

TWO POEMS

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About the Author

Alfonso Manalastas is an op-ed contributing writer, a spoken word artist, and a poet from Butuan City, now based in Manila. He was accepted as a poetry fellow for two national writers' workshops. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in several journals including *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Cha Asian Literary Journal*, *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, and *Cordite Poetry Review*, among others.

A STUDY OF GRIEF

I.

You walk over to an empty bar stool,

Etta James blaring from a speaker
some honeyed words uttered
with a kind of eloquence
made possible only
by rain,

tiny droplets drumming
beats to a window, tapping
Morse code for *are you alright?*
where a hooded grief
takes the seat next to yours.

You do not welcome grief's company,
but his is a language where *no*
means *yes* and *yes, anyway*,

sips gold liquid and insists
small talk while you spit
blood with every answer
from your alcohol-parched mouth,
his line of questioning
a forceful inquiry
into your joy:

*But why? You have
so many reasons to be happy.*

II.

Here is a pamphlet.
Like many of its kind,
it will tell you what to do.
It will know exactly what to do.

It will tell you of resilience
and laughter in children's lungs
as they drink gutter water
and play naked through the flood.

It will tell you of lost people:
lost mothers, fathers, of lost limbs,
how hope is a blue pill
you purchase on eBay,

drink knowing that the world
is far too tired to have any room left
for grief, and you will
believe it. You will

believe it when it tells you
to take grief in a box,
ship grief off somewhere distant,
limpid cold, except

everything we send skyward
eventually finds its way back.
You are lucky if it doesn't land
on your delicate head.

III.

Of all things,
grief understands this most:

the only thing that separates
the departed from the disappeared
are the footprints pressed
on moist terrain.

Welcome to the factory of alleged virtues.

Here, everything you've lost
is found, only better.
Like polished chrome, watch
as grief glistens

in the high tide of the morning,
on stage at a talent show,
dripping wet from a pulpit
over Sunday's homily.

Grief comes to you
unabandoned,
unabashed,
weighs your pockets down
heavy as a missing organ
and yet shinier than ever. This

is where grief comes to die,
to be reborn and baptized
new; a teething infant
eager to suckle your light,
swirl you gentle on his tongue
as you dissolve.

PAINT BY NUMBERS AS VAN GOGH

I once was asked on a job interview to describe
the color blue to a blind man, to which
I responded with a resounding *no*, I said

what sick man would I be if I lied? The truth is,
who knows for sure how blue looks? Like
right now, as I glance at the sky hand-painted

on this marvelous box, I see a flurry of blueness
—eight different kinds numbered differently,
the opacity to which they’ve found their resolve.

Some even a little green. You can place next to it
a picture of the sea perched perfectly still, and
I wouldn’t know the difference for what is the sky

but just an ocean without gravity to hold it back?
Eleven stars and a moon—now this, I can tell
clearly, is a starry night, an approximation

of all the dark we’ve abandoned in the day, blueness
whirling around yellow dots as if to devour them.
Such carnivorous display twinkling above cities

whose hues and pigments pulsate
under the tyranny of math—*three* for blue, *four*
for another kind of blue, and so on. So tell me,

how am I to describe the color blue to a blind man
in all its forms? *Six* is also blue,
and so is *seven*. Instead, I turn to the cypress tree

black and sullen in its singular hush of dark,
its tree bark clawing up the rectangular frame
as if to say *here dear blue, devour me, too*.