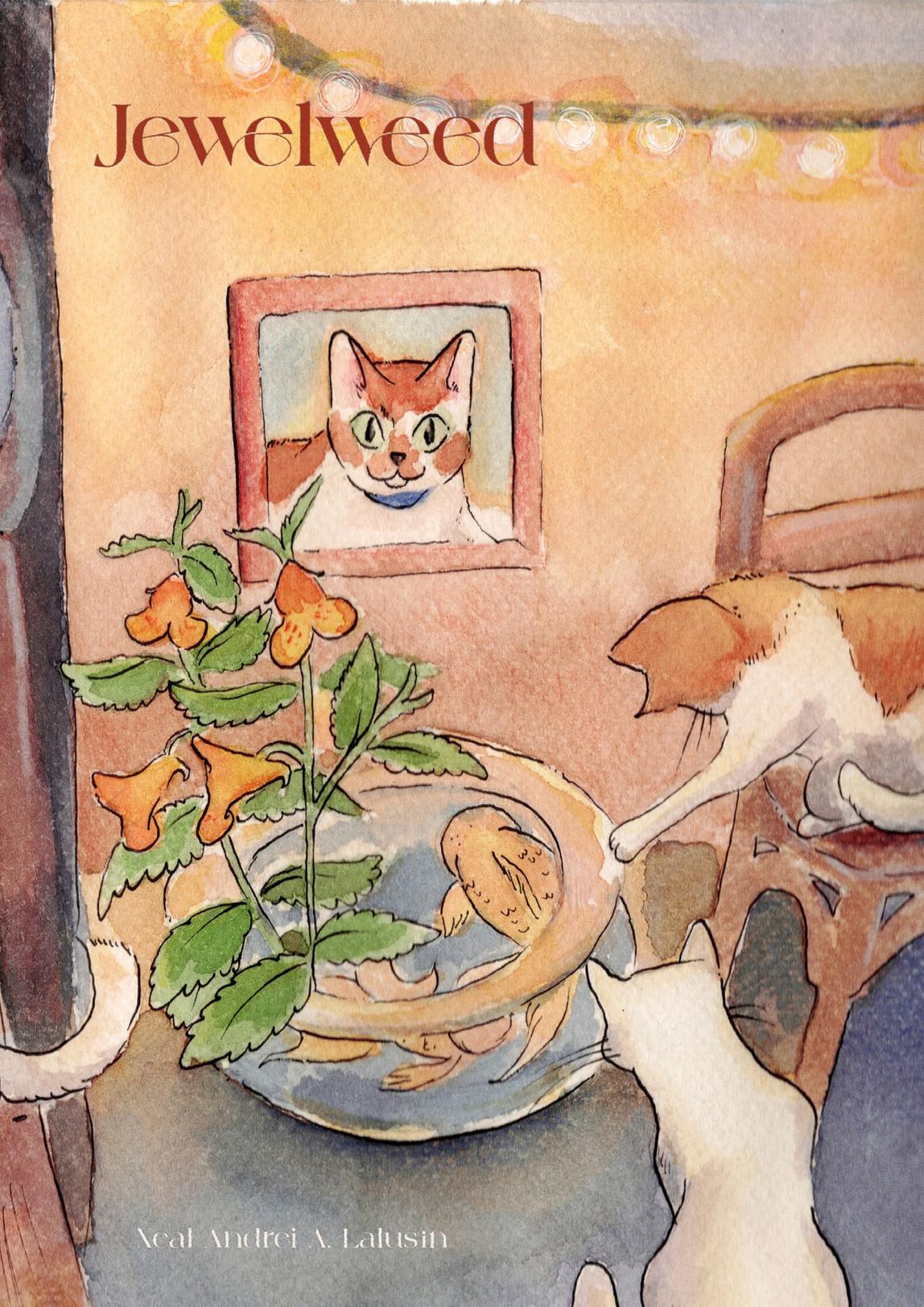


# Jewelweed



Neal Andrei A. Lalusin

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# Introduction

Jewelweed didn't start taking its form until I was in the middle of being 24. Before that, the poems were just sitting in my Notes app waiting for their time. I knew I was writing what would be my next book, but I didn't know what I wanted the final product to be like. It wasn't until I had a medical emergency that I found the common string that ties these pieces altogether: I fear of going into debt.

A lot of these pieces are actually really old poems Frankenstein-ed together into new ones. It took around three and half years of writing and editing before the book fully took its final form. These poems were written simply because I didn't know who to share my thoughts to. It was easier to write about how I felt ugly because of my psoriasis, how I still couldn't figure out my gender identity even after all these years of experimenting, how my social class dictated what kind of healthcare I received. When everything came with a bill these days, writing words on my phone was the only free thing that I could do.

I spiral at the thought of being perceived more because these poems will be read by other people. I spiral even more because I've crystallized these feelings into poems before burying them into the ground. Silly me, these jewels ended up being seeds and now I have a shrub of orange flowers, ready for picking.

Now it's you who's visiting. What will you use the jewelweed for? You can pick a flower, make yourself prettier and put it on your ear. Maybe you can crush them with some of the leaves, and make a salve as medicine. Or you could just admire them with me.

It's your choice. I just hope you feel seen by me, as you see me in this book.



# **Content Warning:**

The following topics are implied:  
Self-harm, depression, and suicidal content.

Explicit language is also used.



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# House Visit in San Pedro Street

What a funny journal –a manual, you say.

*“How To Operate This Body.”*

Spine too thin, practically bursting at the seams.

Written like a story book:

*“Good evening to the children that will read at night.*

*Good morning to the mothers that will sew it back tomorrow.”*

Quiet when the pop-up jumps out.

A small delight for the ones who cannot read.

Look at you, baby,

the new homes you’ve made for these pages

couldn’t wait to be vacant again.

The portraits came from twenty-peso bills –

wish you could’ve cut a few out from the new coins

but the grinder is on loan.

They took away the faces

from the thousand-peso bills too.

*Doesn’t matter*, you think.

It never passed your hands anyway.

The cover is a picture of three cats.

A small orange kitten with a white underbelly,

Curious and brisk, your one and only little lady.

An all-white loaf of a cat.

He’s skittish and loud and he will never admit that he loves you

– but he does.

And the eldest is a big white and orange tabby,

Lounging by right by the door, where the sun greets good morning.

One of them will leave

you don’t know which one yet.

and you will forever spite God for it.

You’ll be sent more kittens, but in the meantime

take all of the pictures.  
you'll need some to remember them by.

Inside are clippings of trinkets you've designated as your favorites  
*or alternatives to the favorites you cannot have.*

Some are recipes of hypo-allergenic dinners.

A concerning number of pages on first aid, in case of asphyxiation;  
*You didn't specify whether it's through anger or anaphylaxis.*

A couple of pages on cleaning cat fur on sofas.

A sizable girth on your husband. Written in a  
language only your husband could read.

Then there's the rest,  
a whole textbook about breathing.



So narcissistic in my self-depreciation,  
the mirror has become contemptuous of me.

How can you tell me not to apologize?  
I know you abhor how I think of myself as a little lady.  
But I'm a tall child in my twenties.  
Still growing, but not fast enough.

You smirk at the sand angel sliding downwards your waist.  
Leaning forward to kiss the small of my nape.  
"Lovely," you say.  
I close my eyes as the hourglass sand trickles all over my face.  
  
It's finally time for bed.

## Twenty-Four

“God, how young,”  
I say as I look at the twenty-four-year-olds walking past.  
I say the same to my reflection.  
The hubris to think I’m so grown.

It’s the little ladies, isn’t it? The miniature men?  
So inconspicuous when they go about their little lives.  
Freedom given by being unseen in their thirties.  
They can teach me how to go back in time.  
*No. Not literally. Not that I would want to go back anyway.*  
But they could teach me how to be small again.  
I’m not growing old, not until I grow up at least.

---

I got a few pairs of shoes.  
A good thrifted wardrobe too.  
None of which are branded.  
None of which I sat down to think if they’re truly wanted.  
I think I’m happy with it.

I also got a fish.  
I play Chopin Nighttime No. 2 for it.  
I think it yearns to the night lamp  
I think it thinks it’s moonlight.  
I think it prays.

I put it in a clear bowl inside my room. Four blue walls.  
The beach sand substrate ends bluntly.  
Probably looks like a trench from the inside.  
Go ahead, little fish, dive into the open sea.  
Bang your head on the glass wall again.  
Tomorrow, this will seem like a new idea.

---

I have debts to pay and debts to gain.  
Still mustering down-payment before the start of my thirties.  
I was advised that there are miniature men still hounded by sharks.  
But I don't want to work. I want to be a little lady too.  
All I got is a body of a tall child.

I can't sell my shoes either.  
I think I like them too much.  
And I can't open a restaurant with just one fish.  
I think people will expect more from soup.  
All I can afford is a body of a tall child.

God. The hubris to think I'm so grown  
Only to feel shame for the little joys I have.  
That's what it is, isn't it?  
The little joys for a tall child?



I guess it's the words that I mouth when  
you're not looking at my direction.  
Distinct, like the clean smell of an old labyrinthine mall,  
yearly painted over to look brand new.  
I'd circle around sales and escalators, lost  
but it's all so familiar, it's undeniable.  
*I think I'm in love with you.*

I could take pride in how cinematic  
the way your shapes writhed at midnight for the first time.  
when I'm drawing out each and every one of your breaths  
from the inside out.

But I envy the tenderness that you were given.  
An apple I hold like a lover's hand,  
with likeness to the way I wasn't held before.

Don't say it to me just yet,  
*you know what I mean.*  
I do not know how to tell you to stop.  
I will not want you to stop.

## Park Date

You threw up worms today. I pretend you don't need help because I can't afford the help you need. I gave up my breakfast because you threw up your dinner. I just can't stand to see you sleep with an empty stomach.

I keep playing the guitar at the local diner, trying to make spare coins busking after waitering. An extra free meal, some tips, a chapbook of your poetry sold on a stand next to my mic. We're getting our names out there, aren't we?

I made friends with the crows by the park. They learned to drop trinkets on my guitar case. There're shirt buttons and tabs from soda cans just bundled together in a gift basket. Some clad in dirt, some crusted with rust. I clean it so it shines. I think they saw it from people leaving tips. They like my songs. I make them from the poetry you share with me. I split the pay with you at the end of the night. I pay my corkage fee to the diner. I take the free dinner to-go. I guess I should also stop by the pharmacy tonight.

The dewormer is out of budget so I buy antiemetics instead. At the very least, your dinner should stay inside your stomach. I'm sorry. You tell me to keep playing my music. We will manage somehow. We are not managing.

The crows left us a present today in the form of money. Something to put in the little piggy bank so you can buy yourself a new journal. We've been friends for four years already — the crows I mean. I wish I knew you as much. I wish I knew who you are when we're not hungry.

I know you want the journal so much but it can wait. You keep insisting in writing. You keep telling me some kind of shit like "Art persists" but we're still hungry and nobody reads those goddamned poems, except me.

---

*Maybe I should take you to the park.  
Punch you in the gut.  
Get you to throw up by the fountain.  
Feed the worms to the crows.*

# Mouth

It must've been a few days since I last brushed my teeth.  
Today, it hurts.  
Today, it's shameful.  
Today, it feels good.  
The insides of my cheeks chewed up from sucking it in.

Today, I want to look deceased.

I have been eating, if you're curious.  
I saw happy miniature men on tv. I was jealous.  
It was a dinner date. There were pellets.  
It's for livestock, still looked delicious.

There are micro-cuts on the tongue—  
too much salt and vinegar chips today.  
The acid from the lemonade leaves a sizzling fizz.  
Hydrogen peroxide on an open wound.  
I'm so pretentious when I said "less sugar"  
like I'm good at taking care of myself.

Today, I want to be clean.

I wince as the menthol toothpaste foams over my gums.  
Turgid bristles sliding through the salt cuts in my mouth.  
Today, I feel alive.  
Or at the very least, awake.  
I leave myself unkempt for weeks  
so I can hear you say you're proud of me  
when I take care of myself again.

Doesn't this feel fresh?  
Don't you want to kiss me again?  
I could regurgitate the chewed-up insides  
of my cheeks if you want my face to look full again.  
Imagine if I lathered soap on my face, too.  
Would I need a different brush for my hair?  
Here comes the guilt again.

# Breathing Practice

It's practice again  
and you're no better at swimming  
than you were at the beginning.  
The man sitting beside you is tracing  
the markings spanning the miles of your midriff.  
You can hear the blood pulsing in your temples  
struggling to come back to your heart.

Hold your breath.      Answer him.  
He's asking why you're scared.  
Stop peeling off the plaque between your ribs.  
He's an arm-span away and goddamn,  
I wish you'd let him get closer  
I know you wish he'd let himself get closer.

Here you are, still clothed.  
It's a little fish bowl and he's acting lifeguard.  
Take off your clothes, baby.  
Yes, the tight tape binding  
around your ribcage too.  
He'll dive in with you soon.  
But first, you have to learn the proper form.

You make the beating hurt, but you have to keep everything inside

"Come, feel my heart beat," you say.  
He wades in.  
The clear waterline is right below his navel.  
You can see everything.

His hand reaches for yours and you get the message—  
your hands by the hem of your tape binder.  
Exhale. His hands need space  
if he's to fit inside your chest.

You're anxious that he'll comment on your uneven skin.  
But he doesn't. He's quiet as it glides smooth over his palms.  
Hand right over the heart.  
Hand right under your clothes.  
Hand counting the beatings you've had.

How lovely. A pair of goldfish  
skimming the clear walls of the fishbowl pool.  
The hem of the tape binder undone.  
Fingertips tracing the visible ribs. Blued skin  
right around the shoulder blades.  
Is it bruised or were you suffocating?

He kisses you under the water.  
Cheeks cupped by the palm of his hands  
He unlocks your mouth with his tongue.  
You borrow the air in his lungs.

Pull yourselves out of the water.  
He's laughing. You should laugh, too.  
It was good. Breathing practice was good.  
Come over at night.  
Ask him to practice again.

# Forty-Five Minutes to Brgy. Malamig

I guess it's easy to pretend my heart isn't pounding out of my chest when the rumble of the jeepney shakes my entire body. My hands are numb. My parents are driving me to the emergency room. Reluctantly. I am pissed. They're pissed too. For other families, this would've brought them closer together. But tonight, there are furrowed brows where hysterical crying should be. I think about how I should be the mature one. I understand the hesitancy for medical support. I'm hesitant too. If I live today, we'll starve for the next three months. I try to be as composed as somebody with a heart attack.

I dislike myself for surrendering. Melodramatic me, thinking I will die at twelve – surmising it is the less shameful outcome.

It's only been fifteen minutes. The rumble calms down by the time we reach the arch of San Pablo City. The procession of vehicles takes its time kissing bumpers. I pray as the chest pain makes itself known again. Nobody in the jeep has asked me how I feel yet. Instead, my dad is grumbling about how I'm not eating right, how I'm not sleeping right, how I'm not doing anything right. I plug in my earphones. "*Kakaselpo mo kasi yan,*" I can read his lips through the rearview mirror. I anticipate the embarrassment that it would bring if all of this was just anxiety. I pray it's a heart attack. Only to spite my parents.

Fuck Marcos. And Duterte. And Aquino And Arroyo. The culmination of their years of incompetency has led to my family's

breaking point. It is about money but it's also not about money. Fuck me, too, I guess. I might be dying and all I can do is write about it. I don't believe in God and yet I pray.

The heavy traffic isn't getting better. It took us thirty minutes to pass by SM City San Pablo. I'm going to die here, I think. We exit by the three-way intersection, past the private infirmary. We're taking the city hospital further away instead. It's cheaper there, but I would have to wait for fifteen more minutes. Everything's a blur at this point. I focus at the heat that radiates inside my hands. I think it's the beating heart overheating. The jeepney winds around the *eskinita*. It's a shortcut, my dad says.

Unseen under the shirt, fingers clawing my chest hoping to reach inside the ribs and wring my heart out. We're here. I survived the fifteen extra minutes. I take in the cold lighting of the community hospital. Our arrival is unceremonious. There's a queue of people who think they're going to die too. The nurse on the front desk greets me.

“Hello. How are you feeling today?”

## Overtime.

I skip the shampoo today.

Bottle's almost empty. Maybe the conditioner can suffice. The doctor says it's good for your scalp anyways. Makes the brain less likely to be naked. I finger the throat of the conditioner bottle to scrape off what's left inside. It feels obscene.

This concert is an hour overtime. I'm singing about how nothing in the world belongs to me.

I twist the showerhead counter-clockwise. The way the water sprays change: a firefighter's hose to my face, then the scalp of a doll, until it blurs into a gentle ghost misting through my body.

The last of my soap bar stares at me. I get it in bundles of three to save around six pesos. It doesn't go far but it makes me feel thrifty. A good glob of it is softened and smeared into the soapbox. What remains is a sliver the size of a fingerling.

I shiver at the thought of scraping it with the washcloth. It's me admitting that I'm at desperate

times right now. It does still smell nice – and things are tight. But I can't do it today. *Maybe tomorrow.*

---

The other day, I sold the spare tube of ointment to my father. Some off-brand prescription steroids I got online. It's for the psoriasis I inherited – alongside his pride and temperament. I thought I was being practical – stocking up before prices go up again. Shipping is expensive and it frees my mind for a few weeks. But I needed the extra hundred twenty pesos for the rest of this week.

I bargain with God to denounce my inheritances.

---

*Looks like you found solace in this show. Stay if you like. In thirty minutes, we start over.*

---

I trace the basketball leather bumps on my nose. I reach out for the last of the cleanser my boyfriend has forgotten to pack the last time he was here. My palms lather the cleanser across my face. It foams up quite easy.

A little goes a long way. It smells like concentrated lemonade. I can't replace this once it runs out.

I look at the dulled razor I haven't replaced in weeks. "I don't need to shave yet," I tell myself as I feel the coarse hair around my lips and on my chin. My boyfriend says I look more mature with the facial hair anyway.

This twenty-four-year residency. What a tedious routine.

---

*This is an encore. Sing with me. The next song is about a little lady who's had a thing for dirty shoes since she was ten, loved dirty men alike.*

---

It's almost dinner by the time I finish. The after party serves fried eggs and rice and there's an open bar for tap water.

Can you pass the soy sauce please? Come. Take a seat even. I love seeing hands move across the table.

## **New Clothes (Interlude)**

I like your new clothes.  
You're getting very good at thrifting.  
Truly the body utilized as a canvas  
for the linen mosaic performance of the day:

a lady wearing a duck yellow veil  
in a verdant violet gown,  
on her highest scarlet stiletto heels,  
sighing as she walks down the stairs.

I'm so happy you're figuring yourself out  
They don't get it. I don't think I do too.  
And goodness, that palette is mismatched.

## PRAYERS FOR AGUA DE MAYO

After sundown, you'll hear children  
singing their prayers for *Agua de Mayo*.  
For this April sun will keep hitting record highs every year.

Forgive the children as they weren't part of the choir.  
Listen past the dissonant singing  
of *Aba Ginoong Maria* as they round the streets.  
candle in one hand, *abaniko* in the other.  
Look at them trying their best to stay in line –  
but as kids are, they're easily distracted.

Maybe we pray at night because the summer vacations  
didn't return at the end of March. When the promised safety  
from the July storms didn't consider the April heat.  
Maybe we pray at night because we pass by the mayor's house.  
Right in time for his dinner, our song audible by the window.

I guess this stopped being about the rain.  
Maybe it's the kids walking around together again  
making friends, finding something  
to look forward to. even as simple  
as some frozen popsicles as thanks from the elders  
and crafted candle guards to compare with friends.

Maybe we pray at night because the moon is humble enough to listen.  
When you're told to not look the sun in the eye,  
you learn that you are beneath your life giver.  
I guess when the night sky is just sunlight by proxy,  
you learn it's easier to pray by the mirror on the opposite side.

---

If you stare at the horizon hard enough,  
you'll find a mirage by the pavement  
of white-hot ghosts of mango trees cut down.

It's funny, when we protested against the lot  
being sold to the mayor's friend to turn into landfill,  
we didn't think that he will just sell it  
to his other friend to establish a new subdivision.

Maybe we pray at night because we're told we have nowhere else to pray to  
and the new homeowners' association is none the wiser.  
They think this is truly just about the rain.  
But our elders know. Our children will know.  
So, when you pass by the mayor's house at night,  
remember to sing louder.

# The Horse Thunder Receives the Medal

Today, it's an embossed topography map.

Right by the elbow.

It's okay.

Just makes you look like you haven't moisturized.

White, like *espasol* dusting on top. Maybe it could pass as sugar?

Pretend you were elbows up on the dinner table,  
just having dessert.

Then there's the tiny bumps on the legs.

Treat it like a lotto scratch-it card.

Baby brown bumps by the root of every other hair.

Scrape the top off—it'll peel off like a scab.

Underneath is a small reddish-pink dot.

It shouldn't bleed if you're careful.

Cap it off with your cradle cap.

Lovely, like the mall snowing the center aisle with asbestos.

Be a friend with that ointment for fifteen minutes after every shower, too.

It's gross, isn't it? Tease it. The tip leaking with a clear balm.

You don't understand how it works, but it erases the marks you hate.

You're lucky that goddamned metal tube is cheap.

One day you'll grow resistance and it'll get tired of you too.

Then your skin will devour you from the inside, out.

You can spend the afternoon recounting meals you've had in the past week.

An allergen might've snuck in without you noticing.

Then repeat to yourself: Nobody notices.

Nobody notices.

And nobody magnifies them like you.

## Waiting With the Mailman

Your letter for this month is late again. I wait patiently by the doorstep. I could've fucked the mailman if he said sorry one more time.

---

I gifted the mailman a bottle of perfume. Citric top notes, with vanilla on the heart of it. All resting on a cedarwood base.

I open your mail for this month. It has a small picture of you peeking by the lip of the envelope. "You look good in a V-neck tank," I say, to myself at least, until I realized I said it out loud. The mailman blushes.

"Thanks," he says.

I invited him to dinner. I'm sorry.

I take him to this restaurant near the church. He's wearing the perfume I got him. I don't think he knows where the letters come from. My eyes are so drawn to the chest hair peering under his deep V-neck shirt. I tell him I'm flattered to be in such virile presence. He laughs as if it wasn't a joke that I stole from you. Jesus would've been livid by the sight of two men having dinner. Or at least, his fanatics. I pretend I understand anyway.

I drag him to our table. Warm lighting. Bamboo and rattan furniture. Barely audible singing from the speakers. We stare at the menu for five minutes. What am I waiting for? When am I ordering? "You're the regular here," he says. "What do you recommend?" Five minutes. Nothing in my head. Think. What do I want tonight?

"Choose for me," I smile back. "What do you think I will like?"

He thinks it's a challenge.

---

I don't think I've eaten much that night. Or the next night. Or the night after that. He didn't force me. There was no spiel about how I should eat more so I'd grow bigger. I feel allowed to stay little.

We walked back to my house. He was spilling secrets on the homes we passed by. Every funny package, every little scam they fell for. Every disappointment they returned. I tell the mailman his working attire is so unflattering. He smirks, telling me I should take it off, if so. And I do so.

---

In our room where I keep your old uniforms, there's small box of letters only filled halfway. I told the mailman I'm just into men in suits with badges and ensigns. An elaborate fantasy, some expensive kink I participate in. He seems to enjoy the role-playing every night, too. He doesn't have to know about you.

He looks so proper under all that coloration. That suit looked so stiff. Always starched and ironed. After all, care and upkeep are necessary. I push him hard on the bed. I know right now I'm telling him what to do but I'm usually a pillow princess. I untangle your tie off of him. My face is hot red. He returned the grin back to my face. I practically dove into his kisses, torrid and hungry. God, I'm so sad and angry. My hands split the long-sleeved polo apart by the middle. He knows I'm agitated. His quiet chuckles of bemusement says so much. Everybody agrees that flying buttons is good entertainment. So carnivorous, the suckling kisses I gave him. I think he forgot what words to say.

"Say you're sorry," I command him. He whimpers as I leave love bites on his pecs.

"Say it."

His abdomen.

"Say it."

His treasure trail.

"Say it. Say you're sorry."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," he whimpered. The belt buckle clanged on the floor. The navy slacks ripped off, hung by the edge of the bed. I lifted his legs up to my shoulders, his groin so exposed. The mailman held his breath as I, propped him against the wall. His lower lip lightly pursed between his teeth.

It was a long night; gored until the devil's hour passes. Fucked in every surface, in every position. In every orifice. Incensed with the alkaline smell of sweat and come and commercial lubricant.

---

I destroyed your suit, my love. I miss you but I've fucked the mailman. I wish I was sorry.

---

## Say hi to my friend, love.

Say hi to my friend, love. We'll meet him  
at the old mall where we had our first date.  
It doesn't really mean anything in this context  
unless we make it mean something.

I'm sorry I wasn't tender this morning  
The same way I'm not tender for this lunch.

There's my friend. His sweat beads over his face.  
I can't help but notice how uncomfortable it might be  
to meet an online friend with a complicated history.  
Then also meet his boyfriend that same day.

There is no eye-contact.  
It's the neurodivergence. I poke fun at it.  
Just you and my friend talking about education.  
I eat my spicy liempo faster than you do.  
I'm quiet and sleepy.

The sex we had in the morning was intense.  
I don't know how to tell you I didn't like it.

"We should eat here again," you say.  
I love you too, the voice in my head says.

The walls are new.  
They tore it down and rebuilt them it seems.  
The lighting is better too.  
So many things can happen in a year.  
I love you. I've never been happier.

We're almost done with lunch. My friend fans his face.  
He laughs off the spice in his fried rice order;  
the same way he laughs my pointed jokes off.  
You tell me I'm mean to him.  
Maybe I am and it's really not that funny.

You look at me doe-eyed.

I fail to hold off a yawn.

I hold your hand under the table.

*I'll miss you. I'm sorry I wasn't tender this morning.*

It will be weeks, maybe months

before we see each other again.

I wonder if my friend notices my guilt.

I'll probably tell him when I'm over it.

I know you'll cry on our next call this evening.

I'll cry too.

In the meantime, I have to say goodbye to my friend.

Then kiss you right by the overpass, near the train station.

I'll say goodbye to you.

Then I'll think about how to say sorry

on the bus ride home.

## New Clothes (Reprise)

Stretch your feet around the leather,  
bend the soles, wiggle all of your toes,  
give the vamp all the creases,  
until the boot's soft and it fits the feet right.

It's amazing how much desire can forgive.

Maybe we can hold each other.  
You look so good in the little dances we do by the porch.  
I'll jump around with you, baby.  
Four-on-the-floor, asking where the perfect places are.  
My pretty boy wants to be Cinderella.

Are you breaking it in or are we deluding that it fits?  
No socks, no insoles, no knots on the shoelaces already.  
You kid about cutting off a few toes if I knew how to sew it back.  
You're thinking it's worth it; *It hurts to be pretty.*

*It's just this one time, you say.*

*I'm happy being a boy, you say.*

But you glow when you wear your new clothes.  
Pleated satin skirt you got for cheap online.  
This fast-fashion boots they never make  
in your size. That thirty-peso flower crown  
you made at your best friend's house.  
Convened together through a turtle-neck  
top with the sleeves cut off.

What an ill-fitted mess – and it's all you.

You think I don't notice the little grins  
you're trying to hide when they can't tell  
if you're supposed to be "Ma'am" or "Sir."  
No labels, you say. None of it matters.

But then you remember the impersonator accusations:  
A predator cloaking as an appropriator,

the demon-spawn, cavorting with fellow Satanists,  
ready to recruit little boys too. An agenda personified;  
Heretics sworn to defy His Holiness.

How does that saying go again?

*“If the shoe fits.”*

Well, it doesn't and that's why you're mad.

They don't get it. But I think I do.

It's not the dissonance of identity, it's concurrence.

We were jumping earlier but now you're stomping.

Little lady, miniature man.

It's okay. We'll break it in, then we'll break it altogether.

They make more of them anyway, in bigger sizes, in different designs.

And when this no longer works for you, my Cinderella,

we'll walk away barefoot.

# Waiting by the Riverbank

I'm skin and bones  
but clasp my chest like it's filled with muscle anyway.  
My infidelities have been in public  
and you know damn well why I let you catch me.  
This decay we've deluded ourselves to thinking it's stagnation.  
It's not complicated, in all honesty.

You went away. I'm still yours.

You're still away. I stopped feeling like I'm yours.

I made bricks from our correspondence.  
Corrugated cardboards from compressed letters.  
Now tell me, whose body should I tie it to?  
Something to sink to the riverbed.  
Body flaking off to the current.  
When the tissues possessed eventually dissolve,  
do we count as oceanic snow?

I wonder if it's really you today.  
I tangle myself over your flailing body.  
God, have my hips missed yours this badly?  
And you're not saying no, just "please."  
"Please" what?  
The man I loved was never this polite.  
I recount your favorite activity was swimming.  
Now let's get this over with.  
I have a date later at seven.

# I Take Off Your Collar

I take off your collar.  
the coughs have stopped.  
just around the time your breathing has too.

My goodness, baby.  
You were so little  
– and even more so in the past few days.

Make it home, my little lady.  
Jump God for me. Get his eyes with your tiny paws.  
I wish I didn't let you down  
the same way God did for me.

I don't know who to say sorry to.  
I turn your collar into a bracelet.  
It's as if you're holding my hand.  
In the weird wonders of the optimistic nihilism that I have,  
I'm somehow glad that your pain was quick--  
but it could've been quicker.

My goodness, baby.  
You deserved so much better.

I flip through all of your photos in my phone,  
trace the leftover fuzz on the crate you died in.  
I don't know how to tell your two brothers  
but they will get it,  
I think.

Make it home, my only little lady.  
This house will wait for your calls.

I've never pawed at the ground like today  
or at all  
and there's a slideshow of you behind my eyelids.  
So I keep my eyes open

and focus on the dirt.  
There's dirt under my nails.  
There's dirt in between the clasps of your collar.  
And in an hour, there will be dirt all over your fur.

And then I make your brother's dinners.  
then I take your favorite plate and wash it  
and then walk back to my room to cry.

You were so little  
Still so much space to take.

Make it home, my little lady.  
There's a heart that beats smaller  
waiting by the windowsill.

Make it home, my little lady.  
Please be there in the morning for me.

# The Poster

I wait by the terrace, staring at a poster hung on the door. It's the Dictator's Dictator Son's face back when the son was still running for vice president.

It's been two months since my parents took me to the hospital. Science can't unhappen what has happened. And my ribcage is about to collapse on itself again.

The hands that will do the *hilot* today has inherited its skills from the father who has lent the same hand on me as a child, back when we cannot afford to go to the hospital.

Today it's just me and my mother and her friend and they both suffer from frozen shoulder. I have an inexplicable chest pain for about three months now. The doctor's prescriptions keep getting more expensive so my mom took me here. It's the same house I was taken to back when I was seven, maybe eight, when my coughing fits and fevers did not stop.

An old man comes out rubbing his palms with some kind of fragrant oil. There hints of coconut and banana leaves emanating from the bottle.

I remember the rumors of my classmate who used to live here. She's the granddaughter to the old man's father. I didn't take it seriously back then. The grandfather wanted to touch her. And he did. *God, we were kids.*

I take it back. There were no rumors. She told me and I believe her because she is my friend.

My mom said the old man works at the municipal

hall as a councilor. He's no household name, but he's good at his job and he's easygoing. I nod as he wrings out the muscles on my back. I don't understand why he's giving attention to my back when I came in complaining about my chest. My face contorts with the pressure. My posture uncurls. He tells me to take a deep breath. It's my first in weeks. It feels cold deep inside my lungs.

I feel the balls of muscle hardened by work and stress and computer games dissolve through this man's hands. I can't cry here so I laugh. My mother and her friend laugh with me. He whispers an indiscernible chant with each stroke. I feel tingling from the tailbone up to the base of the skull.

I can breathe again.

The Dictator's Dictator Son is grinning at anyone who looks at him. He's mocking me with his two fingers up. This sign of peace like I'm supposed to forget why I can't go to the hospital.

I ask about my classmate, how she's doing. The old man says she's in Dubai now. A flight attendant. She has a kid. She's okay now—they think. There are no rumors. The grandfather's dead and my friend's not in the Philippines.

"It's your back," the old man says, chuckling. "Your back is so stiff that you're hunching up, compressing the hell out of your chest." He finishes up the session by sticking a menthol patch with the writings on the sticky side. It seems to be prayers in a language I do not speak, the same one he whisper-chanted earlier. I sit on the side as my mom and my mom's friend get their turns with the hilot.

My face turns blank in disappointment and shame. This would've been written on the prescription pad as:

*“Referred pain on chest due to myofascial trauma and inflammation resulting in shallow breathing. Rest and further physical therapy sessions encouraged.”*

But there was no prescription. The man who figured out my sickness wasn't a doctor. The system that figured out what was wrong wasn't Science. My ribcage feels tender. It will never be sturdy again. I feel disillusioned.

The old man finishes their sessions with a smile. He tells me this will take two to three more sessions to fully recover. I'm conflicted but I can breathe again so I still look forward to the next session.

I look at the poster of the Dictator's Dictator Son again. I feel contempt, betrayed even. In other days, there will be nuance in the thoughts I think about him. But in days of fatigue like this, I cannot think of it as a picture of a human being.

I asked the old man how much he'll take for payment. He said a pack of cigarettes will be fine. Maybe a vote for him too. I don't know who he's referring to.

# Utang

Kahel na muli ang ala-una  
ngayong kalagitnaan ng Mayo.

May dasal na hindi napakinggan  
hangga't di nakikita ang bughaw

na karagatan sa aking mukha  
para lamang sa pandong ng ulap.

Ngunit kung ang alon sa baybayin  
ay dapat maibalik sa dagat,

kailangan ko rin maibalik ang  
hangin sa aking hamak na baga.

Maaari rin bang ibalik ang  
kamangmangan mo O, Panginoon

na nagtataka kung bakit hindi  
sa dagat iniigib ang tubig

na inumin ng sangkatauhan?  
Siguro, sa pagdating ng Hunyo,

ay tutubo ang mga pananim  
at pipitasin ang mga bunga.

Sapagka't wala nang mas-titiyak  
pa sa pagkagutom sa umaga.

# Waiting By the Bus Stop

Doesn't it take you back?

Cold legs barely covered by the three-inch inseam shorts;  
sweating armpits under the bolero sleeves.

You still refuse to wear clothes appropriate for the weather

How young were you back then?

You do look better now though, I admit.

Street lights take over for the new moon

and you can only see as much as your glasses allow.

The bloom lights now shine in pillars.

How divine the unclear can get

when you're contemplating about crossing the other side.

Look left, then right. before you cross.

The details are the same but you have your money now –

Enough to buy more food.

Your groin is sore. Nothing but soda and junk in your body.

It's been years since you were like this.

All the physical ills were just anxious fears.

Ready to offer everything in your hand at the moment.

Play games? Eat? Masturbate? Anyone?

It's a packed schedule. No time to leave gaps on it.

Otherwise, you'll start thinking

and we don't want that, do we?

Look left, then right, before you cross.

The details are the same but you have a boyfriend now

---

Delirious.

How can you turn your other cheek to him?

He struck it so bad, the capillaries have found new paths to flow through.

It's not compassion. Not even close.

You taunted him. By the phone lines where you meet every night.

The earphones look like butterflies when you put them on the table.  
You lose focus gazing at it.  
It's now flying back at the camera.

You're still taunting him.

His face looks like your first love.  
I hurt you to hurt him, we tell our self  
– but goodness, his face looks so different when he's kind.

Guilty you. There are no other faces to see. He's always been kind.

---

The convenience store has turned off the last of its lights two hours ago.  
You last received a text from him four hours ago.  
He's been in transit six hours ago.  
You raised your voice at him almost eight hours ago.

It's cold and dark on your side of the road,  
right by the convenience store where you have been waiting for him.  
Across you is the bus stop – nothing but a sign and a street lamp.  
He's just got off the bus. You can see his grin shining.  
The light from the only street lamp showers over his shoulders.  
Haloed, like the divinity you're supposed to find at the end of the tunnel.

Look left, then right before you cross.  
The details are the same but this is a different love now.

Are you laughing? Are you crying?  
Giggles between sobs bandage the guilt as you walk towards him.  
You are only as strong as the embrace you greet him with.  
Inaudible whispers between necks are exchanged.  
I'm sorry I yelled. I'm glad you're here.  
Apologetic you, there's nothing else to say.

# Everybody is Noah

Stare ahead, my love.  
Up north, you'll see the sun  
as it sizzles the skin you're not protecting.

You don't have enough sunscreen.  
Your brother shared it with you  
and your friends  
and his friends who are now your friends  
because all of you are looking at the pink flame glowing with neon green.  
But you, and all your friends too, stare at the fire,  
and you're sure, this time,  
they're seeing what you're seeing.

It's pretty, isn't it?  
The kind of fire that you only see  
when you're a curious kid  
throwing a cigarette foil packet into the open flame.  
You gaze at it and it's pink.  
It pulses green at intervals, and it blends and it's beguiling.

So, how'd you end up here?  
I heard God said He'd drop a bucket of water over your neighborhood  
—except God forgot to mention how big His bucket is.  
Others heard it too and they told you not to worry.  
But they had boats and you don't  
just like your friends  
and your brother  
and your brother's friends.  
You only knew how to swim.

And they're not Noah. They won't let you in their boats.

I guess what forecasts don't tell you is how clear the sky is after the flood.  
The water dries and you see apartment complexes baked by noon.  
Cement walls breathing dust,  
wooden beams yards apart.  
The sunburns you get after being pickled and sundried  
—skin peeling off.  
It's raw and pink.  
It's prickling.

Some made it. Many didn't.  
Those who had boats did. Big boats, arks even—but they weren't Noah.  
The ones with the boats wanted you to be Noah.  
And you're angry because they could've been Noah.

You stare at the people you survived with:  
Your brother, your friends, your brother's friends.  
Standing still.  
Waiting for someone to be Noah.

---

Somebody pulls out a lighter—she's a mother, I think.  
It's dusk so she lights a candle.  
Your friends get the message.  
People gather around to get what they can,  
sharing fire before the sun sinks.  
And you stare at them, thinking:  
*Broken houses make great fire starter.*

It's rude to stare, my love.  
You're looking at the same thing everybody else is looking at.  
Go get your piece of wood. Doesn't matter whose house it was from.  
Just get your fire and make a torch with it.  
Everybody's burning something.  
Someone starts singing.  
Then everybody else is singing.

This is where you start singing too.







# *Acknowledgements*

I didn't really know when will this book ever be finished. I had so much ambitious concepts in mind that I had to forgo. The writing process is becoming tedious and I literally had to stop myself of fidgeting with every piece of poetry I was "supposed" to put in this book. It wasn't until my boyfriend, best friend, and my constant, Mark, who had to pull me aside and tell me to keep things simple. He told me that I should just write what I know and what I feel. This would've taken even more years to finish. Just like with many other poets out there, I'll never be satisfied with my own work to the detriment of my self-esteem. I think it's good that I still feel like that.

So, thank you, Mark, for always reassuring me that my work is great. That I should stop editing it repeatedly before I butcher the original work. In between episodes of Bluey, in between the b-sides of the latest album we're stream-partying, in between the lines of the Richard Siken poems we read over and over, you never miss with the affirmations. Always pushing a safe space so I can get better. I always feel loved when you're by my side. I can't wait to come home to you.

Thank you, Shairene. You have no idea I write poetry about our gossip sessions. I really do miss you. Life is catching up to us and it will just get faster as the months go by. I'm using this as an excuse to say the sappy shit we avoid saying in front of each other. You know I love you too, right?

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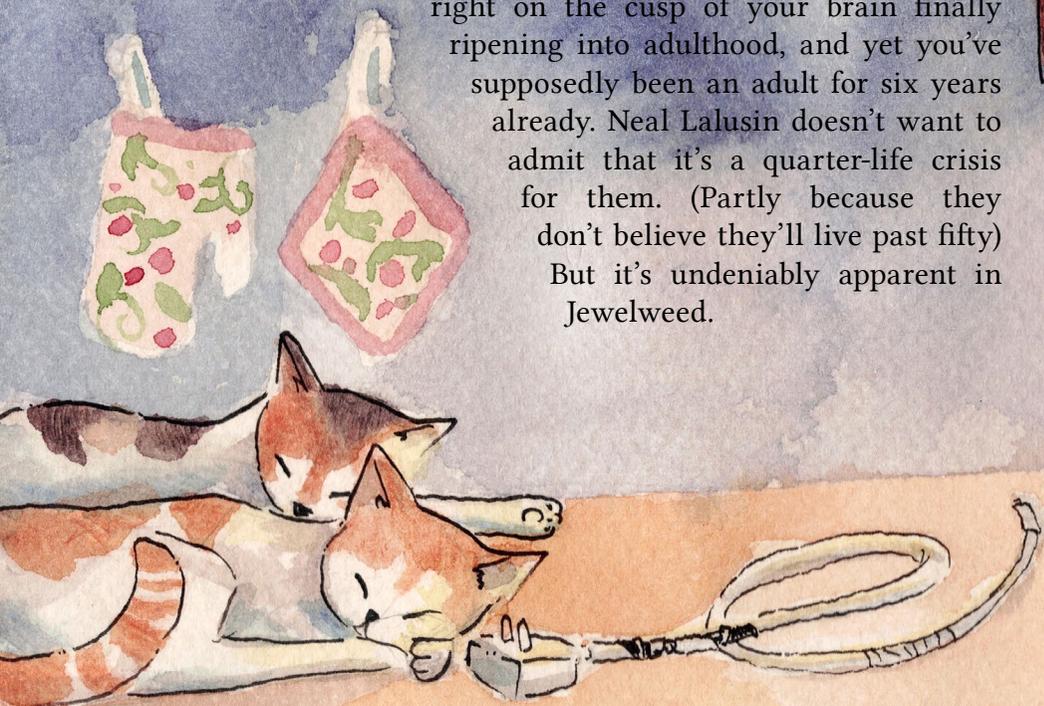
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Just like with many other poets out there, I'll never not feel terrified of putting my poems out to the world. These poems were once the little capsules I put all of my hard feelings in. Now it's yours. So, thank you for reading my poetry. Of course, there's no reason for me to write if there was nobody to read them. Thank you for trusting me with your time. I hope you still stick around when the next one comes out.

Twenty-four is such an interesting age. It's right on the cusp of your brain finally ripening into adulthood, and yet you've supposedly been an adult for six years already. Neal Lalusin doesn't want to admit that it's a quarter-life crisis for them. (Partly because they don't believe they'll live past fifty) But it's undeniably apparent in Jewelweed.



Neal Lalusin prefers to tell his experiences through run-on sentences with questionable grammar. He studied Business Education at Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Sto. Tomas Batangas where he discovered his passion for writing poetry. He is currently living in Alaminos, Laguna with his five adopted cats begrudgingly listening to his bad karaoke showers.

