



Working the Rice

Banaue, Philippines

[Aimee Nezhukumatathil](#)

Toes are first to bend
in wrinkles. At the base
of the Panawe Rice Terraces,
I stand flamingo to examine my foot.

My pistachio toes
have had too much water,
too much light climbing these
green steps. My skin smells like

the orange salamanders
dodging our wrinkled hands
as we break the water to pull
the rice roots. I peek at the other *trabajadoras* —

by now their feet
must be tuberous plants
rooted in the slips of earth.
I want to retire to cool, wooden floors,

puffing dust clouds
with each step. I want to eat
chico fruit, sweet lanka, anything
but rice. I want to crush cricket shells

with my heel, hear
their cellophane sound
in death. You devilish vegetable,
push your shoots tomorrow and tomorrow,

but enough for today. Under
my hat, I mutter sunless words:
pagod na pagod — careful so my supervisor
will not hear. My tongue catches a drop of sweat

in the corner of my mouth.
Sometimes these steps ripple
upward on their own, as if we climb past
our very hilltop, high enough to brush young rain, cloud, wing.

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