Ekungok, Listen

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Argotist Ebooks
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Ekungok, Listen
Family Trees
written for the 2016 Guam Educators Symposium on Soil and Water Conservation

1

Before we enter the jungle, my dad
asks permission of the spirits who dwell
within. He walks slowly, with care,
to teach me, like his father taught him,
how to show respect. Then he stops
and closes his eyes to teach me
how to listen. Ekungok, as the winds
exhale and billow the canopy, tremble
the understory, and conduct the wild
orchestra of all breathing things.

2

“Niyok, Lemmai, Ifit, Yoga’, Nunu,” he chants
in a tone of reverence, calling forth the names
of each tree, each elder, who has provided us
with food and medicine, clothes and tools,
canoes and shelter. Like us, they grew in dark
wombs, sprouted from seeds, were nourished
by the light. Like us, they survived the storms
of conquest. Like us, roots anchor them to this
island, giving breath, giving strength to reach
towards the Pacific sky and blossom.

3

“When you take,” my dad says, “Take with
gratitude, and never more than what you need.”
He teaches me the phrase, “eminent domain,”
which means “theft,” means “to turn a place
of abundance into a base of destruction.”
The military uprooted trees with bulldozers,
paved the fertile earth with concrete, and planted
toxic chemicals and ordinances in the ground.
Barbed wire fences spread like invasive vines,
whose only fruit are the cancerous tumors
that bloom on every branch of our family tree.
Today, the military invites us to collect plants and trees within areas of Lilekyan slated to be cleared for impending construction. Fill out the appropriate forms and wait 14 business days for a background and security check. If we receive their permission, they’ll escort us to the site so we can mark and claim what we want delivered to us after removal. They say this is a benevolent gesture, but why does it feel like a cruel reaping?

One tree my dad never showed me is the endangered hayun lágu, the last of which is struggling to survive in Litekyan its only home. Today, the military plans to clear the surrounding area for a live firing range, making the tree even more vulnerable to violent winds, invasive pests, and stray bullets. Don’t worry, they say. We’ll build a fence around the tree. They say this is an act of mitigation, but why does it feel like the disturbed edge of extinction?

_Ekungok_, ancient whispers rouse the jungle!
_Listen_, oceanic waves stir against the rocks!
_Ekungok_, i taotao‘mona call us to rise!
Listen, i tronkon Yoga‘ calls us to stand tall!
_Ekungok_, i tronkon Lemmai calls us to spread our arms wide!
Listen, i tronkon Nunu calls us to link our hands!
_Ekungok_, i tronkon Ifit calls us to be firm!
_Listen_, i tronkon Niyok calls us to never break!
Ekungok, i halom tano‘ calls us to surround i hayun lágu and chant: “We are the seeds of the last fire tree! We are the seeds of the last fire tree! We are the seeds of the last fire tree! Ahe’! No! We do not give you permission!”
Ode to Fina’denne’ & Kikkoman Soy Sauce

1

A wood carving of the last supper
hangs on the wall above our dining table
in Mongmong, Guam, circa 1980s.
Where’s the fina’denne? I wonder.

2

Fina’denne’ (pronounced fin-ah-den-ee)
is the most important condiment, sauce,
and/or marinade in Chamorro cuisine:

1 part soy sauce
1 part lemon/lime juice or white/coconut vinegar
chopped onions (white and/or green)
chopped donne’ (red chili peppers)
chopped tomatoes and/or garlic (optional)

Mix in a bowl, chill, serve.

3

Fina’denne’ is holy water
at every special Chamorro event.
Spooned over rice, grilled meat and fish,
cooked vegetables, and even green salad.
On Guam, fina’denne’ is served
at McDonalds and KFC.
It was recently featured in Saveur Magazine,
and now has its own Wikipedia page!

4

On ordinary days, my dad
simply places the soy sauce
bottle in the middle of the table.

“Who’s Kikkoman?” I once asked him.
In his myth-making voice, he bellows:
“Kikko is an ancient Chamorro chief
who once caught 10,000 green sea turtles
and stored their tears in bottles.”

“And soy,” he says. “Soy is a magic bean
that grows in the Far East. The turtles eat them
before swimming to Guam. It means, long life.”

5

I stare at the Kikkoman bottle and imagine
the Nakajima ki-84 Hayate fighter jets
that bombed our island on December 8, 1941.
I stare at the red cap and imagine
the imperial rising sun of the Japanese flag.
how my grandparents were forced to bow
during those violent years of occupation,
how the blood of 1,000 Chamorros
marinated the land. Yet

where the Greater East Asia
Co-Prosperity Sphere failed,
the Greater Asian Amino Acids
Concentration Sphere conquered:
our stomachs continue to bow
to the fifth taste of “umami”
(pronounced oo-ma-mee),
and the sixth taste of empire.

6

Now, listen to the legend of Kenji Ekuan:
as a child, he watched his mother pour soy sauce
from a half-gallon bottle into a tabletop dispenser.
He witnessed the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.
His younger sister died in the explosion.
His father, a Buddhist monk, died from cancer.
Kenji traced his father’s shadow and became a monk
at a temple in the ruined, irradiated city.

Having faced nothingness, Kenji decided to make
human things. He studied art, started a design company,
and after three years and 100 prototypes,
created the transparent Kikkoman bottle in 1961.
“The shape is gentle,” he once said. “During the war, we were forced into acting differently. But for 1,000 years, the history of the Japanese people was very gentle.”

Kenji also became famous for designing motorbikes and bullet trains.

7

More than 300 million Kikkoman soy sauce dispensers have been sold in more than 70 countries since then. They infiltrate every Chamorro kitchen and table. Soy sauce gently bullets through our intestines.

“Is it healthy for me to consume soy sauce everyday?”
“Is Kikkoman soy sauce made from genetically-modified soybeans?”
“Are companies like Kikkoman testing on animals”
“Does sodium increase blood pressure and heart disease?”

8

I watch my dad chop the ingredients and place them in an empty bowl. “Pass me the ketchāp,” he says.

In Chamorro, the word for soy sauce is ketchāp, which is also our word for American tomato ketchup. “Same difference,” he says.

I ask him: “If soy sauce is Japanese, what makes fina dennē Chamorro?”

“It’s Chamorro,” he smiles, “because we made it better, we spiced it up.”

He raises and tilts the teardrop shaped bottle until it bows to us.
Micronesians in Denial

“And YES, Guam, the U.S. Territory, is located in MICRONESIA
And the people there, Chamorros, are MICRONESIANS in denial”

—Emelihter Kihleng from “The Micronesian Question”

1

Every year, I’d watch the mango tree
in my grandma’s yard blossom and bud.
Somedays, we picked the unripe, green fruit,
and dipped them in salt, soy sauce, and tabasco.
Somedays, we pickled them in vinegar, sugar, and chilis.
Above us, hundreds of mangoes still suspended
like small islands in a sea of leaves and sky.

2

My grandma lives on Guam, the largest
and most populated island in the Western Pacific.
Mapmakers named our part of the ocean,
“Micronesia,” because they viewed our islands
and cultures as small and insignificant—

small enough to be colonized
by Spain, Britain, Germany, Japan, Australia,
New Zealand, and the USA. Small enough
to become plantations, church missions,
military bases, nuclear testing grounds,
detention centers, and tourist destinations.
Small enough to be extracted
for our souls, phosphate, tuna, sugar,
copra, labor, soldiers, and corporate profits.
Small enough to be invaded, occupied,
diseased, divided, bombed, and assimilated.
Small enough to hide the crimes of empire.

3

I used to watch the mangoes grow and
ripen into a yellow, orange, and red sunrise.
I could barely wait to eat them
for breakfast with a bowl of Cheerios,
for a sticky after school snack,
for dessert chilled in the fridge.
A tropical kiss in every bite.

Towards the end of the Cold War,
Micronesia was kissed by decolonization.
Nauru gained independence in 1968
The Northern Marianas became
a US commonwealth in 1978.
The Marshall Islands, Palau,
and the Federated States of Micronesia
(Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, and Kosrae)
became independent and signed
Compacts of Free Association
with the USA in 1986,
which allowed citizens of these new
island nations to migrate,
work, and live as “habitual residents”
in the states and territories,
including Guam.

Yet Guam has remained a US territory
since 1898. Guam is still on the United Nations
list of non-self-governing territories,
one of the last 17 colonies in the world.¹

That’s why they say Chamorros
are Micronesians in denial:
we have been denied our right
to self-determination and sovereignty.

¹ The FSM voted “yes” on UN Declaration Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007. The Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Palau, and Nauru were “absent” during the vote.
I will never forget the day
I rode my bike to grandma's house
and all our mangoes were gone.

Stolen.

"Those fucking Micronesians,"
I spit and pick up stones
to throw.

SOUNDBITES:

"Those criminal Micronesians."
"Those dirty Micronesians."
"Those drunk Micronesians."
"Those homeless Micronesians."
"Those welfare Micronesians."
"Go back to where you came from."

That's why they say Chamorros
are Micronesians in denial:
we have denied being like those
uncivilized Micronesians.

That's why they say Chamorros
are Micronesians in denial:
we have denied the humanity
of other Micronesians.

I never tasted another mango from grandma's tree
because that year my family migrated to California.

Today, nearly 20,000 Micronesians from COFA
countries have settled on Guam.

Today, nearly 75,000 Chamorros
have migrated off-island.

Dear Micronesian cousins, I'm sorry
for dehumanizing you. I recognize
that you work hard, pay taxes,
and only want to build a better future
for your children. You deserve better.

I’m sorry I displaced my anger onto you.
So much has been stolen from my people.
So many others have settled our island
without asking permission. I’m sorry for
seeing you as competition and not as family.

8

Micronesian Cousins, I ask you to recognize that Chamorros—the longest, continuously colonized people in the world—deserve better as well. Recognize Guam as not simply your American “horizon,” but as our sacred homeland that we are fighting to protect and reclaim. Cousins, I ask that you stand with us and support our struggle for justice and independence. Rise with us, cousins, because if you don’t, Uncle Sam will take everything, and our people will be forced to migrate further and further away from home, and our children will never again know the taste of sweet mangoes.
Off-Island Chamorros

My family migrated to California when I was 15 years old. During the first day at my new high school, the homeroom teacher asked me where I was from. "The Mariana Islands," I answered. He replied: "I’ve never heard of that place. Prove it exists." When I stepped in front of the world map on the wall, it transformed into a mirror: the Pacific Ocean, like my body, was split in two and flayed to the margins. I found Australia, then the Philippines, then Japan. I pointed to an empty space between them and said: "I’m from this invisible archipelago." Everyone laughed. And even though I descend from oceanic navigators, I felt so lost, shipwrecked on the coast of a strange continent. "Are you a citizen?" he probed. "Yes. My island, Guam, is a U.S. territory."

We attend American schools, eat American food, listen to American music, watch American movies and television, play American sports, learn American history, and dream American dreams. "You speak English well," he proclaimed, "with almost no accent." And isn’t that what it means to be a diasporic Chamorro: to feel foreign in a domestic sense.

Over the last 50 years, Chamorros have migrated to escape the violent memories of war; to seek jobs, schools, hospitals, adventure and love; but most of all, we’ve migrated for military service, deployed and stationed to bases around the world. According to the 2010 census, 44,000 Chamorros live in California, 15,000 in Washington, 10,000 in Texas, 7,000 in Hawai‘i, and 70,000 more in every other state and even Puerto Rico. We are the most “geographically dispersed” Pacific Islander population within the United States, and off-island Chamorros now outnumber our on-island kin, with generations having been born away from our ancestral homelands, including my daughter.

Some of us will be able to return home for holidays, weddings, and funerals; others won’t be able to afford the expensive plane ticket to the Western Pacific. Years and even decades might pass between trips, and each visit will feel too short. We’ll lose contact with family and friends, and the island will continue to change without us until it becomes unfamiliar. And isn’t that, too, what it means to be a diasporic Chamorro: to feel foreign
when you return to your own homeland. To all my fellow
off-island Chamorros: there’ll be times when we’ll feel adrift,
without itinerary or destination. We’ll wonder: what would
our lives have been like if we’d stayed? If we return? When
the undertow of these questions begins pulling you out to sea,
remember: migration flows through our blood. Remember:
our ancestors taught us how to carry our culture in the canoes
of our bodies. Remember: our people, positioned like stars,
will form new constellations when we gather and re-connect.
Remember: home is not simply a house, village, or island;
home is an archipelago of belonging.
Ode and Elegy to Drinking a Can of Coconut Water with My Dad in California

Once, I bought a can of coconut water for my dad because he felt homesick for the island of our birth.

After the first taste, he can’t stop talking story about the tropical past. He claims, as a barefoot child, he climbed tall coconut trees that touched the Western Pacific sky. And he swears his grandpa removed the husk with his teeth and cracked the shell with his knuckles. And he swears his grandma grated the meat with her fingernails, and squeezed it into milk and oil. These products are trendy and expensive now,

I tell him, imported from plantations in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Thailand. He laughs and says his great-aunties sat in a circle weaving coconut leaves, and if you pressed your ear to their woven mats,

you could still hear their gossip and singing, even after they died. And because circles make memory seem less broken,

he recalls his great-uncles, too, sat in a circle braiding dried coconut fibers into rope, used to lash canoes and thatched houses, just as our veins bind our genealogies to endure the lashing of waves and conquest. I read aloud the nutrition facts label: 45 calories, 30mg sodium, 470mg potassium, and 11g sugar. Fat and cholesterol free.

He responds with this origin tale: once, a young girl, beloved by our entire island, dies during a time of drought. The family buries her and weeps upon the grave, from which an unfamiliar tree sprouts.

They watch it grow and bloom until its hard, strange fruit falls and opens on impact. The girl’s mother braves
the first sip, then smiles for the first time in years, as if her body, after having been completely emptied,
is finally replenished. From that harvest, we planted a sapling whenever a child was born. As generations passed, the trees became kin, teaching us how to bend without breaking, how to create without wasting, and how to take without depleting. My dad tells me, during his last visit home, that invasive beetles are devouring our coconut trees. We discard the aluminum cans in the recycling bin and swallow the bitter aftertaste.
Guam, Where America’s Voting Rights End

1. My 7th grade social studies teacher made us, the children of Guam, memorize the names of all 41 American presidents, whose portraits stared down at us in the furthest American territory from the White House. As I recited their names at home, my parents watched Bill Clinton play saxophone on television. “Are you voting for him?” I asked. My dad, wearing his Army t-shirt, said: “Didn’t your teacher tell you that our votes don’t count. It doesn’t matter that we’re citizens or veterans.”

2. A few years later, my family migrated to California, where I became a resident, graduated high school, and registered to vote. But after Al Gore lost, I learned that living in the states doesn’t guarantee your ballot will actually count. I learned how easy it is to memorize the name of a president who wages two wars and sharpens your island into a weapon. And isn’t that what an American president is: a name to which our lands and bodies are ultimately sacrificed.

3. When Barack Obama campaigned in 2007, his name gave me hope because it descended from slavery, from the civil rights movement, from a mixed raced family, from the Pacific. Yet Obama only visited Guam once. In 2011, his plane landed at night on the air force base, refueled, then departed. That’s when I learned the arc of history doesn’t bend justice towards Guam. I learned no matter what the president’s name is, he remains our commander, and our island remains a forgotten name.

4. For thirty years, a straw poll on Guam has accurately predicted the result of U.S. presidential elections. In 2016,
Hillary Clinton won the poll, yet still lost to Donald Trump, thus breaking our historic (and ironic) streak. I voted for neither candidate, which felt like a betrayal to my kin back home, who don’t have a voice in the election. Some activists now petition to extend voting rights to the territories; instead, I want our decolonial voices to be counted, I want Guam’s liberation from American presidents to be inaugurated.
Ode and Apology to the Chamorro Restaurant in the Diaspora

Your grand opening is a celebration for all Chamorros. For those on-island, you’re a sign that we’ve arrived, safely, and settled into our destination. For those off-island, you remind us culture can be served from any kitchen. But when I read your Yelp reviews, I burn with anger at how diners fail to appreciate your complex flavors. They say, you’re a confusing mix of Mexican and Filipino dishes; they question the combination of coconut, chicken, lemon, hot pepper, and onion; they describe your marinade as part Texan, part Asian; they call you, “inauthentic” and claim L&L Hawai’ian Barbecue is real Pacific Islander food. I’ve heard all this before, since ever since my family migrated to California. I say to you: si Yu’us Ma’ase, thank you, brave chefs, for believing in our cuisine, for the shine of your red rice, the tang and depth of your kelaguen, the spice of your fina’denne. Si Yu’us Ma’ase for proudly displaying our flag and printing the Guam seal on your menu. Dispensa yu, I’m sorry, for not visiting you more often, but home still tastes bittersweet, and it turns my stomach knowing that lack of business will force you to close soon, and you will be forgotten, just as our islands have been forgotten. I’m sorry that you, like all diasporic Chamorros before you, will choke on this bony truth: there’s no recipe to make our culture visible and digestible to the world.
100 Healing Rituals for Chamorros Suffering from Homesickness and Diaspora

1. Open a can of Spam. Follow your instincts home.
2. Make fina’denne and pour it over everything.
3. Call your Chamorro grandparent(s) and ask them for a story about home.
4. Read the Pacific Daily News online.
5. YouTube Jesse Manibusan’s song “Forever Chamorro.” Sing along.
6. Build an altar using shells, coral, postcards, photos, or other souvenirs.
7. Call your Chamorro parent(s) and ask them for a story about home.
8. Read Guampedia online.
9. Open a can of Vienna Sausages and a can of Budweiser. Call that dinner.
10. Google Earth your village.
11. YouTube Jesse Ruby’s song “Guam take me back.” Follow their voices home.
12. Make kaddun pika, even if you live in Arizona.
13. Explore the Chamorro Roots Genealogy Project. Follow this map home.
14. Close your eyes and imagine the most beautiful sunset you’ve ever seen.
15. Open a can of Corned Beef. Cook two eggs, any style. Eat with two scoops white rice, fina’denne, and Budweiser. Call that breakfast.
16. Read Michael Lujan Bevacqua’s blog while eating breakfast.
17. Lather coconut oil over everything.
18. Read the Hale-ta Book Series. Follow your roots home
19. Sport your Fokai, Crowns, or Magas apparel!
20. Call your Chamorro godparent(s) and ask them for a story about home.
21. Tell your non-Chamorro friends taotaomo’na stories. Tell your Chamorro friends how your non-Chamorro friends don’t understand taotaomo’na stories.
23. Buy the Chamorro-English dictionary on Amazon. Hold on to that moment when you open it for the first time.
24. If you don’t speak Chamorro, learn a new word of our beautiful and endangered language everyday. Hold each word carefully, as if you were holding the last of our beautiful and endangered birds.
26. Make red rice.
27. In order to make red rice, you’ll need to buy achiote. Drive to the closest Asian grocery store. Look for Mama Sita’s powdered achiote from the Philippines, which comes in thin yellow packets. Remember your grandma’s red-stained hands after she harvested achiote seeds from her yard.
28. Go to the nearest KFC and order red rice and fina’denne. Act surprised when they act surprised.
30. Go for a hike that ends in a waterfall. Close your eyes and call this place home.
31. Chew the puga you’ve been hoarding in the freezer.
32. Buy a round-trip ticket home for a holiday, wedding, christening, graduation, or funeral. Worry about credit card debt later.
33. Listen to the “Beyond the Fence” podcast online through KPRG Public Radio Guam.
34. Wear your Chamorro bracelets and let them clang like your grandma used to.
35. Bump JD Crutch’s song “Bente Uno” really loud on your morning drive to work.
36. Date a fellow diasporic Chamorro (make sure you aren’t related before going on a second date). Or date a non-Chamorro and enjoy the temporary pleasure of being exoticized.
37. Listen to Dakot-ta Alcantara-Camacho’s song, “Where you From,” on his All Life is Sacred EP (which you can find on Soundcloud).
38. Visit the Spam Museum in Austin, Minnesota.
39. After the Spam Museum, visit The Herbivorous Butchershop in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the first ever vegan butcher shop, which was founded by two diasporic Chamorros.
40. Play bingo.
41. Fanginge’ every Chamorro elder you meet.
42. YouTube Island Trybe’s, “Blow ya Mynd.” Lowride your way home!
43. Wear your Sinahi everywhere.
44. Read any book by Peter Onedera.
45. Get a Latte stone or plumeria tattoo.
47. YouTube Erica Nalani Benton’s song, “Back to Guahan.” Replay your way home.
48. Buy a Chamorro language children’s book and imagine your parents reading this book to you when you were a child.
49. When someone asks, “Where are you from?” Point to the empty space on the map and say, “I’m from this invisible island.”
50. Cha-cha-cha everywhere.
51. Youtube Melvin Won Pat Borja’s poem, “No Deal.”
52. Recite the “Inifresi.”
53. Drive to the nearest military base. Close your eyes and imagine Angel Santos and the entire Chamoru Nation flying over the barbed-wire fence.
54. Just Tabasco everything.
56. YouTube Jesse Bais’s song, “Guam on my Mind.”
57. Make chicken kelaguen.
58. In order to make chicken kelaguen, you must first buy a coconut. Drive to the nearest Asian grocery store. Crack open the coconut at home only to find that it is completely rotted inside. Drive back to the grocery store with your machete. Get into an argument with the Asian owner, who won’t exchange the coconut. Go back to
your car and get the machete. Walk back into the produce aisle of the store. Crack open the coconuts until you find a good one. Pay for the coconut, machete in hand. Say, “Keep the change.” Drive off like the most bad ass islander who’s ever lived in an American suburb.
59. Blame it on the cha-cha-cha.
60. Buy a round-trip ticket home for no reason. Worry about credit card debt later.
61. Eat at the Chamorro restaurant and/or food truck in your area. Try not to ruin the meal by comparing the food to your parents or grandparents cooking.
62. Recite the novena in Chamorro using the rosary your grandma gave you at the airport. If you can’t say the novena in Chamorro, YouTube “Chamorro rosary.”
63. Read Vicente Díaz’s book, Repositioning the Missionary.
64. Give chenchule’ every chance you get.
65. Watch the Muña brothers documentary Talent Town.
66. Cook Calrose rice. Use your fingers to measure. When you smell the rice steaming, close your eyes and call this scent home.
67. Get your clan name tattooed across your back.
68. Youtube Jack Lujan’s song, “Inifresi.”
69. Wear your “Prutehi yan Difendi” t-shirt.
70. Close your eyes and remember the last time you hiked to Pāgat.
71. Place a Guam or CNMI Seal sticker on your truck and drive on the freeway until another diasporic Chamorro spots you.
72. Visit the Waikiki Spam Jam in Honolulu, Oahu.
73. Read Keith Camacho’s book Cultures of Commemoration. Remember what your ancestors survived.
74. Tell yourself that you will return one day, you just have a few more things to take care of out here.
75. YouTube Flora Baza Quan’s song “Hagu.” Hail the Queen of Chamorro music!
76. Go to the closest zoo that houses a Micronesian Kingfisher. Tell the bird, “Soon it’ll be safe enough for you to return.”
77. Attend the nearest Liberation Day party, which you can locate using the guamliberation.com website.
78. Read my poetry books (no refunds)!
80. Call any one of your Chamorro aunts and uncles. Be thankful to your grandparent(s) for having so many children that there’ll always be someone to give you a story about home.
81. Learn how to craft a kulo’. Blow the kulo’ everywhere.
83. Youtube Jesse Bais’s song “Uno Hit.” Remember that off-island and on-island Chamorros are one.
84. Get “Dandan I Paneretas” stuck in your head all December and air stick dance with an imaginary partner.
85. Attend the nearest Feast Day of the Immaculate Conception.
86. BBQ everything.
87. YouTube “Malafunkshun.” Laugh your way home.
88. Look at your American dollar bills. Find the word, “Gumataotao.”
89. Read Lehua Taitano’s poetry book, A Bell Made of Stones.
90. Wear zorís everywhere.
91. YouTube episodes of Nihi! online and imagine watching them with your parents when you were a child.
92. Buy a one-way ticket home.
94. Remember that migration flows through our blood and this is just another stop on our epic itinerary.
95. Join the nearest Chamorro, Marianas, Sons and Daughters of Guam, or Hafa Adai Club in your state. If there are none, start your own Chamorro club in your church, community center, military base, high school, or university. Remember: when our people gather, we become stars forming new constellations of home.
96. Attend the Chamorro Cultural Festival in San Diego. Call this gathering home.
97. Build a Guma’ Chamorro in Balboa Park.
98. Shout, “I exist! I exist! I exist!”
99. Whisper, “mahalang,” the only word built to carry all this longing.
100. Drive to the ocean. Take off your zorís and step into the salt water. Return your tears to the sea, where they belong. Close your eyes, and call your body home.
Ode (Ending with a Confession) to the First Mango I Ate on Guam After Decades Away

All the mangoes I’ve tasted in California were imported and lost their true flavors in transit. All the mangoes I’ve enjoyed in Hawai‘i were home grown and ripened by island sun, but they often act too glamorous, with their own annual festival at a 5-star hotel, where local chefs and mixologists dress them in fancy pupus and cocktails. But you, my love, are modest. My godfather picked you from his farm, and my godmother placed you on a plate for my breakfast. I’m alone this humid morning, so I fondle your skin, supple and cool in the air-conditioned dining room. I slowly undress you, nibbling your tropical flesh until I reach the spot where all your fibers tremble. When I look up, I notice a large statue of the Virgin Mary, staring at me, my fingers, lips, teeth, and tongue sticky with the juice of our sin.
During Your Lifetime, 2016

For Guam’s “Greatest Generation,” which refers to the generation of native Chamorros who died and survived the massacre of World War II on Guam, including my grandma, who is now 94 years old

You survived violent Japanese military occupation and the bloody march to Manenggon. You endured American bombing, and felt the wounds of our island stitched by barbed wire fences. You said goodbye to the sons and daughters of Guam as they donned uniforms and deployed overseas. You hugged all your children as they migrated, one by one, off-island.

You witnessed invasive beetles devour half our coconut trees. You prayed as diabetes and cancer diseased half our relatives. You listened as English endangered our language and snakes silenced our birds. Dear grandparents,

I doubt if we’ll ever receive reparations, or sovereignty over our own nation. I can’t count how many more bodies bags will arrive with tough boxes and folded flags. I’m not sure if our language and birds will sing wild once again beneath healthy coconut trees. And I don’t know if all your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, will return home, together, during your lifetime, to show the abundance that you will be survived by.

The Pacific Written Tradition

In 2010, I read aloud from my new book
to an English class at one of Guam’s public high schools. After the reading, I notice a student crying. “What’s wrong?” I ask. She says, “I’ve never seen our culture in a book before. I just thought we weren’t worthy of literature.” I wonder how many young islanders have dived into the depths of a book, only to find bleached coral and emptiness. *They* teach us that missionaries were the first readers in the Pacific because *they* could decipher the strange signs of the Bible. *They* teach us that missionaries were the first authors in the Pacific because *they* possessed the authority of written words.

Today, studies show that islander students read and write below grade level. “It’s natural,” *they* claim. “Your ancestors were an illiterate, oral people.” *Do not believe their claims.* Our ancestors deciphered signs in nature, interpreted star formations and sun positions, cloud and wind patterns, wave currents and ocean efflorescence. That’s why master navigator Papa Mau once said: “if you can *read* the ocean you will never be lost.” Now let me tell you about the Pacific written tradition, about how our ancestors tattooed their skin with defiant scripts of intricately inked genealogy, stories of plumage and pain. Or how our ancestors carved epics into hard wood with a sharpened point, their hands, and the pressure and responsibility of memory. Or how our ancestors stenciled petroglyphic lyrics on cave walls with clay, fire, and smoke. So the next time someone tells you
islanders were illiterate, teach them about our visual literacies, about how we are reclaiming

the skill to read and write the intertextual sacredness of all things. And always remember: *if you can write the ocean we will never be silenced.*
About the Author

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