



# Dela Torre

Dani Putney

**Dela Torre**

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*For all the mutts*





## Heritage

Dad was born in 1939.  
I was born in 1996.  
4 of my 7 siblings were born  
before you, Ma. Did you visit  
Pampanga as a kid?  
That's where your step-  
children were raised.

3 wives, 57 years, & 7,000  
miles away from your Talisay  
home only makes sense  
if I say *colonialism*, Ma.  
Time & distance must be  
products of your *zeitgeist*,  
a suspension in *post*—

why did you & Dad  
make me in America?  
Ma, I can call you *nanay*  
in 3 languages except my own.  
I have no birthright.  
My unborn body lost its roots  
in 1957 after Dad graduated

from his segregated  
high school—Falls Church,  
Virginia—& the Air Force  
assigned him to Clark AB.  
Ma, his Oriental desire  
was set, & I lost, years before  
1991, when you were 24

& he took you to California.  
I want to know him, & you,  
but I only have numbers.  
Tell me, Ma, how you survive  
separated from your culture.  
You say I'm lucky to live here,  
but I think you're wrong:

Luck is not being born at all.

## Los pioneros

En este camino  
los hemos matado a todos.  
Las caléndulas respiran  
la sangre de sus memorias.

Los fantasmas se queman  
por el cielo—  
los rumores por el cosmos.  
¿Los oyes? Al nacer  
las mentiras se infiltran  
por el suelo de la verdad—  
nosotros no lo creemos.  
La atmósfera está infectada,  
¿la ves? El pasado  
no nos dice nada—

## Halo-halo

Tucked in a fluorescent corner  
of my go-to mini mart is chicken  
adobo, a row of fish heads,  
& my mom's favorite, pork  
blood stew. After a decade  
of visits, the café shines the same:  
a couple of *kumustas*, steel ladle  
on steel tray, Styrofoam boxes  
foolishly compartmentalized.  
*Maraming salamat po—*

but I remind Ma to buy halo-  
halo, *Yes, you said you would.*  
I see myself in the cup's crushed  
ice, scattered like islands  
throughout an archipelago,  
the shards of my DNA floating  
in evaporated milk. Add coconut,  
sweetened beans, & gulaman,  
& I'm my parents' child:

lighter than the Visayas,  
darker than Virginia state.

What if I grew up outside  
America, a mestizo transplant?  
I wouldn't use whitening lotion  
to become a Pinoy model  
of the West. My nose would have  
the right type of crooked, my chin  
the perfect dash of stubble.  
Heterogeneous treats  
come standard with twice-  
colonized island nations.

Like ube, my color would be  
undeniable: no doubts  
under hot fluorescents, no more  
dessert metaphors. My brown feet  
would mirror Ma's brown feet,  
a bowl of dinuguan between us,  
her face just a face,  
no longer a reflection  
of our homeland.

Gathering Wood, 1998

Our ebony wheelbarrow,  
his breath at my back,  
logs of cedar? fir?  
at my feet, little hands  
suspended midair—  
roller-coaster instincts.  
Our forage was equal parts  
survival & play,  
he wanted me to have  
adventure like he did,  
younger, countries away.  
I wanted love,  
maybe more, I was stricken  
by his gray mane  
& mustache. Since then,  
every chest under my tongue  
has been a homecoming.  
Daddy, I'm here,  
can't you see me? I want  
the roller coaster back,  
my back against  
your breath, we need wood  
for our fire, Dad. I'm frost-  
bitten without you.  
I must re-create,  
give me beards & musk—  
musk, the not-enough  
of men's flesh,  
always older, never  
the same gray luster.

## Miscegenation Blues

*What are you?*

A boi excavated from the Sierra,  
heart buried in coniferous molt,  
bones lost under industrial growth.

*Tell me who you are:*

A sun-baked Valley gurl,  
nails grown from asphalt weeds,  
nerves wired across Interstate 5.

*Where are you from?*

An expat archipelago dweller,  
pores chilled by Pacific breeze,  
feet rooted in volcanic ash.

*Give me your origin story:*

The mutt in Western clothing,  
ancestors warring within muscles,  
lactic acid coating Talisay memories.

How queer for my skin & 46  
chromosomes to mislead denizens  
of this cesspool, to confuse my Asia  
with their America.



## Picasso Bleeds

Artists speak of me  
with Rodin on their tongues,  
chiseling me in the ventricles  
of their minds, erecting  
a nouveau David to flatter  
Michelangelo, coating  
my skin with Renaissance  
limestone. But my bones  
          breathe:     melting clocks  
          & atmospheric skulls  
          that feed calcium to my body's  
          impression.     I'm lost  
on Duchamp's naked staircase,  
a war along my blue-yellow skin.

## The Price of Olives

I'm the most beautiful person  
I know. I'm an ancient Greek deity  
by 21st-century postcolonial norms.  
Did you know racial mixing  
was illegal in America until 1967?  
During *Loving v. Virginia*, my mom  
was born across the Pacific—  
it must have been cosmic. 29 years  
& several wars later, my Visayan  
aunties were pleased to welcome  
ripe olive flesh into their tower:  
*We did it.* No sun necessary  
to darken my skin, no melanoma  
price tag, but my chest still bleeds  
Euro hegemony in the acne scars  
beside my nipples, the tiny hairs  
along my sternum. With Ma's color  
& Dad's texture, I'm the poster  
child for every whitening aisle  
across an archipelago I only know  
through someone else's story. I want  
to touch the history in my bones,  
but all I feel is skin, beauty,  
the American Dream. *We did it.*

## Turning Point

Southbound on 95, the first real  
turn you make from Fallon  
to Las Vegas happens in Beatty,  
a place famous for its straight shot  
to Death Valley National Park  
& candy shop. I never stay long—  
forever a destination in mind—  
but I'm always thrilled to reach  
the small bend outside town.  
Leading up to this curve  
is the tiniest of rivers, the Amargosa,  
only recognizable by way of shrubs  
& riparian trees. If you look closely,  
you can see the slightest of dips,  
almost gully-like in its infancy.  
When the river ends & I'm  
on the highway's fulcrum, my body

projects into the mid-aughts,  
fourth grade, my family's  
summer expedition. Ma drank  
enough water to drown her organs.  
(Don't ask me why we didn't stop  
in town.) Dad swerved onto sand  
& we sprang out, van doors left  
open, our roles already assigned.  
Past a low fence my mom squatted  
on the baby gully & pissed,  
male bodies a wall around her.  
Maybe it was pre-Independence Day  
sentiment, but I felt American then.  
Every family road trip has its  
pee-in-the-water-bottle scare. Yes,  
even those with yellow mothers,  
yellow children.

## Coordinates for My Dad's Ashes

Apostrophe:

I didn't want to write

for you, for me,  
because I might spell

*forgiveness*, the same feeling—  
or is it an action?—

Ma said anchored  
your sclerosed heart.

(You can already see  
I'm not good at this.)

I needed to believe  
you were God:

It's a cakewalk to destroy  
a monolith, your whiteness,

a penchant for the Orient,  
the skinny boy who discovered

Luzon beauties  
& never looked back.

Alternatively, I found  
psychoanalysis:

There was a blond man  
(I think we have the same type)

who gave you a camera & said,  
*Remember me.*

I glimpse your chests painted  
with Mid-Atlantic scum,

I want to lick the photograph,  
maybe I'll understand why

you denied me this memory  
& instead talked about

gay prison rape.  
Call me the id

to your ego—it's simple.  
I still tell everyone

your conquest was denial,  
a route forged in tropical storms

& the sweet taste  
of mangoes.

You found an archipelago  
while I found men

to replace you.  
(Is my honesty

too sentimental?)  
But I know I can't

write around your body,  
much like I can't

throw away the scrap of paper  
where I left you:

Latitude: 39.37  
Longitude: -120.12

## Cryogenesis

This one's for the kids  
iced in time, trapped  
in a psychedelic journey  
through cerebra, the herbs  
of their lives wafting through  
stale air like cigarette smoke  
feeding collapsible lungs;  
their thermometers count down  
to absolute zero—doomsday—  
mercury flowing through frosted  
glass, bodies encapsulated  
in a chamber labeled *Reckoning*;  
their hearts are locked,  
beating silenced by lies told  
to our children, valves made  
inoperable by formaldehyde  
chilled to preserve a dead US

## Kimchi

Nothing gives me more hope  
than spicy cabbage—

with a bowl of steaming  
wheat noodles in front of me,  
I can finally be—

my Filipina mother didn't eat  
ramen growing up, or like  
kimchi, but my picture of Asia  
was painted in America—

as an American, I can choose  
from curated Eastern symbols—  
Ghibli, kung fu, & K-pop—  
I learn from the weeaboos  
& down-low fetishists—

I'm the most Filipinx version  
of myself with white friends  
in a Japanese-style ramen shop—  
Filipinx, not Filipino,  
not because of my non-binary  
identity but because *x* marks me  
as Anglo, barely yellow—

& the truth—I don't become  
anything by eating kimchi,  
no metamorphosis,  
my face still a question—

## Naked Heat

Fireworks barrel through me  
as I lean against the cool wall  
of my room. This nation's  
independence ricochets off  
towers & sidewalks, festers  
within me as District swelter  
trickles down my thighs.  
Hordes of strangers leave  
the Mall with memories  
to relive alongside their spouse-  
plus-2.5-children family units  
back home. My sweat tells me  
no: Night-sky chemicals may  
thrill us, but this country will  
kill us. Vibrations rupture  
my yellow belly & spill blood  
on the carpet. My chromosomes  
burn in protest.



## Pauli Exclusion

I may not be a physicist,  
but I know an atom's  
electrons spin opposite: one half  
positive, one half negative.  
What this means is  
even at matter's most basic,  
we're asymmetric. Biologists claim  
we're bilateral, like planaria cut  
in two, though it's all a ruse:  
dimorphic logic for a superficial  
answer to similarity & difference.  
No, our (a)symmetry isn't  
split into re-  
cursive flatworms or clams or  
any class of invertebrates,  
our matter isn't the hemolymph  
of beetles or grasshoppers or  
praying mantises that wave hello  
from my backdoor gable.  
What if I said everything  
was chaos  
composed of subatomic particles,  
the smallest gyrations counter-  
counter-clockwise, halfway left,  
halfway right? No need to believe me  
to understand the truth: What truth?  
I'm not the first to say life is  
a perception of reality. Our bodies  
exist because we make them.  
Scientists are simply masters  
of justifying their observations  
through repetition—but all I know,  
lies.

This work of art is

an indictment. Your white-  
flight prayers book-  
ended with exclamation  
marks & empty anecdotes  
won't reach me. I don't want  
your mouth full of flies.  
I want the parcel of valley  
stolen by your ancestors,  
your hundreds of years  
of money bags & livestock,  
your muscle ripped between  
my teeth. Did I stutter?  
Your statements of diversity  
& inclusion don't sate  
my vampiric hunger:  
I'd rather you didn't atrophy  
good meat in CEO & director  
roles assigned at birth.  
My legacy? A paternal  
Southeast Asian fetish  
& yearning for an archipelago  
denied to me at conception.  
Skip the consolation,  
just give me your body.  
I can sell the colorless  
skin for a modest price  
so long as there's no cancer.

## Otap

I know I'm home when I see  
striped-green awnings, a cardboard  
Pikachu face smiling from the window,  
& *Asian Market* written in sans-serif  
blocks. The aisle closest to the door  
is my favorite: all the goodies to hoard  
in my pantry. Boy Bawang corn nuts  
to Hello Panda biscuits, Royal Family  
mochi to spicy Samyang seaweed.

I remember my first trip to Crepe Myrtle,  
a lalaki on a mission. I scanned  
the snack section for Cebu's finest  
puff pastry. I didn't expect Shamrock—  
that's pasalubong fare—but it seemed  
like my luck was nonexistent.  
After inspecting the rest of the mart,  
grabbing extra Nongshim ramen  
& too many sachets of jasmine tea,

I decided to peruse the small bites  
once more for good measure.  
I'll never forget the bag's translucent  
plastic & green font: *Product of*  
*the Philippines. Eureka*, the European  
in me might have cried,  
but I instead whispered *Salamat*,  
for this moment, for my culture.

## Killing Field

In his homily, Fr. Harvey talked about “unsettled souls” or what Cebuanos call “mga kalag nga wa mahiluna” and how his Marian devotion helped him to cope with the spiritual needs of parishioners.  
—Malou Guanzon Apalisok, *Cebu Daily News* (October 31, 2016)

Nanay tells me about the dead bodies outside her Talisay home: the 1970s murder spree by communist insurgents within the heart of the Visayas. She speaks matter-of-factly, as if decay were her birthright, piles of stiff limbs a girl’s typical walk-to-class scenery.

I want to ask her *why*, as if she could explain slaughter, but I recall my US birth & silently laugh. I chew on my tongue because I’m stupid to think there’s a *more* to massacre, a rhetoric to shroud the reflection of Ma’s hometown: a mass graveyard. I imagine, years before,

aswang sniffing out corpses in public school restrooms & hidden berms, a humanoid sheen across the ghouls’ eyes spelling *hunger*, or *joy*. As in, battle-born flesh tastes of palabok, that mix of savory pork & salty shrimp restless spirits leave behind on skin like a remember-

me, like last week’s buried pot of kimchi.  
*I wish them peace*, I lie to her. I hope, in secret, that the souls were all devoured. Blood seeps into the afterlife & pollutes it with trauma that conquers pedigrees. I was born with ghosts in my eyes: I look at Ma,  
yearn to eat hers.

Dela Torre

One sound can mean  
the difference between America  
& alien. Linguists describe  
this phenomenon as articulation:  
tongue moves forward, muscles  
contract around the vowel.  
Have you ever wondered  
what makes an accent seem  
foreign? Mouth organs have  
different settings, ask any gringo  
in Spanish class. I'm set

to American English, a patriot  
in my voice. I must remind  
phone bankers of another SoCal  
Democrat who surfs too much.  
I was raised to believe  
the immigrant dream meant living  
indistinguishably, but if you  
pronounce my first name  
with an unrounded vowel,  
I'll know you understand treason.  
Ma left her Philippine tower

so I could call her mother in perfect  
English, but my lips crave  
the saltwater shores of Mactan.  
My name feels most real  
when it sounds like Lapu-Lapu:  
a mango against my cheek.  
When I speak Spanish, I think of  
my mom's famous sunburn story—  
she fell asleep on a beach near

her childhood home. I was born  
with Ma's blaze along my tongue,

her plea to never forget our past:  
colonization in two languages.



## Notes

*Loving v. Virginia*, referenced in “The Price of Olives,” is the US Supreme Court case that ended prohibitions on interracial marriage.

“Pauli Exclusion” was titled after the quantum mechanical principle of the same name, which asserts that in an atom, no two electrons can have the same four quantum numbers. Thus, electrons in the same orbital must have opposing spins.



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*Figure 1*: “Coordinates for My Dad’s Ashes”

*Glassworks Magazine*: “Turning Point”

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*The Racket*: “Gathering Wood, 1998,” “This work of art is”

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*Rigorous*: “Cryogenesis”

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## About the Author



Dani Putney is a queer, non-binary, mixed-race Filipinx, & neurodivergent writer originally from Sacramento, California. *Salamat sa Intersectionality* (Okay Donkey Press, May 2021) is their debut full-length poetry collection. Their poems appear in outlets such as *Empty Mirror*, *Ghost City Review*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Juke Joint Magazine*, & *trampset*, among others, while their personal essays can be found in journals such as *Cold Mountain Review* & *Glassworks Magazine*, among others. They received their MFA in Creative Writing from Mississippi University for Women. While not always (physically) there, they permanently reside in the middle of the Nevada desert.

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