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Sacred and Perishable Country of Want: Poems

by

Carissa Natalia Bacongus

A Thesis

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Introduction

This poetry collection is entitled *Sacred and Perishable Country of Want*, a poetry collection discussing the body as a medium of horror, and how these horrors can continue to explore the intersections of cultural identity, gender, queerness, sexuality, and trauma. This project is divided into two parts. The first part of the project is an academic preface which focuses on dissecting how the body as a central image can be used in exploring how the presence of an external power or empire can push the transformation of a subject into an inhuman state by entering the body into a state of defamiliarization through abjection. In postcolonial studies, the crisis of identity is explored through the concepts of hybridity, fractured selves, and split identities. In line with this, the study of the Filipino identity is heavily reliant on how the body was treated during the colonial eras. Because the violence of colonial history is deeply rooted in the image of the body, I will be studying how the genre of horror affects the relationship between postcolonialism and the body, thus impacting and influencing contemporary Filipino poetics.

The second part of the project consists of original poetry. Inspired by the structural narrative explored in works such as Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic* and Franny Choi's *Soft Science*, the poetry collection contains a story within the poems following the fictional narrative of two characters set in Cotabato, Philippines: Dian, the main speaker and current medical student, and Carlos, her childhood friend and beautiful shapeshifter. Dian and Carlos are presented as opposites at the start—Dian is female, light-skinned, and scientific-oriented, while Carlos is male, dark-skinned, and artistic—although it becomes revealed that Carlos can shapeshift into the opposite sex. While the two become estranged in the present, Carlos and Dian meet once more in Metro Manila the day before Carlos becomes engrossed in a gruesome homicide. Carlos's female-shifted body is found violently cut open, yet her face intact. As

Carlos's seemingly nonexistent identity and murder becomes a national case, the local public finds themselves eerily attracted to her cadaver, as the body itself never decomposes nor shows signs of rot. Meanwhile, Dian obsesses over Carlos's unsolved murder, and is forced to contemplate her own relationship with Carlos and their fallout, as well as her own repressed desires and relationship with her body and identity.

While not all poems in the collection will include the characters of Dian and Carlos, their journey and character development throughout the narrative will dictate the section of overarching poetic themes explored in the collection. Thus, through this poetry collection, I explore the narrative of gender and queerness as a lived experience and as a human relationship of connection which impacts one's own relationship towards body and its horrors—asking the reader, what does it truly mean to have a body? What does it mean to have *the* body you're in, taking into account that the body is always a figure that is both a constant in one's human identity, and yet also always changing or shifting due to human biology? The body is an everyday horror: these questions defamiliarize what we understand of a body, and thus, impact one's identity.

Body Horror and Abjection in “The Catechisms of The Body”

To further understand body as a horror, let us consider Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund's definition of “body horror” in “Grotesque Bodies” as a defamiliarization, rendered by alterations, corruptions, erosions, or de/evolutions from within, separating human from non-human (56-57). While horror by itself can be defined by painful and intense fear, dread, or dismay, one of the reactions that is elicited by horror is disgust, and this is achievable through body horror. I explore these concepts immediately in the interaction between Carlos and Dian in “Dian and The Revelation of Carlos, 2005:”

Feel this, he says, cool as a pig who asks a butcher.
 She takes his breast, and it is full
 and she retracts
 as if on fire, no,
 as if burned. Dian wonders if the caterpillar
 can taste the moment of its own rupture:
 the aftertaste of its previous skin.

While the poem introduces Carlos's shapeshifting, Carlos uses his body as a means to explain the phenomena, and Dian reacts with both fear and desire. Both of the characters undergo a queer horror: they are introduced to the seemingly abnormal experience of puberty through desire and the changing of the body through a magical mutation through Carlos's revelation. This event starts Dian's sudden feelings towards bodily functions, wherein as Edwards and Grauland state: puberty, gender, sexual desire, body odor, and of the like, all generate disgust, shame, and even fear—and these become aspects of horror in one's daily life. The anxiety of mutation, and not death, is highlighted in the body (57). Queer horror also can be explored in this framework: as "queerness" becomes synonymous with what is odd, curious and strange (109).

Disgust generated from our knowledge of a familiar body into an unfamiliar state mirrors Julia Kristeva's discussion of abjection from her book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, wherein meaning is created by the loss of distinction between subject and object or between self and other, human and animal. Kristeva continues to discuss how abjection is a part of personal archeology or buried consciousness, meaning the abjection is a repression. Similar to

how postcolonial figures are not free of their colonial histories, in the context of the Philippines, these violences brought about by colonialism through catechism are not truly left behind, they continue, and are only repressed and internalized.

In Resil Mojares's "Catechisms of the Body," published in the book, *Waiting for Mariang Makiling: Essays in Philippine Cultural History* by the Ateneo de Manila University Press, he seeks to investigate how the body is represented through colonialism in literary texts through a discussion on how colonialism revised how the Filipino people compose, cover or ornament, and even feel and use their bodies. He concludes that it is through catechism, or oral instruction through a mode of systematic questioning, that was used in order to convert bodily conduct. As the Spanish felt the task of building Christian communities in what they believed was paganism, these early codes of conduct were often militant.

Not only were the missionaries interested in the presentation of the body, they emphasized that the manners of the body heavily mirrored the purity of the soul. Therefore, the rules for the Filipino body were invented in order to isolate it from the pollution of sin through constant vigilance and panopticism (Mojares, 175). All these conduct of the body during the time of Spanish colonization are meant to exercise one importance by the medieval Catholics: discipline of mind and soul (176). Through their body-space series of exclusions and negations (Christian/Pagan), (Civilized/Wild), (Enlightened/Ignorant), enforced through shame, fear, and guilt, norms were embodied and thus, identity was created. In "Dian Keeps A Secret, 2006", Dian and Carlos are introduced as two different natures:

Dian wipes her hand on her thigh. While Carlos plays futsal in the sun,
Dian stays in the shade; and covers her legs where the light

dares to brown her. *It is because you are going to be careful, and you are going to be successful, and you are going to be so much of both of these until you die.* This is what he says,

Carlos comments on their difference—wherein Dian is committed to not only be disciplined, but that her discipline will last her throughout her lifetime and therefore, her success in life relies on this constant conduct. Carlos’s “curse” as he states later in the poem: “And so you will be the only one to keep this secret / for now I curse you with the burden of myself,” is that his queer friendship with Dian is what “pollutes” her, and disturbs her discipline. Kristeva states that abjection defies boundaries, is resistant to unity, and disturbs the identity, order, and system that is necessary to create the subject. Further connecting this onto postcolonial discourse, I quote Homi Bhabha’s concept of displacement from his book, *The Location of Culture* published by Routledge, wherein he introduces a transformation from a “split” self, which contains the terms and territories of both sides.

The relationship of Filipino identity and abjection can be further found in Nerissa Balce’s *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* published by The University of Michigan Press, where she discusses how Filipinos were regarded as “abject bodies” during the Philippine-American War. Due to rising technology in America, people were able to envision the human body through photography and print. Yet in media and literature, the image of the Filipino body was used as a means to affirm an American imperial identity, and was used to represent “an infantile, savage, ignorant, and unassimilable population,” mirroring Mojares’s discussion on the natural pollution of the Filipino body prior to the discipline of the Spanish.

Mojares’s exclusions and negations mirror Noel Carroll’s discussion of the creation of monsters in *The Philosophy of Horror* through body horror as a “composition of horrific beings” through fusion: as categorical distinctions between examples such as Inside/Outside, Living/Dead, Insect/Human, and Flesh/Machine not only blur the distinction between living and dead, but they are both in the realm of a subject being living and dead (43). Kristeva’s concept of abjection can be inferred through Carroll’s concept of horrific metonymy: how disease and contamination are impurities that tend to surround the horrific being or subject, thus not only through the body, but all manner of filth are tandems of attributes to horrific subjects (51). Therefore, through Mojares and Carroll’s discussion, these themes of control, discipline, and torture of the flesh in the era of colonization were then meant to show devotion into the divine and a separation from the danger and disgust of filth.

Moreover, Kristeva’s main example of abjection is the cadaver—how the cadaver is an abject body through “death infecting life”, a body both in the state of subject and object, therefore, the abject (3). I explore these concepts in “The Barangay Reacts to Carlos’s Corpse, 2017”:

*the death of a beautiful morena woman
is the most poetic image in the third world*

yet none of them

know of her name

While Dian reacts separately to Carlos’s death, I show how the barangay “watches” the image of Carlos, and treats his female body as a spectacle for it both embraces beauty and filth. To structure Carlos’s cadaver, I take inspiration from the anatomical venus—wax figures created

in late eighteenth century Florence by Clemente Susini to be used as an anatomy teaching tool for male students in the medical field (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1: “Anatomical Venus, Wax figure of reclining woman, Florence”, Wellcome Library, London, 17 Oct 2014, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anatomical_Venus._Wax_figure_of_reclining_woman,_Florence._Wellcome_L0058207.jpg

As Joanna Ebenstein states in *Ode to an Anatomical Venus*, the anatomy of a woman was separate from the canonical body of the male, and the Venus was not only created as a teaching tool but to delight and elicit popular audience, as its uncanny allure successfully attracted both locals and visitors (2). Moreover, Ebenstein discusses how through the image of the anatomical venus, the female figure is shown to remain beautiful and arguably sexually desirable, as the abjectness of the Venus’s innards adds to her special frisson (4). I then explore these ideas in “Dian and The Anatomical Venus, 2017”:

[...] an illusion of a woman
 who refused the injury to define her,

beauty fooling death to claim her—another

body to love apart from how it lived.

Taking the imagery of the anatomical venus and appropriating it into Carlos's body, I mirror Balce's discussion on how the Filipino cadaver then is a sign of nationhood and victory, and of American sublime—wherein the colonization was treated as a rationalization, further grounding Filipino consciousness onto the image of the body (65).

Hauntedness and Identity in Poetic Narratives

Identity formed from the tension of precolonial and colonial history enters a postcolonial “third space”, according to Homi Bhabha's discussion of hybridity—an essential term in postcolonial studies. In this third space, Bhabha introduces a crisis of identity formed in the postcolonial state of being, which is the formation of an emerging subject-position through interweaving elements between the colonizer and colonized, thus challenging essentialist cultural identity. Aligned with Bhabha's discussion, Edwards and Graulund state that while the word “postcolonial” implies an end to the colonial period, it does not erase the history of colonization, nor the status of being a former colony (125). A postcolonial subject must then find a new sense of home and belongingness through challenging the hegemonic authority of colonialism.

Because the violence of colonial history is deeply rooted in the study of the body, the body can be used as a central image in literature to present these states of postcolonial horror. Bhabha concludes that the third space is a mode of articulation: not simply a productive nor reflective space, but also a space that engenders new possibilities. Could this space which Bhabha describes be through poetics? In another essay by Resil Mojares, “The Haunting of the Filipino Writer”, he describes the hauntedness of the Filipino writer in three aspects of soul drift

or soul loss (soul, as defined by Mojares, as a way to evoke the “spirit” of the nation): through shock, seduction, and sin—all through colonialism (300). Shock, like how an external shock dislocates the soul, leaves a body derelict and disoriented. Colonialism acts as a disruptive force to an emerging nation, becoming a trauma of Filipino literature. Further, colonialism is not simply an invasion, but also a long seduction (303). Americans held their own imperial rightness, and proceeded to intimately civilize the Filipino people through presenting new language, forms, sensibilities, and patterns of thought—causing the people to disengage from their own local ways of conceiving and representing, losing the wealth of their own distinct structures of meaning. Finally, Mojares defines sin as self-limiting, exclusionary, and exclusive. The soul becomes starved by both political and cultural exclusion through either bias or forgetting.

Yet, the concept of haunting is a metaphor of the drive towards the practice of writing, as haunting is a form of a desire: of something unfulfilled and left unfinished (309). Hauntedness then is a symptom of a profound affliction of a nation not quite conscious of itself. How does the writer confront the loss of soul and violence of body in terms of identity through poetics? Filipino writers become haunted by the sense of not being able to break through the depressing realities that entrap them, and yet the very reason to this, in Mojares’s words, “stares us in the face.” However, Mojares also states that hauntings point not only to the past of colonization but to the future, as these are elements which flourish creatively within the poetics of a postcolonial subject, particularly of the Filipino subject. While the narratives of Dian and Carlos center around the body, they are both figures of grief—they are both haunted by each other, and through the image of Dian’s mother and her developing motherhood in the narrative, she is haunted by her family history and background, and this informs her outlook and her beliefs in her life. As I explore in “Dian in Manila, 2007:”

Dian's mother is pregnant again, which means something
 in her mother will live a better life than Dian, one without
 stuttering or a decade of hard, incessant rain. *How stupid to leave*

with the goal of affording to come back—

but Dian is only a girl in Manila and her mother is only an older girl in Dubai
 and all girls need to leave their homes
 to prove they are worth having.

Dian's relationship with her mother is highlighted in this poem, through not only the dynamic of her distance from her mother, but her mother's status as an overseas Filipino worker (OFW) in Dubai, and Dian's childhood belief in escaping the poverty of the Philippines—which then continues to haunt Dian throughout her relationships with both Carlos and her mestizo boyfriend, as even the pregnancy of her mother informs a dynamic on how Dian perceives her role as a girl, woman, and mother, in the context of a Filipino. Here, I explore how the hauntedness of a writer comes from displacement, dispossession, decenteredness, and disembodiment from the trauma of colonialism—much like the treatment of the body as we have discussed.

To Edwards and Graulund, postcolonial horror can be defined in three different states: the grotesque, the erupting, and the violated. These states ground the postcolonial identity onto the physical realm, once again allowing us to confront, or even visualize, these through our own presentation of body horror. Furthermore, Rebekah Cumpsty and Rebecca Duncan in their discussion of empire in "The Body in Postcolonial Fiction after the Millennium" published in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, they discuss how in the lens of culture fantasy or power, the body is not a passive figure; thus, works on the body have a postcolonial paradox on representing objectification without replicating the trauma on the body (593). While violence is replicated in Carlos's body, I have chosen specifically to focus not on the gore and horror of the act for shock value, rather, to use the perspective of Dian in the

narrative as a means to explore the tenderness and grief of queer friendship that continues to thrive in lived realities in the contexts of navigating hegemonic power—as queer temporalities and queer bodies are a horror of its heterosexual counterparts. Contemporary postcolonial literature, then, should not be viewed as “leftovers” of colonization, and that they present a perspective of a current, lived reality. To address unfolding imperialism, Cumpsty and Duncan quote Ann Stoler on the usage of the word “ruination”: as ruin is not easy to document and see, to “think with the ruins of the empire” then means to attend towards postcolonialism as “lived” in diverse and situated ways (596).

Queer Temporalities and Queer Bodies

Taking all of these into account, why choose narrative poetry as a means to approach this subject? J. Neil Garcia’s essay “Should Writing Be Gendered?” published in *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques* by the University of the Philippines Press also discusses how all writing already partakes in gender politics as masculinity or femininity determine a text’s utterance and linguistic sensibility in relation to poetry (152-153, 155). Literary expression enriches a text due the meaningfulness of gender exploration, as gender specifics experiences abundant with signification (158). However, Garcia introduces a paradox to the act of gendered writing: queer or “sex/uality” poetry and writing needs to declare itself to the reader as it is not as obtrusive as other distinctions of one’s identity, including but not limited to, one’s class, race, gender, and ethnicity; yet, one’s lived experience of sexuality is hammered into every single entity, experience, text, and object, thus, it determines how one writes—what one writes about and how one writes is through their queerness. Moreover, according to Bruce Heiden in “Narrative in Poetry: A Problem of Narrative Theory” published in the journal

Narrative in 2014, the lyric narrative itself is a hybrid form (272). Both Garcia and Heiden's ideas mirror how queerness and postcolonial writing is rooted in hybridity.

Elizabeth Freeman introduces the queer concept of erotohistoriography, wherein the body is a means to be a tool to effect, figure, or perform the encounter of the hybridity of the present, as well as a method to create historical consciousness (96). Freeman claims, in her discussion of Frankenstein's monster through erotohistoriography, that he is monstrous "because he lets history too far in, going so far to embody it instead of merely feeling it," causing an erotic relation to history, thus, the novel is concerned about the erotics of historical consciousness and that bodily encounters with history are a queer pleasure with the past (104). This is furthermore echoed in Joyelle McSweeney's "Bug Time" from *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults*, she discusses how the concept of a historical, imperial, or corporate time only promotes the illusion of stability and linearity; while evolution becomes wasteful as it produces bodies as mutations. Calling "Japanese insects" as "Japanese" due to their evolution being driven by Japanese society, the history of bodies are an antihistory of nonfunctional mutation (McSweeney, 43). McSweeney asks the reader, "What genres are these body-writings? [...] what kind of bug-life are we enjoying? What kind of genres are produced by our damaged mitochondria, our hyperdeath cycles?" (44). My interpretation of the use of poetic narrative as opposed to the prose is to distort the reader's convention of linearity in narrative as a means to go against the idea of stability from our concept of time.

The linearity of narrative is further explored especially in queer experiences in Jack Halberstam's concept of "queer time" and "queer space," wherein a queer "way of life" develops as an opposition towards institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction, as this way of life then becomes a way of disruption outside of the paradigmatic markers of life experience

including birth, marriage, reproduction, and death (2). Taking into account Garcia's discussion and experience with queer and gendered poetry, my interpretation of these concepts further emphasizes the urgent narratives of displacement, dispossession, decenteredness, and disembodiment in the understanding of queer identity.

As Edwards and Grauland state in their essay of "Queerly Grotesque", even the grotesque body itself must be queer, as these bodies are othered as abnormal or even monstrous (122). I take inspiration from McSweeney and "Queerly Grotesque" for "uk-ok girl" wherein I explore the narrative of an "uk-ok" or cockroach girl and how her girlhood and identity is tied to her relationships, whether they are tragic or positive. Moreover, although uk-ok girl, similar to Carlos, have elements of monstrousness and violence in their bodies, I explore how despite these, that is not all they have to them as they stubbornly persevere in magical narratives that attempt to silence their movements As I explore in "Portrait of Dian Meeting Carlos After 10 Years, Part 1, 2017":

[...] *i mean |for*

shapeshifters | our only monuments | are imagined |from others | who love us |

I explore Carlos's persistent voice that haunts as a ghost or a memory rooted in Dian's reality, giving him a character with agency despite the violence and his awareness of it. Additionally, I also explore uk-ok's girl constant ruminations against a world conscious of their functions. All of these concepts are explored into the idea of the body, and the horrors that erupt from its lived reality and experience.

Throughout this discussion, we can also be faced with another question in terms of body: if the othered body is horror, is it possible for the othered body to be in the realm of euphoria, or the opposite of horror? Before the body, we must first consider Michael Snediker's concept of "queer optimism," which according to Sara Ahmed, is not optimism of an ordinary sort, as this optimism being rooted in its queerness means that it cannot guarantee what this particular happiness must look like or feel (160). Ahmed then goes on to quote Frederic Jameson on how queer people must develop anxiety about losing the future, because this gives a possibility of a future in the alternative of understanding happiness (161). In other words, I understand this to mean that if queer time does not have a set future unlike its heterosexual counterparts, then the future must only be imagined through the lens of happiness—as queer time can only liberate against the pressure of paradigmatic life experience through optimism that although the future is imagined, it is theirs to live. I explore this through the use of ekphrasis, where I gather inspiration from *The Metamorphosis of Ovid*, 1886, a sculpture by Auguste Rodin, and acknowledge the translation of myth to physicality, and how the use of both a confident and loving tone of *Ianthe Upon Iphis*, a poem inspired by the Greek figures translate queer optimism against the other tragedies in the original Ovid:

[...] if the display ever

breaks / if we are ever melted / again in this world / we will be as naked / as we

came / unlike other forms of grief / we have nothing to worry about / we cannot

be buried / in ways that matter / how easy it is to fall into tragedy / but not for us

To reiterate Mojares's concept of "haunting", it is through writing, or through poetics, wherein we can construct identity both as a subject of a lived reality and an agent of history. By introducing both body horror and postcolonialism onto identity, one confronts one's own cultural, lived experiences, presenting the violence of soul and body within one's poetics. As a Filipino writer, it is important for me to investigate my own relationship with queerness and the body as not simply an isolated experience, but as an experience of identity passed down throughout history through *Sacred and Perishable Country of Want*. The violences towards the Philippines is reactivated through body horror, yet so are the legacies of colonial past and struggle for liberation in order, to quote Cumpsty and Duncan, to "see the very shape of pain": the poetics of body horror as a means to both empower, challenge, explore, and even comfort the identity of the postcolonial subject.

Sacred and Perishable

Dian and The Revelation of Carlos, 2005

Such is their weight upon the grass, body as imprint, as ecosystem.

It is 5:00 PM and all days

enter transformation: which means,

children sip plastic bags filled with soda

disobeying all their school diets with styrofoam

filled with instant noodles. Dian buys one shiny sunny-side up egg

while Carlos teaches her to sprinkle the extra powder

like garnish. What bliss to exist somewhere else

before the jeepneys come

to take them back!

Is transformation what is it then, when Carlos beside her,

tells the story of how butterflies must never be lonely

for they eat what they once were. No,

Not eat, he corrects, delicate finger

upon delicate collarbone. *Higop*,

more like: like an inhale, a gulp,

passing through the tongue so quickly—

blink and you'll miss it in the throat!

Do you want to know a secret? The sun

kisses their tangerine drenched faces

as a goodbye. Carlos's finger dips

into the white fabric of his boy uniform,

and Dian—though she does not know this word yet—

considers ruination.

Feel this, he says, cool as a pig who asks a butcher.

She takes his breast, and it is full

and she retracts

as if on fire, no,

as if burned. Dian wonders if the caterpillar

can taste the moment of its own rupture:

the aftertaste of its previous skin.

That day, Carlos, sun-smothered

transformed into a girl in the night.

All of Dian's hands

suddenly cannot grip

and the soda spills onto her skirt and stains

even her socks!

Dian Keeps A Secret, 2006

Dian is special in that way. In class when Carlos asks for $\frac{1}{4}$
she folds the paper before she cuts, as if it is a secret to the teacher

and the sight of a jagged rip is a punishment for the unprepared
seatwork taker. In the sari-sari store¹ when Carlos stabs

the juice pack bottom up, Dian circles the designated hole.
In church when Carlos takes the other's hand in his,

Dian wipes her hand on her thigh. While Carlos plays futsal in the sun,
Dian stays in the shade; and covers her legs where the light

dares to brown her. *It is because you are going to be careful,
and you are going to be successful, and you are going to be*

so much of both of these until you die. This is what he says,
the he who he is a she: the she that has been revealed.

And so Carlos is a shapeshifter, some kind of alien,
but he holds Dian's hand as if she has always been so familiar.

*And so you will be the only one to keep this secret
for now I curse you with the burden of myself.*

It was easy then for Dian to ask, *what kind of curse
is a friend?* Of course, the kind you learn to love

in the same way the cockroach is tricked
that the hair strand tied around him is a limb

and that his body is unbound, unbothered,
and is his own.

¹ Sundry store

Dian Receives The Scholarship, 2007

or, a lesson. The classic creation myths: Lovers and brothers
 and monsters. When the God Apolaki stabs Goddess Mayari's eye and only in the violence
 does he remember she is his sister and that he loves her. When
 the Goddess Alunsina realizes that her creations mean she must destroy
 her lover's work, she leaves him. No matter how you see it,
 even the earth is a love story with no happy ending, only
 beginnings and beginnings. Anagolay²: even what is lost deserves a god,

even a daughter; each fruit born
 from dead lovers; even the savage had fairytales.

When Dian received the scholarship to Manila,
 it was the myth of Dian and Carlos: only children
 attempting to escape the narrative, not knowing
 their bodies are ready to love and doomed to love—

Dian is leaving Carlos,
 which is to say,

she'll see him everywhere,
 even her soup.

² Tagalog goddess of lost things, believed to be the mother of the goddess Dian Masalanta.

Portrait of Dian Meeting Carlos After 10 Years, Part 1, 2017

up close | there are pores | moles where she left them | a stray nose hair | brushed away quickly
| using the shot glass reflection | yellow light flickers | the whole bar smells like Cubao | Carlos

says *you look like* | *you've seen a ghost* | and Dian says | *well* | *did you learn anything* | *being in that form* | the word in meaning | Carlos is not a figure | but the act | of shifting | Carlos laughs

| even his pitch | becomes lighter | *I'm glad you recognize me* | *but who cares about recognition*
| *what are we robots* | *funny* | *i don't have a single photograph with you* | yes, says Dian | *sometimes*

i think i made you up | *i'm real though* | *as real as this* | *fucking light bulb* | *jesus* | *it's about to spark us like this* | *you would think* | *this whole bar is a safety hazard* | *one spilled beer* | &

boom | his hair | a different gravity

what are you doing here Carlos | *what* he asks | *did you think my life ended* | *when you left* | he's always been | the cheeky kind | *Dian what* | *do you think my life is like* | *what life should i be living*

| *trick question* | for Dian | Carlos has always been a knife | *did you choose that life* | which means
| *are you living in the body* | *of a woman* | *or as a man* | *do you want to be pregnant* | *or just married*

| Dian likes Carlos | for his jagged edges | and she always tucks her knives | deep in her kitchen drawers | she's careful | and he's | some kind of artist | she guesses | *Dian i think medical school*

suits you | *i can see it* | *the way everyone can* | he holds up his hand | a puppet motion | *you be the doctor* | *i think* | *i'll be the body* | *you gaze upon* | *trying to figure out* | *how to save a life* | *i suppose*

| *i've always wanted to pick you apart* | *so now you can do the same* | *but you'll never save me* | *the way you saved yourself* | he laughs | *Carlos what do you mean by that* | a sigh | *i mean* | *for*

shapeshifters | *our only monuments* | *are imagined* | *from others* | *who love us* | *anyway* | *you wish you made me up* | *unlike fairy tales* | *i looked for you* | *i chose to haunt you* | *no need to compare*

mythologies | *i found you* | *and your unlovable hands*

Portrait of Carlos Meeting Dian After 10 Years Part 2, 2017

a bar of women
on top of men

and men on top
of other women

carlos and dian sit
in the secret position

of woman and man
divided

by the light—a
fluorescence displaced

between two countries
of quiet want—

they sit close enough
to become it

and burn
even the dj

Dian in Manila, 2007

Dian's mother is pregnant again, her belly pixelated
 and bulging on Skype. If Dian studies a little harder
 maybe she can see her again. Dian has a good understanding
 of language, which means, she doesn't struggle saying "chocolate"
 or "nakakapagpabagabag³."

Dian's mother is pregnant again, which means something
 in her mother will live a better life than Dian, one without
 stuttering or a decade of hard, incessant rain. *How stupid to leave*

with the goal of affording to come back—

but Dian is only a girl in Manila and her mother is only an older girl in Dubai
 and all girls need to leave their homes
 to prove they are worth having. Dian grazes her hand
 against the PC screen
 and imagines she feels it kick. Was she like that too?
 Begging to come out, or be known
 by whoever was brave enough

to imagine what future would save her mother's marriage
 with the palm of their hand; like her mother
 grabbing fate by the reigns, running head fast wearing her sundress
 of a wedding gown, where even rain does not apologize
 for falling. Would Dian be like that too? Smelling roses
 when all she's ever known was the stench of sampaguitas
 filling her fingers and even the walls of the fence of the churchyard? Thinking it was
 worth it,

really worth it,
 and happy to do it again?

³ Causing uneasiness

Dian Witnesses The Mandaluyong Television Stall, 2017

Carlos is dead. And yet
 there is no Carlos
 slaughtered. Her face
 unbothered; *Rejoice* hair

the woman's face in the television means
 as Carlos, there is only a woman
 untouched. Unknown. She lays
 pooling into saltwater pearls.

Each sale TV playing the same news:

carved as if to study if
 meat was worth the study;

a woman with a body
 the rawness of her
 it's all medicinal you see

the bean of the kidney,
 the sponge of the lung,
 each organ where it should be
 right?—

but the poetry of her face
 is where the camera follows
 sunkissed features
 scorched in daylight.

Dian against thousand half-price televisions screens
 the newscasters in awe:

Like a siren
 out of water,

Maria Makiling
 reimagined,

the late muse
 of Amorsolo,

a bouquet of calla lilies,
an abaca basket of fruit.

But to Dian,
it was Carlos

her friend,
her stupid friend.

The Barangay⁴ Reacts to Carlos's Corpse, 2017

The barangay is watching,
saying to themselves

*the death of a beautiful morena woman
is the most poetic image in the third world*

yet none of them
know of her name

and how Dian pronounces it
with her sharpest r's.

⁴ Small district

Carlos, 2017

i always believed
the practice of empathy
i once dreamt of dian
she was hysterical in her apartment
in front of the mirror
so i came up behind her
my hands on her belly
in this dream. so i ripped her
no intestines; no organs; no bloodshed
and now some wound
i just laughed. her body
and old. and then too young
i try to measure the walls
i stepped into
and put her on
my favorite dress

that for medics
means to never name the rat
like i always do
i've never been there
bashing her sweet head against the glass
and took her into an embrace
button. and i pressed so hard & i had nails
open and there was nothing
just some crying girl
and it was so funny to me
was a filthy mouth. we are both young
and not old enough.
count all the hollow ribs. and then
the cavity of her
swiftly like
my dearest white dress

Dian and The Investigation, 2017

Dian should know this already. A dead cat means
the only thing left alive in it are the ones

with no conception of the self. Consider the bacteria of the tongue,
or the parasite of the eyebrow. When Dian was eighteen,

she wanted to impress her mestizo⁵ boyfriend
by waxing her bikini line, which means

she wanted him to the point of dysmorphia.
There is a secret ecosystem, where even the lichen

unapologetically lingers on the tree.
They keep Carlos's body in the streets

like a shrine or a spectacle. His rosy brown face
angelic against concrete. Both cars and fire ants

swerve to preserve him. The people memorize
each of his womanly eyelashes.

Each of her organs is an interactive art piece.
In her second year Dian had a store-bought cat

corpse. Ugliest little thing—mouth lax, pupils
turned; she would not dare to gaze upon its face

for the fear it would let her understand that death meant
not knowing what lives a body continues to live without you.

Dian thinks *I am inventing a meaning, Carlos,*
for your anatomies. If you are not a science

perhaps you are a metaphor. Carlos remains
preserved as the most beautiful corpse in the country

like a body sacred and perishable. Dian scratches her arm;
wipes away the dead skin caught on her fingernails. To empathize

with bacteria, to scratch the skin
not as limb, but as surface, as some kind of earth,

⁵ Mixed-race, usually of Western and native Filipino origin

*Carlos, how selfish of you to leave like that—I wish
you could see how even the rot dares not to desire you.*

Dian in The Girl's Restroom, 2006

Before they knew what it meant to be a girl or a boy
what they knew was the difference
of ritual. The girl thing
of walking together
to the restrooms. Some kind of safe space
for gossip, freely passing words
and napkins. Discovering the only bleeding
not born from injury:
you know,
the grossest kind.
Dian staring upon her shame
learning new disgusts.
And yet Carlos
no expulsion of black blood
or meaty lumps
and not even the stench
of vinegar or
of rotting bread.
Everyone masks sweat with cologne
and cherry chemical lip gloss.
Then there was Carlos and the anomaly
of nonfunction; a new kind of sin.

Dian Mourns, 2017

Except she doesn't. Instead
 Dian smuggles Carlos's heart
piece wrapped in a banana leaf—
 a fist is only so small
she is afraid to misplace it;
 wraps the puso⁶ in her lunchbox
 to save it for later

⁶ Hanging rice; or rice boiled in a woven pouch of leaves

Dian Brings Carlos's Blood Under The Microscope, 2017

the cells function unaware
they've been isolated

from his body. dian
and the white blood cell

searching for a solution,
dancing in a losing

battle ground to work
songs, estranged

from its goal
and yet *you*

*see carlos, something in you
must still fucking care*

Dian Dreams of Making Out with Carlos's Corpse, 2017

I want you God

I want you

but not enough.

What Dian really means is

I want to crawl inside you

because I saw in your cadaver

how strong the foundation of your bone marrow

how your womb is not a womb

but an empty house in some country

that I can freely rent

with nothing but a suitcase of pambahay⁷

and a twin size mattress.

stop,

stop.

In the dark Dian apologizes to her now fiancée: she's not in the mood. *We can get each other off but I don't want to fuck tonight.*

That's okay, he says, because he's always been a gentleman. That's why she said yes.

She guides his hand to her clit: says *Don't*

it's very important to Dian that he doesn't

It's very important to Dian to keep going, she's not fucking around

and she has nothing to apologize for;

no other God to moan to now.

⁷ Clothes worn inside the house

The Barangay Reconstructs Carlos, 2017

even the priest visits
to kiss Carlos's forehead
he sprinkles her with *agua bendita*⁸
like a dousing of gasoline
and all his girl parts
are engulfed in fire.
but no one's looking at that
only for a warm place
for their stained hands
and meat to grill for their fool mouths.

⁸ Holy water

Dian Reconstructs Carlos, 2017

most days carlos is a boy
but dian always stays dian.
that's the murder
clue: his girl body
was a secret base
no one else was supposed to see
and now through the exposition
all the cityfolk can see him
really see him
through her viscera.

Dian and The Anatomical Venus, 2017

She waited for his body to stiffen
 or for his fingers to blacken,
 or for the rats to enter through his orifices:
 but Carlos looked younger in his sleep,
 like that time Dian flicked his napping forehead
 when the rare buggy drove by.

She waited for the flies to eat his sweat,
 his skin to sag and gray,
 his eyeballs to explode and melt
 into thick swimming pools, or clear snot
 like when he cried when tripping over
 a tekraw. Maybe for him to mold; grow fungus or
 new undiscovered life forms. Once, Dian's mother scolded her
 for falling off a kalachuchi tree,
 saying *yawa*⁹, *look what you did to your elbow*,
 even before she understood
 what it meant to scar. In school Dian wondered

how carefully to handle the cadavers,
 and sometimes she wondered if they could get up,
 show her themselves, maybe tell her
 how it got so bad for them—what hidden injuries

surfaced by a constructed knife.

She liked that story,
 the gashing of the wound,
 the eight-year-old in her
 that picked the scabs,
 that pressed a sharp nail onto a mosquito bite,
 that licked the white halo
 of a *singaw*¹⁰. If it was painful,
 it means it was alive,
 and it was something to commit to memory
 of healing.

Skin-clear Carlos with no acne
 full lips moisturized and oiled
 delicate eyebrows, no armpit hair
 or stench of rot:

⁹ A common curse word; demon

¹⁰ Canker sore

A corpse of a person that never truly existed
 outside of Dian's memories
 of perfect sunsets
 with the smell of coins from her hands
tucked in a skirt pocket; an illusion of a woman
 who refused the injury to define her,
 beauty fooling death to claim her—another
 body to love apart from how it lived.

Carlos Explains Shapeshifting to Dian, 2007

i like it when you try to sew, or when you tie your shoelaces:
how you know what goes where, and when you hold

your hands out i like to slip my fingers in;
puzzles of animals from the same clay.

i think you like the way our bodies
work, but i'm so sorry we have them,

because you're a girl and i'm a boy,
which means i want us to be good for each other.

but i'm not a boy, i'm a beast,
and you're not a girl. you're a beast,

and i think we have to learn how to disappear
comfortably when you know you're bound to be feral.

Dian as Orpheus, 2019

No one wants to admit
the act of turning

back is easy. Everyone wants
to step forward

into new light, live
comfortably knowing

the sacrifice was worth it—
that the walk was never

lonely. Dian knows her mother
was never really waiting for her

to make it out of the talons of
Cotabato, or that the gutters

of Manila now only mean
just another city that she

was never going to get out of
if not for scholarship

after scholarship. Wasn't there
a life behind her? And didn't it

want her too? And didn't she
want that life to say it,

grip her by the shoulders
and take her then and there?

Dian Leaves The Country, 2019

A tarsier
growing in Dian
packing her innards like sardines.
Holding her fiancée's hands in the airport—
maybe if I birth her there, we'll get her a visa
and she won't have to live like—

excuse me—I need—

Sticky green rice
from a banana leaf heart
before the flight—

Dian and the happiest bile
the toilet has ever
swallowed.

Dian in The Happy Future, 20XX

In other words, a tourist
Comforted by ruin.

If there were any temples left
Unbombed, she wondered what shape

Would survive from erosion, or which
flora proved itself to be pretty

enough to be given a name.
All the other visitors are taking photos in the castle.

Can you imagine what it was like is the easiest phrase Dian overhears;
this architecture after all is a puzzle with unclaimed pieces.

As she holds the cold, gray, foreign stone
the weight of it like any other brick,
Dian stays homesick for a home she never had.

Acknowledgements to the Cast

To Dian,
I wish there were more books
that told of your myth
and how violent it is to forget.

To Carlos,
I am sorry
that you were never born
and that Carissa was born instead.

Country of Want

the day I got my period I smelled like oranges

a few days after I turn fifteen
I am squeezing oranges
as if there is something to expect

from this sour liquid
crushed flesh—my mother

tells me, see, rip it
from here. I open one
with my nails now dyed yellow
and pluck out
a bright juicy kidney
I open my mouth, swallow

even a seed. I am afraid
I still believe that in my stomach
there will be a tree while I am swishing
the juice with my fingers
all the seeds look like eggs.
forming mush in the colander
I imagine a tree growing out of me

and suddenly, an opening
something dripping.
I am fifteen and before this
I am more of a child.
body too young to know what
it is like to be thankful and regretful.
here, you take what it bears

and squish.
I am afraid of
the tree, or what
my body is hiding.

or I fear that the
future is sweet
and sour,
or what tenderness
is lost.

Portal

my love letter to a toilet bowl : i emerge in the fountain of a demon king : i am the lost princess : i am
 the girl in the heart of a robot : i am every loose limb i have been missing : i come into
 the water : enough : this is my body too big for the book : this is my fist that
 makes a heart when clenched : this is a boy with a scar and he loves you :
 this is a hollow dagger : this is a fairy tale you did not ask to be a part of
 : when i look into a mirror it is always clean : when i look into a mirror
 even the rippling is a part of me : the girl has my face but she is not
 : the girl is in the mirror but she does not have my face : i
 conjured you from seafoam : this water is spit : when you come
 back will it be you : there is a villain with two hearts and one of
 them is yours : does it make you real : what power can you find
 when you are desperate : foolish girl : you think you can love a
 kingdom like that : i want to feel hopeless and then feel hope : i
 want to fall in love and into the earth : i want to never grow older
 : look : who is in your place : my dragon breath : my cheap fairy
 wings : my thirst : no one sees you like this : no one sees the
 movement : no one can capture the space you pretend to fill :
 no one sees belonging as physical : no one sees the water as liquid
 and only as reflection : no one makes a sound in the overflow : no one
 defines this emptiness : a story that refuses to end is not a story but a prison :

do you thin
k the beast knew
of the injury of what w
ent beyond the hunger o
f what a rumble does to a gi
rl of what a stomach defines my
body it caught fire it caught illn
ess it caught the pig's head by t
he arrow or was it a wolf was it
a baby was it something i said d
o you see yourself in the eye of
whatever beast you denied a f
ill or whoever's milk you u
ndrank do you think it k
new of mercy or on
ly the hurt onl
y the hurt

An Apology to Mothers

I had mistaken the blinds for crickets

in the hot summer of western wind. In another life,

I would have married sooner. And, let's pretend the job

market fishes me out of the oyster, and I buy a house

In two countries and three islands. I bridge them together

with my body every few months. I eat mangoes until

I get sick of the bagoong. Until the mornings become so blurry

I lurch them out of me with last night's dinner. And then,

a bear cub in the shadow of my shape

comes out of me: claws first head second.

I will kiss it, once, twice, and we will both cry

in bilingual tears. And then, after lying

to myself every day, I plant the trees

whose branches have grown from my belly

and we eat fresh fruit forever. And when I see you

aged, with a new mutt to adorn our woods,

I will say see, you never needed to worry .

See, it was never because of me.

I would have said it was worth holding onto the hunger.

The life I wanted to offer you is already dead.

But still I wanted it in this life.

Mama, I wanted it in this life.

Abecedarian on Cruelty

Aping at each other's genitals,
 Blistering the dry boats of our
 Canine bearing orifices. I, the
 Dog in all of this; the psychic of
 Echolocation. I can tell I've been
 Feral. I can tell you I want to be
 Good for you.

How could I make this simple for us?
 I who have never known rage,
 Just how to be as intimate as a cannibal
 Kissing another cannibal.

Listen:
 Mileage upon mileage we are racing
 Neither of us learning the right cariñosa¹¹. But
 Oh, how we always end up here:
 Peeling our own oranges.
 Quail eggs in our omelets. We
 Ruminant in the kitchen. Eat leftovers. Drink

Saliva. I want to but I can't untangle my
 Teeth from your skin. I'm
 Urinating on the floorboards,

Vaccinating every rat I come across the
 Wreckage I've built in my heart from
 Xenobiotic blueprint and foreign bone.

You say it's fine. And so it is. What
 Zany, silly, beast I am to imagine otherwise.

¹¹ A folk dance

Borrowing Bodies

I appropriate the shape of the sun

to kiss a boy

so hot and burning

to hear the engine

of a throat

to bite into

tin man metal

watch it fizzle

like soup

I appropriate the shape of the knife

to know of thrust

to know of the phallus gripped

by a means to cut

to say:

I too know of your metaphor

I appropriate the eye

of a needle

to sew you in

see me

see you

become me

have i gone through you yet

even just for a second

I appropriate the tooth
on a necklace
lovingly encased in resin
intimate when you
pluck me from gum
all to be scrubbed shiny and new
on your palm
or tucked in your drawer

I appropriate the wolf
for I never know my own strength
how to slice
hunger with a meat
that sits too comfortably
on my mouth

I appropriate the shape of the meal

now walking

talking

bruising

biting back

I appropriate

your dentist

I believe

you owe me a molar

I appropriate the shape of
the space between us
to make this flesh whole
borrow me
borrowing you
when I lay my head
upon your lap
sever the rest of me
the untouchable
untouching

I appropriate the shape of the chain

down your legs

yes i become it

down to the bolt

in your bedroom walls

I appropriate
the hand that loves you
tucked under your weight
how it has never known
of the burden

Frog Poem

Others use pins. I stabbed her spine.

Tell me you aren't curious to see what's happening on the inside.

I cut her open, the trembling little thing. Her belly spills black
baby boba eggs and the teacher tells me don't
play with your food. Was that what it was, a hunger? It's

alright. Everyone wants to believe someone else
is the monster. We all have it: blood
so goey it looks like spit in the light. I scoop out her babies, thinking,
how gelatin we are actually; how tiny she looks and how unaware

of the word *injury*. After her organs re-acquaint
and fail to fit into her new spaces,

I scoop up her parts and return her in the bucket
with a laugh. Eventually we will dig a hole in the ground
and pour the bucket, and pretend
all the frogs are all already dead. Everything
goes back to the body. She would never remember them

as being. She would remember instead
their squelching, the way they must feel
slipping desperately through my latex fingers. I watch
a student vomit yellow
milk, green yolk. Eggs, she will explain

later. I think about the act of witnessing.

Frogs are an invasive species, which means
everything we do must have a reason. I think of my stomach,

and I think of opening it ,
and I think of opening me
and I think of skin, my slime, my liver,

my squelching, beating, ovary, empty space
for a baby, my body, shit body,
shit for the worms body, shit into the ground body,
body for burial, body for weeds, body that steers aside
the frog's chewy noodle intestines
with my knife.

Oops, I mutter, a non-apology
to nothing as the blade slips and bursts open her kidney,
and my fingers scrape what can never

be held in the palm
of anyone's hand.
How tremendously
we quiver. How I crave to listen
to the tiniest, aching heartbeat.

Anagolay will birth Maria

Be still, my beating
Pulse, my quivering organ, for

Stories are named after women
Like storms. Limb by limb we weave

Together loss into a body yet I ask you
Not to wither here: before you eat me from the inside

See this body as mountain: take the trees and animals
And suck them dry. What is left of this flesh but the stir

Of what is yet to come. I hold you, here, be still: you do not
Want. You only promise me a new chance of death

As I offer you life granted only by brutal tenderness
You were not asked to be given.

If you ask for blessing, take the mountain and fall in love:
Return myth into the ground and sow limb into earth.

This is how we are born into soil, heaven breaking
Itself to become body; Hell rising into the history of skin.

But before this, a name: when I see your trembling face and finally
You are held I will only need to look. Say you look like me,

Say I'm sorry. What is a body if not the will to become.
After you have left me only then

Will this crying stop. Then, you bloody baby
Girl will do it all over again.

You will inherit this myth. You will inherit
What I cannot give.

uk-ok¹² becomes girl

uk-ok girl wakes up one day

washes all her legs

even the ones that are missing

¹² Cockroach

uk-ok girl washes the dishes
stains every plate green
puts herself in the dishwasher
she likes to act clean
and she likes the tumble

the whirl of the fan
is a blade on her skin

uk-ok girl learns about gender
says It's what's between your legs
follows the stripe
of urine
through her tongue
falls head first into the toilet bowl
and drinks it clean

uk-ok girl holds her bug friend

again and again

as he commits bug suicide

again and again

thank you for being kind, he says

again and again

uk-ok girl dies
and comes back to life.
the only thing that bothers her
is the stench
and how she can't
even smell it

uk-ok girl hosts eggs in her veins

when she takes a shower

they are all watching her

through her pores

she knows they're there

they know she knows

they are watching

uk-ok girl holds her bug friend

and puts their heads together

and chews

and chews

I'm not dead yet, he says

down her throat

Wait, he says

uk-ok girl opens her pussy

and opens it

and opens it

there's nothing there

but dog teeth

uk-ok girl bangs

her head against the wall

I want to live here! she cries

I want to hear everything

and see everything

she rubs all her limbs

into the corners of the wall

into her image

I want to be home!

I want to be home!

now that she knows

she can want.

uk-ok girl falls for gamugamo¹³ girl

in her dusty dress.

uk-ok girl hides

all the matchsticks and candles

but still finds gamugamo girl

in the image of her grandmother

against the light

¹³ Small moth

uk-ok girl thinks It's too late

for she's eaten

her bug friend's mouth

and made it hers

he's sticky

and she's always

licking her lips

uk-ok decapitates herself

That's enough of that!

alas

she can still speak

and hear his bug whispers

in the walls

uk-ok girl feels pretty today
with her lipstick
shoved in her pussy
Make it red make it red
see! she's just like all the other girls
eating meat
in the laundromat

uk-ok girl doesn't open her eyes

when she feels him above her

and inside her bones

Vomit me, he says

with her mouth,

Vomit me.

Vomit me.

Vomit me.

he is gone

in the morning

uk-ok girl sweat

a pool of hair

uk-ok girl stares into her reflection

busy gouging out all her eyes

Can't see what you've hurt!

the arm is not her arm

but it thrusts the spoon into her

like she's a meal

uk-ok girl can tell
when the room is moving
You! she shouts to god
You are moving it!
god says Who
is that second bug
living in your body?
uk-ok girl stops.
Sorry, she says.
I'm so sorry.

there's a humming
in uk-ok girl's chest.

there are bees
in uk-ok girl's nostrils.

This is why I love you,
says gamugamo girl
clawing uk-ok girl's breasts
apart to find
the hive she has been hiding

Where is it, she searches
for uk-ok girl's heart
and her nails
scratch nipple instead.

uk-ok girl dreams of bug friend

where they kiss their garbage

and poison each other.

uk-ok girl wakes up

but it's only Tuesday

uk-ok girl says It's no good

she has a rambutan

for a clit.

the flesh sticks to her nails

and they always

smell like home.

uk-ok girl calls on the phone,

I need help, I am hurt.

too bad

she is an insect

incapable of proper speech.

uk-ok girls laughs one day

and giggles out a baby.

Come back the way you came,

She says.

No, says the baby,

I didn't want you for a mother

before you didn't want me for a child.

Baby stands on two legs

and squashes uk-ok girl

with his left foot.

Ew! he cries

and no one cups him

to the breast.

uk-ok girl thinks she and bug friend

were friends

but why can't she

remember his name

instead she knows

his many legs

how they crawl

out of her liver

they write

ugly words

in her flesh

with their fingers

she commits

them to memory

instead

when gamugamo girl
eats uk-ok girl's asshole
uk-ok girl takes out her limbs
one by one
and prays
she will finally be
swallowed, fingered
into
a throat.

uk-ok girl comes home
and bug friend is sitting there
the way he sits on everything
and she always runs through him
the way she runs through everything

I know what you did,
he says with her mouth.
Everyone knows what you did.

at the dinner party,

uk-ok girl ruins her best dress.

uk-ok girl ruins her prettiest jewelry.

uk-ok girl ruins everything.

uk-ok girl scissors open
her guts. but there's still no one there
and now she's bleeding
all over her good bed sheets.

Oh, says gamugamo girl,
You started without me.

neither of them mention
the intestines.

uk-ok girl practices holding
her breath
underwater.

she likes to see her body
struggle.

she likes to ask which
of her organs
still want her alive.

uk-ok girl thinks she's so

soooooooooo

so so so so

pretty. then why

is her body

leaking filth

like

it's first nature

uk-ok girl knows girl

rhymes with disposable.

Hello, she says in the phone line

I don't matter

You don't matter

Ma'am, please,

says the person on the phone, If

I can even call you that,

uk-ok girl eats
her first worm
it slides down her throat
body to innard
squirm to swallow
I don't like that, she says
I wish I was full
of teeth.

poor uk-ok girl
everything reminds her
of her own devouring.
when she is hungry
she starves.

uk-ok girl smashes

herself into

a tiny, tiny, box.

it's just her now.

it's just her

for now.

body horror

head { how many lozenges can you take

before you pass out;

the first snow came as a mistake

in early october the wind came with

a violence like a character who demanded

a name the snow arrived like dry flakes

of a scalp from a head who didn't

understand what it meant to need

knowledge of biology say are you ready

for the cold yes i think no that is the

problem. you think.

eyes imagine this: / looking directly at the sun / only to find / it was you

all along / who must be set on fire /

ears i love this song the one that goes

[. . .]

sorry that was my language

i mistook

the crinkling of leaves for the rain

nose you tell the doctor / you can't breathe anymore

she says it's normal / you can't expect it to adjust that fast

just keep breathing / it's not like you have a choice

it's not like you ever did /

tongue r r r r nnnnnn enye nggg

no one says it like you

mouth how long until you forget your own name / the one that's easier to say / until
you have the words / to name this instead / whatever definition can capture you

throat regurgitation is the act of purification: listen to its speech: i don't
want this:

i never wanted this: what is this: i want to be pure: again: we must:

to spit: to vomit: a part of you: to operate: clean: function: process:

have you ever asked a body: really ask it:

lungs trying to make peace

with expansion:

i will never be at peace with you

and your act of breathing

ribs from his plucked rib she was born

even the myths tell you

something in you is foreign

maybe that's why

limb you're moving to america

Ianthe Upon Iphis

After *The Metamorphosis of Ovid*, Auguste Rodin, 1886

how could i have known / there was a room / for prayer / in the rawness / of my
desire / it is easy / to say i did not know / i feel / i am an animal / that only keeps

sinking / its teeth into plastered skin / i am worse / than the bull / and the daughter
of the sun / braver than the waxen wings / of daedalus / i want to touch

/ be touched / eat / be eaten / and in every crevice / i find myself / in the art /
of never letting go / silly husband / what would the gods know / of a mortal love

/ like this / baby / i wed your history too / i wed every shape of you / my
betrothed / how easy it is to forget / our bodies are separate / how easy it is to

fall / into your flesh / everyone in the poem / everyone in the audience / was
created / only to show how everything i am / is to embrace you / too / listen now

/ to our legacy / i knew it all along / we were bound to be celebrated / look at us /
happy few / whose only tragedy / is that you could have held me / sooner /

never mind the transformation / never mind the body / or the form / only that i
/ lay beneath you / you are the legend / of loving me / isn't that more savage /

than a war / no one calls it for what it was / an act of defiance / how this freak /
of nature loves you / really loves you / but what is nature / if not cruelty / two

figures walked into the light / then became it / say / if the display ever breaks / if
we are ever melted / again in this world / we will be as naked / as we came /

unlike other forms of grief / we have nothing to worry about / we cannot be buried
/ in ways that matter / how easy it is to fall into tragedy / but not for us

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2. "Dian in Manila, 2007" borrows a line from Hanif Abduraqib's "When I Say That Loving Me is Kind of Like Being A Chicago Bulls Fan" and Reina Adriano's "Alunsina Departs The Station."
3. "Portrait of Carlos Meeting Dian After 10 Years Part 2, 2017" borrows lines from "M—Black Monday" by Marcin Swietlicki, translated from Polish by Elzbieta Wojcik-Leese.
4. "Carlos, 2017" borrows a line from Dan Albergotti's "Things to Do in the Belly of the Whale."
5. An earlier version of "the day I got my period I smelled like oranges" was originally published in Heights Ateneo.
6. "Portal" was originally published in 聲韻詩刊 Voice & Verse Poetry and borrows a line from Becca de La Rosa and Mabel Martin's "Mabel."
7. "Abecedarian on Cruelty" borrows a line from Daniella Pafunda's *Natural History Rape Museum*.
8. "Frog Poem" and "Ianthé Upon Iphis" were originally published in LIGAW Anthology.
9. "Anagolay will birth Maria" was originally published in Marias & Sampaguitas.
10. All "uk-ok becomes girl" poems are heavily inspired by CA Conrad's *The Book of Frank*.
11. "uk-ok becomes girl [there's a humming ...]" has a line inspired by Mark Cayanan's "Body with Another."

12. “body horror” is inspired by Mark Cayanan’s *Narcissus* and was originally published in the Upper Mississippi Harvest.
13. I am dedicating this thesis to my biggest fans: Thea, Pia, Chesca, Migs, Dainty, Ia, Martina, Lia, Aga, Janus, Ianthe, Yana, Athena, Stuti, Jasmine, Karma, Paola, Jouji, Armando, Dheraj, Kaden, Olivia, Sam, Brayden, Ying, Fed, and everyone else who saw me struggle in this journey of different timezones; the professors who recommended me to pursue my graduate studies: Sir Carlomar Daoana, Sir Martin Villanueva, and Ma’am Nica Bengzon; my thesis committee who not only guided me but showered me with overwhelming support: Dr. Sarah Green, Dr. Judith Dorn, and Dr. Jaya Jacobo, and the group SEVENTEEN for daily motivation and inspiration.

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