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An Anthology of Queer Southeast Asian Poetry in the Pandemic

Edited by Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr.

## A/PART

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Southeast Asian Poetry  
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S E A Q C F

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## INTRODUCTION / Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr.

Scrolling through the wasteland of ephemera that is Twitter, I'm struck by statements complaining that there are already too many anthologies about the pandemic. And it might be true, in a way, how COVID-19 anthologies as a genre have sprung up like weeds, but I also felt that this truism painted an incomplete picture. As gay poet born in the Philippines who is now based in Singapore, I was curious to know how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected queer individuals in Southeast Asia and what poems have been written about their experience.

My mind was filled with questions during the months when I stayed home in what was euphemistically called a circuitbreaker period. What does it mean for a body to desire in isolation? How do LGBTIQ individuals navigate their suddenly and severely restricted perimeters? How have we been transformed by this global health crisis?

*A/PART* is an attempt at addressing these questions, gathering different queer voices in the region and crystallizing a fraught moment in history. It articulates our pandemic anxieties and yearnings, our longings to touch and be touched. As a document of witness, it serves as a record of how we have lived through a long-term catastrophe.

The title of the anthology reflects how we have been separated from one another through social distancing, lockdown, community quarantine, and other measures imposed to mitigate risk and exposure to the virus. And yet it also speaks of a shared experience, of be/longing, of how each of us becomes part of a bigger tapestry in these unprecedented times. *A/PART* expresses the tension between isolation and interconnectedness, between estrangement and intimacy—a tension that we've felt keenly during the pandemic.

I'm drawn to that word: between, which suggests a liminal state, a threshold, a continuum. I'd like to imagine that the slash in *A/PART* visualizes this sense of between-ness, aside from evoking

an off-kilter wall or a stick figure looking down a precipice. The slash can be a barrier, a mask, or a face shield. It can also be a portal, as what Arundhati Roy has said about the pandemic: “a gateway between one world and the next.”

The poems in this anthology reveal various possibilities of how queer individuals in SEA have tried to grapple with meaning (or the lack of it) during this difficult period. They speak of doomscrolling, of destruction and natural disasters. They locate interstices and weigh intensities in a world that has become occluded. They wonder about the apparition of a rainbow and boats marooned in a harbor. They consider emptiness and nothingness in a void deck. They channel the voices of a dead mother, of fish in a river. They reminisce about 2019, a year which feels like a lifetime ago, and about places where we used to meet. They itch with cam-to-cum lust while in quarantine, watching Boys' Love shows and daredevil boys in porn. They play with knots and ropes. They thirst.

I hope that you'll enjoy reading these poems as much as I did putting them together. May this small sampling of works pave the way for you to seek out more poems and stories by LGBTIQ writers in Southeast Asia. Padayon!

*Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr. (he/him) is the author of Aria and Trumpet Flourish and co-editor of SingPoWriMo 2018: The Anthology. His second poetry collection, Tangere, is forthcoming from the University of the Philippines Press. His poems have been published in Likhyaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature, Kritika Kultura, Tomas, and other journals and anthologies. He has received prizes from the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, Kokoy F. Guevara Poetry Competition, British Council, among others. Born in the Philippines, he has been based in Singapore since 2011.*

## **DESIRING-VIROLOGY / Lune Loh**

Interstices: COVID-19 as machine  
what Pythia foretold, so unlike us,  
us so sun-rimmed and moon-eyed;  
all once essence, now surrendering,  
deus ex libido ad libido ex machina;  
or, what Marx prophecized, God  
as nature denaturing fast, fascist;  
elegy written into circuit, Trojaned;  
flesh scripted into fearful proximity;  
un-life, un-death transistor territory  
a corona discharge; we autoproduce  
a thousand distances from ourselves  
from techno-virality planes: Intensities.

*Lune Loh is a core member of /S@BER, a Singaporean writing collective, and is currently an Undergraduate at the National University of Singapore. Her works have appeared in Evergreen Review, SOFTBLOW, Cordite, Cha: An Asian Literary Journal, and various SingPoWriMo issues from 2017 – 2019.*



## NATURAL DISASTERS / Nerisa del Carmen Guevara

1

A wall of wind from across the globe.  
How does it begin, the origin of doom?

Butterfly wing gathered from a stream.

Fin of careless fish.

God.

2

A typhoon is churning, out there.

Today is stunning with its long sunlight lashes.

Grief feels like this, all the time:  
Typhoon in the distance, this city in perfect summer.

What is destruction?  
There. There.

3

Out there, something is happening,  
Sailing over the wind.

The quiet has a shimmer.

4

The open sea is a gateway between heaven and earth.

5

What did the beach look like when love ended?  
Were the plates still on the table?

*Nerisa del Carmen Guevara is a poet and performance artist residing in the Philippines. Author of Reaching Destination (2004), her poetry is found in The Comstock Review and other publications. She was recently anthologized in The Achieve of, The Mastery: Filipino Poetry and Verse from English, mid-'90s to 2016.*

## **DOOMSCROLLER'S DUPLEX** / Andrew Kirkrose (*an Odyssey with no nostos*)

This homecoming by any other name  
is stalled at the border of doorway and door.

At the threshold, a doorway endures  
what must be allowed. A siren is singing

as sirens must nowadays sing: out loud,  
with no teeth left showing through three-layered cloth.

Three layers of skin and not one left  
marking the point past which blood should not flow.

Blood does not flow beyond taped lines on floors.  
It wells in the creases, air pockets, and folds.

Every day a fresh crisis, as pockets unfold.  
As things barely buried are shuddering still.

Before I am buried, I shutter, stay still.  
No one at home knows how to weave shrouds.

I dispose of my shroud before I come home;  
loop loose-ended meetings to tassels untorn.

I suture lost endings; turn tatters to seams.  
I look into waters where nothing can breathe.

No one remembers, in waters that breathe,  
though bees wash up humming of happier shores.

Wash up, buzzing through a litany faster  
than overturn, undertow, bottle intact.

Then overturn undertow, unbottle  
the facts. Butterflies dreaming of something they knew.

I daydream in butterfly, knowing  
no end. Scar tissue clings onto branches,  
no, ends. A root of scar tissue cleaves  
into soil in the end, splits itself, laughing,

in two. Soil, in the end, is the basis of harbour,  
displaces potential, holds space for dock.

This place holds potential for space, docks  
soft corner from starlight, uncompasses land.

Soft corner of midnight, encompassing, lands  
between crater and pit. Diffusion begins.

Between crater and pit, confusion begins.  
Light surges through a body with no breakers,  
brokers no light in a body unbroken.  
Recover your losses at membranes uncrossed.

Recovery fails when a membrane is crossed.  
Give the sirens whatever they want. All you  
want is some siren voice singing  
this homecoming by any other name.

*Andrew Kirkrose (he/him) is a queer transgender Singaporean poet and student of linguistics and literature. His work has appeared in journals including Cordite Poetry Review and PERVERSE, and anthologies including EXHALE: An Anthology of Queer Singapore Voices.*

## THIS JOKE I TELL / Stephanie Dogfoot

the joke I tell people is that this is the longest I've gone without hearing a rape joke in years / the punchline being, I'm speaking this into my computer webcam at a zoom stand up open mic / the premise being, I never thought I'd survive this long without a stage to perform on / the punchline being, it's actually kind of liberating not caring what a roomful of cishet strangers thinks of you anymore / the set up being, 2020 is the most gender euphoria I have felt in my life / the punchline being, they can't misgender you if you don't go outside in the first place / the twist being, it's pretty cool being able to pass finally / something about computer screens and casually emailed-off bios that makes us all braver / they can't make you come out if you're not allowed outside in the first place / by which I mean, I have lost track of how many times I've started calling myself 'they' on the internet / the premise being, I went five months without alcohol and didn't notice / the punchline being, I just really miss drinking too many beers talking shit with dumb cishet male comedians sometimes / the set up being, months before the bars open he will ask if it's true that I'm, you know, non-binary / ok at least the right pronouns aren't that important to you / right? / the punchline being but how does that work anyway? / and the joke I tell is that I never came out because it was hard enough explaining what bisexual meant / that this is the longest I've gone without explaining myself / the premise being, what does anyone have to prove to anyone in a pandemic / wait what was i supposed to prove in the first place? / the punchline being, I am still accumulating Hawaiian shirts / even as my chances to wear them keep falling / call it preparing.

*Stephanie Dogfoot (they/she) is a poet, drag performer and comedian from Singapore who can be found at @stephdogfoot on most of the social medias. Their first poetry collection Roadkill for Beginners was published by Math Paper Press.*

## **BED** / Nguyen-Vu Viet Anh

By the way words are empty,  
ourlovebeatsmyhearttodeath  
Is that a word?  
Yeahnoduh.

Home after pride.  
Lying, the truth is the world doesn't need Viet Anh.  
Viet Anh doesn't orchestrate Pride.  
pêđê in Vietnamese means queer,  
Without queer, Vietnam is impêđêd.  
Ghosting, the voices at 1:12  
AM  
GMT+,  
bounded in my neofrontal cortex: should have hugged  
more queer,  
more women,  
more people,  
little by little, still drinking the rush of  
all just in sparkles;  
and, by the way, poets are empty.

I guess that it is life's joke that my father used to beat the shit out  
of my mother and I cried  
and said to myself  
“forgive him  
I would never.”

So at that time a fake suicide was set up,  
mother hid near the river.  
The script was set.  
Should I hide too?

Tremble, mossy beam, moribund fish;  
Abhorrent, the plastics clinging.  
Put to rest, riverbed, breathe, end.

Rain, warm road steaming,

Nguyen-Vu Viet Anh is a Vietnamese young spirit, self-identified as queer. Viet Anh encourages their audience to enjoy the ambiguity of gender by choosing what pronoun they use. Viet Anh can spend a whole night painting things out of memory or watching the nights fades away. In mornings, they return to researching about "queer stuff". They are also the Director of "Queerator" in SEAQCF 2021 line-up.

## RAINBOW / Jose Luis Pablo

The last rainbow I saw was at a friend's wedding, an omen blessing the union despite the worsening drizzle and the impossibility of two women marrying in our country. I realize that I will not be able to swim my way through a sea of rainbow flags this year to protest this fact, then dance in a room of shadow and kaleidoscope speckle with strangers to celebrate not being stoned for our defiance, our joy like Noah's upon seeing the Godsent symbol after the deluge. How he must have seen each animal pair swell with pride for bearing the gift of the survival of their species! But some creatures are luckier than others. The Houses do not pass laws to protect our jobs, what more our love? There are more important things, they say, like emergency funds when the volcano rained ash on the metro. A Senator asked the people to pray for rain until scientists told him how lahar can be a tomb. What rain should we pray for to wash away the virus? What prayer for ignorance? What can the sky give us for our idleness?

*Jose Luis "Nico" Pablo is a poet and a nonprofit communications manager based in the Philippines. Their poetry has appeared in various publications detailed in [joseluisbpablo.wordpress.com](http://joseluisbpablo.wordpress.com) and was awarded by the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature in 2018. They are non-binary and genderfluid (he/she/they).*

## JOY, ON YOUR 50TH— / Jhoanna Lynn B. Cruz

Forgive me [REDACTED]. But you know how it is—when you want to [REDACTED] true, it doesn't come [REDACTED]. You wish someone [REDACTED] would [REDACTED] [REDACTED].

You turned 50 during the COVID pandemic—the year [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] lost—but [REDACTED] secretly [REDACTED] [REDACTED]  
reprieve [REDACTED]—[REDACTED] having a valid [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] milestone [REDACTED]. You have not recovered from [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] I threw [REDACTED] your 18<sup>th</sup> [REDACTED].

I tried.

By the time I turned 50, we had returned [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]. I had to sell  
my house [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
I renovated [REDACTED] the same  
space [REDACTED] occupied when you were born, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] hoping [REDACTED] would return. [REDACTED] didn't.

Two months after my 50<sup>th</sup> [REDACTED], I [REDACTED] transform [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
for my father's funeral. Two years later, I went into [REDACTED]  
and was diagnosed with [REDACTED], the same illness that  
killed my [REDACTED]. Before that [REDACTED], my mother died, too. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] I started over [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED].

Three things are certain in your 50s:

You will not [REDACTED].  
You will not lose [REDACTED].  
[REDACTED] menopause.

But [REDACTED] know you are [REDACTED] [REDACTED].

It's not 2020 that COVID stole [REDACTED] Not time.

Where is the world you [REDACTED]

Are [REDACTED] still waiting for [REDACTED] your partner? You [REDACTED] she [REDACTED] [REDACTED] halfway through [REDACTED] [REDACTED]? But she doesn't know either [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. She can't even [REDACTED] [REDACTED] instead she says, "know that I will always love you and care for you."

Take it. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] what is elided. Know that nothing is [REDACTED].

Non-refundable plane tickets, hotel bookings, what you thought you had.

And even if they were [REDACTED], you can just [REDACTED].

[REDACTED] *Papunta ka pa lang, pabalik na ako.*

But I am really glad I'm not [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] [REDACTED].

Love, Mommy

Jhoanna Lynn B. Cruz teaches creative writing at the University of the Philippines Mindanao in Davao City. She holds a creative practice PhD from RMIT University, Melbourne. Her first book, Women Loving. Stories and a Play (2010) is the first single-author collection of lesbian-themed works published in the Philippines. These stories are also available as an eBook entitled Women on Fire (2015). Cruz's memoir, Abi Nako, Or So I Thought was published in 2020 by the University of the Philippines Press.

## SA DATING TAGPUAN (A MEETING PLACE)

/ Steno Padilla

Sa umpisa kasi  
Kuwarenta lang ang usapan.  
Pagkatapos ng higit 'sang b'wan  
Balik na ulit sa dati:  
Magkikita tayo nang alas-onse  
Sa walang-kamatayang tagpuan  
Manananghalian,  
magkukuwentuhan  
Magrereklamo tungkol  
Sa kani-kaniyang amo  
At lalakad sa liwasan  
Kahit tirik na tirik ang araw.  
Ngunit ang kuwarenta  
Ay naging otsenta,  
naging uno-singkuwenta.  
Namuti na ang mata  
Nakapiit pa rin sa hawla.  
Ang araw-araw na pagkikita  
Nauwi sa tatlong letra—  
LED o LCD  
At kung magkakatampuhan  
Idinadaan sa TXT.  
Salat man sa hawak  
Sa akbay at sa yakap  
Ang ating pakonsuwelo  
Narito pa tayo.  
Kung malasin man at hindi  
Magtagpo sa 'sang b'wan  
Magbabaka-sakali  
Sa walang-hanggang bukas.  
Batid natin kasi  
Sa simula't simula pa lamang  
Na hindi sa daplisang  
Ng ating mga titi  
Nasusukat ang pagsasamang  
Sinusubok ng salot  
Lipunan man o karamdaman.

Well at first  
We thought it was forty  
That more than a month later  
All will return to normal:  
We'll meet at eleven  
In our usual meeting place  
We'll have our lunch chatter  
Complain about our bosses  
Then we'll stroll in the park  
Not a care in the world  
Under the blazing sun.  
But forty turned into eighty,  
Into a hundred and fifty  
The year almost over but  
Still we're in separate cages.  
Our daily routine  
Reduced into three letters—  
LED or LCD  
And if all else fails  
We turn to SMS.  
Yes, we crave for each other's  
Touch, arm on shoulder,  
embrace  
Our only consolation  
Is knowing we're still here.  
While things may take a turn  
For the worse  
And seeing each other shifts  
Farther into future  
I'll leave my hopes to  
tomorrow  
Never-ending as it is  
For we both understand  
That this thing we share  
Relies not on how  
Our cocks graze each other,  
Tested by the plague

May higit na unawaan  
Ang puso at isip  
Na kahit ilang -enta ang lumpas  
Tayo'y babalik  
At muling magtatagpo  
Sa dati nating tagpuan.

Of society or the virus.  
Our unwritten pact persists:  
No matter how long this takes  
We shall meet and return  
To our favorite rendezvous.

*Steno Padilla is a gay writer from Bulacan, Philippines. He won the Lampara Prize twice for his young adult novels in 2017 and 2018. His poems can be read in Busilak: New LGBTQ Poetry from the Philippines and short story in Dx Machina: Philippine Literature in the Time of COVID-19.*

## HAVEN / Kendrick Loo

The year, we kept saying, shouldn't have been like this. We cut down the stars and then it was June. *Waren de sterren bereid?* No one was. All around town people wandered, saying goodbye till the world was washed with sorrow. *En dan?* The curtains lifted with sea wind, gone blue with choked laughter. We bracketed our bodies in my bed, and the boats waited in the harbour, unaware that no one would move them for months. *Ben je naar de haven geweest?* We left the house once and waved at the boats, trekked through a supermarket of emptied shelves. We never touched in public though, our hands in our pockets. *We bedoelen hem.* Yes. He would hold me as I slept, that was enough. *Maar doet het echt?* It was so warm that summer. *Er waren geen sterren nodig, en blind is de muur.* A body's final resistance, that the light is prevented from passing through. *En groot is de haven van het hart.* I was always retreating into his arms that summer. Our hands ringless, the wind slipping through.

Kendrick Loo is the reviews editor for *Singapore Unbound*. His poetry and literary reviews has been published in *fourteenpoems*, *EcoTheo* and *The West Review*, amongst others. He can be found tweeting at @stagpoetics.

## **BOYS' LOVE / Eroheizst**

Falling in love is falling in love is falling in love  
The same way that has happened  
To Sarawat and Tine

Much like an apple that fell on Newton's head  
The mass in the chest cavity  
Accelerates  
And then falls with the same heartbeat

There's no revelation conjured by human tongue  
Strong enough to defy  
Gravity

And when two boys kiss each other  
The flowers also magically bloom  
Springing from the earth

*Eroheizst is the pseudonym of an Indonesian writer who loves to write poetry and short story. He has written Op-Ed articles about marriage equality and feminism for the national media. He is bisexual and is in a happy relationship for almost six years with his lovely boyfriend.*

## **LOSS, DESIRE AND MISSED THINGS** / Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé

1.

It's coming from downstairs. Someone's blaring "Sweet Child O' Mine".

2.

It's loud, and it's coming from just the lower floor. It's not someone in the void deck, or in the small park no one goes to.

3.

This is the sort of knowingness that comes with living in the heartlands. It's kind of special, a learned intuition.

4.

Knowing void deck is peculiar to our lived experience here. It goes beyond the idea that Americans say overpass, while the British say flyover. Here, everything is a highway because our country is small, and there are so few of these things, you don't need special names for them.

5.

Guns N' Roses took a long time to make *Chinese Democracy*. Was it fourteen years? Was it that long ago?

6.

Imagine the fourteen lines of a sonnet, and taking a year to write one of those lines. One line after another, in measured steps, one year after another.

7.

That's what a day without you feels like.

8.

It's a tragic solitude. It's an inexplicable sense of abandonment, without any choice in the leaving. You can't feel abandoned, when there was never any intention to walk away. That's what the death of a lover feels like.

9.

About once a year, someone manages a Facebook post on something with that gravitas. The pain seems unbearable, and somehow these people find the words to express this condition.

10.

It's almost always an unwilling survivor, it seems.

11.

The last one hadn't posted anything since 2012. Last year, someone mentioned it'd been twenty years since Aerosmith's "I Don't Want to Miss a Thing". The writer thought the moment needed to be commemorated. The song was anthemic. It was about big love, the kind about rescue and permanence, something larger than life. It was on repeat on the radio, every morning and night, like a canticle.

12.

Do you remember watching *Armageddon* together? You said Liv Tyler was luminous, but nothing she ever did after matched *Stealing Beauty*. No one could regain that screen presence, you said.

13.

A grade separation is what forms, like a wall of air, between an overpass and an underpass. There's nothing in this space, except for its important use.

14.

Emptiness has its function, you say. Nothingness has its function. But you were always there, even in the silence. And now, nothing is shared within this space. Nothing really happens in your room, and my being alone in it.

*Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé has authored seventeen books, spanning fiction, poetry and nonfiction. Founder of Squircle Line Press, he has also edited over twenty publications. Desmond is the recipient of the IBPA Benjamin Franklin Award, Independent Publisher Book Award, Singapore Literature Prize, and three Living Now Book Awards. His website: [www.desmondkon.com](http://www.desmondkon.com)*

## 2019 MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN A LIFETIME AGO

/ Fajar Zakhri

I remember falling asleep by his side.  
“Quiet Signs” softly in the background.  
fresh off a mental joyride,  
then kept up by work all night.  
how glad I was that we didn’t fuck.  
then the awkward goodbye.  
stopped by a friend’s for lunch.  
then went to that audition  
believing I wouldn’t get the part.  
except that I did and it was the start  
of a year-long play without direction.  
me: an inamorato gone unrecognized.  
him: a lothario / the exemplary earthling.  
our names high up in the unwritten marquee.  
to each other we were the second billing.

I remember not falling asleep by his side.  
Japanese cartoon and faint TV screen light.  
tainted by a broken heart,  
then kept up by talks all night.  
how glad I was that we did fuck.  
how weird it was to bare for another.  
how I wish it wasn’t our only time together.  
how I wish to have met his mother.  
how I wish he really had been my lover.  
how I never got to fully recover  
from the drawn out love hangover.  
how things never quite got better.  
except that they did, just in ways I had not anticipated.  
all the while I faded into the background facing the music.  
all the while he stepped to the forefront scheming with his tricks.  
a part so laughably unconvincing. might as well cue the curtain  
call

then slide over to the dreamland and cry your eyes out.  
tell me you love me, like that one time, in my dream.

cut to the next scene. looks like another false alarm.  
but hey, at least you loved me once.  
let me repeat this line: you see, I've come this far by virtue of  
love,  
most of it discreetly tucked. then it becomes someone else's vice.  
for the likes of me were born into this world knowing our place.  
the likes of me are ghostlike with something of a human face.  
the likes of me grapple with misplaced contempt for the self.  
but never for one second did I regret wrapping my love up in a  
bow.  
just imagine how lovely it would have been to tie it up  
to his hands; for one can love with their hands tied,  
with the rest of the body on the go.

should it be too much to ask for, though,  
I won't mind notching myself to his bedpost,  
sinking into yet another bed of memory,  
sleeping alone. I'll do it solemnly,  
in remembrance of everything:  
the pull of his blanket,  
the static beat of the air con,  
the TV that's never quite watched, just stared at,  
the computer screen that's somehow always on,  
the merging of two bodies heated by pent-up lust,  
the trembling of my untouched bones,  
his delicious torso, his far-flung moans,  
his accidental farts and slow-burning snores,  
his 9am alarm call, which was never false,  
always ringing in my ears, his words said and unsaid,  
this time last year... a little over 6 months prior to that...  
a lifetime or two ago, who knows?  
come catch the ghosts of me roaming around his room,  
wrecking his sheet, picking up whatever's left of my love—  
the rest of me somewhere else, fully whole.

*Fajar Zakhri is a writer based in Jakarta, Indonesia. His poems are essentially pop songs and have appeared on Queer Southeast Asia, Globetrotter, and Magdalene, among others. Get in touch with him on Twitter (@whatsthefaz) or Instagram (@whatsthefazzz).*

## PENISILLYN FOR QUARANTINE / Aeоald Xerne Beuel

These acrid pills I take three times a day,  
This foul-mouthed cup of urinary distilled,  
A spoonful germination of shittiest dismay:  
I'm fed up, locked up, all rottenly stilled.

Debarred from screwing, I leak out in thirst.  
Swiping gay-for-pay pals and only fans first,  
Cam-to-cum scrummy: all filtered with fangs.  
Your cocksure and cooee sicken my lungs.

Unsend the bootless virals and selfies.  
Unfollow alter, then undermine trolls.  
Thy milt is my vax: Login, virtualize your swell.  
Distantly unmasking, "I'm gonna fuss you well."

Got no more load for sexting; I'm ready to ditch.  
Nothing but a residuum of our yearlong itch.

*Wilzen Du Bermoy, known under his nom de plume of Aeоald Xerne Beuel, is an Instructor in English at Visayas State University Tolosa. He obtained both his BA and MEd from the University of the Philippines. Concurrently, he is pursuing a doctorate in communication at the UP Open University.*

## **BIG TOP** / Ng Yi-Sheng

Watching gay porn in a pandemic  
becomes half \_\_\_\_\_, half circus act:  
how the daredevil boys place their tongues  
in each other's \_\_\_\_\_ like lion tamers;

how they fall into embrace like trapeze artists,  
clutching \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_, no safety \_\_\_\_\_;  
how they cry out to the \_\_\_\_\_ as if  
no governing body's watching;

they're loading the cannon now, ready  
to \_\_\_\_\_ themselves off. The fluids they  
swap are sweet as popcorn. I cheer them on,  
sad clown that I am, honking my swollen red \_\_\_\_\_.

*Ng Yi-Sheng is a Singaporean writer, researcher and activist. His books include the short story collection Lion City and the poetry collection last boy (both winners of the Singapore Literature Prize), SQ21, Loud Poems for a Very Obliging Audience and Black Waters, Pink Sands. He tweets and Instagrams at @yishkabob.*

## ANATHEMA / Miguel Barretto García

The theme for tonight  
Is anathema.              The anthem in your chest  
                                Is them.  
Them, who had gripped your wrist  
                                Behind your back.  
Them, who grabbed your collar,  
                                It was, turns out, *warm*. Spit.              It was all play,  
                                All games,  
                                They say,  
Harmless. That when you walk,  
                                You walk on all fours  
                                The Pavlovian impulse  
                                To drool.              To obey.      *Obey*, they say.  
Wag your phantom tail.  
                                And if you don't have one              They will improvise.  
                                Remember how they  
                                Grabbed your wrist  
                                Behind your back?  
There is a rope. And there is a knot.  
                                The knot is nylon.              The knot is also gut.  
And on your lift to the tree,  
                                You get to be Aldrin or Armstrong  
                                In your momentary liftoff.  
That permanent spacesuit you wear  
                                In the aftermath of memory  
                                It is just too hard to breathe  
                                When air has the viscosity of spit.  
                                The song you play in your ear  
                                Is a hum, a lullaby  
                                Inaudible to them  
                                But you.              Them.    What do they know  
About you?              Just because of a No.  
And you say it again.              No.  
                                And quietly. No.              *Please, that hurts*,  
                                You hear yourself speak  
You hear yourself              Trail into an echo  
                                The cave is hollow and quiet

Enough to play with shadow  
And light.            There is a candle in the cave.  
                          Clean the wax, and  
                          Make a wish.

*Miguel Barretto García (they/them) was raised in the Philippines and in their final PhD year in decision neuroscience, studying human perception. They perform and compete in poetry slams around Switzerland. Their poems have been accepted and published in Rattle, the Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, Asian Cha, harana, among others.*

## OCCLUDED WORLD / Mark Anthony Cayanan

Dear each other, the miracle that should've transpired transpired in our telling  
We threw stones over our shoulders, needed to maim our shepherdless selves  
We were excuses tempting us to covet our neighbor's goods, were those our better days  
Truth a thing spreading mouth to mouth, our freedoms haven't released us from  
Loneliness, measured by who we're with as we make do with reaching down our decencies  
For honesty, trust anyone with a mask, there are deniable beliefs, and we almost trust  
The city priest, in his aversion to bombast, admitted in his homily how he preferred  
The unfussiness of western apparitions, their prophets unassuming white schoolgirls  
The smart ones know when to sacrifice privacy for our lady's warnings and reward  
No lesson here but a safe admission of guilt, like all our other faces only valuable

After it's recognized by another, here have the word, I've already stolen yours, Don't  
Kill yourself with worry, through a rhetoric of cocked force the government devises us  
No cure for these sleep-free nights, unrescueable hours when hunger overrides dignity  
Once we're ended our sufferings shall be our passports, is a guarantee we depend on  
Parlay our ignoble appetites into salvation, appetites are all we who aren't enough are  
Though some deaths are a relief this one isn't, our bodies are adventures we resent  
Whenever hurt we resent each other better, god never assured us we'd have it easy  
To us unquiet except during tragedies, we hope he hasn't built a parable around us  
Our prophet with the charisma of an unmartyred saint performed the new feeling  
We curiosed ourselves into fervor, meant Yours when we said Yes and relented  
We the setting for the prophet's visions, the prophet was teenaged savior to another's

Herald from a decade earlier favored the wilderness over adulation and died of cancer  
While the same virgin appeared to both, to be more useful one must harvest attention  
The prophet's face is the virgin's face, body in a bandage dress, years later the secret  
To fucking people over, we heard a dying man say but never caught the sentence  
Deeply involved with each of our dying, the story's revived in each of our children  
Our astonishments faked, dying assembles you your faces, a poet answered the man  
But these aren't faces you'd care to remember, when we finally listened it's no secret  
No one is truly moved by the existence of others, not even you, always this perceptible  
Discrepancy we mistake for envy, pity, is it affection, did the prophet whom we used  
To love trick us, whose denials must we disbelieve to be convinced we were either  
Stupid or stupid together, we in their younger eyes were a sea of hair on the mountain

Our hungers transparent, that time we worshipped was when some of us lived best  
Now we test tiny deaths every day, our one fate traced back to a man blond-beautiful  
Known for vigor, he flew country to country to pass on the edgeless fear of ourselves  
Pathogens like doomsday prophecies can drive us to faith or premature annihilation  
In any story the telling's the one predictable end, we don't throw wisdoms, throw tiny  
Shocks of anger the way we throw compliments, we're important, having had more  
Mass cards and owning all sad stories, we carry bitternesses and haggle at the market  
By we, we mean every I has disclaimers, if we adore you how much do you owe us  
We swim past the crowd of we and flail against the tightening net, during the final  
Apparition, we expected a show to outshine shows, suns shooting all its flares inside us  
Wanted maybe god and all thinkable gains, but then distracted clouds, unpregnant

Disappointment, how god's gentle reprimands have death tolls, if the prophet loved  
They spread love with the fairness of the indifferent, though we crave unearthly justice  
We need mercy, a swordless angel, golden-robed, one seam cutting across our bodies  
No angel is decrepit and undue punishment, every decrepit government's manned  
We've tried and tried to restore ourselves, flung prayers to the world in regular despair  
Though the world mimics the evil in us, each other we shoulder and, hollow, hollow

*Mark Anthony Cayanan obtained an MFA from the University of Wisconsin in Madison and is a PhD candidate at the University of Adelaide. Unanimal, Counterfeit, Scurrilous, their third poetry book, is forthcoming from Giramondo in 2021, and new work appears in The Margins, Electric Literature's The Commuter, and Lana Turner. They teach at the Ateneo de Manila University.*



S E A Q C F