

Anak Sastra, Issue 13

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[Bruce Hinrichs](#) is an artist, musician, and professor who teaches biopsychology of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. He writes both fiction and nonfiction from his home in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Rebecca Andem earned an MFA through the University of Southern Maine. Her latest novel, [Water from the Heart](#), is set in Thailand, a place her heart visits frequently. Currently, she lives in China, where she teaches writing to hard-working high school students.

[Kimberly Sullivan](#) is an American living in Rome, Italy, where she works in international development. Her short stories have been published in various journals and anthologies.

Christa Boyd-Nafstad is a mom, wife, vegan, attorney, writer, poet, and runner. She is more successful at some of these things than others. Christa was born in New Orleans and raised in Texas. Her work has been published by the *Voices Project*, *Cliterature*, *American Bar Association*, and *Fordham Int'l Law Journal*.

Marla Anzalone is a travel writer and essayist living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She completed her Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing at Chatham University, and is currently a Master of Arts candidate in English Literature at Duquesne University. Her work has appeared online at *Punchnels.com*.

[Brendan Walsh](#) is a recent graduate of the MFA program at Southern Connecticut State University and is currently living in Vientiane, Laos, teaching English through a Fulbright Grant. He has been an English Instructor in South Korea, an intern at the Catskill Poetry Workshop, a featured reader at The New American Writing Festival, and is an Anna Sonder Poetry Prize winner, as well as the recipient of the Leslie Leeds Poetry Prize. His work has appeared in *Connecticut Review*, *Lines and Stars*, *Paper Nautilus*, *The Truth about the Fact*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Halcyon*, *Cobalt*, and *Mason's Road*.

Bruce Sydow has been published in *Blue Streak*, *Penduline Press*, *Switched-on Gutenberg*, *Tahoma's Shadow*, and *Proud to Be*. He earned his master's degree from the University of Washington in Seattle. He has held faculty positions at Saint Martin's University and Chapman University, among other colleges, was elected Professor of the Year twice, and received the Excellence in Teaching Award. He lived in Vietnam from 1969 to 1971.

Paul Lomax is currently enrolled as a doctoral student in Education. His poetry has been published in *Poydras Review*, *Dark Matter Journal*, *Pank Magazine*, *Postpoetry Magazine*, and *Ars Medica*.

[Miguel Alberto Gomez](#) is a part-time lecturer at De La Salle University in the Philippines. His interests include photography and poetry.

Writer on weekdays and English teacher on weekends, **Preeyakit Buranasin** has a bachelor's in English and a master's in English Literature. During his studies, he started writing both in prose and poetry, resulting in works in various genres. Preeyakit is an Ananchanok Poetry Award recipient.

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October 2013 featured author interview with Bruce Hinrichs

Q. Why do you write? What are some of your motivations?

Writing, like painting, is a means of creative self expression. It is a way to explore ideas, feelings, and points of view. What is it like to be someone else? What are the essential features of a good life? Art (writing, painting, music, dance, photography, film) is a means of exploration. Nietzsche said we have art so we may not perish by the truth. Kafka said a book must be an axe to break the frozen sea inside of us.

Q. What is your writing process like? Do have any quirky writing habits?

I write both on computer and by hand. Amazingly, the work turns out differently depending on which method I use. Computer writing is more orderly; by hand I can be more surreal. I like humor, satire, parody, and surrealistic works. I like to watch other people writing and editing. I like to go to museums or performances or listen to music to get inspired. If I am at a performance that I am not interested in, I write a story in my head.

Q. As an academic, do you see your creative writing as an outlet or does it tend to compliment your work?

I write books and articles about scientific psychology, brain science, film, and art. My nonfiction and fiction writing are nearly entirely separate from each other. They only overlap because the content in both cases is coming from my limited brain. I only know what I know, which is a serious limitation. I admire story writers who can imagine other views, other worlds, and fill their stories with references to amazing facts. Would it be helpful to know everything? What would a computer write?

Q. You lecture in both film studies and psychology. Please explain how (if at all) these two subjects feature in your fiction?

Both show up in my fiction because it is what I know. The two fields are quite different from each other, but I like it like that. I love both science and art and feel that both can offer great discoveries and enjoyment. For me, there is no conflict between science and art. They are two complementary ways of understanding, learning, and expressing ideas.

Q. What is your most memorable experience about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia?

Anyone who is old enough certainly remembers the monks who lit themselves on fire to protest and try to stop the atrocities and madness of the Vietnam War. The image of the burning monk was used by Ingmar Bergman in his film *Persona* to represent the horrors of modern life that affect us so emotionally that it is impossible to put into words. This is one area in which a film can do something that a book cannot.

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" * "

"Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a persistent one."

– [Albert Einstein](#)

Quack, quack, he said. Sounded nothing like a duck. He didn't quack; he just said quack, quack. You know, the word quack. He said the word. Not the sound. Just pronounced the word quack. Twice. In a row. Quack, quack.

Well, what does one say to a guy who says quack, quack? I started to walk away without saying anything, but then impulsively stopped and turned back to the weird guy and said quack, quack right back at him. Quack, quack. He seemed to like it – his face and eyes lit up – and then he started to say quack to me again but I stopped him and asked him if he wanted a drink.

We sat on barstools next to each other in a seedy bar that I favored, looking forward staring at liquor bottles standing upright all lined up in front of a faded mirror at the back of the bar. The liquor bottles looked to me like ballet dancers lined up prim and proper ready to begin their dance. The liquor bottles were facing forward as if they were staring at us, too. What did we look like to them, I wondered? The double quacking was still in my mind and there wasn't a duck in sight. We each had a drink in front of us. Well, his was mostly gone, I guess, but I was still sucking on mine. I noticed that a bottle of tequila seemed on the verge of a pas de chat. The weird quack, quack man turned to look at me, which got my attention.

Then he told me his story. He needed me. I was the guy he was supposed to meet according to a fortune cookie he opened last night. I had the right clothes, the right hair, and the right face. I was the right guy. The fortune cookie said so. Quack, quack was the clincher, he said. The fortune had been very long, he clarified. It even contained a footnote that was indicated by an asterisk in the message. The footnote said the guy would say quack, quack. The weird guy apparently felt that this asterisked footnote was immensely important. I peeked at the liquor bottle ballet dancers, and I could have sworn the schnapps and bitters were performing a pas de deux.

Where, I asked, did you get such a strange fortune cookie?

He worked in a Chinese restaurant, he replied, and he always took home a handful of the fortune cookies. He explained that last night he had looked at the pile and noticed one cookie was looking back at him. That's what he said. One fortune cookie was looking back at him. I didn't ask.

Then he paused telling his tale, and he leaned toward me and looked directly into my eyes and slowly, very carefully enunciated the word, "figuratively." Well, yeah, of course, that's what I was hoping. Duh! What a relief. Would've been kinda peculiar if he had meant the cookie was looking at him "literally." You know what I mean? But, as I said, I didn't ask. I stared at the liquor bottles more intently and for a moment thought I saw the crème de cacao smiling at me. Not really a smile; more of a smirk.

Then the quack quack man told me that he had opened the fortune cookie that was looking at him and had read the important message inside – the very long fortune. The fortune had told him that he was to meet a man that he needed. A man dressed like me. A man who looked like me. A man who apparently was me. Oh, and of course, the important

footnote in the fortune (you know, that had been marked by an asterisk) made it quite explicit that the man who was needed would say quack, quack. That's right, the man would say quack, quack.

Well, I replied in a rather abashed manner, that is very curious indeed. Perhaps you are mentally ill. Perhaps you had a hallucination. Perhaps you are from outer space. Maybe I'm mentally ill. Maybe I'm having a hallucination. Maybe I'm from outer space. Perhaps you have recently experienced a bump on the head. Perhaps you are some sort of con artist with the latest con that I am not familiar with. Perhaps you have taken some illicit drugs that make you delusional. Perhaps you have taken leave of your senses. Or perhaps I have taken leave of mine. I really do not know what is going on. This is all very strange, very strange indeed, I remarked. I also noticed that a bottle of Drambuie seemed to be standing in fourth arabesque position.

You know, I must admit, however, that I was getting curious. Just what was this all about – this quack, quack nonsense? I then inquired of the man whom I considered to be probably a bit whackadoodle: what is it that you need? You say that you need me. But, for what? What is it that I can do for you? I squinted hard and looked him in the eye. It was the same eye that had looked at the fortune cookie, and the same eye that the fortune cookie had looked back at. Figuratively, he claimed, but now I wondered. The liquor bottles were still looking at us, ready to begin the grand pas d'action. I glanced from the ballet dancers to the face of the weird quack, quack guy.

He stared at me for a long time. Then he simply said: answers. I need answers. He looked down at his glass and then he looked back at me. I thought he might be crazy, but I also thought I should listen to what he had to say, just in case. The liquor bottle ballet

dancers weren't going anywhere and neither was I. I ordered another round and I noticed that the bartender nodded at the ballet dancers as if there was some sort of secret between them. I wondered what it could mean. Then I turned back to the goofy quack, quack guy and took a more serious tone.

Okay, I'll bite, I responded, what are the questions? Now, I really thought I had him there. I imagined he would have no idea what questions to ask. If this guy was a nut then he would not have any clue what questions he needed me to answer. I was beginning to smile, expecting him to be stumped by my query.

However, he wasn't fazed. Not at all. He was ready to talk. So, he did. You see, he began relating his story, I am going to take a trip to Myanmar next week. I have never been there. I am to deliver a package that is not entirely legal, as far as I understand. It is from my employer at the Chinese restaurant down the street.

Oh, yeah, I interrupted the weird guy, the Chinese restaurant where you got the fortune cookie that looked back at you. Yeah, right, I chuckled.

He was not bothered by my sarcasm, not at all, didn't even seem to notice it. Rather, he continued his strange tale. I am being well paid for delivery of the package, he said. It is not drugs, nor guns, but I cannot tell you exactly what is in the package because I do not know exactly myself. It is a metal object. About 18 inches high. I think it might be an artifact of some sort. However, what I need is I need to know what I should do when I get there. To Myanmar. The instructions were not clear. All I really had was the fortune cookie and it led me to you. The quack, quack you said to me was the confirmation sign. You are the man with the answers. There is no doubt. You are the man with the answers that I need.

No, that can't be right, I quickly exclaimed. I am a nobody. I am just a guy sitting in this bar having a drink. I am divorced, no kids, I live in a studio apartment downtown, I have a meaningless job, and now it is after work and I am having a drink. I don't know anything about a fortune cookie or even what Myanmar is. I only said quack, quack because you said it to me. I don't have any answers for you, buddy. I'm sorry, I just don't. The liquor bottle ballet dancers looked as if they were a bit dejected about this, even a bit melancholic. I wondered what effect this would have on their failli?

But, the weird guy stammered, surely that was the sign, he insisted. The fortune cookie said so. A guy who said quack, quack to me, a guy who is dressed like you, who looks like you would provide the answers. The answers that I need before I begin my journey to Myanmar. You are the man with the answers, you simply must be.

My curiosity and politeness were quickly being replaced by exasperation. Quack, quack indeed! No, I blurted out. I am just a normal guy. I couldn't possibly know what you should do in Myanmar. I don't even know what that is. You can't go around believing in fortune cookies! What is wrong with you anyway? The ballet dancers were almost slumped over now. I avoided eye contact with them and looked into my drink.

Okay, okay, the weird guy said. But then, apparently undeterred in pestering me, he insisted, have you ever seen one of these? He had reached into his coat pocket and removed a small object that was part metal and part hard rubber. He held it in his palm and reached it up in front of my face. He held it on his open palm a few inches directly in front of my eyes. He disclosed to me that the object had been secretly placed into his coat pocket shortly after he had received the package. With a serious and worried look on his face he then proclaimed, I don't have any idea what it is or what it means. Do you know? Do you?

I took a sip from my drink and then told him, yes, I know what that is. It is called a capo. It is a device that is used on stringed instruments such as a guitar in order to raise the pitch. It is derived from the Italian word *capotasto* which means the head of the fretboard. A capo is tightened onto a fret and shortens the strings thereby raising the pitch of the instrument. But, listen, weird guy, why do you ask me such a strange thing? The dancers were perking up. I expected at least a *petite saut* soon.

Ahh, a *capo*, the quack, quack man said. So, that's what it is. Okay, it raises the pitch. A capo raises the pitch. Very interesting. Perhaps it is some sort of clue, some message. See, the fortune cookie was right – you did know an answer. You knew about the capo. How did you know that?

Well, I used to play guitar a little, I answered. But, look, lots of people know what a capo is. And, by the way, it's just a coincidence that I said quack, quack. You said it first, after all. Quack, quack, you said. Then I said it. You said it first. Coincidences happen all the time, you know. I don't know why. I don't know if it's because of quantum physics, fate, random events, fractals, chaos, or some other strange and curious force, but I do know that coincidences are a regular part of nature, a very common part of good old Mother Nature. Yes sir, coincidences are all around us all the time. You cannot avoid them. They are a law. A very curious law of nature. Wherever you go, whatever you do, there is a coincidence right there or around the corner. It's guaranteed. Yes, I'm sure that this is all just a coincidence. Just part of nature's laws.

The weird guy's face now suddenly looked lost and hopeless. Crestfallen, even. He looked as if he was ready to cry or to have a panic attack, I couldn't tell which one. And, yes, while coincidences seem to be a regular occurrence in nature – one of nature's odd laws – it

also is a quirky law of nature that pretty much anyone who sees a face that looks like this guy's face just has to feel at least a small bit of sympathy for the person who has that face. So, what did you expect, then? Yes, I felt a small bit of sympathy for the quack, quack guy. Consequently, I thought I'd better humor him a bit more. Even the liquor bottles looked as if they wanted me to humor the odd quack, quack man a little more. So, I did.

Okay, tell me, I inquired with a sincere voice and a facial expression of genuine interest, what is this Myanmar that you mentioned? I hoped this would cheer him up a bit, showing a little interest, you know?

Sure enough, it worked. I noticed that the ballet dancers seemed impressed and maybe were even a bit pleased with me. I mean, for showing some sympathy and interest in the quack, quack man.

The wacky guy's face perked up. His energy returned. It's a country, a region of Asia, he answered. It used to be called Burma. Some of the earliest civilizations were there some 13,000 or so years ago – the Pyu and the Mon civilizations. Hey, wait a minute. I think I'm on to something here, he said excitedly. His face was lighting up like crazy now. He sputtered out his thoughts. These early civilizations practiced primordial forms of Buddhism, he continued. They had a spirit called the Kapu which later came to represent taboos among Polynesian peoples, a kind of code of conduct. You know, that is what this must be about. Now I think I understand. There is a famous statue – the Kapu statue. It is very special. When this statue is rubbed it makes a noise, a specific sound, a clear, pleasant tone, somewhat like the Tibetan singing bowls that hum when their rims are rubbed. You know about those bowls? Well, the Kapu was a spirit in the early religious beliefs of the Pyu

and Mon peoples in the region that is now known as Myanmar. The Kapu statue makes a soothing tone when it is rubbed correctly.

Then the weird quack, quack guy looked me straight in the eye with a look of solemnness. He intoned: it is of high religious significance. The package that I have must contain a Kapu statue. That must be it. A Kapu statue. They are very rare and very valuable. That must be it.

Okay, I replied with a bit of uncertainty, that would be sorta cool, for sure, but what in the world is the message? What is the answer that the fortune cookie told you to look for? I mean, what is the answer? Is it the identification of the Kapu statue? Is that what this is all about? It was then that for just a moment I thought I saw a lightbulb turn on just above his head. I glanced over at the liquor bottle ballet dancers, and I believe the ouzo was starting a pirouette.

Well, the quack, quack man elucidated, I'm now realizing that perhaps it is a fake. I mean perhaps it is not a genuine Kapu statue in the package that I am to deliver. You know, perhaps we would be able to tell that it is a fake because the pitch would be wrong. He looked at me with the same eye that had much earlier been looked at by the fortune cookie. The eye was gleaming now. It was large and shiny. Meanwhile, I was looking back at him with cautious trepidation, and simultaneously I was unconsciously rubbing my finger around the rim of my glass that was sitting on the bar in front of me. I am not sure, but I believe I may have heard a high-pitched squeak. Also, a bottle of aquavit was performing a rond de jambe.

The loopy quack, quack guy persisted with his thoughts. He explained: The capo is telling us that the pitch is raised. I believe now that when the statue that I am bringing to

Myanmar is rubbed that it will make a pitch that is too high. That is how we will know that it is a fake. It is not a genuine Kapu statue. That is what I think the answer means. The capo tells me that, he concluded. The dancers were all back in their first positions now, again staring straight at the two of us sitting on the barstools. What we must have looked and sounded like to them was still a complete mystery to me.

Zooks, I said in astonishment, you certainly have reached an interesting conclusion. I mean, Jeepers, could you be right? A fake Kapu statue you have, you think? Criminey, I am amazed at what you have surmised. The pitch is too high, you think? Is that it? Egads, I am dumbfounded that you were able to glean all that from what little information you have.

Oh, but surely it is all due to you, the quack, quack man insisted. It was you who opened my eyes. And, all because I opened the fortune cookie that looked at me. Yes, don't you see, he said with eyes now wide open and bright, it is all due to you. You were the one with the answers, just as the cookie said. But, now I must hurry. He downed the last bit of drink that remained at the bottom of his glass. He stared at me with a face lit up with anticipation. I must go and figure out what to do about the fake Kapu statue. Thank you so much for giving me the quack, quack. The fortune cookie was right – you were indeed the man with the answers.

Then the strange man leaped up from his barstool and hurried out of the bar through the front door. I watched him as he went. What an exceptional guy, I thought. I shook my head. What a far-out guy. I looked back at the ballet dancers. A bottle of triple sec appeared to have lost its tutu.

After a short while I finally relaxed a bit. That certainly was a zany, exotic experience, I mused. Yes indeedy, a truly bizarre encounter. Bizzarro! It dawned on me that

coincidences can sometimes be quite overwhelmingly enigmatic. That one certainly was. But, I then realized, I was getting more than a bit hungry. Yes, I definitely was a bit peckish. But, hmmm, wait a minute, I remembered that the strange quack, quack man mentioned a Chinese restaurant just down the street. You know, that sounded good. Okay, fine; Chinese it would be.

The Kung Pao chicken was pretty tasty. I was finished with my dinner and felt sated and content. I sat slumped in my chair reminiscing about the weird guy at the bar and I had an intangible, dream-like feeling that the whole thing had not happened at all, that it was all imagined somehow, that it was an illusion, a dream, mirage, or phantasm of some sort.

The waiter then interrupted my reverie. He came with the bill, and of course, with a fortune cookie. I took the cookie from its plastic wrap and set it on the table in front of me. I stared at it for a while just out of curiosity to see if it might be looking back at me. But, no, nothing seemed out of the ordinary for a fortune cookie. It was not looking at me in any way that I could discern. I tried closing one eye and looking at it with the other eye. Then I tried the closed eye. And, you know, for a minute there I thought maybe, just a smidgen, that it might be looking back at me. Well, that gave me a bad case of the willies, so I stopped doing that.

I then picked it up and broke open the crisp little tan cookie and removed the paper inside that supposedly held my fortune. Right away I noticed that this piece of paper was much larger than those normally found inside fortune cookies, and it seemed to hold a very long fortune. Very long, indeed. Freaky, I thought.

I unrolled the paper and noticed that the long message on the fortune paper included an asterisk. Yes, that's right, an asterisk. I glanced quickly to the bottom of the

fortune, and sure enough, there it was: a footnote. A footnote in a fortune cookie fortune. That is a new one on me, I thought. What an extraordinary coincidence. Today must be a very special day of coincidences, I speculated. I suppose, after all, coincidences have to build up sometimes. It's probably just another strange law of nature, you know, a massive build-up of coincidences day. Perhaps today was one of those massive build-ups of coincidences days.

I then stretched out the paper that contained my fortune so that it was fully open and I held it with two hands up to my face and began to read the very long, idiosyncratic message. However, before I even got through the first few words of the long message, I was interrupted by the waiter who was still standing next to my table and whom I had entirely forgotten about. He spoke to me.

I don't think anyone else in the restaurant noticed or heard him when he bent down and looked directly into my eyes with a look of pure sincerity and earnestness on his face, a look of genuine expectancy. He leaned over and quietly said to me: quack, quack.

* * * * *

"Why Are You Here?"

I was still in bed when she got up. She'd set her phone on a vibrating alarm, hoping not to wake me, but I felt the buzz against the sheets. I think I was already awake. She tiptoed to the bathroom and dressed behind a closed door. I could hear the water running and the steady stroke of her toothbrush.

"This doesn't make sense," I whispered when she came out. She carried her sandals and slipped the messenger bag onto her shoulder.

"It'll take me almost an hour to get there," she answered. "All the guidebooks say sunrise is the best time to see the temples." She leaned over to kiss my back, and I heard her bag clunk against the side of the bed. It was heavy with all her contingencies. Carrie never went anywhere unprepared.

"I meant your going alone. We're on vacation. We're supposed to do things together."

She stood up straight. "Do you want all your stories to begin with *we*?"

"Yes." My voice ricocheted off the dark walls, and she shushed me.

"I don't want us to be one of those couples who run out of things to say to each other. I want my own stories, and I want to tell them to you." She touched my wrist. Her bag bumped against the bed again. "I want to tell you first."

"Who else would you tell?"

She straightened her spine again and slipped the bag over her head. "I think that's the problem, Drew."

It was too early in the morning for such an old conversation. I pulled my hand back under my belly and buried my face in the pillow. It smelled. It smelled every morning. We'd tried the air conditioner and fan, just the air conditioner, just the fan, windows open, windows closed. Nothing stopped the damp. It seeped in through the walls with the darkness, and all night it gathered in our sheets and pillows. It tangled our hair and twisted our dreams. Every morning we woke up musty and sweaty and sour. It was like the entire room had morning breath. And my pillow was the hairy tongue.

I rolled off the pillow, but it was too late. The latch on the door clicked into place. She was gone.

I didn't actually have plans for the day. When Carrie had asked on Thursday, I muttered something about touring the silk farm, but I didn't really care how they got the silk out of the cocoons. If I really needed to know, I could always look it up on Wikipedia. Instead, I spent the day wandering around Siem Riep – again. A young man with no legs sat in one of the alleys and wove bracelets to order. I sketched a rough design of little doves and our wedding date, and the guy nodded. He knew what tourists liked. So I left him to his work and parked myself at a table pushed up against the wall across the alley.

I didn't know one restaurant from another. They all had wooden tables wobbling on uneven sidewalks. The placemats were bamboo. The condiments were clustered in rustic pottery dishes that were locally manufactured. The whole place was decked out in cliché, but I liked the comfort of it. I drank a chocolate-banana milkshake and read Australian gossip magazines while the guy worked. When he finished, he hollered something indecipherable, and I strolled over with my money ready and a tip I thought would make Carrie proud. I even mumbled *akun jann*, the full extent of my Khmer phrases. Then, with no other plans on tap, I went back to my table

and ordered a bowl of *amok*, mostly because I couldn't resist the name. Food run amok. Classic. The soup was pretty orderly, though. There was nothing unidentifiable in it. It had subtle layers of lemongrass and coconut and probably sixteen things I couldn't name, but it wasn't too spicy, and none of the vegetables were cut too big. I was satisfied.

Carrie was not.

"It doesn't make sense," she said.

"Isn't that what I said?"

But she didn't respond. We were in our room again, cross-legged on the freshly laundered sheets. The balcony door was open, and although there wasn't exactly a breeze, the air finally felt like it could breathe. The potted plants under the eaves had straightened their spines and stretched their arms, and the setting sun warmed the white walls and white sheets into a golden tropical postcard. With Carrie's shower-moist skin and damp ringlets, the whole scene was set up for the kind of chick-flick romantic moment that only Carrie knew I loved. Except she wasn't exactly present. Her mind was still riding down the dirt road she had discovered on the way back from Angkor Wat.

"Why didn't I just buy the stupid drawing?" She was almost crying.

"Because it was a stupid drawing?"

"That's not the point."

"So what is the point?"

She toppled. Her body just crumpled forward, and her head landed on my thigh. All I could see was her hair draped over my leg and her back, that little ladder of her vertebrae disappearing under her tank top. Sometimes when she did yoga, I would sneak up on her and

play the discs of her spine like notes on a keyboard. She always laughed, but this mood was new territory. I had no idea if levity was even an option.

“Carrie,” I whispered. “Care Bear?”

Levity was a bad idea. She growled against my leg, and when she tossed her head, I saw the damp pattern her hair had left on my shorts. Seeing it made it real – and itchy. To distract myself, I gathered her hair and coiled it around my fingers, but that squeezed out drops that landed on her back. She shrugged me off and sat up, shaking out her curls.

“He wanted money,” she said.

“Yeah.” I wiped my face with the bottom of my T-shirt and tried again. “So you saw a sign that –“

“Hand-painted.”

“—a hand-painted sign that said ‘Children’s Art,’ and you decided to check it out.”

“I knew if you saw it, you would go down that road.” She growled again, but it petered out into a frustrated sigh. “I hate always being the sensible one. I wanted to tell you about something adventurous, not just taking pictures shoulder to shoulder with a thousand other tourists.” She sighed again.

I squeezed her ankle. By the time she’d returned to the hostel, I was long past restless and bored. Luckily, there was always someone killing time outside the volunteer house, and I’d gone down to eavesdrop and maybe nab the hammock. It was almost four by the time Carrie rattled into the yard on her borrowed bicycle. The two day guards were going through the change of shift routine with the night guard, and Rosie, the volunteer coordinator, was waiting for her husband. They all squealed like kids when they saw Carrie. Head to toe, she had more red dirt on her than the road.

“You definitely looked like an adventurer,” I said, but she was still beyond the reach of humor.

“The road was treacherous, nothing but muddy ruts and puddles. I don’t think anyone ever goes down that road. Everyone came out of their houses when I rode by.”

I nodded in agreement and tugged at her hair. “I bet the kids were fascinated by you.” But as soon as the words landed between us, I knew I was rushing her story. I was also focusing on the wrong thing, the old thing instead of the new. The kids we taught spend at least ten minutes a day petting her red hair. They never got tired of it. Carrie hated it after the first five minutes the first day.

She scowled. “There were a few kids on the porches.” Her face lit up a little as her hands started to sketch the scene in the space between us. “All the houses were on stilts, side by side. They were tiny, just the porch and then one room inside. I could see into the rooms. They were empty, like nothing there. No chairs or tables. Maybe some blankets strung up like hammocks. They have nothing.”

“Did you stop?”

Again, it was the wrong thing. She spun off the bed and walked out to the balcony. I followed as far as the door. Down the road from the volunteer house, a small *wat* stood alone among the squat little stores and makeshift restaurants. There was a pool hall we hadn’t dared to go in and a high school where all the teenagers gathered to line dance after dark. It was a neighborhood off the tourist track, but at that moment, the sunset made it a film set. It was perfect. From the golden spires of the temple right down to the low scrim of dust left by a passing motorcycle, to the night guard tossing pebbles at a rooster in the courtyard and the

sounds of food frying rising up from the back of the house next door – I loved it all. And I never would have guessed it.

Carrie turned around. “We shouldn’t have come. We don’t belong here.”

“What happened, Care?”

She shrugged, and after a second, she squeezed her face against a fresh bout of tears. “He thought I was stupid.”

“Why?”

She glared at my error but continued before I could backtrack and offer the appropriate reassurances. “He took me all around the school, showed me the desks they built and the whiteboard they bought, the new roof. All the time he was talking about the donations, and I knew what he wanted, but I thought...” She twisted her hair into a knot at her neck and straightened her shoulders. “He showed me the school schedule. The local priests take turns teaching the classes, and once a week volunteer teachers come in to teach English. They’re booked up for something like eight months.”

“Like we’re doing,” I said.

“I don’t know what I was expecting, a gallery or something. Children running around.” She leaned against the railing. “He showed me a book, a photo album filled with coloring. They were just crayon pictures of rainbows and cows and houses.” She sighed. “He wanted ten dollars per picture.”

A breeze passed through. I heard it first in the leaves of the potted palms, and then I saw it ruffle her skirt. I felt it on my skin, on my legs first, where my shorts were still wet. The sun had almost sunk behind the temple.

“I don’t like it here,” she said finally. “All anyone wants is money.”

“They’re poor.”

“I grew up poor. I never asked anyone for help.”

“But isn’t that why we’re here?”

She yelped. Or gasped or gulped or choked. It was a sound I’d never heard before. And then she was crying. Past her shaking shoulders, I saw the night guard leaning against a tuk-tuk by the road. He and the driver looked up. Carrie followed my gaze and made that strange sound again. She pushed past me into the room. I found her in the bathroom, scrubbing her face. She spun on me.

“Would you buy the picture?”

I didn’t dare answer. But that was answer enough. She hurled the washcloth at the shower and tried to push past me again. I grabbed her wrist.

“It doesn’t matter if you didn’t buy a picture. We’re doing more than our share. We paid a month’s salary to be here. We’re teaching the kids, helping. We buy local goods, eat at the restaurants.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?”

She shook her head and buried her face in her hands. She’d lost weight since we’d arrived, and her wedding ring looked even bulkier than it usually did. I reached out and touched it. I pulled her hands down.

“I always wanted to get you a prettier ring.” I squatted a little and smiled up into her gaze. “You were right. We didn’t need matching ones.”

“Why are you here?”

“I love you.”

She shook her head, and for a second, I couldn't breathe. But then she continued. "That's what the man said. When I didn't buy a picture, he just looked at me, and he said, 'Why are you here?'" She shook her head again, but it was like the motion took on a life of its own. She couldn't stop it. Her hair came loose from the knot at her neck, and she just kept shaking her head. "I don't know," she whispered.

"I'm sure he just wanted a donation."

"I didn't want to give him one." The words rushed out of her.

"You weren't obligated."

She scrunched her eyes and mouth tight and held her breath. I'd seen her do the same thing at the end of a yoga session, and I knew the expression that would come next, the release, the settling, the softness. I waited, but when she opened her eyes, the vein that ran at an angle up the middle of her brow still pulsed. She frowned deeply.

"I wanted something better for my money. Any kid anywhere in the world could have colored those pictures." The tears pooled up again, and she rubbed at her eyes with the back of her wrist. Her voice creaked. "I wanted a better story."

I grabbed her hands and held them tight. "It's okay," I said, and when she looked up at me, I saw something I'd never seen before. She needed me to fix it. "It's okay." I kissed her wrists. I smiled. I tugged her hair. "It's okay."

"How?"

I didn't know. I shrugged. "We'll just tell a better story."

* * * * *

"Balinese Traditions"

The warm air of the terminal hit Giovanna's face as she exited the plane. Walking toward baggage claim, she saw her reflection in the mirror. Her lean frame, long, dark hair and olive skin contrasted with Pietro's robust build, blond hair, and rosy skin. The juxtaposition caused her to smile.

They didn't belong together.

That's what every confused stranger's glance telegraphed to her before asking if the boy was her son. Some simply assumed she was the nanny, telling her how adorable her charge was.

Back when Jake was beside her, no one asked those questions.

Pietro's tiny hand clutched hers anxiously. His body pressed close to her leg as she made her way to the visa counter. These past months, he never let Giovanna out of his sight, even to go to the bathroom. He crawled into her bed night after night. Exhausted as she was, she never had the energy--or the heart, really--to insist he return to his own room.

"Two visas, please," she said to the uniformed woman behind the counter. "I don't have any rupiah. Do you take euro?"

"Yes. Forty euro."

Giovanna took the visas the woman handed her in exchange for the bills, then made her way to passport control, followed by a long wait at the baggage carousel. As they waited,

Pietro's eyes grew larger and increasingly worried. His lips trembled; tears threatened to burst from his eyes.

“Oh, *amore*. It's been a long flight. You must be exhausted.” She knelt down and stroked his cheek. “As soon as we collect our bags, we'll find the taxi outside waiting to bring us back to the hotel. You'll feel better after a good night's sleep.

“I want our own house, *mamma*. Not a hotel. Why are we here?”

Why are we here, indeed? Hadn't she asked herself the very same question, at least a million times? If her own doubts weren't enough, there were her parents and her sister, her colleagues, her neighbors. No one could understand it. Not even Pietro.

She looked deep into those clear, blue eyes, with their flecks of white around the pupils. Jake's eyes. She sighed deeply. “It's where we're meant to be, *tesoro*.” She forced a smile. “You'll love it. I promise.”

A few minutes later, dragging two suitcases behind her and managing long strides despite Pietro clinging to her, she emerged into the sweltering day. Hundreds of Indonesian faces stood before her, each with a placard bearing a name. Panic welled up inside of her. She looked frantically around the solid wall of name cards, seeking out her own as the pressure on her leg grew tighter. When she glanced down, she saw the tears streaming unchecked down Pietro's soft cheeks.

“Okay, we came. Now can we go home, *mamma*?”

*

Women washed clothes in roadside streams. Bare-breasted women worked beside men in the rice paddies, flocks of ducks waddling or swimming around them. Wood carvers worked at makeshift workshops along the road's edge. Women carried enormous baskets balanced

precariously on their heads. Young children rode astride scooters that zipped dangerously between the cars. Giovanna screwed up her eyes each time one of the young drivers attempted a dangerous swerve.

She turned from the window to Pietro's body extended across her lap. Exhausted from the jet-lag and his tears, Pietro had fallen asleep just outside of Denpasar city limits. She stroked his blond locks absently.

What on earth was she getting them into? Giovanna had made so many questionable decisions in the past months, but on this trip she held firm. Jake had wanted this, and therefore, so did she. She screwed up her eyes as they barely passed a scooter driver, no more than a day over nine years old.

*

"Here we are," announced the driver. He turned and observed the sleeping boy. "You take care of him. I'll ensure your bags reach your bungalow."

Giovanna smiled and nodded, lifting Pietro as she walked into the reception office.

A man in a sarong and traditional headpiece accompanied her to her bungalow. She lay Pietro gently down on the single bed, removing his sandals. He snored gently, his angelic face in perfect repose.

"If you need anything, Madame, please do not hesitate to call. Breakfast is served from seven to ten in the open dining room beside your bungalow."

"Thank you so much. Good night."

Giovanna bolted the door behind her as he left. She extracted her toothbrush from her backpack, brushed her teeth and shed her clothes, not even bothering to locate her pyjamas. She

glanced at her watch--still on Bologna time. She tumbled into bed, watching a gecko scurry up the bungalow wall as her eyes grew heavy.

*

Sunlight spilled through a crack in the thick draperies. Giovanna observed its pattern through one wary eye. She turned to the clock on the bedside table. 8:30. On the bed beside hers, Pietro was still asleep at half past eight. Still in his own bed. She couldn't remember a night of unbroken sleep in the past three months, and here they'd both slept for twelve solid hours. The miracle of jet-lag.

She rose, pushing aside the mosquito netting, aware of the whirr of the fan above her head. The tiles felt cool and smooth under her feet. Quietly, she made her way to the bathroom. She splashed cool water on her face and dabbed her face dry with a plush, white towel.

Despite the rest, her eyes were slightly bloodshot. Faint purple shadows spread under her eyes, the result of too many sleepless nights. She rubbed her index and middle finger from her nose outward along her left cheekbone, trying to recall the radiance of her skin that disappeared months ago.

Maybe this vacation would help restore the old Giovanna.

*

Pietro sat in sullen silence at the breakfast table. At her urging, he ate a bowl of cereal, and then gazed blankly at his place setting.

Giovanna worked hard to fill the silence. "Did you hear the roosters this morning? There are quite a few ... Look up there, honey. See the people out in the rice paddies? Shall we take a walk up there later this afternoon? ... There's the start of the jungle, over there. Peaceful, isn't it?"

What a change from the city ... There's a shuttle bus going into town in a half hour. Would you like to go and see the monkeys?"

She was aware of the forced joviality to her voice, sounding almost manic to her ears. But Pietro's vacant stare caused panic to well up inside her. When he slipped into this state, Giovanna responded with forced chatter. It was absurd, she knew it was. Still, his silence terrified her.

Later that morning, Giovanna bought their entrance tickets to the Monkey Forest, and then peeled out extra rupiah notes to buy bananas for Pietro.

The bananas didn't last long. The most aggressive monkeys gathered at the entrance gate, intimidating each new visitor. Pietro didn't stand a chance. Petrified by their aggressive grunts and how they edged around him, he quickly rid himself of the entire bunch and buried his face in Giovanna's skirt. She placed a hand on his shoulder, feeling his body tremble through the thin cotton of his T-shirt.

"*Mamma*, let's go away," he sobbed.

"Oh, Pietro, honey." She channeled her most calming voice. "Don't worry. They can be a bit aggressive when they want food, but they'll be okay. I promise."

"No," he wailed into her skirts. "They want to hurt us."

"No they don't. Take my hand." She maneuvered his body away from her leg. "Do you see those men in green down there, wearing the Balinese sarong? They're here to make sure the monkeys behave, that they don't become too naughty with the visitors. They'll look out for you. And so will I." She met her son's gaze and saw the pleading look in his eyes. He was scared about more than the monkeys. Would she be able to look out for him like he needed? She didn't

know, but she forced a confident smile and pulled him gently onto the entryway path. “Come on, *amore*. You’ll love it.”

They wandered the Monkey Jungle’s shaded paths and watched the macaque run alongside them, swing from the trees, and scurry up statues or temples. Pietro delighted in the monkeys who sat beside carved monkey statues. He watched a mother macaque scoop up her young and place him onto her stomach, carrying him along as she moved around.

When he came upon a wading pool, he stopped short to see the monkeys jumping from the branches to splash in the cool waters. He observed as they chased one another, as they fought, as they cannon balled into the water, then shook out their wet fur, hitting the spectators.

Although she might have been mistaken, Giovanna may even have witnessed a ghost of a smile on Pietro’s face. “You like them, don’t you?”

“I do.” He nodded. He was silent, watching two monkeys rolling over one another in a fight. “Dad likes monkeys, too. He should be here with us to see them.”

Giovanna felt a lump forming in her throat. Her tongue felt dry. She nodded silently, afraid her voice might fail her. “You’re right, darling. He should,” she managed in a voice that almost sounded normal.

*

Pietro stared at the carp flittering through the lily pads. The giant koi pond stretched before the ornate Pura Taman Saraswati temple. Giovanna admired its orange color, its intricate carvings and elegant spires. It looked so tranquil surrounded by water. She breathed in deeply, feeling a sense of peace.

“Madame, your nasi goreng.”

She turned her eyes from the temple to face the waiter. “Thank you.”

“And you, young sir. Your fish.”

“Thank you,” Pietro said quietly, eyes downcast until the waiter left. “Do people in Bali always sit on the floors, *mamma?*”

“No, honey. But it’s comfortable, isn’t it? Sitting on these mats, with the view of the pond and this temple.”

He nodded solemnly, looking like a seventy-year-old rather than the seven-year-old he was.

Giovanna remembered that playful spark in his eyes, the one that had disappeared. Would it ever return? She so longed to hear that high-pitched giggle, to watch his whole face light up when he smiled. Instead, he sat before her, a faint frown of concentration on his face. She knew if she tried to speak with him, he’d provide monosyllabic responses, preferring to be left in silence. Their days were punctuated by silence now.

She sighed once again and looked across the lily pads to the carved gods draped in black and white checked sarongs. A Balinese girl was placing offerings of flowers on their pedestals, the look of devotion evident on her face. Giovanna wished she could believe in anything that fervently. All she felt was hollowness inside.

“*Mamma.*”

She turned to see Pietro’s pinched face observing her. “Oh, did you finish already?” How had he managed to finish when she hadn’t even touched her meal? “Would you like some fruit? Some ice cream?”

“No, thanks. Could I lie down on the mat and rest while you finish your lunch?”

She saw that distant look in his eyes. “Of course, darling. Just lie down there and close your eyes. Your body is still on Italian time.” She began eating her fried rice. Within a minute she heard gentle snoring from across the table. The monkeys must have worn him out.

Turning back to the temple she saw a woman who looked Indonesian taking a photo of a tall, blond foreigner. The man mugged for the camera and the woman laughed. He stepped toward her to retrieve the camera, but took her in his arms instead, spinning her around and kissing her. She laughed, but gently pushed him away as she looked around her. He took her tiny hand in his as they strode to the temple. Giovanna watched her indicating the statues and explaining something to him.

The waiter returned to clear her plate and she ordered fruit and tea. When she turned back, the couple was leaving the temple. She watched their departure with something like regret.

Years ago, walking hand in hand under the porticos of Bologna, she and Jake must have looked similar, his tall, muscular frame dwarfing her petite figure. His blond hair glistened in the sun, announcing to the city his foreignness. She’d loved when his huge, rosy hand gripped around her tiny fingers.

He’d come for a year to study at his school’s Bologna center during his Master’s degree in international studies. She was in the city completing her degree in Italian literature when they met at a student party. She’d almost bowed out when a friend invited her. The city was swarming with loud, drunken American university students. Willingly spending an entire evening with them at one of their parties seemed senseless. But it was there she met Jake. They’d seen one another across a crowded room, and, like the old cliché, she felt the thunderbolt. So did he. By the end of the year, he’d changed his plans for a doctoral program in America for one at the

University of Bologna, eventually getting a professor position at his old university's Bologna center.

She looked down at her wedding band. That party had been fifteen years ago. The Bali trip had been a surprise Jake arranged months ago for their small family. She and Jake had always wanted to come here. They cancelled a scheduled trip soon after the 2002 bombings. A few years later, they cancelled a second time when Giovanna discovered she was pregnant and the mere thought of travelling half-way around the world exacerbated her twenty-four hour morning sickness.

And now, years later, she was finally in Bali. She and Pietro. Alone.

*

The crowds grew denser as they walked down Monkey Forest Road. Giovanna clutched Pietro's hand tighter as they weaved their way through the crowds. She kept a careful eye on the uneven sidewalks.

A policeman in a yellow day-glo vest blocked her with his arm as she tried to cross the street. "No crossing now. Ceremony is beginning."

"What ceremony?" she asked, but he'd already moved on.

Music grew closer, the sound of unfamiliar instruments filling the air. To her left, a group of young men dressed in identical red short-sleeved polo shirts, sarongs of various patterns and flip flops approached, playing stringed instruments, drums, and a gong. Pietro observed them wide-eyed, but when the drum grew too close, he covered his ears and winced. At the intersection, they spilled into the next street. Cars waited patiently behind the police barricade lines.

"Maybe it's a parade," said Giovanna, bending low to speak in Pietro's ear.

“Look, *mamma*.” Pietro’s voice rose with excitement. “There’s a parade float.”

Pietro had seen small-town American parades when visiting his American grandparents. She turned to see what Pietro’s finger was indicating. It did indeed look like a parade float, with colorful layers arranged on top of heavy bamboo poles. On top was a large, papier-mache white bull, a young man riding on top and waving his arms in the air. At a signal, a group of young men dressed in yellow-colored sarongs heaved the float up, resting the bamboo poles on their shoulders.

“Oooh!” exclaimed Pietro, switching from Italian to English, the language spoken with his father, but one he’d been using more frequently with Giovanna. “How can they carry that through the streets? Isn’t it heavy? What are they celebrating, *mamma*? Is it a holiday?”

The old Balinese man beside him clutched Pietro’s shoulder with his long, bony fingers. Giovanna observed the deep crevices in his face, his wispy white hair, and wondered how old he was.

“Not quite a holiday, lad, but almost,” he said in accented, but precise, English. “It’s a cremation ceremony, and it brings together the whole community.”

Pietro’s big blue eyes widened as he looked up in confusion. “A cremation ceremony?” The music grew louder and Pietro turned back to the street where a group of colorfully-clad women walked behind the float. Enormous baskets of fruit and flowers were perched high on their heads.

The old man observed the women, too, before turning back to Pietro. “Yes. Three people have died. In our religion, we wait and allow their spirits to mingle with the elements: with the earth, air, fire, light and water. Then we cremate them so that their souls can return to live again, perhaps within a baby about to be born to the same family.”

Pietro frowned, a furrow forming between his brows. He looked so much like his father when he was up late writing an article or preparing a lecture. When did Pietro learn to adopt the same expression? Or had he always done it and she'd never noticed before?

“People can come back as a baby? Into the same family where they used to live?” The furrow grew deeper. His voice took on a breathy quality.

The shadow of a smile formed on the old man's face. “Yes. That's what we believe.”

Pietro remained silent, turning back to see the street celebration, the swirl of colors of the mourners dancing to the raucous music. Giovanna pressed against him, feeling the tremor of his shoulders. The sunlight caught the glint of tears in his eyes. She shouldn't have brought him here.

How could they free themselves from the crowd, when they could move neither forward nor backward, hemmed in by the throngs of celebrants and observers? But now Pietro was looking up at the old man, and the sadness transformed into a glow. He no longer looked distraught. Was that a smile in his damp eyes?

He reached up and tapped the old man on the arm. “Is it just your religion, or can the dead come back for others, too?”

Giovanna caught her breath. His little face looked so earnest. His blue eyes burned with a hope she hadn't seen in so long.

“My daddy died, and I miss him. My auntie is expecting a baby. Could my daddy's soul come back to us in that new baby?”

The longing was painfully evident in his voice. Giovanna swatted away a tear.

The old man glanced at her nervously, then bent down as far as his frail frame would allow. “It's a mystery to us all, but we can always pray, can't we?”

A grin broke out across Pietro's face, the first smile she'd seen since that awful dash to the emergency room five months ago. His glowing face turned up to hers. "*Mamma*, did you hear? Daddy might come back! Now we just have to wait for *zia* Lina's baby to be born."

She felt her heart breaking all over again at the idea of pointing out what the priest had already explained to Pietro: that his father was in heaven, that he could hear Pietro's prayers. His eyes examined hers, waiting for her affirmation.

"Yes, my dear." She took a deep breath. "Maybe. We'll have to wait until the baby is born to see."

He smiled up at her, looking even more like his father. He leaned into her, throwing his arms around her waist in a hug, his rosy skin against her olive skin. Her long, dark locks tumbled over his tousled, blond curls. They didn't belong together, and yet they did.

The music grew louder, the dancing more frenetic. They both turned back at the cremation ceremony, a Balinese tradition, mother and son, thankful to be a part of it.

* * * * *

"The Monk"

I saw his dark eyes first, looking me over, trying to decipher me instantaneously. Bravely. He was like a small and mischievous imp. He couldn't have been more than 10 years old, but who knows here, he may have been as old as 14. Underfed.

He darted behind a building, and what could I do but follow. I turned the corner and found myself on a main thoroughfare through the city. The street was bustling with people; people in cars, on scooters, on bicycles, on foot. There were shops and stands with all kinds of merchandise. There were food stalls selling fried tofu.

On my right I saw a woman sitting cross-legged on the ground, begging for money. There was nothing exceptional about her, and she would not have caught my attention, except for the fact that she had no eyes. There were not even holes where her eyes should have been. No eye sockets, just skin stretched taught.

I had read somewhere that people in Thailand gouge their eyes out and otherwise dismember themselves so that they can earn more money begging in the streets. But her eyes did not look gouged out. They just weren't there. She was the real thing, I decided.

I walked on, and the street changed its constitution. Gone were the shops and stands and in their place were seedy bars with pounding music and numbered girls who were not so much dancing as bouncing in place like drugged zombies set on automatic. There were drunken American tourists who sat leering and who could lazily point from their seat and say the number of the girl they wanted.

I searched the crowd but by now I had lost hope of finding the boy and was just walking blindly. I stopped at a random remaining stall that sold various odds and ends, maybe called accessories. As soon as I approached eyes looked greedily at me hoping for a sale.

I picked up a beautiful chopstick for the hair and asked the lady how much. She glared at me with flat brown eyes, “100 baht”, she spat. I knew that was way too much but I didn’t care. I asked her to put it in my hair for me. How she hated me then, and pulled and jerked my hair unnecessarily hard. It’s no wonder she hates me, I thought to myself, walking around unfettered, a stranger in a strange land, free, able to come and go as I please. While she stands at a knick-knack stand all day and always will.

She must think I’m rich, I thought, and probably to her I actually was. Freedom is walking around unknown in a foreign place. I left the stand 100 baht poorer, but still had a bit of money in my pocket, plus a new up do.

The sun beat down and I stared at the ground. I had lost all hope of regaining site of the boy in such a crowd. On the curb I saw a pile of cockroaches that just plain beat out the cockroaches back home in the south just by their sheer tremendous size. These were more than cockroaches. These were monsters. And there were dozens and dozens of them.

In my memory now it seems like there were hundreds of them, but I think in reality it was more like two or three dozen. They were all crawling all over each other in a big pile in the corner between the curb and the street. I stopped and stared in disgusted awe, and the look on my face must have revealed my inner feelings as I suddenly heard a peel of laughter belting out.

I looked up to see a sort of fat dwarf, female I think, staring and pointing at me and howling with laughter to the extent that she actually held her belly with both hands and chortled

like a drunken sea captain, while passersby looked on and smirked, no doubt thinking, ‘look at the lily white, can’t stand the site of a roach.’

At that moment a little motorized golf cart or a vehicle pulled up with a driver crying out the well known shout of ‘tuk tuk!’ Though these words were usually an annoyance to me, I was on this occasion happy to quickly disappear from that spot.

I accepted his offer and climbed inside. We sped through the city, dodging the cars, the scooters, the bicycles, and the pedestrians. I told the driver to take me somewhere where I could get a good cup of tea, though my intention was actually to get a beer.

We stopped at a corner after driving in circles for a while, and I paid him his money, only haggling as a matter of course. The café on the corner served both tea and beer and had seating outside on the back of the building off the main street.

I seated myself at one of the tables outside and watched the few people who meandered by, though it was too sparsely populated to be a good people watching location. After a while, a waiter came by and took my order.

When he came back he was carrying my Singha along with a bowl of peanuts and, for unexplained reasons, a game of Connect Four. I hadn’t seen a Connect Four since I was a kid, and the sight of it made me wax nostalgic. “In case you get bored,” he said, and I guess he intended for me to play it by myself like solitaire.

Uneventfully, I drank my beer and was on the verge of leaving when I saw a boy approaching my table and I knew without a doubt that it was him. He was carrying with him an armful of flowers which looked to me devotional in nature.

He walked up and placed a flower on my table. He smiled at me and said, “10 baht.” I saw the flower was actually a chain of flowers, white, done into a small circle like a bracelet,

with a small chain of red flowers trailing at the ends. All I had left was one 100 baht bill, so I took that out and gave it to him.

“I don’t have any change,” he said. “That’s alright,” I replied, “no worries.” He looked confused. “Just keep the change,” I explained and smiled convincingly, I thought. “No,” he said, “that’s too much, I can’t do that.”

“Ok,” I understood, I picked up the flower off the table and gave it back to him. “No, keep it,” he said pressing the flower into my hand. Then he added, “Just drop it off at the temple.”

I held it in my hands and its delicate aroma filled my nose. The world was suddenly good, happily scented. Seemingly without reason I said “Do you want to play Connect Four?” and I motioned to the device sitting lamely at my empty table.

He smiled once more, did a slight bow, then turned on his heel and was gone. I sat for a second wondering if he had understood my question, then I realized that he was gone. I hastily laid my 100 baht note on the table to pay my bill of 30 baht, then charged off into the night not waiting for change.

“Wait!” I called out after the boy, then for some reason I added, “Who are you?”

He rounded a corner and was gone. Until I rounded the same corner and caught sight of him again momentarily. Rows of flowers were steaming out behind him. Why was he running? What did he want from me?

It was as if he were purposely antagonizing me, but he was too young to understand that, wasn’t he? He was just a kid after all. Maybe this was just a big game to him.

I was running. I ran past a little square with a fountain, and I could still see his orange shirt ahead in the distance so I kept on. Except I was at that moment interrupted by a stout woman wearing blue jeans and a white t-shirt who was blocking my path.

She held some sort of bags in my face. I tried to hurriedly step around her but she expertly stepped in my way as if she did this every day. "Food for the birds?" she smiled a toothless grin still holding the bags about six inches from my face. "Thanks, some other time maybe," I replied, glancing around furtively, but to no avail. He was gone again.

"Are you sure, miss? They would like it so much, see how hungry they are?" she motioned to the legions of pigeons and some doves flocking around the fountain. She saw the look of pity on my face and quickly held out a bag of seeds for me to take. Really, I had nothing to lose. "Sure, why not?" I said.

I was following a boy, and I didn't know why. And I had lost sight of him. I sat down on a bench and started throwing seeds randomly, wondering how I had ended up here. Immediately, hundreds of pigeons flocked around me in a sort of mad bird frenzy bordering on a bird riot. I was nervous. I got more nervous when the bolder ones started to land on me and peck at the bag of food in my hands.

I stood up to take my leave, and just then a relatively large and stocky man who had been eyeing me from the corner of the fountain hastened up to me matter of factly stating in a loud voice, "20 baht!" he held out his hand with his palm up for me to place the 20 baht in and looked at me with his eyes slanted with anger and his short square face set in a grimace, already anticipating problems.

“Excuse me?” I said innocently, as if I didn’t understand what was happening, cursing myself for being so stupid, and cursing myself for leaving my last 100 baht on the table at the café. “The food you used cost 20 baht. You fed the birds, now you have to pay for the food.”

I began to protest indignantly, “But, she didn’t say anything about paying, she just gave me the food.” The woman in question joined the conversation and began screaming, “Yes, this woman took the bird food and now she is refusing to pay!” The man joined in the chorus, “She is a thief! She thinks you get something for nothing!”

Although I protested loudly in my defense, the bystanders didn’t raise an eyebrow. They were totally indifferent and obviously used to the charade that the pair at the fountain played out daily. I sensed the futility of arguing further. I said, “ok, ok, I’ll pay. Just chill out please.” They pair stood silently waiting for their 20 baht, I saw the woman cast a victorious glance over at her cohort.

I reached into my bag and pulled out my wallet as if to pay, then I clutched my bag and as fast as I could and took off running. I made my getaway to the Chao Phraya river where a group of monks dressed in orange robes were waiting for the water taxi. I went and stood in the midst of them. I noticed that several of the monks were smoking cigarettes, and two had visible tattoos. These aren’t like the monks back home, I thought to myself.

A big German with lots of blonde leg hair was also standing in the taxi queue. He obviously wanted to make contact with me, and it was only a matter of seconds that he managed to hold out before he approached. He told me he was German, which had been obvious from the get go, and had just arrived from Hamburg the day before. I pretended to be Norwegian, which I do quite often when I’m abroad, so as not to arouse the chagrin of my hosts. Sometimes I’ll pass myself off as Swedish even. Nobody even questions it. Although one time I did have an

individual insist that I was lying and was in fact Russian. However, that individual was quite inebriated and on a tourist boat.

The water taxi came, and I excused myself from the German and filed onto the back of the boat with the monks. If you don't go inside in the air conditioning and just stand on the deck on the back of the boat, you can ride for free.

We sped up the Chao Phraya, and I waited two stops before I got off. I thought that put enough distance between me and my latest incident.

It happened to be the same stop that all of the monks were getting off at, so I just sort of floated off the boat in the crowd and let myself be carried to the docks. Then the crowd of monks departed and I was left at the dock standing all alone. I didn't know where I was going.

I noticed a big complex of temples in front of me. They looked odd because they were a bunch of different styles in a big jumble. There was a Chinese Taoist temple, and what looked like a Burmese temple along with the standard Thai temples.

I started walking towards the complex instinctively. A man who had been standing talking to a group of other men suddenly came up to my side, "I'm sorry miss, the temple is closed. However, I can take you to see the top five sites of Bangkok for only 100 baht." I pressed past him stating flatly, "I'll try my luck." He turned away more resignedly than I anticipated.

As I was walking to the temples, a strange fog gathered and hung in the air. By the time I had reached the temple gates the fog had transcended upwards and formed into the most outstanding clouds I had ever seen. I later found out that these type of clouds are called mother of pearl, and are very rare. They shimmer with a supernatural power, and they appear glossy to the touch. They are like little round psychedelic mushrooms.

The sky was a crazy pattern shining vibrant on the temple roof, a white stone temple with black metal trimming, the Burmese one. It beckoned to me like I was lost at sea. I went in knowing that the boy was in there, yet at the same time knowing that it couldn't be.

And then I saw him. I watched him disappearing into the main doorway and into the temple. The flowers were still in his hands. I rushed after him and within seconds I stood at the threshold of the temple looking into the foyer.

There was a giant golden Buddha looking down at me. He sat Indian style and his hand was raised as if asking me to stop and contemplate my actions. Other than that, the room was empty. I stood in the doorway looking around. I noticed the box of flowers that the boy was carrying laid at the foot of the Buddha. I proceeded forward.

A monk entered the room at that moment and hurriedly approached me. He was smiling and offering some kind of greeting. "Where did the boy go?" I asked impolitely, and then mumbled some sort of greeting as an afterthought.

"Where did who go?" he said nonplussed.

"That boy who ran through here just now, where did he go? I saw him come in."

"There is no boy here. I am the only one in the building. Except now that you are here."

"But look over there. That box of flowers, at the foot of the Buddha. He put that there just one moment ago."

"Oh, no, miss," the monk smiled somewhat condescendingly, "I put them there myself this morning, just as I do every morning."

I looked around in vain for further evidence of the boy's entrance into the temple. The monk was lying, I knew it, but why?

"Would you like some orange juice?" he said out of the blue.

“What? Come again.”

“Orange juice? You look famished, you are maybe confused. Come sit down with me and have a cold drink.” I followed him unwittingly to a little side suite behind the Buddha with a desk and some whicker chairs.

As we sat I decided on my next line of offense, “So the boy that ran through here...”

“There was no boy. Forget the boy.” He answered, smiling serenely.

“So,” he continued, “you came here on money from the state welfare office?”

“No.” I said.

“Then how did you come to be here?”

“I worked, I bought my own ticket.”

Same smile, yet patronizing.

“You are married, but you have left your husband.”

“True,” I said, “and what about yourself.”

“Monk,” he answered gesturing to his orange robe. Then he said, in a statement not a question, “You don’t know where you are going.”

“True again,” I said, “Do you?”

“Yes,” he replied, “you are staying here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You will leave the temple now. When you come back to the gate you will turn right. Walk past the first cross street to the next block. Halfway down the street is a dress shop. You will go into that shop and up the stairs. There at a sewing machine sits an elderly lady waiting for you. She has been waiting for someone to come help her with the shop, she is too old and cannot run it by herself any longer. That is what you will do from now on.”

He stood up briskly to escort me out. As we walked to the door I said, “Are you sure about this?”

“Of course my dear.”

“Oh, but one more thing,” I said as we approached the front entrance, “I have to show you these wondrous clouds that are outside the temple right now. I think they led me here.”

He walked outside with me, and we stood together staring up at the sky. It was plain and boring and overcast and gray.

He turned to me smiling and said, “Looks like you were wrong about the boy and the clouds as well.”

* * * * *

"Chôm Chôms and Tic Tac Toe"

The daily market of Hoi An in Vietnam nudges up against the murky waters of the Thu Ban River. Low tarps drape across a narrow walkway and tuck in carts of fruit, fresh fish, rice, vegetables, jewelry, fans, and hats together with hundreds of people. It's hot, the air is trapped, and it feels like you're maneuvering through a stifling blanket fort. Walking in any fashion other than single file is impossible, yet scooters weave through patrons, carts, and cages of chickens.

Even at 7AM, it is impossible to move languidly from table to table in the market. The chaos doesn't allow for browsing. Children are towed behind their mothers by the wrist. Women wave large, fresh fish at me as I pass, hunching over beneath the low tarps that are well above the heads of the average Vietnamese person. Chickens cluck, smaller caged birds squawk, and flies land on everything. The smell of freshly caught crabs and clams and other cockroaches of the ocean hang in the air, trapped and baking beneath the blue tarps. I search for a way out of the labyrinth of tables until I spot a fruit that I had fallen in love with two summers ago in Costa Rica.

There, it's called a *lichia*. In the US, it's called a rambutan. But the Vietnamese name is my favorite, *chôm chôm*—meaning hairy. The small reddish-pink fruit is about the size of a golf ball when ripe and gets its name from the small spines that cover its skin. It reminds me of all the joy that a pink Koosh ball once brought to the children of the 90s.

Breakfast, I think. I approach the young Vietnamese woman bagging clutches of *chôm chôm*s, and ask slowly, "How much?"

She takes out two bills from her change purse to show me. A blue 20,000 VND and a yellow 10,000. It totals a buck-fifty American.

I pass over the paper money to her and she hands me the bag.

“*Cám ơn,*” I say. “Thank you.”

She smiles back, but I can only tell from the slight squint of her eyes and the raising of her cheeks. Her mouth and nose are covered in a pink facemask with white Hello Kittys on it that protects her face from the sun. “*Cám ơn,*” she says in a delicate voice, and waves as I turn away from her table.

Leaving the market, I search for a quiet place to enjoy my bag of *chôm chôm*s and scribble on some pages in my notebook. I’m in country to be a travel writer and travelling with 24 other Americans who are also students in my travel writing program. It’s difficult to allow yourself to be engulfed by a culture when you’re travelling in a herd of 25 Americans. You stick out. You become a spectacle. You don’t get to experience the candidness of a situation. I’ve broken from the group on this day to try to blend in better. I’m hoping that without an entourage of American travellers, I can experience and observe a few candid moments of Vietnamese life.

Across the river from the market is a quieter, less touristy part of Hoi An. It hugs the outskirts of the normal tourist beat and marks where the more residential section begins. Balconies that border the street hold laundry that catches sunlight between its threads. A rare breeze picks up the scents of spices and fresh herbs, coriander and mint. On some porches, large, white circular sheets of rice paper dry in the sun and decorate the street. At night, the rice paper will be brought in for dinner and in its place, brightly colored lanterns will paint the

porches and streets of Hoi An. I sit beneath a palm tree and enjoy the quiet air as another breeze from the river dances over me. I begin to people watch.

I'm not the only observer. Behind a group of boys playing soccer, a smaller boy stares at me.

He sits on the concrete steps in front of the door to a shop. He's younger than the boys kicking the ball. When I smile at him, he giggles and quickly looks away. I turn my eyes back to my notebook. I try to peer out of the corner of my eye at him again. My baseball cap is pulled low and my Ray Bans shield my eyes from the sun as I try to stealth-spy on him.

He's staring at me again. He's wearing a red T-shirt, and cropped jean shorts. A Yankees cap fits loosely around his ears. He's missing his bottom two teeth; maybe he's about seven years old. Tufts of hair stick up from under his cap. His hair is messy from catching the winds of adventure like little boys do.

I look up at him again and smile. Then wave. He looks at his toes for a quick second, and waves back. I raise a *chôm chô*m and gesture an invitation.

He accepts.

When he's about a foot away, I take off my sunglasses. "*Xin chào*," I say. I'm still self-conscious with my Vietnamese greeting, so I add my safety net, "Hello."

"Hi," he says. I hand him the piece of fruit. He smiles and starts to peel back the prickled rind revealing the fleshy fruit inside that looks like a skinned grape. If I were to bite into an eyeball, it might feel like this—except for the pit.

"I like your hat," I tell him. "Do you know the Yankees?"

"Yeah!" he says, "Derek Jeter, number 1."

I laugh and nod. "He definitely is," I say.

“You like the Yankees?” he asks. His eyes are wide with excitement for a real connection.

I can’t bring myself to tell him that I’m a Boston fan.

“I, uh,” I start, then look at his dimpled cheeks that would make any Red Sox fan want to turn tail and cheer for the Bronx Bombers. “Yeah,” I say, “They’re all right. Jeter’s number one.”

I close my notebook and set it down on the grass, and grab a piece of fruit for myself.

“What’s that?” he asks, pointing.

I open it for him and show him. “It’s my notebook,” I say, “I’m a writer.”

“Like stories?” he asks.

“Sort of,” I respond. His English is very good, he has been taught in school and probably at home, but I’m not sure how well ‘creative nonfiction’ will be grasped by any seven year-old anywhere, regardless of their native language. “I write stories that are true,” I say.

His forehead wrinkles in thought. “About what?”

I finish my piece of fruit and hand him another and take another for myself.

“Many things,” I start peeling back the spiny skin on my *chôm chôm*. “When I go back to America, I’ll write about Vietnam.”

“Oh,” he says. He moves from his squatting position next to me and shifts to sit cross-legged. He uses his teeth to tear into the piece of fruit.

“About me?” he asks, and he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. His bright brown eyes widen.

The question surprises me. Honestly, I have no idea what I'm going to write about when I get home. I'm on sensory overload and over-stimulated by every color, sound, smell, and taste that makes up Vietnam.

"Maybe," I say, "Do you want me to?"

"Yeah!" he shakes his head quickly and his jack-o-lantern smile widens. "My name is Thanh," he says.

Before I can ask, he tells me, "T-H-A-N-H."

"Thanks," I say. "*Cảm ơn.*"

He nods, chewing another piece of fruit.

We sit together and watch the river for a few seconds. Side by side. This would never happen at home. Someone would shout "Stranger danger!" and I would be questioned about sharing fruit with a seven-year-old boy. People are open here. They want to meet you. They want to talk to you. They want you to write about them. I'll return to my Pittsburgh neighborhood in a little over a week and smile as people pass me. Maybe one or two will smile back. The rest won't.

They'll rush by me. They won't say hello. They won't ask where I'm from or if I like staying in Pittsburgh. They probably won't sit with me and talk about the Yankees. They won't share *chôm chôm*s under a palm tree.

Quickly, I'm homesick for what home could be like, but isn't. I don't want Thanh to leave our palm tree, not yet.

"Do you know how to play Tic-Tac-Toe?" I ask.

He looks at me with his eyebrows knitted closely together. We've slammed into the language barrier. I pull out my notebook and draw a grid then fill it with Xs and Os.

“Ohhh,” he says, “like Go-moku.”

“Yes,” I say, familiar with the larger tic-tac-toe-esque game, but having never played.

“It’s like that but smaller.”

“Same same, but different?” he asks. Same same. It’s a common phrase I’ve heard here by local people, or read on tourist shop t-shirts. It’s an attempt to connect similarities across borders—a way to establish commonality.

“Exactly,” I say.

I draw a grid on a piece of paper, and hand him the pen. “You first.”

He puts an X in the right upper corner and hands the pen back to me. I put an O in the lower left. He plays the corners, placing another X in the top left corner. My dad taught me this rule while we would wait for our brunches at Bob Evans after church services. Always stick to the corners. I put my next O between his two Xs and he grins as he claims the only corner that’s left.

I put my O in the middle square, and hand him the pen. He triumphantly puts an X between two others on the left side of the grid, and laughs.

“I win!”

“Good job,” I say.

Behind us, a woman calls. Thanh calls something back to her.

“I have to go,” he says. “I have to go to lessons.”

He gets up, and I hand him the last *chôm chôm*. He thanks me and bows his head. He asks if I’d really write about him. I told him I would. That I would write about the Tic-Tac-Toe King who beat me in Hoi An. And that he’s a bigger number one than Derek Jeter.

* * * * *

"He Sees Women Planting Rice"

Laos

Swift winds had long since died there. Air tumbled
like a lazy toddler over paddy
grasses. Women in round bamboo hats, hats

he'd seen in war movies, plucked green tufts, one
by one until they held salad bundles.
even in the heat, particularly

stifling that day, they covered head-to-foot—
evading sunburn and dengue fever.
They transferred grass between paddies, picking

then replanting, pushing roots of each strand
Back into the soft-silt, mother-womb, birth-
lair, warm and ripening in endless sun.

The grasses were divided, separate
by centimeters inside the paddies,
and the women straightened their backs, it seemed,

for the first time in days. They stretched toward
light, the driving sun, harsh but fair, and breathed.
The women too, were spread like rice tufts

across the expanse of field—separate
but similar, they swayed simply with breeze,
grew with sun and mud and water. He knew

then, as he always had figured,
that one becomes what they harvest, that rice
is the conduit for callused hands, bent

backs and sunburns. But in each grain is strength,
is love, is the calm of rice fields stretching
into jungles which could never know death.

He knew that his life, devoid of harvests,

attached to nothing implanted in earth,
could disappear with little consequence.

"Fly Song for Laos"

Vientianne

In samsara, the great soup of souls brims
with suffering—deer once worms, dogs once ants,
trees once monks, bears once fish and flies once men.
The petty, greedy, angry, murderous men
relegated to the lowest rung, bugs,
bacteria, lives gone with sprays and swats.

In *samsara, samsara, samsara.*

The movements of six legs imperceptible
dancing inches, feet, in flicks of feet
around glasses of Lao coffee and bread,
and go-stop webbed wings strobing whipped air past
our clumsy ears which numb one hundred flaps
into a death-pitch siren shriek—the *buzz*—,
are the subtlest annoyance, the human
bond which transcended into the primal
understanding that some life is tactless,
some life itches skin before it touches
and some life buzzes decay and shit piles.

In *samsara, samsara, samsara.*

Still, in Laos, we kill none, feed their maggots
with our dumpsters, give them meaning through our
gentle swats and their evasions, watch them
breed on our clear windows and cheer them on
for lust fulfilled so wantonly, for sex
in midair and the freedom of it all.

In *samsara, samsara, samsara.*

It's not their filth, no, we've seen them try,

rinsing their antennae dexterously
with digits stained in refuse and discard,
like the market alley cats that lick paws
of fish-gut-fur to clean their faces,
like the people who wash with dirty water
in the dank sewer-stinking showers.

In *samsara, samsara, samsara*.

"Cam Wept Here"

A vanishing sunset
skirts the precipice
of Langbiang Mountain.

Lilies of the Valley
command us to their bells
silent in early twilight.

Clustered in white,
their floral notes provide
a sweet fragrance for our kiss.

Our passion sealed,
a muted sky celebrates
in hushed hues of muddy silver.

Night falling,
we ride our bikes into the village
on a slippery slope,

And hide in our jackets
like frightened turtles
as we walk past lighted windows.

* * * * *

"The True Face"

The tree rubs
its reach through
villages veiled
beneath nuoc mam frowns,—

aging creaks sing
before willing spills
leaving every buổi sáng
every gaze
very little

* * * * *

"Coffee at 5:43"

The espresso machine
hisses in angered protest,
as white steam erupts
from silver fringes,
plunging into
white dairy froth

A man eats
in hurried solitude,
each morsel,
a masticated thought,
an anxious glance

A foreigner enters,
hands in his pockets,
self assured and
certain of his place,
in this world

The manager paces about,
in yellow that melds
with browns and greens
of shelves
and false shrubbery,
that stand silent,
on display

Bossa flows
on the cusps
of consciousness,
its fluid rhythms,
cast aside

by the motions,
of afternoon

coffee

* * * * *

"While I Was on the Road"

I'm by myself on this long road.
I like it fine if truth be told.
Afar ahead my fate awaits
But now it looks like I'll be late.

For fair she was this girl beside the road.
Perhaps a bit too fair if truth be told.
She had a glass of water in her hand.
Perhaps it was a custom of this land

To offer water to strange men upon the road.
I find that to be very odd if truth be told.
Her stare was strong and straight at me. It stabbed my soul.
Then she said, 'Come here, stranger, drink this ere you go.'

Of course I could ignore her and continue down the road.
I wasn't even slightly thirsty if truth should be told.
But here she was, a glass in hand, a smile I can't refuse.
Apart from time, and time I have, I'd nothing else to lose.

I walked to her. I took the glass. My eyes were taken off the road.
I took my time. I drank it all. I tasted every drop if truth be told.
She knew I liked it. She, too, did like it. I could tell from her smile.
Time was completely still and everything was quiet for a while.

And then she took my hand, said, 'Come with me!' and led me to a different road.
I tried resisting but she insisted. Well I was weak if truth be told.
She took me far, far, deep into the woods, as if to make me lose my way.
And lost I was. My road was nowhere to be seen. She had led me astray.

And then I found myself dancing along with her. I had forgotten my own road.
And while we danced she said, 'Where were you heading?' I said, 'No idea'. And truth was told.
'Can I be lost with you?' I asked. 'Of course,' she said. And we continued dancing in the woods.
Sometimes while I'm in bed with her, I dream about a distant road, a dream I never understood.

"I Know I'm Whispering into the Wind"

I know I'm whispering into the wind,
My voice too soft too far for you to hear.
I know that only fools do such a thing.
You'd think I ought to speak into your ear.
But I already have tried speaking loud
And all my words were uttered strong and clear.
So sure my words would reach the highest cloud
But you, who matters most, didn't seem to hear.
The world has heard but I care not of it.
My words were meant for you alone my dear;
The rest don't interest me a single bit,
That you don't hear remains my only fear.
Now fly with haste and carry words of love.
Fly to her now, the one whom I speak of.

"To Others You Might Be a Silly Rhyme"

To others you might be a silly rhyme;
Just ink on paper; letters rearranged;
Just simply ordinary speech made strange;
An art that is long dead; a waste of time.
O but to me you are my magic key
That opens the door they call 'eternity';
My only chance to be forever free;
My only chance of immortality.
When death shall come and claim my mortal soul;
When time stands still and interests me no more;
When I'm but bone and dust and done with all;
I shall refuse to knock on heaven's door.
But I shall come and rest in peace in you.
And when someone reads this, life shall renew!