sat and stared and slept, in this house intended for a holiday, while my grandmother obsessed about sleeping in a stranger's bed, insisting we buy new pillows.

It all boiled down to salt. A matter of science, you see. When my sister drank too much water, it flushed out all the salt in her body, and faced with a less-dense space (her brain), the fluid rushed in, her brain swelling up and out, pressing against her skull. She

forgot where she was. She forgot whom she was with. She forgot what day it was. She became angry. Scared.

What year is it, Maria? *It's Mia.* (No one calls her Maria.)

What year is it, Maria? *1999.* (Ten years too early.)

She did not know.

The night before, she was at a Ministry of Sound concert, when we were up in the air, on a plane, sleeping, not yet knowing.

Then she woke up.

First she blinked her eyes. Then she squeezed my hand. Then she sat up in a chair. Then she teased my dad, and told me I didn't know what I was talking about—and I knew.

A few days later, she sat with us in a wheelchair, tubes removed, meds not yet, to hear mass in the hospital chapel. That evening, she cried into our mother's lap, a new babe, born again, afraid, rubbed with salt—protected the whole while, it seemed; our mother's touch, keeping her from the unknown deep.

It was Easter Sunday.

And I knew—that whatever we knew or didn't know, whatever she did or didn't do—

She was here.

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"the smallest,

miniature

wave from the saltcellar

reveals to us

more than domestic whiteness;

in it, we taste finitude."

- taken from "Ode to Salt" by Pablo Neruda

The tides rise. Pain, but, also, pulse. Blood, sweat, tears, they're all here. We are here, too, but not all. And not the same. Moving fluids, shifting densities. Another space. A new state. Seasoned with salt, as in full of grace. *Sal Sapientia*: the salt of wisdom. Thus, to be "salted" means to be experienced—have lived, still living.

A hand held in open sea. Lifeline. Root. The circle is rejoined, covenant kept. The statue of mother, carved deep underground. Trace element, returning, restores balance. Savour, savior, sustaining. A silver pendant, warm in my palm. Remember its touch. *Do not forget this time.*

A price paid in salt.

Over and again.