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Milkfish

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MILKFISH

by

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University of Kansas, 2011

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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DEDICATION

For my Mom and Dad

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Thank you to *Reservoir* for publishing a previous version of “An Imagined Retelling of My Childhood and Future.”

Thank you to my family and friends, the USC MFA Cohorts from 2015-2018, Sam Amadon, and Nikky Finney for helping me breathe life into this manuscript.

ABSTRACT

Milkfish is a collection of poems that explores familial and generational trauma in a Filipino-American family. Primarily written in first person narrative, it gives voice to a Filipina-American who has experienced controlling behavior, verbal abuse, silencing, and colorist attitudes and behaviors from her father and mother. The collection seeks to understand why the speaker's parents raised her this way by investigating how the parents were raised in the Philippines. These poems were constructed with the help of interviews between the author and her parents. Additionally, it explores the patriarchal structure of Filipino families and shines a light on "women's work," which has been invisible because of this structure. By extension, the collection aspires to demonstrate how its narratives are similar to and different from other Filipino-American and Asian-American immigrant narratives.

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“What I hated was being a child, having no choice about what people I loved.”

—Louise Glück

An Imagined Retelling of My Childhood and the Future

Tell me about the time where I talk back to my father,
slow your speech down and speak clear and full. My mother stands up for me
and blossoms beyond limitations, says I can live anywhere, do anything. People
tell me I look like her, not my father, I'm unashamed.

A window opens, letting in the cool midnight air. I
sneak out, wear sleeveless dresses, and let the moonlight
caress my bare legs. I go to sleepovers like the other girls in my grade.

My parents teach me things by lingering outside: how to identify an onion by its
stalks; how to prune flowers for new growth. They praise
standing up for oneself, and I find and use my voice all along.

Expose my skin to the sun. Forget Filipino TV, wear shorts and run
in the daylight, keep a secret in the root of my tooth,
in the core of a smooth stone in the ocean, in the dark between the stars and the moon.

Trees rise rapidly, Everlasting Revolutions bloom and fold over like in a cinema reel.
I shed an outer layer, and people are indifferent to cotton,
doves, clouds. My breath suspends, I wait for a new morning to expand.

Finally, I step into a garden, where roses interlace,
form a crown above my eyelids. I am normal and acceptable,
but also in power. There's no mistaking me.
I can see. Slow your speech. Tell me others can see me.

PART I

There Are No Accidents

My friend crashes on a motorcycle with a boy,
their romance still in roses.
Her sister walks toward me,
holds a new friend's hand, absence.

Can you come to the funeral? she asks.
I have to ask my dad, I say,
but whenever I ask for things from him,
I turn into a fish.

Glassy-eyed.
Mouth agape.
Tama na! he tells the fish.
I blink. Hover in one watery place.

My dead friend lived
in the trailer park.
Her mom drove her
to a different neighborhood

each morning so she could go
to a better school.
She was coming home
from the neighborhood.

Can you go? she repeats.
There are easier things
a fish could ask for
from her father. I shake my head *no*.

*

My father flips over in a jeep with his friends,
out for a drive in the country,
beyond the trailer park,
where the *sampaguita* flourish.

The vehicle arcs in the sky,
swivels upside-down.
Strands of hair suspend. Their limbs
weightless for a moment.

The metal console
impales the boy

in the driver's seat.

My father's friend joins my friend.

When my father returns home,
he walks to the fish tank.

His father spits *Joseph*,
problema yun taong iyon

then leaves the room.

The fish rush to the surface.

My father's hand reaches
for the food.

He fastens his eye
to a fish's mouth.

Drops his hand,
leaves the room.

We Were Known for Our Fruit Trees

My mother peels the fiery red,
deep green mango into one long skin.
It suspends then drops to the floor,
gathers with the other curls at her feet.

We were known for our fruit trees, she tells me.

Coconut, guava, chesa, and mango.
Tender white meat of the coconut.
Bijou pink flesh of the guava.
The chesa creamy like mousse.

She pushes through the yellow flesh,
her thumb against the back of the blade,
the piece swivels then separates.

*The neighbor kids came to our house
and climbed the fruit trees.
They would always reach
for the guava, the tallest at 20 feet.*

She shaves the mango to the pit.
The bowl full of jeweled pieces.

*I also sold mangoes in the third grade,
for five centavos each.
That's what a Coke was worth.*

I reach for a slice. My mother twists
open a jar of *bagoong*. The scent
of fermented fish fills the air.

*I helped the other children gather fruit.
My arms were always full.
There was plenty for everyone.*

She scoops the *bagoong* with the mango.
Hands me the slice, prepares her own, smiles.

*Our mangoes were the sweetest
you'd have ever tasted,
the yellowest
you'd have ever seen.*

For a moment, I see her under the fruit trees:
coconuts, guavas, chesa at her feet.
Mangoes gathered in her arms.
The trees sway behind her in a light breeze.

My mother, Elisa, the Mango Queen.

Ahas

Ahas nests in my girl room,
 slithers around my ankles and wrists,
the only parts exposed to the sun.
 It ripples in the medicine cabinet,
on the bathroom counter, writhes
 around cotton balls, while I dab
my face with *Eskinol*, smooth
 Sebo de Macho on my scars.
In the shower, it slides toward the bright orange
 block of *Likas* papaya soap;
I pray the suds will strip
 my skin of melanin.

Ahas hisses through the mouths
 of my family. *Emylisa*,
bakit ang itim mo na.
 I see the snake's reflection
slither in their eyes. Its muscles flex
 across their retinas, body
a lateral undulation. Snakeskin darkens to obsidian.
 When *Ahas* catches my eye,
it smiles, scales contracting
 and expanding, savors the air's
charged molecules between us.

I wear long sleeves and pants
 in the summer so *Ahas*
won't touch me there.
 Once, my sister ran
a hot bath for me, scoured
 until my brown skin
tinged pink. *Ahas* wound
 around my neck,
the brightest red.
 My mother laughed.

The temperature climbs
 to 100. Through my long sleeves
and pants, sweat sweetly clings.
 My eyes sting. I shade them and look
down, away from the sun.
 Study the grass for another
second, then start to feel
 the pull inside. *Ahas* dances

until I reach the threshold
and close the door behind.

First Lesson of Girlhood

I luv you. Will you hld my hand?
from a boy in kindergarten.

I shimmer when I give
the note to my father.

He shakes it
right back in my face.

My eyes widen and fill,
turn into glass marbles.

He leans close,
his breath on my cheek—

I shrink to fit
in the palm of his hand—

*If this happens again,
you will stand in the silent square.*

I flail my fish head,
flap my fins erratic—

he drops me to the floor,
a faint thud on the carpet.

My mouth opens and closes,
bubbles of air.

The Haircut

I wanted long hair
to flip and comb.

I grew it to fifteen inches,
measured it in the mirror.

Brushed it before showers,
rubbed my scalp with coconut oil.

It shimmered and shimmied.
One hot day in Kansas, my dad said

It's getting too long.

Pearly sat me down
in a wooden chair

in the kitchen.
I told her I wanted

Just a little.
She cut half an inch.

Dad said *shorter*.

My lips pressed,
my eyes turned to water,

my hands curled
beneath the chair.

Shorter.
I willed all my girl strength

But it's my hair.

My father got close to my face.
His eyes bulged.

No he said it's my hair.

Joseph in the Vegetable Garden

Where Joseph steps, a plant sprouts;
he's careful not to step there again.
He slowly walks a perimeter—

seedlings, shoots in his wake—
along the neighbor's fences
perpendicular to the house,

a low living wall for the final side,
still open to the abandoned field.
He stoops down to check on

saluyot, Nalta jute, their serrate
shapes, and *kamote* tops, sweet potato
leaves, their heart outlines, pointed tips.

He pulls imposter buds on his
hands and knees. Constructs metal
tornadoes for *sitaw*, Chinese long beans,

and *talong*, Japanese eggplant;
they lengthen and curl at the ends,
rise and set at his hands

that made metal lattices from leftover
chicken coop wire where stubborn vines
crawl up. Exhausted from their climb,

the vines settle in thin squares,
develop silent verdant wind chimes:
Upo, bottle gourd, and *ampalaya*,

bitter melon, never touch,
sway shadows on the ground.
Joseph cradles the vegetables

before picking, the produce rests
in his cupped hands. He walks
the perimeter in the morning

and at dusk to water, prune,
or talk. In the evening,
his family forms an oval at six,

ladle the vegetables onto
their plates, bow their heads
when Joseph says Grace.

A Collage of My Love through School Projects

Your fifth grade science project was titled “Which has the most density?” A mother’s love or a daughter’s? Golden oil, clear water, amber vinegar layered in their glass jars. The sunlight made them sing. The way the liquids floated on top of each other, so I buoyed you. Helped you research, cut construction paper. Printed off the information while I studied late at school. When you got first place, I was so proud of you.

We practiced tracing bubble letters in the air and then on construction paper. Your fourth grade cereal box book report—“The Woman in the Wall.” As you nodded off to sleep, I half woke, half carried you to bed, lay my head next to yours, finished coloring.

I picked up nature and brought it to your room with third grade flower paintings. Dipped twine in hot pink paint, curled it, then laid it straight on a blank page. I shut your art notebook then pulled the string straight out. When I opened the notebook, X-ray orchids bloomed just for you, your cheeks flamed by fever.

Our hands folded plain white strips of paper into hearts, diamonds, teardrops. We glued them radiating out from the center all around. When it was finished, I helped you dip it in glitter. Pinned it to the ceiling above your bed, a northern star to guide you out of choppy waters.

We cut out a tan circle with Fiskar safety scissors, small black circles for your eyes, a brown crescent nose, a light pink mouth. Your first grade self-portrait was topped by bits of black string for your hair. We picked pieces of cloth from my sewing kit, constructed your outfit into a tapestry, made you my baby girl.

Retreat

Out my bedroom window,
the blue and silver
swing set glimmers
in the backyard.

My family bought
it at a garage sale.
Cheap plastic and metal,
but I build myself another home:

the individual swing, a bedroom,
the see-saw swing, a living room.
I pile rocks
in the kitchen,

the carriage swing,
where I store food
for the winter.
I decorate

with loose grass,
dirt, sticks, and pebbles.
I breathe slower,
talk to myself,

find comfort
in the outside.
My mother prunes
her roses

in the front yard.
My father waters
his vegetables
in a backyard corner.

It is dusk,
when the light
and heat softens
to something bearable.

Each of us forgets
the other.
For a moment,
each of us content.

The First Time I See *Ahas*

Marilag's fingers sway
to temper the water.
She twists the faucet off.
I step into the tub.

She scrubs my
knees, elbows,
and armpits. I laugh.

But when she reaches
my neck, she scrubs harder.
My skin tinges pink,
rose, ripe rambutan.

She adds hot water.
Scrubs again. Sighs.
Douses me one more time.

When I rise, she winds
a towel around me,
my head just above
her hip. In the mirror,

I see a tail
slither away
from my neck.

I say nothing
and pad to the kitchen.
My mother exclaims
Why are you so red?

Akala ko dumi
Marilag responds.
I thought it was grime.

My mother kneels
in front of me.
Cups my chin, tilts
my head side to side.

Ay! Itim lang siya diyan.
She's just dark there.
My mother and sister,

the color of pearl, laugh.

I Transform into an Eastern Cottonwood

The hour begins when my father leaves the room.
In the silent square, I try not to stir. I listen
to the tick tock from the blue clock on the wall.

I face my bedroom door, ajar, and know my father
moves in the house. He knows I will not move.
My torso toughens into a long, thick trunk. Dips and rises

in my skin create fissures, harden into dark grey bark.
Arms turn into branches, fingers petioles and leaves.
Legs and feet, those moving roots, fix into the carpet,

dig past into the earth, spread through the soil.
Tick. Tock. The blue clock elongates time like a bubble
blown from a wand. My leaves burst forth dark green,

coarsely toothed, they curl once-in-a-while. My back
to the window. This will end when my shadow moves
from left to right, when the minute hand returns to three.

I think about why I got sent to the silent square: a seed
puff drifting, landing on his toe or temple. Bark rises
and falls, relieved, having faced my father's screaming.

As the seconds tick by, my spade leaves drift to the ground;
I grow bald. The fissures rise, morph back into girl skin.
Branches soften into girl limbs. Restless roots bend,

retreat from earth, foundation, carpet into short chubby legs.
Leaf scars are the last to leave my body, heart-shaped,
small caves raised to dimples to smoothness, before

I'm ten again. As long as I live in his house, I'll turn
into an Eastern Cottonwood, collecting leaf scars anew,
before I stop asking to ride my bike to Maria's house at night.

PART II

When My Father Calls Me Ugly

I.

A muted pressure
like the running of a wet
fingertip over a glass.
Wet rings suspend in my eyes.
I stare out the car window,
the Kansas wheat whipping
to the east in the sun's bright glare.

II.

Lolo returns straight home
from work every day,
his hands clean
despite the machinery
at the naval base.

He washes again
while *Lola* retrieves
his *tsinelas*,
sets the newspaper
next to his favorite chair.

There are no cigarettes,
alcohol, or cards in the house.
He talks to his only friend, Doro,
late into the evening,
only on the weekends.

III.

You're ugly to him means:

*I took care of birds once;
I loved them so.
I was scared they would fly away
so I tethered them to my wrist.
When they'd fly a little too far, I yanked back
the string. Or was it the rope.*

But they flew away eventually.

I'm trying again. For you, the string.

IV.

You look like your father, my mother's sisters sneer.

When my parents fight, my mother spits
She's your daughter.

Later: *I never regretted having you.*
But I still wear the face
of her sisters' shame.

V.

Lolo's dusk shadow
falls on Joseph
while he daydreams.
His siblings' voices
sealed by the house.
He runs.
Gets caught by the wrist
and yanked back.
Feels the cutting
of a switch
until his legs blush.

Joseph bites his lip,
but doesn't cry.
Follows *Lolo*,
head down,
into the house.

VI.

The silent pressure swells.
I am stuck with my father
for fifteen minutes,
the time it takes from
the high school to home.

I glimpse my acne in the side view mirror,
my body 15 pounds lighter,
and run my tongue over my braces,
their tightening a lesser pain than this.

VII.

At a family reunion, multiple generations of Warrick's reminisce at my Aunt Vivian's.
My uncles cup San Miguel beers in their tired hands, sit on plastic lawn furniture in their
shorts and *tsinelas*. Cigarette smoke rises to meet the stars; a card game abandoned on the
table. The night deepens. I hear dishes clanking and gossip in the kitchen where my aunts
clean up.

Outside I hear:

*Remember the time when Lolo
tied us to a fence and left us there?
It was so hot that day and the field was empty.*

My uncles laugh and laugh. They turn to my father:

*Joseph, he beat you, but you didn't have it so bad.
My father's face together but loosens at the seams.*

VIII.

My father wakes before the dawn.
Slices tomatoes, onions, peppers
in the hospital kitchen. At three,
he picks me up from school.
Has met me for ten revolutions
around the sun.

IX.

Five minutes until we reach home;
the pressure holds. I try to hold
my breath for the whole sunflower field.
Did he call me ugly
because I disobeyed him yesterday?
In this new body with his face?

X.

My mother observes,
*I don't think your father ever liked children.
He won't let the grandkids play in the backyard
or field. He says they'll get too dirty.*

XI.

Long grasses in the field where chesa trees swayed
and *sampaguita* dotted the landscape like stars.
My father escaped *Lolo's* shadow on the day
his brothers were tied to the fence.
But there was no true escape.

XII.

I am not a bird.

XIII.

Two years after the car ride
past the wheat
then sunflowers,

I tell my friend:

I had a strict upbringing.

He responds:

You're a good person, aren't you?

You're a good person, aren't you?

I look out the window and stare.

Chocolate Milk

Marilag's eyes travel
to the lower half of my face.
It has always been a shade darker.

*You look like you have
chocolate milk
all over your chin.*

Before I go to bed,
I scrub my chin raw.
Likas papaya soap.

Eskinol cleanser.
Sebo de Macho
for my scars.

Scars from acne.
In winter,
little cuts form and bleed.

I scrub every night.

After school I see
soap opera Filipinas
crying on our television.

Judy Ann Santos in *Esperanza*.
Kristine Hermosa in *Pangako Sa 'Yo*.
Claudine Barretto in *Sa Dulo Ng Walang Hanggan*.

Their tears glint
in their condensed
milk complexion.

I look from the screen
to my mom and sister's
fixated faces.

Their light complexion
inherited from a Chinese
great grandfather.

On those days,
I wash twice.

On those days,

my tears
more luminous
than all five women.

One Night

My parents let us stream
through the backyard like milkfish
when dusk dips into night.

Past the swing set we have no fence.
My backyard fans out
into the abandoned field strewn

with Eastern Cottonwoods. The cicadas cling
to the trees emitting low sirens
gathering into a roar. Their bodies fall

like rain trickle in the tallgrass.
Some scatter on the sidewalk
their skeletons iridescent
ready to be picked apart by our small hands.

My parents granted me one wish
to glide through a summer evening with friends
before the first year of high school begins.

The breeze ripples the wild prairie grass
and we are the only constant, us girls,
side-by-side on a fallen log
playing telephone in the moonlight.

A river of silver hair secrets pass
from ear to ear crowned by fireflies
worshipped by a field of broken branches.

We are one elongated milkfish
the sole living species in the Chanidae family
a mysterious breed the age

when milkfish die. I forget
I am a girl in a silent square
and swim into the night.

Saturdays in Olongopo City, Zambales, 1960

*We hid in the mountains:
papa, mama, my brother,
Vincente, my sisters, Ena,
Laura, Virginia, and Delia.*

Joseph pushes the sand
with his toe, makes mountains
by Lake Miracle. *Lolo* and
his brothers the only ones here.

*I was a young man.
I was afraid the Japanese
would take us
and kill us.*

Lolo's stories float in the ears
of Dani, Junior, Joseph,
his eldest sons. He alternates
who he takes to the lake,

all seven boys would scatter
like seeds in the air,
fall like rocks into the water,
ripple and splash the surface.

*They raided our villages.
Killed the men,
pulled the women
into the bushes.*

The girls, Jane, Vivian, and Rosalinda,
polish the floor into a mirror,
pick *sampaguita* as white
as the billowing blouses
on the line at home.

*We were lucky.
But we didn't see
other Filipinos
in the mountains.*

Joseph thinks it would be easy
to hide around the lake, lay his body
flat like a reed on the forest floor,

haloed by starfruit.

*You boys have it easy.
All I ask is that you obey
and don't get in trouble.
That's how you stay safe.*

Once, he was out too late.
Lolo caught him,
peeled a switch,
turned his legs to fire.

His belly is on the sand,
but he pretends he's underwater.
They're never allowed to go in.
Lolo's voice breaks through the surface.

*I survived those days
in the mountains.
Be thankful you're alive.
Now, you must survive.*

Joseph gasps for air
even when he's not in trouble.
Lolo gives him no chances
to swim beyond the shore.

Saturdays in San Fernando, La Union, 1963

“Her mother, like my mother, like myself, our voices are so small sometimes, and the work that must get done is so interminable.”

—*M. Evelina Galang*

Elisa pitches hot soapy water, a wide liquid arc fans
from a plastic bucket, lands with a splash on the floor,

curtsies to her partner, the old wood mop,
Gusto mo bang sumayaw? The mop bows, *Sige*,

they twirl, sway figure eights from living room
to dining room to three bedrooms, when the dance ends,

she returns him to the closet where he lives,
shuts it gently, whispers *Salamat* in a tired breath.

Melts, mixes candle stubs with amber
kerosene, mutters an incantation, waits

for the concoction to harden, a smooth paste
she can swipe with a fingertip,

scoops the floor wax with an old t-shirt,
one her skinny arms and legs outgrew years ago,

wipes the floor back and forth, the shape
of cockle shells evaporate, hums a tune

while the high sun dips to eye level, wax oils settle.
Pulls the *bunot*, halved coconut husk, from below the sink,

starts polishing, alternates between hands and feet,
sometimes runs across the room, laughs, for a shine.

When she finishes, she kneels, spreads her hands
on the floor, smiles at her reflection, murmurs, *Maganda*,

every Saturday, this is her favorite chore,
the magic to see, be seen by her hard work.

The Only Time My Father Hit My Mother

The welt on her cheek
as ripe as the mango
on the table.
Elisa holds still.
Looks at Joseph,
who bows his head,
sinks into a chair.
She walks to the kitchen,
draws a knife
out of the drawer,
returns to Joseph.
She reaches
for a mango.
Starts peeling.
Looks down at him
with her broken blood vessels.
Her threat of leaving
worse than the weight
of the knife in her hand.

Lola and Lolo in the Kitchen

Light scatters on red
and white checked curtains,
the flowered vinyl tablecloth.

My grandparents' kitchen
stands still for twelve summers:
Lola and Lolo, figures in a diorama.

I sit across from *Lola*,
who peels an orange,
sets the slices in front of me.

Lolo shuffles, opens the fridge,
picks up and puts down the paper.
His hand rests on the back of her chair.

Did you take out the trash?
She shrinks.
What have you been doing all day?

I look at her.
He stoops down.
His voice drops like a pit.

You're lazy and worthless.

She disappears
except for her eyes,
glass marbles with cracked insides.

Every year after,
the glass remains,
coated by a layer of dust.

Even When You Sleep, I Am with You

I.

*When you were young and couldn't fall asleep,
you would lie on my chest.
My arms tightened around you. I rubbed your back.
I became a raft.
The rise and fall of my chest,
your resting place.
I rocked you to sleep,
the motion of breath,
your ear to the ocean.*

II.

*I supported you with the strength
of vine lashed to wood,
bamboo with hollow culms
to buoy you.
The large long bamboo for my square frame
felled through fire: My first lover strayed
when I left for the States.
Single mother to your brother.*

III.

*Smaller bamboo set
side-by-side through the years.
So you wouldn't feel the wood in your chest,
I laid down banana leaves,
folded you close with palms.
Even though you no longer fit
on my chest, you can still place
your ear to my heart
in the middle of the ocean.*

My Father Teaches Me to Kill a Chicken

Embrace it, so that it calms down in your arms.
Shh. He cradles the chicken's head in his palm,
moves as if to close its eyes with his thumb.

Angles the neck. Slits the throat. The chicken
bobs in my arms, its last moves toward life.
Blood spatters my skin, drains into the bucket.

The twitches fade, its full weight settles.
For a moment, I am terrified of death.
Then my father finishes what he started:

he closes its eyes. *You can let go now.*
He grabs the legs and pulls the dead from me.
The water roils in the tall pot, he dunks the bird,

until the small feathers wet right above its feet.
Jiggles it up and down, pulls it back out. Repeats.
When the bird is out, he tugs a wing feather. It fails

to give. He dunks the dead again. On the sixth time,
the feather slides out, like a petal pulled from a flower.
Now it's time to pluck. We sit side-by-side on the wood

steps, a plastic sheet below us. My father works quickly.
The steam rises, the skin loose, he asks me to join him.
Tug firmly but carefully. You don't want to tear the skin.

We don't speak while we pluck. The feathers fall, stick
where they land, form haphazard nests at our feet.
The chicken balds: patches of light beige, white, pink.

Our fingers raw. When it's clean, my father turns to me,
You have some blood on your cheek. He moves to rub
the spot but stops. Points with his thumb. Picks up the bird.

Good work. He walks into the kitchen, shuts the door.
I start picking up feathers. This is what is left of death.
We are all alone. Even those who must clean up after.

My Aunts Called Me *Bangsit*

I thought it was because
I didn't bathe enough

or dirt clung to the folds
of my knees and elbows

or I never wiped the sweat
from the heat.

But the nickname
came from a nickname

my mother's sisters
gave my father:

Basura.

Because my mother,
who drew blood,

dispensed medications,
created me with my father,

who sliced tomatoes,
swept the cafeteria.

A Dream Reveals the Lie

“Imperialism’s racial justice could be sustained only through an ongoing training of perception in an aesthetics of racial terror.”

—Vince Schleitwiler

I peel the bark off an Eastern Cottonwood, strips of paper mache.
Underneath, a white world lit from within, the light almost blinds.
The dark grey bark can’t match the glow of the inside, I pull

skin from flesh—a crisp sound—uncover the soft ivory
of a scrubbed newborn, the longan fruit, the pearl surface
of a stone in the ocean, the pulse of a star. Peel piece by piece.

Dead skin a circle around me. I wonder if I’d shed the same way.
I dig my nail into my arm until it starts to bleed. Peel the skin
but there’s nothing underneath. No white to replace my brown.

I kneel and gather the flakes, hold them close to my chest.
My eyes wet. Face the Cottonwood and try to piece the flakes
back on the trunk, but they fall. I abandon them. I am done.

Self-Portrait of a Girl Who Tells Herself Everything Is Alright

“Mahirap gisingin ang nagtutulog tulugan.”
—*Filipino proverb*

I ran with a piece of glass in my foot but thought it was a pebble.

It came from a broken ceramic bowl that I thought I had stepped on the day before.

The bowl held cereal and spoiled milk that I had eaten just minutes before.

The milk I pulled from the broken refrigerator sat by Mexican leftovers.

I ate the Mexican food in the restaurant even though it had a piece of plastic.

In the restaurant, they sat me by the drafty window in the middle of winter.

In the middle of winter, I stayed at work until midnight without overtime.

At midnight, the snow was 6 inches deep in the parking lot.

At 2 a.m., a truck from the company came with a plow.

The streets leading home were plowed but revealed thick icy black sheets.

I drove at 10 miles per hour for 11 miles.

I woke at 6:30 in the morning to return to work.

At 7:30 in the morning, a thick sheet of ice covered the windshield glass.

I hammered at the windshield glass.

I wanted to break the glass and tell myself *everything is alright*.

Instead, I finished scraping, got in the car, and drove.

PART III

Like My Father

I hit my lover once.
Not a friendly pat
on the arm or back.
But a hard smack
at the center of his spine.
I tried to laugh,
play it off like a joke.
Don't ever hit me again.
I shook my head.
Knelt like a
broken branch.
I was desperate
to have my way,
to be obeyed,
my father
and *Lolo's* hands
in my hands.
But my heart was still mine.
I offered all to my lover,
never struck him again.

Elisa Joins Her Flowers

She kneels among her Peace Roses,
her Little Blessings,

*I have a cluster of cancer cells
in my left breast, she tells them,*

she lays fresh soil,
breaks it up in her hands,

pats it down, a bed
for an old friend,

*I can have a lumpectomy
and then do chemotherapy,*

she fills the dented watering can,
showers the spot she turned over,

but I've decided to cut it off,
picks up her pruning shears,

*I'd rather have them remove it all
than return to the operating room,*

her mother through the double doors,
the branches of her lungs gone black,

a leaf shudders between the blades,
Am I making the right decision?

Drawn toward her Spellbreakers,
her Everlasting Revolutions,

she clips the dead leaves, petioles,
they spiral ghostly to the ground,

slowly the green stalks emerge,
the leaflets open and proud.

When she kneels again, a bright
yellow blossom edges her vision,

*Hello, she greets the Pilgrim Rose,
I thought you were dead,*

she leans in, closes
her eyes, inhales.

Uncle Rick Turns to Water at *Lolo's* Funeral

Uncle Rick is known as the hard beetle,
black shiny shell of his leather jacket,
cruising on his motorcycle,
beating his son.

Uncle Rick liquifies at *Lolo's* funeral,
his suit of tears streams over the casket,
hands pressed on the lid deliquesce,
his feet already a puddle.

Uncle Rick still sees the hard shell
of *Lolo* no casket can compete with,
how the water breaks upon the sheen
but leaves no mark.

Years before, *Lolo* had his teeth pulled by a stranger,
convinced it would be cheaper,
he didn't tell anyone he had it done,
a man with all his teeth gone, bite whittled to his gums.

Uncle Rick's waves swell,
fill the space of the room,
until everyone drowns.
No longer a beetle,

a man at the feet of his father, flailing,
a father who fails to see his son.

Ahas Reappears 15 Years Later

Sometimes, when I talk to my mother,
I see *ahas* at the corner of my vision,
curled up or a ripple across the room.

When my mother excitedly tells me
Marilag got stopped at a Philippine
airport, I see a dark blur skitter.

Why? Because she has a nice purse?

My mother sends my sister
a Coach, Michael Kors,
or Dooney & Bourke, every Christmas.

*No, he thought she was from abroad
because her skin is so fair!*

There's a ripple in the corner,
a serpentine shape emerges,
but I force myself to look straight ahead.

The light-skinned always
receive special treatment,
always get stopped at the airport.

Maybe he thought she was half-American.
Or half-German.
Or half-Chinese.

The Filipino soap operas
I grew up with play a reel
in my head, but then shudder

to a stop. Maybe the guard kissed
Marilag's feet. I snicker and the blur
in the corner starts to fade.

*The light-skinned aren't inherently
brighter than the brown, mom.*

What? distracted, unsure.

*The people who get stopped
at the airport or get to*

*act on TV. They don't look
like me. Are they better?*

Better than who?

Better than me.

No, no, that's not what I'm saying.

Then what are you saying?

Ahas disappears.

My Father Offers Me Kansas

The land always bright when my father drives Kansas.
We begin our road trips with the car windows down.
Wind ripples my hair, a river flashing pinpoints of light.
The summer heat escalates, once more, over 100,
hot air rising into the sky before we turn the AC on.

The squares of Kansas lie before us, a quilt
unfurled and laid flat. Hills and valleys—
waves undulating in the middle of the prairie—
indentations in the land where a giant slept.

Sometimes, he turns the radio on,
our voices meld with Neil Sedaka,
Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole,
remnants from the karaoke machine
we used to sing at home.

These trips are the closest we'll ever get,
our eyes fix on the expanse,
sometimes a story escapes him,
a piece falls into place.

He sees himself at twenty-one,
his cherry tricycle zipping in and out
of crowded Olongopo streets, small business
carting people around, but here he can drive
with his shoulders down, empty winding roads.

Sunflower heads beckon, welcome me before they
whip past. Wheat stalks bend golden, reverse
sunlight and wind. Beyond the wheat,
the Eastern Cottonwoods form a comforting line.

My father offers me Kansas in these miles.
I look out the window while he concentrates
on the road. The brightness strains his eyes,
the heat waves rise, thin ghosts. When I offer
to switch, his fingers tighten on the wheel,
No, that's okay. I can go for a while longer.

Acts of Service

her love language walks hallways at night the same pigeon-toed angles found in your feet
checks on you at two a.m. at three sweeps mops polishes floors with a *bunot* both your
soles against the coconut husk while watching reruns of Filipino soap operas her hands
your hands slice bitter melon eggplant for *pinakbet* (your favorite) or cooks chicken
tinola or *adobo* knows when a fever is coming brews ginger tea a touch of lemon honey
stirred by spoons inherited smears tiger balm on your chest your rise and fall matches
hers helps you study helps with all your school projects when you tell her you are dating
she says *I know* smiles and both breathe a sigh of relief takes care of flowers the fortune
plant the bamboo plant carousels of cactuses knows to never overwater she sniffs out
other Filipinos Filipinas (your radar young) even if they're one-sixteenth thumps pinches
fruit at the grocery store calls across miles voice rushed with worry a small whine you
recognize your timbre in her voice when she holds your hand it's pillowy remember you
are made of the mango the wood of the trees when her hand won't always holds yours

To the Night,

I have been
nameless.

But brown woman
raises her hand,

fingers spread,
here.

I choose
to walk home

alone at night,
a luxury.

No one occupies
the street,

when I run,
I run zig zag

down the center
of that black river.

A boomer bounding
across the prairie.

If a snake leaps,
I'll clip

its throat
with my beak.

I could vanish,
a whisper

in the motionless air.
But the occasional feather.

I am here.
I am here.

Letter to a Fortune Plant

Dear *Berde*,

With your many names, *Dracaena fragrans massangeana*, corn plant, fortune plant, you need to live. Hold a sacred place by the windows. A light green line runs through the middle of each leaf—your tender spots I trace with my finger.

When I was 10, your leaves quivered as each note resonated through the black bell. My mother stopped buying fruit to buy me that clarinet. I no longer play, but a quiver lets me know that you're listening to the radio or my voice.

Your breath removes the toxins in wax, paint, smoke—thank you—allow me to breathe day and night. You don't ask for much, a little water once every week or two. I'm sorry I overwatered you, forgot how fluoride turns your tips brown, sudden droop.

When I was 13, braces seemed a luxury. When my father handed over the credit card, he looked like he was bullied into it. I wept for my teeth to be such a burden, dreamt for weeks that they crumbled when I closed my mouth. (I still do.) I hope you helped him pay it back.

You are a third of my mother's fortune plant. She sliced off the top, stripped the leaves: *Water once every two weeks. Place in light. Talk to it regularly. New leaf nodes will grow. Arrange stalks for balance. They don't mind being close together. The roots will find their way.*

My mother, did you help her, too? She ghosted hospital hallways, extra shifts, signed loans (like her parents did for her and all her siblings), so I could study with ease, attend classes without hunger.

I have heard of your mysterious sudden flowering—why *fragrans* lingers in your name—after years people wait, sometimes for nothing. But other times. I'll wait. I am very good at waiting.

I thought I could pay them back. But my debt lives, a light green line running through me.

So, instead, I promise to take better care of you. Only water once every week or two. One day I'll cut off a piece and pass you on to my children. Maybe one day you'll flower. You are also, after all, my mother's child.

Revisiting My Childhood Bookcase

Just Listen

The Family Under the Bridge

The Wolf at the Door and Other Retold Fairy Tales

Girl in the Mirror

The Hunchback of Notre Dame

Among the Hidden

Postsecret

Ghosts Beneath Our Feet

The Doll in the Garden

The Woman in the Wall

Flipped

A Wrinkle in Time

The Land Before Time

Running Out of Time

Better Than Running at Night

The Night I Disappeared

Multiple Choice

Mick Harte Was Here

The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle

Here's to You, Rachel Robinson

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Ozma of Oz

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

The Marvelous Land of Oz

A House Like a Lotus

The Cure

A Certain Slant of Light

A Ring of Endless Light

Sleeping Beauty

Tomorrowland

The New You

Beyond the Tree Line

His chair, the only padded one
at the dining room table.
My father breathes on the glass,
reaffirms that something
can be borne of his breath.
Makes mountains out of thin air.

He looks to the backyard.
Bird feeders hung from two trees,
then one, when he chopped
the cherry. Pruned obsessively
when it was young.
It never bore fruit.

His gaze beyond the trees to the field.
My father sits alone now,
a padded square of his own making.
Any cut made on a tree
is a wound that must heal.
Some of mine will never.

But I won't walk
these empty fields
as a woman.
I sit next to my father,
look where he looks,
cover his hand.

Prairie Burning

I.

The Flint Hills are on fire.
Every spring, the smoke billows,
engulfs the car briefly,
I am blind.
Then emerge on the other side
to see the sky. Oil blue.
White clouds sail,
abundant on the water.
A line of fire shimmers
like a cicada's wing caught
in light at the right angle.
The Flint Hills curve
like my hands curve
around the wheel. I dip
into valleys of gold,
like keys tucked away in drawers.
I sing along to oldies songs
about girls who love
their fathers but must eventually
leave them. My father loved
me in his own way, but he
could've followed
a different wave.

II.

Each blade screams from the heat.
Fire razes trees and shrubs
while grass will return rich,
bow at the soft, wet muzzles
of cattle. I cannot take in all
82,000 square miles:
the tallgrass stretches from Kansas
to Oklahoma, unplowed prairie.
Patches of burning dot the landscape.
wasteland preparing for rebirth.
A moving on.
When I graduated, I moved to a city
larger than the palm of my hand.
When I visit my parents,
the Flint Hills mark my return.

III.

Jack rabbits, white-tailed deer,

prairie chickens. Cows
scatter across the landscape
beetles in the distance,
dogs up close.
The city is a different animal.
There are days
I want to return
to Kansas, but can't
picture myself between
the tallgrass and open sky.
I've been outgrowing the prairie.

IV.

In summer, hills will shimmer
green again, sky a clear water
that will stream over me,
the ground, blades amassed
like soldiers, their medals glint
in the sun. The heat,
an iridescence that
covers Kansas like looking
through an insect's wing,
soap bubble, clear oil.
The burning a step
toward this beauty.

V.

This is my advice
to the girl who emerges
from the smoke,
the one a part of me:
Let your braid unravel
like the wave of a loose whip.
Raise your daughters in the dirt
tongues of winding country roads,
let the girls ramble, let them speak,
beyond the silent square.
Try as you might,
you can never peel away
your skin. But know this:
brownness is a blessing,
an emblem of where
you're from. Family
roots in your hands
and eyes, but their burning

can die with you.
You'll emerge on the other side.

NOTES

The epigraph, page 4, is from the poem “Brown Circle” by Louise Glück in her book *Ararat*.

An older version of “An Imagined Retelling of My Childhood and the Future,” page 6, was published in *Reservoir’s* Issue III, January 2017.

The epigraph for “Saturdays in San Fernando, La Union, 1963,” page 33, is from the short story “Miss Teenage Sampaguita” in *Her Wild American Self* by M. Evelina Galang.

The epigraph for “A Dream Reveals the Lie,” page 39, is from *Strange Fruit of the Black Pacific: Imperialism’s Racial Justice and Its Fugitives* by Vince Schleitwiler.

The epigraph for “Self-Portrait of a Girl Who Tells Herself Everything Is Alright,” page 40, is a Filipino proverb that translates to “It is hard to wake someone who is pretending to be asleep.”

“Beyond the Tree Line,” page 54, is after a photograph by McNair Evans in the *Southbound: Photographs of and about the New South* exhibit. It also borrows language from the article “Dangers of Over Pruning” by Arborilogical Services, Inc.

“Prairie Burning,” page 55, is after a photograph by Langdon Clay in the *Southbound: Photographs of and about the New South* exhibit.