

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

The final project for WR 150 “Poetry Now” asked students to translate some aspect of their academic research paper into a collection of poems for a non-academic audience. A caveat was that the poems present a sufficient argument or aesthetic experience, such that readers of the poems need not have also read the research paper for the poems to make sense. Hallie Lazaro more than rose to this challenge. Her research focused on the cultural silences and hidden shames surrounding gender discrimination and immigration, as these topics are depicted in Monica Ong’s highly visual poetry collection, *Silent Anatomies*. Hallie’s poetry project uses Ong’s book as a model both for creating meaningful intersections between words and images and for contextualizing family history in a larger narrative.

In “The Life Cycle of a Tree: A Cultural Journey,” Hallie’s stylistic choices and varied forms reveal how immigration is a constant and complicated navigation for Lazaro, the narrator based upon her father. Slight linguistic variations enact large emotional shifts, as in the first poem where the meaning of *Lazaro*, “Help of God,” becomes a plea: “Lazaro is foreign soil on the tongue. / Wet and choking. / God help Lazaro.” Hallie’s poems also present powerful images. In “Growth” a Narra tree grows from Lazaro’s back, a metaphor for the difficulty of assimilation. In the next stanza we see how otherness is often pathologized: Lazaro’s doctor “prescribed [him] an axe and / told [him] to cut down [the tree] and bury it / in the backyard.” As I re-read “The Life Cycle of a Tree,” I was struck by how timely these poems are. When the very humanity of immigrants is being questioned and reduced by the language of policies such as “catch and release,” we need texts like Hallie’s to remind us that immigration always involves a specific individual’s experiences.

Jessica Bozek
WR 150: Poetry Now

FROM THE WRITER

When prompted to complete the task of writing our own collection of documentary poetry that reflects a political or social issue, I was floored. My initial thought was: *How can I possibly come up with an original collection of poetry?* I looked to Monica Ong's *Silent Anatomies*, my literary muse for the semester, for guidance. I felt inspired by the intimacy of *Silent Anatomies* and decided to openly discuss the difficulties of immigration by telling my father's story. Writing poetry was a struggle, but with scrap paper and my father's stories in my pocket at all times, I made it.

HALLIE LAZARO is a rising sophomore at Boston University's College of Arts and Sciences. She is majoring in Neuroscience and is on the pre-medical track. She was born in Manahawkin, New Jersey, a small drive-by town. Hallie has a love-hate relationship with writing but has come to admire the intimacy poems have to offer. A hobby of hers is collecting antiques and her dream is to become a doctor. She would like to thank Professor Jessica Bozek for her infinite patience, encouragement, and critique.

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The objective for this collection of poetry is to expand upon immigration and cultural silences as Monica Ong does in *Silent Anatomies*. This project will explore the cultural ties immigrants carry with them to the United States and their struggle to assimilate into a new culture while clinging to, or rejecting, their past. Culture, as these poems will argue, stays with us, and can either empower us or hinder us.

Like in *Silent Anatomies*, where many of Ong's poems are spoken through the voice of Medica, most of the following poems will be spoken through the voice of Lazaro. Lazaro, in this context, represents an immigrant of Filipino background. The content of some of these poems draw on personal stories of my father's immigration to the United States and his struggle to assimilate into American culture. The themes of the poems stem from the unintended tradition my father and I started. When he cooked fish and rice, he told me stories of his life in the Philippines as we ate together. These stories filled my head as a child and gave me an intimate feeling of what Filipino culture is. They have urged me to return to my roots and inspired the common symbol of these poems: the Narra tree. The Narra tree is the national tree of the Philippines because it is resilient and strong. It is meant to represent the cultural pride that every Filipino immigrant may carry with them. Many of the times, I write about how a Narra tree grows out of Lazaro's back, making his culture "noticeable." For many immigrants, not only is their physical appearance noticeable to Americans, but also their mannerisms that stem from their culture.

This project begins with the poem "Lazaro." The original idea stems from how people could not pronounce my father's last name when he immigrated to the United States. The style, therefore, follows Lazaro's identity in his home country and how he struggles to adapt in the United States. The poem is meant to introduce Lazaro to the reader and orient them at the beginning of Lazaro's journey. The poems following Lazaro incorporate several poetic styles. "Mag Inġat" is written in prose, some are coupled with photos, and many poems contain phrases in Tagalog and Spanish. The different styles are meant to engage the reader with imagery, as Ong does in *Silent Anatomies*.

As it comes to a close, the project questions whether immigrants should forget their cultural roots and accept American culture as their own or acknowledge their cultural roots and integrate them into their new lives in the United States. There is not a wrong answer, but Lazaro will show us the pieces of culture many of immigrants choose to embrace, as well as forget.

HALLIE LAZARO

Prize Essay Award

THE LIFE CYCLE OF A TREE: A CULTURAL JOURNEY

Lazaro

Lazaro.

Pronounced "*lá-sab-row*"

Meaning: Help of God.

Lazaro is from the earth,
deep roots, dark and knotted.

Lazaro comes from *patria adorada*, pearl of the orient.

Lazaro is ~~freedom~~.

Lazaro is the sound of wind ~~roaring~~

Flying over seas.

escape

running

Lazaro.

Pronounced "*Lab-~~zza~~-row*."

Lazaro is foreign soil on the tongue.

Wet and choking.

God help Lazaro.

[1]

Mag In̄gat [2]

The winter of 1982 was the first snowfall for Lazaro. November chills shocked the *Narra's* [3] roots, unused to the chill. Shouldering branches and unburdened baggage, Lazaro steps off the plane. Cadiz gave him 5 dollars. One crumpled dollar curled from the cold in his pocket. *It will have to do. I will be fine.*

No one told him that the streets weren't paved of gold, the dirt paths in the village seemed freer. No one told him that white ghosts would threaten to swallow him whole, or that the snow would seep into his salted bones and run them dry.

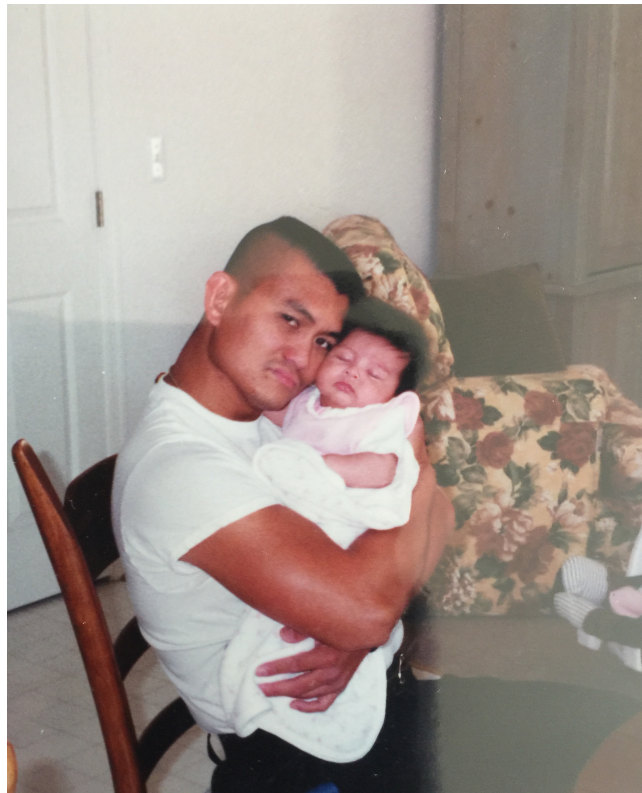
I will be fine.

Last of nine, Lazaro was the first to plant our seeds in the snow.

And they grew into a forest.

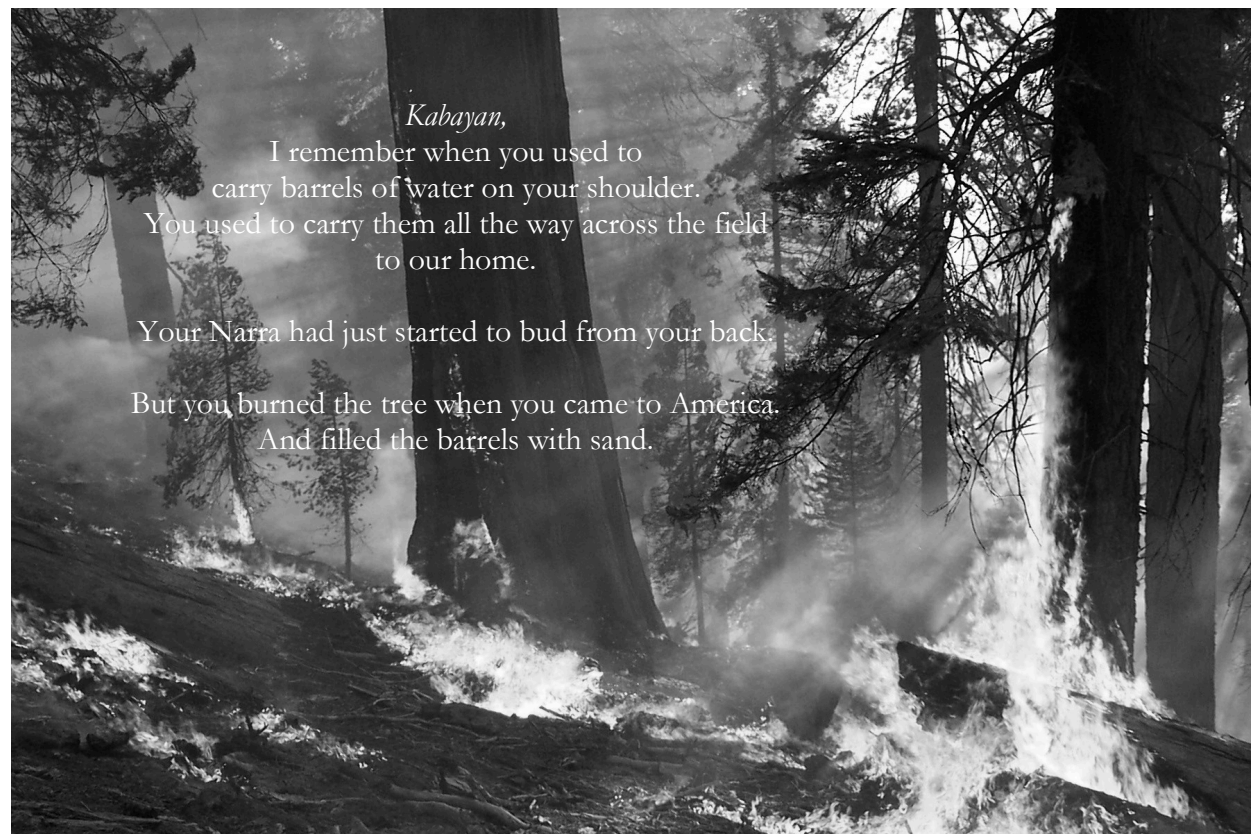
We will be fine.

Girls aren't supposed to swim.



[4]

I want you to sail the Ocean.



Kabayan,

I remember when you used to
carry barrels of water on your shoulder.
You used to carry them all the way across the field
to our home.

Your Narra had just started to bud from your back:

But you burned the tree when you came to America.
And filled the barrels with sand.

Growth

When I came to America,
a Narra tree grew from my back.
Its gnarled roots became one with my spine.
Its leaves tickled my ear, and told me stories
I tried to forget.

I went to a doctor
because I was getting a lot of stares.
He prescribed me an axe and
told me to cut it down and bury it
in the backyard.

When I did, the Narra sprung from the earth.
And I watered it.



Q & A

When they ask you
“Where are you from?”
Answer with,
the same place as you,
home.

Maybe then the ghosts will leave you
alone.



For Them

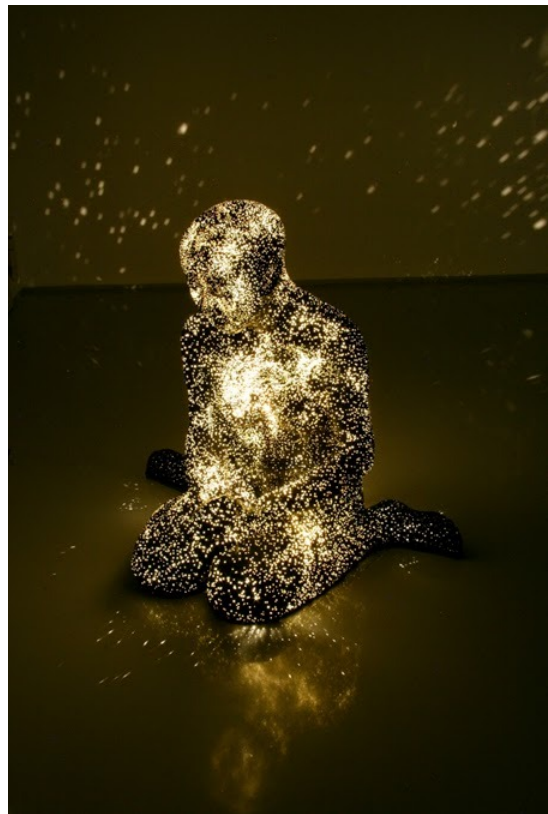
One Nation under God, indivisible,
with Liberty and Justice for ~~all~~. *them*

But not for *us*.

Cloudy Days are Better than Cloudless Nights

My sister's skin was the sky at dusk.
Ugly with its shades of color.
Hideous with its intense depth,
scarred,
like tilled soil in the sugarcane fields.

She wanted her body to be a cloudy day.
All white.
So she scoured her skin
with a machete,
And scrubbed away the night sky.



Dawn is Better than Dusk

My Daughter, your skin is the sky at dawn.
Beautiful with its shades of color.
Wondrous with its intense depth,
scarred,
Like bark.

The Moon is jealous,
and tries to scorn you.
Do not listen to Her.
For the Sun is more interesting
than the Moon.

When I was a sprout,
My *Inang* [5] would let me sit
under the ironing board
as she worked.
She would talk to me,
and fill my canopy with stories,
and tell me of the past.

When I was a sapling,
My *Inang* would tell
me that I, the youngest son,
would inherit the land.
She would say this as I
recited a poem about
an old, yellow dog.

When I grew tall,
Inang whispered to me less.
I no longer recited a poem about
an old, yellow dog.
I did not inherit the land.

I moved my roots.

**My Night Sky,
Sit next to me.
I will give you some of my
leaves and sew them into your
canopy.
Let us talk together.**

**Dearest Daughter,
Do not let anyone
snatch the forest I cultivated
long ago.
Care for it. It is yours.
Sing *Mi Último Adiós*
to it.**

**When you grow tall,
Do not listen to the whispers
that tell you to be silent.
Sing your poem.
Cultivate your forest.**

Stand your ground.

Ancestry

Stories are best told with rice.
When you wash the rice, pour the water
over the Narra out back, it likes it best.
Fill the pot with rice and water, use your thumb.

Rice is best with fish.
Watch me pull a fish from my ear,
I'll wrap it in banana leaf and steam it.
Watch the steam, it will tell stories
from my *inang bayan*. [6]

When you ask me
if these stories will be forgotten,
I'll give you *siopao*.

Be careful.
In the middle,
is a Narra seed.

NOTES

1. *Patria adorada* translates to “beloved country,” alluding to the poem *Mi Último Adiós* by José Rizal. Rizal is known as the Philippines’ national hero.
2. *Mag Inang* is a phrase in Tagalog that roughly translates to “safe travels.”
3. The Narra tree is the national tree of the Philippines.
4. *My Father and I*, 1999.
5. *Inang* translates to mother.
6. *Inang bayan* translates to motherland.

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