

Everything All at Once: Readings & Conversation with Four Alice James Books Poets

(Joseph Legaspi, Ina Cariño, Aldo Amparán, J. Estanislao Lopez, Janine Joseph)

Event Overview:

Four principal poets debut new collections from Alice James Books and discuss the expansive nature of storytelling in poems. Expressing individuality via internal and external landscapes; disabling hierarchies; examining lineage and familial influences; and uncovering how personal and collective histories collapse—and inform and obscure our memories, languages, and selves—the poets communicate collective visions of our myriad borders and query origins with an approach akin to transillumination. This event will be livestreamed. ASL interpretation and live captioning will be provided.

Introductory Remarks by Joseph Legaspi:

Greetings and welcome to “Everything All At Once: Readings and Conversation with Four Alice

James Books Poets.” My name is Joseph O. Legaspi and I am honored to preside over this event,

presenting three intensely talented, self-assured debut poets, Aldo Amparán, Ina Cariño and J.

Estanislao Lopez; and Janine Joseph, who recently published her anticipated second collection.

After the readings, we will sit down to questions and a wide-ranging conversation on personal

and shared poetics; lineages, histories, borders, memory; the poets’ viewpoints on the state of

contemporary publishing and literature; and whatever else flutters into the horizon. Our poets will read in alphabetical order. Please welcome Aldo Amparán.

Aldo Amparán:

Thanatophobia, or Sleep Addresses His Brother

No duerme nadie por el mundo.

—Federico García Lorca

Night: the world boils. Men

toss sleepless

in their sheets like stars.

Because I look down

where a man holds his only son

among the spillage

of buildings & children
sitting on debris
after the bombs

cast their shadows
onto stone. There the boy hangs
from his father's arm, his father's hand

folded to the open neck, & the open eyes
like cold nickels look past me, past
the white sheet of linen.

How terrible
the fabric that veils
the end. How terrible

the night for him, the sleepless,
Brother. When an American soldier
swallows a grenade which bursts

as it slips down his throat, a Mexican
immigrant, a woman beaten
half to death for stealing

a pomegranate, breaks
the fruit's skin open, red
from her wounds

like the inside of the fruit,
or the inside of the soldier,
& doctors put to sleep

a girl to replace her heart with a new
beating. Soon that artificial
sleep turns the same terrible

fabric. Her mother, quiet
as a desert in the hall,
admires Wojnarowicz's *Untitled*

(*Buffalo*), that great beast at the edge
of the photograph suspended

in air forever.

& the girl's father reaches
her mother's arm to keep her
from plunging off the rooftop

to fall into you,
Brother. I know nothing
but impermanent rest.

How do you do it
each time you take & take & wrap
your permanence around

sleep? Brother,
you terrify me.
You make my heart

gallop like buffaloes
in the white desert, their large bodies
advancing their fall.

Glossary for What You Left Unsaid: Mad

† mad, *n.*

1.

In my religious high school, a pastor recounted a story he saw on the news about a woman who burned alive her newborn triplets in the oven & woke up, as if from a trance, to find their tiny, charred bodies. The pastor uses this story to prove the existence of the devil.

2.

First time I walked
clasping my lover's hand, my back
itched with stares. I heard
the cracks of revolving necks
shaking their disapproval. A sound
of interlocked cogwheels. I crossed
the bridge to El Paso, rotating flesh
still trailing my steps, my hand
red inside my pocket.

3.

Mother says I was born with a yellow stomach. That I was always a difficult child. Age six: I wouldn't eat anything that wasn't round, afraid of all the edges in my mouth.

4.

In the 17th century, women who spoke to animals or inanimate objects were burned at the stake.

5.

& another cogwheel snaps.

6.

I carry a sadness like a sibling in my arms,
& though I feel the weight unhinging
humerus from scapula, I bare it, offer
my bastard brother's scalp the curve
of my throat. Mornings I condense
back into the world. His concretion
fastens my extremities to the mattress.
I hear my mother calling & my brother
shoves harder against me.

7.

Age twelve: I felt earthquakes no one else could feel— the whole house shaking— the mirror's rattle— the rooftop shedding shingles—

8.

Age fourteen: walls bawled louder than smoke— same noise as an open window— in a speeding car— people shouting from the avenue—

9.

*Saw you kiss a boy— last night— looked like
you tried— to swallow— his face— swallow
him whole— his— hole— his— what would your mother say
best— your brother wasn't here— to see
would've done abuelo— in again— & again*

better fix— yourself boy— better fix this—

10.

I've written seven suicide notes: seven yellow pages ending in apology.

11.

& again, there's proof of the devil.

12.

& another cogwheel snaps: my mother shouts— *you are mad* says— *you are mad* says—

13.

14.

I'm sorry.

The Day I Came Out

stains flowered
the ceiling
of my hotel room
where I'd hardly
slept sun leaked
the inauguration
of my new decade
& next to me a man
I didn't know
past the bends
of his body stirred
I reclined beside myself
in the shade
to remember
his face
exalted in my breath
& how his voice
shook the mounting
pressures of still
water as he said
I love you
though he'd never
seen me before
that night I love you
with his gin
& tonic his winter
-fresh his navel
piercing his
elongated Os
I love you he'd said
& maybe war ended
with the word
I turned to his sun
-smoothed torso
asleep there his
abdomen a road
-map of white space
clavicle shoulder tiny
bird of a bruise
in the drop

of his back
& I thought *maybe*
there's still time
for celebration
my future a sky
blue terraria
to display this
ever burgeoning
affection not
affliction not
affectation nor
consequence I
kissed the man's
forehead & left
him there
nameless left with no
number only
the memory of his
skin & this brilliant
yearning to be
seen outside
the street pulsed
shameless so full
of color my body
broke into a wave
of electricity
merging seamlessly
with the rest
of the world

This Room Will Still Exist

In the beginning
a field
broke grass

from damp earth
& fertilizer
but crops

would not grow.
The city crept
closer. Before you

& I
were born
our hearts
were ripe

fruit dangling
in a lonely
woman's
backyard.

|

94 years ago, a stranger slept

with the window open. Fog surged

into his room. Imagine waking

from a dream of sky to sky.

|

Tonight, your face vanished
from my mind's unending
mirror. A blue sadness replaced it.
A sound not your voice,
not your laughter, but the echo
of a gunshot. I strike
my dresser's mirror, break off
a shard the size of your head.

|

There are 86 sadnesses in this room alone.
I've counted each of them: the serpent
standing upright to the height of the ceiling,
the warm bear skulking the corner, his fur
matted in dust. I've grown a blue
mantis the size of my hands. I've fed it
copper & hyacinth. & often, the black caracara
locked in the closet ululates at night.

|

I'll carry the nightstand, carry
the bed & the desk,
the lamp & the moth circling the lamp
to a new room
in a new country. I'll wear a different tongue.

I'll lacquer the moon. I'll build a bookshelf
from the bark of a dead tree. I'll kiss
a man. I'll kiss a man. I'll kiss

& ask the moon: when did my brother become myth?

His face a brown blotch in my dreams.
His skin, particles floating in sunlight.

|

Some dull hour in the future, this alcove

will be emptied of sound. In a steel table,

in a changing city, my humbled body

will open for the last time at the hands

of a stranger. I'll love them for this final act

of surrender. For the kind

stitch & staple. & later, these walls

will hold in them the hum of two lovers,

which is to say two men or two women

burrowing into each other's breath.

Parable of the Missing Country

We woke up
from dreams of strange rains
of smoke & lavender
petals rains

of meat & human teeth
& we found México

had disappeared
from our maps our globes
now unfamiliar

sketches our travel guides
our aerial views

from the window
of an airplane
the sand glittered
in an endless shore

& from the mountains
of El Paso beyond

the serpentine border
& the rusted wall
not the lights
that once gilded our faces

but an unnatural dark
we called home
we dialed phone numbers

so long our palms
cramped into fists
we yearned to hear

our mothers' voices
but met only the desperate
wind of dead lines
months shook

into years & we drew
our bodies to cluttered rooms

that reminded us
of our childhood
where we drank

mescal & told each other
outlandish tales
from our hometowns

in a Spanish
so broken

it carved the insides
of our mouths
years sparked decades

we forgot our mothers' face
our tongues our old
bedrooms which melted
like clocks & trickled

out of our past
we no longer understood
the brutal sounds our names

made so we traded them
for softer notes we smothered

in our fingers
an old memory

the sound of cigarras
rasping the too hot summer

morning we'd ran
barefoot after
the ice cream truck
we ran circles

in our heads
to keep this memory
from fading

the way our hands
faded in the quiet light
of an in
-describable absence.

Ina Cariño (Pre-recorded):

Lean Economy

I pop tins of the greasiest luncheon meat open,
slather my chin with animal salt: asymmetrical
to the story of that soldier whose pinky fingers
were cut off in the war. want versus want.
real love is when you loot a crate of lard-filled cans,
throw it into the Pacific to feed your ancestors.
in this oily paradigm we learn to glut ourselves
on marrow. they say it's a shame I subsist
on scraps. *where do you shop for food?* show me
someone who won't argue that there's nothing
sentimental in this world, as if bastard histories
don't crave undoing. in exchange I'll show you how
to nourish yourself. lift your grandmother's knife.
slice through the fattest layer in your gut & eat.

Bitter Melon

balsam pear. wrinkled gourd.
leafy thing raised from seed.

pungent goya, ampalaya: cut
& salt at the sink. spoon pulp

from bumpy rind, brown half-moons
in garlic & sparking mantika.

like your nanay did. like your lola did.
like your manang braving hot parysak—

you'll wince. you'll think of the taste
of your own green body—mapait

ang lasa. your sneer. masakit, dugo't
laman. it hurts, this smack of bitter.

yes you'll remember how much it hurts,
to nick your thumb as you bloom heat

in acid, sili at sukang puti—to grow up
glowering in half-light—to flesh out

& plod through your own grassy way,
unfurl your own crush of vines.

after you tip it onto a mound
of steamed rice, as you chew,

the barb of it will hit the back
of your throat. look at yourself,

square. you used to snarl at moths,
start small blazes in entryways.

woodchip fires, flaking paint.
look, tingnan mo—see your lip

curling in the glint of your bowl.
unruly squash. acrid vegetable,

you'll flinch. you'll want to see
nothing, taste like nothing. but

when you disappear your meal—
when you choke on the last

chunky morsel of rice—you'll slurp
thirsty for more—a saccharine life.

huwag mo akong kalimutan,
you'll plead—

taste me.

taste me.

Rice

unhatched songs quiet perfumed white
dirt-borne pips cooking on the stovetop

I listen in half-light breathe still tilt my ear
as memories of lola float up with the milkscent

over her shallow basket she'd clean the rice
pick tan shell from ivory kernel say

*in America with a husk like that
you could scuff at the lightest skin the palest fear*

daily she fed me sweet muck of thick soy
gingered meat hot mounds of rice

I still wonder how a grain too small for a wish
holds the task of feeding in its shell

I left lola on her cement step her chipped
plates those women stooped & bronzing in paddies

& I try not to confuse the smell of soggy hulls
with the damp musk of an American Dream

still I wait for the water to bubble in the pot & soon
in this half-light they'll bud up soft be what they'll be

& when it's time to grow up into this white
white world give me a brown husk like that

Perishable

for Mama Tet

my grandmother taught me how to slit
the milky belly of my favorite fish. to scrape
at filmy scales with a knife, snip the stiff fins
behind each gill. I watched as her hands,
cracked & mapped with grease scars,
lifted the flap of its stomach under running
water: green viscera awash in vermillion,
streaming down the drain. slashed body—ready
for the pan, for salted skin to spark in oil.
it was dark in our kitchen, a single window
above the sink, & I didn't understand
what perishable meant. once, at school,
we were tasked with gathering canned goods
for people devastated by typhoon.
beans, instant coffee, tins filled with rice.
I wanted to send them bananas. eggs, butter,
sayote. milkfish, what I knew of sustenance.
but grandmother let me be. I packed the dying
treasures in a cardboard box—took them
to class the next day. everyone laughed.
in shame I cracked the eggs behind a bookshelf
to sulfur the hall in the weeks to come. I knew
that much—that breaking can mean release.
what I didn't know was that the fish
under the faucet wasn't alive, even as
I'd watched grandmother hook her finger
into its cavity and pull from the wound.
at dinner, I poked at cooked flesh with my fork,
a million bones fine as whiskers threatening
to prick my gums. *why didn't you tell me.*
grandmother didn't answer. instead she pried
spine from remaining half, picked the meat clean
of tines—scooped it soft into my mouth.

Janine Joseph:

Coup-Contrecoup

I was at a low ebb when the ambulance
reversed along the gravel and the roar
traveled to Janine. For days the churned
rocks looped their sound until her brain
felt like the surf and the familiarity lulled
her to sleep. Lulled her in the hospital's
machines, lulled her in the backyard
of her father's home where she swayed
in suspension like the empty hammock
at first, then thrashed in the gale
like Odysseus lashed to the mass of me.
She could not tell you where I was though
the depths were in her. Wailing where
I waited were the sirens skirting the corner,
the vehicle still leagues away from rescue.

My Chiropractor Gives Me a Name

for *what's the matter*: the white
stack of vertebrae curving in
reverse in my neck in the revelatory
film. I massage my misery but cannot see
the error in what she touches
on the negative, distracted I am
by the sight of the illuminated
petroglyphs bucking beneath my
occipital bone. *We can correct this*,
she says—and she twice does
so fast I do not remember closing,
on the drop table, my eyes.

On my back, low tide and stray stars
suddenly after a decade, then her voice
pooling clear in my ears. She by the light
box where my spine lingers lets me
heave an *Oh* when I side-by-side see
a healthy neck against mine and see-see
my nape as held by the wreck. *Oh!*
she leans in her study of what of my body
the rays traveled accidentally: my costal
cartilage long calcified, skeleton a lantern
framing the air rendered black. I put my face
in the reflection.

Oh, I'm Dying, I'm Dying,

the disembodied voice ribs
in the clip of the snake whirlpooling itself to a fake death.

Blech, she belches, *blepp*,
as the faux cobra scrapes, underside-up along the grass, forked
tongue trailing the coil. *Oh*,
I'm dead—but we know it's not. The touch-me-not gapes
its mouth long enough
to be patted again by the cowgirl who runs one finger a length
of ventral scales. With shit
it musks itself, sometimes punctures a bleed in its commitment
to being left alone.

I rewind to the seconds of its resurrection, when it flips to flee,
and pause to admire its hog-
nose of a snout, upturned and useful, subtle shovel in the plot.

Abecedurian

for Aba

Bourdain, in the rerun, says the king of fruit's camembert-like
custard smells of sun-spoilt death, but the phrase she recalls is

dead grandmother, which bites my tongue. How does anyone forget
ever eating, ever excavating from the pale lobes of the foie gras

fruit, she gasps. We finish the rest of our attachment with this mis-
giving, googling images of thorned husks bisected like my own

human brain. Impossible, to her, to sample, then overwrite the funk.
Impossible, to her, that the Janine I was was ram-rattled into the

Janine I am now. When the concussion receded, I journeyed across
kame and kettle in my habit of skin, immigrant again in this *after*

life of a life without my grandmother tongue. In lake Lillian I pressed
my forehead, but nothing natural bore me. I dub her monochrome

now with noise. *Ang Doktora, Principe Te-*

ñoso, Anak

ng Kidlat—her whole

oeuvre voiced over with what I have left. How does anyone forget?

Pollen-yellow, the odious pulp I can't qualify on my tastebuds. How

quick my mouth went dry. At the reunion, we extend the butterfly leaf,
reminisce around the table, and in all my stories she is a monolingual

sitcom grandma. When I sketch the time she didn't know it was me
telephoning, I flush with my hands two fluencies, the punch line

undermined. Even their memories, my memory devours into this
vanisher language. How does anyone do anything, I stop asking

when I board the plane. In this life, I exist awake until the altitude change
exhumes me. Where did she go, where did I go in that rest. I've heard it's

xenoglossy, what happened next: I heard through the pane, faint as
zodiacal light, her voice in the air beyond where the body went down.

The Night Before You Are Naturalized

we practice an ordinary life. Fresh off my flight,
you ask if I have eaten, and I ask you if you are hungry
and we pull into the lot of the nearest restaurant
that has something for you and something for me.
It is almost spontaneous—we just have to make
a quick call to say they can eat on ahead without us.
You are seated to face me, and, out of habit, I face
the window that overlooks the corner and reach
of street. I order what I've missed most and you
listen for what is good here, then order what comes
recommended. It takes me through the appetizers
to not be distracted by the moment's poetry, how
I might write a poem titled like that magazine's tagline—
They're Just Like Us! for example. Or a poem set here,
against the partition, where I erase you by calling you
ALIEN RELATIVE in every instance where the "you"
appears and I disappear behind THE PETITIONER
in a bit of verse not really for us but for the paparazzi
reading. I focus when I see you fumbling with your grin,
your front flipper tooth suddenly chipped in half,
which you hand me when I ask what it is that you
have done. Our dinner bowls arrive, but we are busy
rehearsing your backup face for tomorrow's pictures.
When we finally eat, a silence settles that isn't silence.
You just won't smile, you say, and show me the closed
beam you'll make, and I say I'll figure it out, don't worry,
I'll fix it. And I do—with a needle and a glue, I bond it.

J. Estanislao Lopez:

Independence Day in West Texas

Bought with the soiled coins
I pinched from the floorboard of our father's truck,
my sister's sparkler fell into her sandal.

Below her body,
light pooled against desert night—

a coincidence of beauty and suffering,
which I would learn is an old coincidence.

Old, too, a boy's hands placed
on the causal chain.

My mother smothered the glowing lace,
first with her hands,
then with a towel my brother fetched.

Fireworks continued.

Horned lizards skittered beneath wood pallets.
I sunk behind our Dodge, and, as my sister cried out

to a luminous sky I then believed was listening,
I buried my legs in gravel,
counting seconds between its shifts of hue.

After the fireworks, gunfire resounded,
continuing through my sleep. I dreamt explosions
turning milky, flooding the desert,

saturating it—

our feet steeped in the milk, my sister's and mine
together. Then, others' feet: our countrymen,

who pledged this precise disaster:
that for her woundedness she'd be remembered,

for her woundedness she'd be loved.

Theodicy Written in the Occupied Sands

We should not have been surprised

at the gardener's blood-thirst
once family was lost to the fight.

Asters went unwatered except by rain.

It may not have been prayer caught in our throat
but privilege, or cartilage, or birds.

There are things we did not imagine:

cities bloused in ruin;
an enduring, flammable night.

There are things that we ignore:

lands razed by God's disinterest;

an old historian pointing to a wound
convinced it spills not blood, but light.

Alternate Ending: Solomon's Misjudgment

No one calls Solomon wise after seeing the child split
between the two claimants. The flesh returned

to two beds. Neither party is satisfied, but both know
the other is dissatisfied, and there's a certain satisfaction

there. Solomon complains about human nature
to his dozen nearest wives. *Is this my blessed nation?*

he cries as one wife shepherds her children out of sight,
knowing better than anyone the scent of divine whim approaching.

After wiping off his sword, Solomon hears the voice of God
like the clinks of a belt loosening. But it's his own belt.

He was never his father's favorite. His ivory throne
now smells faintly of iron, of all the old wars.

He misses his brother, beautiful Absalom, whose hair
still hangs in a tree. Coarse flower. Absalom, abloom.

The Framework of an Imaginary Nation

*First, we imagined a wager
against our survival. We said damned if we do,
damned if we don't—so we did.
At some point, we were the underdogs,
and that underdoggedness swaddles us still
against each cold threshold of conscience.
Yes, we dressed our dead in the satin
of the Latinate. We pointed
vaguely to some old texts,
and everyone's devotion burned brightly,
collective swamp lights
silhouetting cypress. We said democracy's
spread is a natural consequence.
A law of metaphysics! We said the gods
of this nation don't parse the votive
and the vote. Now, we've been accused
of standing by these values.
And to our accusers we say,
why not be the bigger person?
You can wave your flags
a little lower. It was never our intention
that these monuments
to our achievement also serve
as the only markers of your graves.*

Anti-Ode to the Metaphysical

It's an easy thing to complain.
Watch me do it
there by rock formations older than any government.

There, beneath trees shivering with crows.
It's so easy I can do it underwater
not even knowing how to swim.

It's easier than falling in love
and, truthfully, is as tender.
In the morning,

nestlings chirp with hunger.
In the night, crickets whine
to be loved.

I've heard rumors of a greater being
whose whole purpose is to field
our questions.

Well, this is not so much a question
as it is a comment, and not so much a comment
as it is a critique.

My ailing body refutes the summer's songs.
I've lost no more than the average man,
but no less, either.

Steeped in patriotism, my children
grow entitled to and estranged from the world.
Trouble enough, this ephemeral life.

Eternity?
Well, I can already tell you
how that will go.

Living in the Moment

I like to live
in the moment. No,
not that one—

not the moment I, knowing perfectly well where he was,

lied to my mother for my father's sake.

Not the one when I realized

the injured heron I had helped into a cage,
nursed amateurishly,
might have been better off without me—

Not the one in which happiness

turned out to be ignorance,
and charity
turned out to be arrogance.

I like to live in moments like this one:

a toilet flushing
in the upstairs apartment,
moths tapping at the lamp-lit window.

I am alone

and can hear my neighbor humming
through poorly insulated walls.

In a moment such as this,

what is joy but infinite?

What is consequence

but merely an odor wafting in from the outside world?

What a wonderful thing

Solitude is, full of excuses—

I mean beauty,

full of a beauty

that has nothing to do with me.

Erosion

A star fantasizes about darkness. A child fantasizes about the gold earrings of her teacher, who tells her stars outlast us all. God fantasizes about time, which, even after all his experimenting, he fails to grasp completely. The earrings, shaped like golden orbits, sway as she nods. Gravity cannot stop fantasizing about cosmic bodies. A rock, released by the child into the air above a river, fears erosion, but also finds it vaguely erotic. A rock is of the smallest bodies gravity fantasizes about. Smaller, still: a grain of sand. The shore's morals are eroding, the sand knows. Lying on the shore, composing it, the grain of sand recalls the flirtations of cartographers and how maps grow more beautiful in the dark.

In Praise of Weakness

When my son
grips my hand,

I am touched
with what

my father feared—
that weakness

tingling first
in my knuckles,

then flaming
through my chest.

All the ways
in which I might

fail him
populate the charted

territory. A point
of pride for my father:

how his finger
never bent

when pressed
against my chest.

As my thumb
wipes the milk

from my son's lips,
I think of

my father's lips.
Always closed.

Never parting
to say the words

.

I say the words.
I say them again:

the words
that will survive me.

Questions from the Moderator:

Since I love origin stories, let me start by asking each one of you how you came to poetry.

Being a member of various marginalized communities—POC, queer, undocumented, etc.—do you feel compelled “to represent” and be “the voice” of your people? Why and why not?

Critics have exclaimed that identity politics is null and over. Do you agree?

Your collections are rooted in the personal, in conjunction with the excavation of selfhood, family and trauma. What are the linguistic/poetic tools do you employ in your writing and exploration?

Speak about your journey toward publication, and what you have learned along the way. How do you vie the state of contemporary poetry?