

Anak Sastra, Issue 14

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[Kawika Guillermo](#) (Twitter: @kawikaguillermo) is a gender-confused mama's something-or-other, a gasoline-and-fire mixture of Irish, Chinese and Filipino, and a heathen with just enough faith to keep writing fiction. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *JMWW*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Annalemma*, and *The Monarch Review*. He spends his days endlessly revising his novel in Nanjing, China, where he also teaches multicultural literature, edits for the journal *decomp*, and hosts the podcast *New Books in Asian American Studies*.

[Kristin Ronzi](#) is a sophomore at Georgetown University. Her work has been featured in the December 2013 issue of *EastLit* and will be published in the upcoming editions of Leodegrance's Flash Fiction anthology and *The Anthem*.

Annette Greene is a freelance writer and educator living in Washington D.C. She writes on a variety of topics including health and wellness, travel, and cross-cultural communication.

[Teresa Peipins](#) is a writer of Latvian descent from Western New York. She lived abroad for over twenty years. Her chapbooks, [A Remedy of Touch](#) and [Box of Surprises](#) were published by Finishing Line Press. Her poetry, fiction, and articles have appeared in *Barcelona Ink*, *The Barcelona Review*, *Buffalo News*, *Conte*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *Poesia*, and other literary magazines in the US and abroad. She has taught English language at the University of Barcelona, the Open University of Catalonia, and presently at the International Institute of Buffalo.

[Michael Lund](#) lives and writes in Virginia, U.S.A. In 1970-71 he was a U.S. Army correspondent in Vietnam. This story ("The Death of Short-timer Sam") is one in a collection due out later this year entitled *Eating with Veterans*.

Jonel Abellanosa resides in Cebu City, the Philippines. His poetry is forthcoming in *Windhover*, *Anglican Theological Review*, *Mobius Journal of Social Change*, *Inwood Indiana Press*, and has appeared in *PEN Peace Mindanao* anthology, *Star*Line*, *Golden Lantern*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *New Verse News*, *Qarrtsiluni*, *Red River Review*, *Fox Chase Review*, *Burning Word*, *Barefoot Review*, *Philippines Free Press*, and *Philippine Graphic*. He is currently preparing his first poetry collection, titled *Multiverse*.

Um Aldrin (Twitter: @aldrinium) is a thirty-three-year-old T-shirt seller living in Bandung, Indonesia. He is the co-owner of Anti-Naked Tees and Luminous Tees.

[John C. Mannone](#), nominated three times for the Pushcart, has work in (or forthcoming in) *Raven Chronicles*, *Synaesthesia*, *3Elements Review*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Prime Mincer*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *The Pedestal*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Bloomsbury*, *Bethany House* and others. He's the 2013 Rhysling Chair, the poetry editor for *Silver Blade* and *Abyss & Apex*, an adjunct professor of physics, and a NASA/JPL Solar System Ambassador for TN.

[Alex Lindquist](#) (Twitter: @alexjustwrite) is a writer, artist and teacher. She recently received her MFA from Manhattanville College. Her most recent poems and short stories have been published in *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Inkwell*, and *Quiddity*.

[Deborah Wong](#) (Twitter: @PetiteDeborah) is of second generation Malaysian-Chinese descent. Her work is recently published in and forthcoming from *ditch* (Canada) and *Poetry Quarterly* (USA). A law graduate from the University of London, she attended the summer intensive creative writing courses at the University of British Columbia. She lives in Kuala Lumpur and is currently working on her first novel while seeking publication for her first poetry chapbook, *Colours of a Familiar Stranger*.

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January 2014 featured author interview with Kawika Guillermo

Q. How did you come up with your pen name? It's interesting, to say the least.

My mother's maiden name is Guillermo. Kawika is what she named me. Like most any name, I had no choice in the matter and don't really care for it.

Q. What motivates you to write? What do you hope to convey through your fiction?

A friend of mine was traumatized today when one of her clients started convulsing from a seizure. She works with mentally disabled people, and this particular man was mute and could not communicate at all. It was traumatizing for her because he couldn't say if he needed a doctor, or anything. It got me thinking—maybe I write because otherwise I would just laugh and scream, seized by the moments of absurdity and despair. Does that sound pretentious? Sorry.

As for what I hope to convey, in this story, I think I was trying to be funny, knowing I'm the least funny person out there. And to get out some pent-up frustrations towards travel blogs and family members. And to be like, "I went there, see!" And to get pinched by a warm literature-loving brunette.

Q. Talk a little bit about your writing process. Do you have any unusual writing habits?

I usually write at about 3pm, an hour or so after waking up. To prepare I go through a ritual of video gaming while listening to podcasts from *Democracy Now*. Nothing gives me creative energy like listening to a deluge of horrible news while running over pedestrians in *Grand Theft Auto*.

Q. As a scholar/academic on Southeast Asia, what initially attracted you to this area? And how have your interests evolved throughout the course of your regional studies?

I had lived in South Korea and traveled to China and Japan before I ever went to Southeast Asia, but when I first arrived in Thailand, I had a transformative experience. My brown skin mixed with my gender ambiguity and my free-for-a-brawl sexuality all seemed to come out as a full frontal identity, and I didn't feel like an outcast because of it. Even more, I had never been taught how to travel, so I felt like I was making it all up, inventing everything including myself. You

know Americans don't seem to travel as much as other Western nationalities unless it's for business or military, so there wasn't an easy formula for me to follow, which felt more free.

Q. You teach English literature in China. How does teaching literature influence your own writing and vice versa?

As an editor for the journal *decomp*, I've grown to dislike fiction written by literature teachers. Most of it seems too referential and lacking any edge. It's too bad, because you'd think that after having read and taught a great deal of literature, teachers would find it easier to know what's dull/cliché, and try to do something different. I hope my work reflects something new.

Q. What is your most vivid memory about having lived or travelled in Southeast Asia?

There was this thirteen year old girl named Lin I met in Vientiane in Laos, who was sent by her family to the tourist district to find a John. I was hanging out with a group of young travelers like myself, and we took it upon ourselves to distract her with cigarettes and alcohol, knowing that if she ever got bored, she would head across the street, to that Applebees-like expat bar, and find some white guy to buy sex from her. So my friends and I took her to a bowling alley and stayed up with her all night, smoking and drinking, trying to entertain her with jokes and games.

When the sun came up we felt like heroes, since we had kept her from being exploited for one night. One night. We patted ourselves on the back. But the truth was the very next night Lin would go out again, and we wouldn't be there to try and distract her. No matter our intentions, we were still just travelers with places to go and monuments to take pictures of.

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"A Travel Blog"

by Kawika Guillermo

From an air-conditioned hostel in Georgetown, Malaysia, I post my first travel blog on *Wayward.com*. After six months journeying around Southeast Asia, this is the first travel blog I've ever written. I reread it, proud of my ability to describe a place without making it seem magical, spiritual or exotic--so long as I don't look like a camera-popping tourist.

Hours after the blog is posted I receive a *Facebook* message from my father, his large, bald, white head popping onto the computer screen. He writes: "Sounds like your doin some travel still. I just wanted to meet you somewhere/anywhere."

Fear grips me. I ignore the message and distract myself with Malaysian travel sites. Museums. Hikes. Temples.

Pop!: "I'll get the airline ticket today and let you know when I arrive. Inshallah."

Inshallah: an Arabic word Dad's recently picked up as an English teacher in Dubai, meaning "God willing."

With my breath hastening, I distract myself some more. Look up Malaysian bars. Clubs. Where do foreigners go?

Pop!: "My ticket to Georgetown is leaving tonight but arriving tomorrow afternoon. I thought I had an earlier one but it didn't work out. Kwensheniao."

Kwensheniao: a Korean word Dad picked up when we taught English together in South Korea, meaning "that's ok."

"안니 괜찮아요" I write back.

How to actually write in a foreign script: what I picked up as a respectful human being living in a foreign country.

I give him time to use an online translation system, but he doesn't bother.

Pop!: "Aha, so my son speaks! I'm coming to invade you! 12pm tomorrow at Georgetown airport!"

I turn off the computer and glance at the Malay woman at the hostel desk. She frowns at a tourist in dreadlocks, wearing a Rastafarian shirt.

What have I done to you, Malaysia?

The day after my father arrives we take a 10AM bus to Penang National Park. From the back of the bus, my father exhales a thunderous snore, turning the head of a young, veiled Malay woman sitting in front of us. My father is a very large, muscular, white, and bald man. The night before, I realized the only place to take my father, without causing irreparable damage to those around us, was on a long hike in the middle of a forest, where the worst he could do was step on an anthill.

The night before: an overture of every "drunken-father" incident that will continue to haunt me. We began at an outdoor expat bar, where everyone loved my father's gentle, zen-like kindness. His subtle flirtations with the servers. His willingness to pay for drinks. Then, like a gentle bear suddenly roused to anger, there were bursts of his typical drunken nonsense. He tossed money at a Malay waitress, screaming "You're all whores!" He spent five minutes staring at a Malay couple locked in a kiss, creeping minutely closer every second, until he was inches away, and then nodded "yeah, that's how you do it." The worst moment, perhaps, was when he karaoke'd John Lennon's "Imagine," held up his finger, showing a single digit, and changed those sacred lyrics: "Nothing to kill or die for, and *one* religion, too."

In a bar full of disillusioned Western expatriates, with little to hold them together but music and language, we were lucky to leave unscathed.

The forest welcomes us with a chorus of croaks, bird tweets and insect buzzing. My father paces just ahead of me, carrying a plastic bag full of plastic water bottles. "You know," he says, "ninety-nine percent of all animal noises are about trying to get laid."

That tinge of fear suddenly returns. I did my duty, I isolated my father from the locals and the expats. But we are alone, in a forest. Trapped, together.

He keeps talking. I distract myself with the scenery. The tall trees, the bubbling brook. The animals trying to get laid. We hike up a stairway of loose stones, the sweat stain growing on his tank-top as he stares at the passing ground, sweat dripping from his chin. Despite his exhaustion, his voice still drones on, this time about his Filipina girlfriend in Dubai, who is only a year older than me. "Ela is almost thirty," he says. "So, whatever that means. Younger than me of course. But, she is a very true person. No fake. So, we are together. I know she can out-swim me, but not used to being out-hiked."

I hear monkeys hooting above us. Leaves rustle. More come out to stare, peppering the trees like brown pinecones.

"I can't explain her," my father goes on. "Innocent, but, oh, I'm just describing—just a *friend* for you, I think."

One of the monkeys throws a rock at us. It whizzes by my father's head, and skips down the mountain path. My father doesn't even notice, his breath starting to heave. Still, he goes on: "We are now officially married under Islamic law, which can also be recognized in other countries and in some other parts of our solar system. I'm guessing."

I watch a small monkey bounce up a tree like a statue on a carousel. A rock in its palm.

"I'm planning on bringing her back to the States this winter. Introduce her to your mother, our old friends."

The monkey winds his arm up. He aims at my father's bald head hovering through the forest like a big white blimp.

"Woah!" my dad shouts. Somehow, I have caught the rock, just before it landed on my father's left eyebrow. The chimps stare at me, perhaps, wondering why I had ruined their fun.

What have I done? Some unnamed Filipina in Dubai—I'm sorry. I've ruined your life.

"Monkeys!" My father sits on a fallen tree and pulls out his camera, aiming it toward his aggressors. "Now you have something for your travel blog."

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"The War Isn't Over"

by Kristin Ronzi

The streets of Ho Chi Minh bustled with thousands of people milling to get to their jobs. I dangled from the handle of one of the yellow and green buses that jockeyed for adequate space on the narrow roads. As we hit a bump in the road, the bus jostled me into the lap of the elderly woman who sat on the bench behind me. "Sorry, sorry," I apologized, straightening the camera around my neck and the notebook in my other hand.

We passed a multitude of flourishing businesses illuminated by neon signs that glowed even in the middle of the day. The smell of grilled meat from one of the street vendors mixed with the noxious exhaust of the bus in front of us.

I juggled the map out of my pocket. Unfolding it was a hassle between the sardine-packed commuters. Three more stops until my final destination. The small window showed the tree-lined forests and the vibrant business signs that were scrawled in incomprehensible Vietnamese. Most, though, had at least some English words on the glass window panes or underneath the Vietnamese writing.

"Mister Andrews?" A timid voice inquired. I surveyed the people nearby. Two feet away from me, a small Vietnamese man rocked on his shortened legs. They ended abruptly in two mottled stumps, not the type that were amputated, but the kind that were malformed. My gaze lingered at where the two stumps touched the bare gravel. "Please follow me. I'm Dien Nguyen." He stuck out his hand to shake. His English was heavily accented but easily understandable.

"Doctor Dinh sends his apologies, but he was busy at the hospital." With deft movements, he parted the sea of people. His mottled limbs contorted as he crossed the street. Each step exposed the bottoms of his stumps that were crusted with callouses. As he walked, hundreds of eyes trailed him. Unsure of the appropriate reaction, I blushed in embarrassment as he shrugged off their glances. "You speak English quite well," I noted clearing my throat.

“Doctor Dinh taught me after I started working at the hospital. When I was a child, he would come to the orphanage and give us free medical help; after I got too old for the orphanage, he hired me.”

“How long were you at the orphanage?” All propriety left me.

“All of my life, sir.” His head bowed down and he was intent on watching his footsteps. For a while we walked in silence until he said, “I want to show you something, Mister.” In the shadow of his steps, I danced through the Saigon streets.

All of a sudden, he stopped in front of a large gated building. Through the slats in the gate, children of all ages sat on the dust-covered ground. Some of them rocked back and forth, others, older children, kicked a battered soccer ball around. Cheerful Vietnamese bantered through the playground. A young woman tended to the smaller children. She pointed to the impromptu soccer game and held a little boy in her lap. Dien and I watched for a few minutes unnoticed. The children played for a while until one of the boys stopped to retrieve his sandal. He looked at the gate and caught Dien’s gaze.

“Dien,” he said and pointed towards us. The game froze as a flurry of small children trailed the soccer players towards the gate. Dien smiled and reached through the gate to the children. They spoke in rapid Vietnamese though I was able to distinguish my name in the midst of the foreign words.

With great fascination, a tiny boy reached out for my camera. I regretted not bringing my Polaroid. I snapped a couple of photos of them and waved to those in the background still crowded around the young woman. Grabbing the small boy’s hand in her larger one, she waved back and smiled.

“We should probably leave now.” Dien walked away despite the collective groan that left the children. He walked purposefully the rest of the way barely even glancing at the streets and intersections that we passed.

Tucked away off of one of the larger streets stood a large building with a red cross symbol named after a saint. The tiles and concrete around the entrance had cracked a while ago. Nurses in pale blue uniforms styled after decades-old English ones bowed their heads in greeting.

A little boy ran around the front lobby with a nurse trailing him. He paused in front of me, sizing me up. The momentary break permitted the nurse to catch up to him and scold him.

Grabbing her hand, he begrudgingly followed her to his cot. Dien headed for the lift and escorted me to the third floor.

The rooms were opened, though most of the patients were obscured by a pale blue sheet that hung from the ceiling. We passed a room where one patient released a blood-curdling moan that chilled me. Dien just kept walking. He stopped in front of a closed wooden door and knocked. “Mister Andrews is here.”

The door swung open to reveal a middle-aged, salt-and-pepper haired Vietnamese doctor. Dien turned and meandered down the corridor without another word. In a clipped British accent, the doctor offered me a seat.

“Thank you for agreeing to this interview,” I said.

“Fred Jameson was my colleague several years ago; it’s the least I could do.” He offered me a cup of tea, which I turned down before pouring one for himself. With great ease he leaned back into the chair. I opened the notebook and clicked my pen, poised to take notes.

“How has Vietnam changed since the end of the war?” I started. The question seemed like an easy introduction into the article I was writing.

“Do you think the war is over?” He asked me. I nodded hesitantly, reminded by the trick questions the nuns used to ask me in primary school.

“The war is over in America, in South Korea, in China, but it isn’t over here.” My pen scurried across the blank, yellowed pages of the notebook trailing his every word. “Every day, I see people whose lives have been destroyed by Agent Orange. People like Dien who were abandoned after being born with deformities. At least twice a month, patients are rushed here after accidentally stepping on landmines. We are still fighting a war here. So no, the war isn’t over for us.” The speech flowed out pointedly. I wondered how many people had asked him the same question.

He motioned for me to follow him into a back room in the bowels of the hospital. Two shelves lined the perimeter of the room. There were specimen jars crowded together on the shelf. There was a jar of a pickled, two-headed baby with three arms and no legs. The one next to it held a malformed fetus with an enlarged skull. The smell of formaldehyde burned my nostrils. The doctor didn’t seem to notice.

My camera remained around my neck, but undulated with each step that I took. With each specimen, there was something markedly different. “Is it just physical deformities?” I asked, leering near a jar but not touching it.

“Physical, developmental, mental, and some psychological.”

A wave of nausea overwhelmed me. The doctor had the decency to look away as my breakfast ended up in the wastebasket. He clapped a hand on my shoulder. “The formaldehyde gets to a lot of people.” The acrid taste settled in my mouth, and I didn’t bother correcting him.

“Thank you, doctor.” I asked a few more questions near his desk, but none were met with as much controversy as the first. Without Dien’s escort, I made my way back onto the main road. One of the street vendors on the corner thrust a stick of grilled meat in my face. For an exchange of a few dollars, I munched on the treat. The spices overpowered the acidic remnants that lingered in my mouth.

On the plane ride home, I composed the article and by Monday, a draft was placed on my editor's desk by 9AM. The first sentence read: “The war in Vietnam isn’t over...”

* * * * *

"Paradise, Filipino Style"

by Annette Green

"Where are the hotels?" I asked the shopkeeper of the open-air stall selling children's clothing. One single light bulb dangled from the ceiling, swaying slightly with the evening breeze.

"I don't know if we have any...try the local hospital. They have rooms they will rent to you."

My husband James and I were visiting the Philippines in the mid-1980s and a ferry stopover on the island of Masbate had taken us into a town one evening that had no electricity except for the generators that some businesses were running.

The hospital was clean, but it seemed strange to stay there as paying guests, even for one night, so we managed to find a small hotel above one of the downtown shops. The next morning, setting our sights on one of the larger islands that was more popular with tourists, we caught a 150-passenger ferry which promised to take us to Cebu before dark. Comfortable in our canvas deck chairs as night fell, no one could explain to us why our boat stayed anchored offshore. It turned out that the island piers were too small for the boat to dock. After spending an unplanned night under the stars, we were finally rescued the next morning by men in outrigger canoes who told us the delay was simply because they had taken the night off and gotten drunk.

We arrived in Cebu City late that afternoon, sharing our *jeepney* with a German tourist, Hans, and his Filipina girlfriend, Suzy. Hans was determined to "go local" and spend as little money as possible because he was a seasoned traveler and here for a month. After taking a look at their shabby hotel room with no windows, I turned to James.

"What do you think? Do you want to stay here too?"

"Well, they don't have hot water. Maybe we could look for something else," he replied.

"You're right. When we get to the beach tomorrow, the showers are going to be cold. The warmest water will be in the ocean."

After heading over to the five-storey Cebu City Hotel, we followed Manuel, the desk clerk, up a dark flight of stairs. The room he showed us had a double bed, a rickety table with two chairs, some window blinds, but little else.

“Are you sure it has hot water?” I asked.

“Let’s check,” said Manuel. “Sometimes you have to run the shower for a few minutes.”

Five minutes later, the water was still cold.

“I’m going to take you to the other side of the hotel,” explained Manuel. “The hot water is usually better there.”

The next room did have hot water and the bathroom, although not sparkling clean, was in fair condition. We met Hans and Suzy for dinner and tried some Filipino specialties: chicken *adobo* with rice and fried *lumpia*, a Filipino egg roll. Promising to meet the next morning, we said goodnight.

At 7:30 a.m. in the town square, Hans was all smiles and ready to go.

“How was your night in the hotel?” I asked.

“Great!” he said. “It was quiet, and I slept well. There was only one little problem.”

This short, stocky man lifted up his shirt, turned around, and showed us his back with 30-40 small red bite marks, equally distributed from his shoulders to his waist. It was obvious that sharing their bed in the bargain hotel had been some kind of bedbug. Amazingly, Suzy escaped with nary a bite—the taste of our friend’s foreign blood must have been too much for the bugs to resist. Hans seemed to take it all in stride and was ready to catch the bus and head with us to Panagsama Beach.

The intercity buses were full but, despite their “express” signs, they stopped frequently to take as many passengers as they could squeeze on. James took one look at the packed bus interior and decided to ride with other men on the roof. Hans followed him as Suzy and I entered the bus where every seat and most of the floor space was already taken up with people, bags, boxes, and even a chicken in a bamboo cage. One box of medical supplies was stamped “M.A.R.C.O.S.”, the acronym being a not-so-subtle reminder of the name of the current dictator of the country.

We had a three-hour ride ahead of us, and I knew I could sit on my pack, if necessary.

“Sit with us!”

I looked up and saw that the offer had come from a young Filipino couple sharing a bench seat with a baby and a toddler. They moved closer to the window to make room for me and wouldn't take "no" for an answer. Fortunately, Filipinos are small people, so I thanked them and sat down on the edge of the seat with my legs stretched out into the aisle. My hosts then began asking the questions I was used to hearing from people in this country.

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Canada, but I live in Japan."

"Why do you live there?"

"I'm an English teacher."

"Are you married?"

"Yes, my husband is riding on the roof of the bus."

"Do you have any children? How old are you?"

I knew from conversations I'd had with other Filipinos that they were fascinated by tourists like me: our white skin and "high" noses standing out in contrast to their own Asian features. This couple was very kind, and we soon lapsed into companionable silence as I pulled out Lonely Planet's guide to the Philippines from my knapsack. Looking out of the window as we passed through smaller villages, I couldn't help but notice that some of the children waving to us had swollen bellies and black hair streaked red due to a protein deficiency. Closer to our destination, I glanced at the naked baby boy sitting beside me on his mother's lap and thought how odd it was that babies didn't wear diapers here. Half an hour later, I felt the wetness on the floor of the bus under my sandals and realized that this was only to be expected after such a long ride.

At the Panagsama Beach resort, bright red hibiscus flowers along with the white orchids hanging from coconut husk planters outside our five-dollar-per-night bamboo bungalow helped make this feel like home, if only for a few days. One of the highlights of our stay was snorkeling in clear blue water and exploring a coral reef teeming with colorful tropical fish and sea turtles at every turn.

Despite the difficulties encountered in our travels here, we returned to the Philippines six months later, this time choosing to visit the island of Boracay, an hour flight from Manila. Given the white sands and gorgeous sunsets on this quiet, peaceful island where people got around

mainly on foot, I knew that, compared to the last trip, I would have fewer interesting stories to tell people back home.

Maria, a pigtailed 12-year-old, walked by our beachside bungalow every morning selling fruit from a basket she carried on her head.

“This is a paradise,” she told me a few days after we met.

“Why do you say that?” I asked her.

“Because that’s what all the tourists say when they come here to visit,” she replied, flashing her bright smile.

Maria explained that she went to school occasionally but preferred selling fruit because she liked to earn extra money for her family. There was no question that Boracay was beautiful, but I also knew that other parts of her country were far from idyllic.

At dinner that night, we had the roasted suckling pig they call *lechon* and paella served on banana leaves washed down with glassfuls of *calamansi* lime juice. The children folk dancing barefoot in their polka dot dresses with big puffy sleeves was the perfect complement to our scrumptious meal. Just for tonight here on Boracay, I had to agree with Maria: this was paradise.

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"Malay Autumn"

by Teresa Peipins

Sylvie watched Philip from the window of their hotel room, taking pleasure in the way he moved. As he paused to speak to a woman standing in front of the hotel, she felt a flash of anger. She resented Philip's delicate beauty, which always attracted attention. His thin frame and blond hair gave him a look of vulnerability.

He came in the room and put a package down on the bed; Sylvie gave him a kiss. He smiled and she felt happy, wondering why all the emotions of her life had to revolve around this person. What would Philip think of her watching him?

"I've got my camera. Are you ready to go?"

They were spending their vacation in Kuala Lumpur, where Philip had a teaching assignment at the university. He'd picked her up at the airport the previous night and wanted to show her around the city before he took her to his house in the suburbs.

On their way downtown, they stopped at a stand and had fresh coconut water. The vendor lopped off the tops of the green coconuts with a machete. Philip commented, "This will cure anything." As they left, Sylvie took his arm and sensed him draw back. He hated any public displays of affection. Usually she could keep it in perspective but nonetheless felt a pang of rejection. She'd had plenty of practice.

They met in California at a MLA conference when Sylvie was still in graduate school in New York. It took three meetings before they spoke, though Sylvie had spotted him the first day. It was hard not to notice him; he didn't have the typical ruffled grad student look. Plus he

was handsome and appeared friendly, always in the middle of a group, as if he were holding court.

She asked Philip why he chose her. "You're exotic." She never saw herself that way in New York. If anything, dark curly hair and brown eyes were fairly standard East Coast.

Philip was low key, never pompous, which stood out in the midst of desperate Ph.D. candidates trying to make their mark. By the end of the conference they were having meals together and met in New York a month later. From that point, it didn't take long for Sylvie to move to San Francisco to finish her thesis, by which time Philip could do no wrong. They shared a small apartment in Berkeley; everything was going well, her writing, and their relationship.

When she met his family she understood why he did everything well from playing the guitar to writing tourist guides to teaching. His parents, both professional therapists and definite overachievers would expect no less. When she later found the valiums in the medicine cabinet, they explained why he looked so calm and self-assured at the conference. When she confronted him, holding the bottle in her hand, "Those conferences. I have to look the part. Can't have me sweating or my voice shaking."

"I didn't realise you were so nervous."

"It's nothing. Don't tell me you're not in front of an audience."

Seeing Philip in Malaysia after three months apart, Sylvie felt herself relax. She'd worried he had changed, that he would meet someone. Memories flooded her at every corner, how he held his fork, how his forehead wrinkled when he was reading. It was the first time she was able to get away from her community college job to visit. After all the years in school, she would never escape its rhythms, its calendar, spring break and a sense of freedom.

Philip maneuvered his car easily, though he had to drive on the left and there were no rules she could discern that governed the traffic. They stopped near the national mosque and the railroad station. "The architecture is so delicate," Sylvie observed. "It's one of the few times I've seen something modern I like." Downtown was filled with skyscrapers, including the obligatory visit to the Petronas building, but there was still a sense of the old and quiet on the side streets they turned down, filled with flower vendors and food stalls.

When they got out to walk, curved archways protected them from the blazing sun. Women in pastel-colored veils and saris passed them. Old Chinese women wore what looked like silk pyjamas. All of them filled her mind with color and grace. But soon enough, the heat etched itself on her brain, and she was afraid for a moment she would pass out.

They sat down at a food stall, and Philip ordered her hot tea. "You'll see; you'll feel better." When they got back to the hotel, Sylvie felt the exhaustion of jet lag creeping up on her. She fell asleep with Philip reading next to her. When she woke the room was dark and he was gone. Despite the air-conditioning, a thin film of sweat covered her body. Sylvie lay in a peculiar twilight, but when she opened the curtains it was still light out so she went down to the pool.

The pool was deserted except for the efficient, well-trained hotel workers who didn't speak beyond set phrases and politely didn't look at her. She jumped into the water and flailed about; her swimming was never graceful, something she was particularly conscious of when Philip was around.

When she got out of the water, he was sitting with the same book in his hands. "Join me," Sylvie said.

“I was thinking about dinner.” Philip prided himself on finding the most authentic restaurants; a habit from writing guidebooks. She didn’t want to admit spicy food was hard on her stomach. “Do you want to go now?”

He shook his head, “Take your time. Sylvie picked a pack of cigarettes out of her bag and stretched out on the lounge chair. “You’re smoking again.”

“Just one. I got them in Tokyo on the stopover.” There had been something appealing about the Japanese vending machines selling just about everything. Tobacco was about the most recognizable item in them. “It is my vacation.” She’d quit a long time ago though the old addiction emerged from time to time.

The pool suddenly got crowded with a group of young Chinese women and western men, probably Australians. The group ordered tequila sunrises as if they were vacationing in Cancun.

After three days, Sylvie found her body felt different; it had an underlying scent of spices. She didn’t know what changes Philip was going through, he spoke so little of such things. At night she pressed against him, the habit of sharing a small bed in California, but here the bed was huge, and he moved away.

They had dinner in the Chinese food stalls near the night market. Sylvie had a chance to try fresh lychee and starfruit. Of all the choices of food, so far she preferred the Malaysian grilled fish and peanut sauce. There was a touch of sweetness to all the dishes. They were even using a variety of utensils to eat with: chopsticks, big spoons, and her right hand. She couldn’t get rid of the smell of spices no matter how often she washed it.

Sylvie had taken endless photos, eaten banana leaf curries, and was completely exhausted by all the tourism. As they sat at the table she turned to him, “This has been really a lot of fun.” she prefaced her comment, “but what’s all this about? We haven’t had a chance to talk.”

“They want me to stay next year.”

“Stay.” She echoed.

“I love it here, you know. It’s close to Thailand.” That was where Philip had done his guidebook writing after a stint in the Peace Corps. “I always wanted to come back.”

“So you’re staying.”

“I want to. One more year won’t affect my job. They want me to stay. I have the same salary, the same benefits. Even better since it’s tax free.”

“What about me?”

“You can work here; I can get you something. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“What if I don’t want to.”

“Don’t you like it here?”

All the visits and meals were an attempt at convincing her to stay. “I have a job too.”

“It isn’t tenure track.”

“Well, I happen to like it, and I have to start somewhere.”

“Remedial English. It’s not even what you did in grad school.”

“But now I’m getting paid for it. I’m serious; I like my job. It may not be what you’re used to.”

“I thought you’d like it here.”

“It’s not that I don’t like it. That isn’t the point. I just can’t give up everything to come here and do nothing.”

“Sylvie, all I want you to do is to think about it.”

“You already made your decision.”

“This is what I’ve always wanted. It’s where I want to be.”

“What are you going to do? Write more guidebooks?”

Philip frowned. “I can relax here. I haven’t stopped since I got the tenure, even before that; it’s been years.

“I don’t have that luxury.” She shook her head. “Another year here.”

“It won’t be a whole year. I have Christmas off and then the summer.”

“You have it all figured out.”

“I want this with you. Spend the summer; you’ll love it.”

The next day, day five of their vacation, Philip drove down the coast to Melaka, a city with a mixture of Portuguese, Dutch, and Asian influences. They visited a Chinese house filled with antiquities. In a small shop, Sylvie fingered a jade necklace. Philip took it from her. “It’s bad luck to buy one for yourself. It’s perfect with your hair.” He fastened it around her neck. “Beautiful,” he whispered.

Sylvie dreaded the long flight back and the exhaustion that awaited her. She’d have to teach the very next day back. That night as she was packing she asked, “All this time away, what’s going to happen to us?”

“I’m hoping we won’t be away from each other.”

“How realistic is that?”

Back in San Francisco, Sylvie found herself in a classic position: give up her job to be with her husband or keep it and risk losing him. The worst scenario would be losing both. Every day an e-mail from Philip awaited her with the type of words he never spoke, hearts and flowers and love. Sylvie hadn’t had so much attention since before they got married. She was enjoying it but her mind was filled with doubts. “If I have to do this for him, I may not even love

him anymore.” She spent long hours talking with her mother and anyone else who would listen to her plight.

Right at the end of the semester, she made her choice. Summer at home, finding a tenant to sublet. In August she’d head for KL; she’d come back to spend Christmas with her mother. That would appease her conscience, but there was no way out of the job dilemma.

When she put in her letter of resignation, she staved off a panic attack by breathing deeply. Her chair said, “No guarantees, you know. I’ll keep you in mind, but that’s just how it is. We can’t wait.”

The second foray into Malaysia was different. As soon as Sylvie arrived, she did battle with a shipping company which had lost a set of books she had been planning on using to compile a translated collection of modern Italian short stories. With the heat and fatigue, she burst into tears when she got off the phone. It had taken her weeks to organize the project and at the last minute, she’d sent them off because her luggage was already overweight. The other boxes with clothing and Philip’s belongings arrived perfectly.

His world of expatriate professors differed little from their usual insular environment at home. If anything, it was worse since the contact with students was so limited and no one else figured in that reality. There were the areas they were expected to live and the places they could frequent as foreigners. Some of the professors adopted a British colonial lifestyle. After one afternoon of croquet and gin and tonics, Sylvie protested, “It’s worse than Somerset Maugham.”

There was literally nothing for her to do, no function she was expected to perform. There was a woman who cleaned and left them meals. Sylvie trained herself to get used to the little lizards that hid everywhere. One dropped from the sky and fell into her morning coffee. She

screamed; then tipped it out and rinsed out the cup. At night their strange sound was reminiscent of frogs at summer camp.

Philip's job was not demanding except in the hours he taught. He left the house early in the morning to return by seven in the van the university provided. Soon enough Sylvie stopped getting up early to have breakfast with him. In the evenings she stopped herself from watching from the window for signs of the van's arrival.

Like all the visiting professors, their house was in the suburbs. As a New Yorker, Sylvie never had a great desire to drive and found herself struggling to get out of the winding streets in Petaling Jaya, which lay on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. To further complicate directions, houses were numbered by how long they had been there, the oldest house was number one regardless of its position on the block. Whenever she took the car, she drove in circles.

The overpowering heat drained Sylvie of whatever energy she had. Ceiling fans weakly spun the air around. There was one air conditioner in the bedroom where she took refuge. She set up her computer in the corner, in vigil waiting for her box to arrive.

Philip said to her at dinner, "Why don't you write a novel?"

"I barely have the energy to read them." She continued. "Daisy says we have rats. She saw one in the back yard when she was picking mangoes." Daisy was the woman who helped out around the house, and Sylvie considered her a lifesaver.

"We'll get some poison. Daisy will know if there's someone to call."

"Maybe we could get one of those monitor lizards to eat them. The neighbor said one ate his cat."

Philip laughed. "You've got to get out of the house."

“Maybe the lizard’ll come back, and we can make a shrine for it. Like in the temples. Didn’t you see the article about the temple lizard that’s a reincarnated monk who returned?”

“I must have missed it. Let’s go out. No lizards, no colleagues. I promise.”

They settled in their booth at a European restaurant. Sylvie turned to Philip over the wine and rack of lamb, “Don’t you get bored? It’s so hot, you’re not even teaching literature. Just English language.”

He looked at her as if she were crazy. “You act as if it were the end of the world to be on a vacation. Just relax and enjoy it. Can’t you do that?” She fell silent. “We could always have a baby. Now would be a perfect time, don’t you think?”

“Having a child is not something you do because your books were lost.”

“Forget it then. I’m going to do an update on the Malaysia series.”

“What?”

“The guidebook publisher, the series I did for Thailand.”

The only reason she could think of to explain his interest in travel books was it provided an excuse to comb every inch of the country. Sylvie was already burned out and managed to say, “You’re kidding.”

She felt him slipping away in the heat away on excursions into the countryside and more hours at work. If Philip had been a different sort of person, Sylvie would have suspected an affair, but she’d seen too many offers from both sexes. It would have to be either an extremely ordinary or extraordinary person to appeal to him. She herself fell into the ordinary category.

One evening they joined some of his colleagues at a typically Asian nightclub with its hostesses on display. It was the type of place Sylvie ordinarily hated with drunken businessmen and the women fawning all over them. But this one had a host, Rajit, who danced with Sylvie as

Philip sat in conversation with Nigel. She'd met Nigel before but never paid much attention. From the dance floor she watched them, heads together as if nothing could interrupt them. Nigel looked like a dark haired version of her husband.

Nigel began to accompany Philip on his trips. The heat had even drained away her jealousy. She sat at home on a Sunday morning nursing what had turned into a perpetual hangover. She was drinking a cup of coffee that hadn't been cleared away from the day before, cold and bitter.

With Philip away so often, she became a regular at Rajit's club in the evenings. Behind her were the usual expats, but she caught part of a conversation. The woman asked, "Do you think he's involved with Nigel?"

The man whose voice Sylvie recognized as Philip's officemate said, "Well, I saw them go into the john together at the Stuarts. Can't imagine why." His laugh was sharp. "If he is, he's a fool. Sylvie is beautiful and smart."

Sylvie sat for a moment absorbing what she'd heard and then tried to leave discreetly. When she got home, she took the jade necklace he'd bought and pulled on it until it broke, scattering beads all over the floor.

On Sunday night Philip arrived home in good humor. Sylvie didn't give him time to put down his bags. "Are you having an affair with Nigel?"

He laughed, "Does it look that way? He's a good friend. I've never known anyone who understood me so well. What is it, the gossip getting around? We're just friends. You know sexually I prefer you."

Her face grimaced as she let the comment sink in. "So you mean you like to talk to him and sleep with me?"

“You’ve twisted my words around.”

In November the box of books arrived and Sylvie sat down to work. At Christmas she went home, leaving Philip to his beloved landscapes and Nigel.

* * * * *

"The Death of Short-timer Sam"

by Michael Lund

"Of course, I knew Johnny," said Greg. "He's the guy who killed Short-timer Sam."

Jeff asked, "Killed him? As in murdered?"

Mark laughed. "No, as in 'put the quietus on' the radio show. A day in March--maybe the Ides of . . . , in fact--Johnny pushed the brass too far, and they canceled the program." His smile faded as he remembered the day *after* they killed Short-timer Sam, the radio personality. That was when the voice of Sam was snuffed out. That is, Johnny died.

"You'd better explain" said Cathy. "Us aging spouses of aging vets are out of the loop again and wondering which of you did what to whom."

Recently, she and Ann had found their husbands talking more about their long-ago service than they ever had. And, reading about the struggles of the next generation of veterans, they were willing to listen.

Mark and Jeff had been drafted forty years earlier and did tours in Vietnam, though they didn't know each other at the time. Jeff had grown up in Philadelphia, Mark in Fairfield, Missouri; so they entered the service in different states through Fort Dix and Fort Leonard Wood. They met six years later when they were both hired by the same university. For a long time, they never talked about their experiences, but recently they'd opened up to each other. Still, they told their wives very little.

"I was an 'information specialist'," explained Mark to Ann and Cathy, "a reporter assigned to USARV-HQ--um, that's Army headquarters in Vietnam. My group produced broadcast

announcements from the giant concrete complex in Long Binh. We used to joke that it would become 'Hanoi South' one day. Anyway, we had a pretty good sound studio, big ten-inch tape decks, first class microphones. The finished products went out on Armed Services Radio."

Jeff added. "And where I was--out on the coast in Nha Trang--I heard these nameless voices droning over the airways about security, providing sanitized battle summaries, reminding us of procedures and opportunities. And just about a month ago, I found that one of those voices belonged to a man I've worked with for over thirty years."

"The same man who filled your ear with advice and complaints all the time you were department chair," said Mark. "And let me admit, you have always been a good listener."

Until their retirements last month, the two men had been colleagues at South Central Missouri State University in Fairfield, a small city bisected by Historic Route 66. Jeff was department chair for nearly a decade.

Cathy frowned. "He's a good listener for anyone but his wife."

"Now you're picking on the hard-of-hearing." Jeff knew he needed hearing aides but kept putting off the tiresome project of weighing options and making choices. "And it may be you're hard-of-speaking."

Ann said, "I think you're suffering from a couple's condition, especially the long-of-married ones. Each spouse has a voice that can't reach the other even when you're in the same room. Oh, we know about that one!"

The two couples had taken the 90-minute drive into St. Louis to celebrate their retirements by seeing a Cardinals game and going out to dinner.

Mark held up a hand. "I've promised to work on it--both paying attention and finding out about hearing aides. But it is also an age thing. All those rock music concerts have deafened our

generation."

Jeff turned to his wife. "Getting back to the subject, did you know that you could take college courses while over there? Career advancement for lifers. 'Lifers.' by the way, are career military."

"But you both already had your degrees, right?" Cathy pointed out.

"Yes," Mark said, "we received our diplomas and our 'Greetings' from Uncle Sam the same summer, but Jeff was at Washington Lee in Virginia, and I was here at Washington University."

Jeff added, "I ended up in military intelligence, gathering and interpreting data about enemy operations in our region while Mark was providing information concerning what goes on inside the U.S. of Army."

"That needs explanation to those already in uniform?"

"Oh, how naive the sweet sex!" laughed Jeff. "And you a career teacher, too, who has survived scores of empty education workshops. Yes, they have to tell us how to blouse our fatigues in the morning and then tell us again, either because they assume we're not paying attention or that whatever they say goes in one ear and out the other."

Mark put down the menu he'd been studying and said, "Let me tell you about Johnny, the voice of Short-timer Sam, a would-be draft dodger who caved at the last moment. He'd bought a plane ticket to Vancouver, was in touch with expatriates there, and had said goodbye to all his friends at Princeton. He was going to be a spokesperson for the anti-war movement in Canada. But, at the last minute, he realized he just couldn't do that to his parents back in Texas."

"A good number of men did," observed Jeff. "Some say as many as 50,000--oddly close to the number that were KIA in Vietnam." There was no need to explain that acronym.

"Johnny called his parents the night before his flight to give them the news, but when he

got close to saying he was leaving the country, his throat tightened and the words wouldn't come out. 'To hell with it,' he told his friends and went down to the Selective Service Office the next morning."

Ann frowned. "This doesn't sound like a story with a happy ending, and we're here to enjoy ourselves. Maybe it's time for a refill." She twisted her wine glass around by the stem.

Cathy looked at her intensely. "I kind of agree, but it's also time we heard some stories from these men's tours." She signaled their server at Pujols Restaurant. "But if you're ready, we can put in our orders."

Both women had married several years after the men returned from Vietnam. Fellow sociology majors at Drury College in Springfield, they became coworkers at the social security office in Fairfield and specialized in interviewing illiterate rural people who needed help understanding and filling out government forms.

Ann and Cathy had been friends before their future husbands were hired at the university. After the weddings--a year apart--the two couples bought homes in the same neighborhood, their children grew up together, they went to the same church. Vietnam, however, was a giant blank space in their collective memory, those stories locked up in a soundproof room.

"Anyway," Mark went on after their server departed, "Short-timer Sam was a made-up character, first having a column in *Stars and Stripes*, then appearing regularly on the radio. Posing as a kind of advice columnist like *Dear Abbey*, he answered questions on how to send money to your family back home, who to see if you wanted to extend your tour, why you shouldn't sleep with mama-san--the woman who cleaned our hootch--uh, barracks."

"Extend your tour"? Surely, all you needed guidance on was how to get out of there as quickly as possible. All I've ever heard about that war was how everyone wanted to come home."

"True. But before you could get on a 'Freedom Bird'--the plane that would take you back to The World--you had to become a 'short-timer,' that is, someone who is approaching his DEROS."

"Date of Expected Release from Overseas Service," explained Jeff. "Oh, I remember my short-timer stick! You whittled off a bit each day with the idea that there was only a toothpick to hand to your turtle--your replacement."

"You also passed on wisdom because you were a clever old fellow, having survived your tour. A short-timer--Short-timer Sam--had advice to offer in print and on the air."

Jeff grinned, "Ah, the short-timer sayings: 'I'm so short I can't see the lawn for the grass,' 'I'm so short a bug's ass is eye level,' 'I'm so short I have to use a snorkel to get across a rain puddle.'"

"Those, of course, are some of the clean ones. The favorite image for a short-timer was a helmet resting on two boots, a hand somehow coming around to salute."

"And you went through stages of shortness. Everyone started at 365 days . . . well, 364 and 'a wake up.' But eventually you could say 'I'm under a hundred,' then 'a two-digit midget,' finally 'a zero-hero.'"

"But get back to what happened to Short-timer Sam," Ann insisted. "That is, to Johnny."

Mark sighed, reached for his second beer as the server took away his empty glass and set down a second round of appetizers. "Johnny loved being Short-timer Sam. Back in 'The World,'--the States--he was studying to be a sports announcer. Harry Carey--the voice of the Cardinals when we were growing up, then the A's, the White Sox, the Cubs--was his hero."

Jeff remembered, "'Holy cow, that might be outta' here!--that was his famous call heard by fans in St. Louis, Oakland, Chicago."

Cathy said, "So, being on the radio over there was great experience that would have helped him after he was a civilian again. Surely he'd didn't spoil his own nest?"

"I'm afraid he did. But he was driven by certain demons. We all are, of course, but his resentment of the war and getting drafted got the better of him. Maybe it was also his inability to tell his parents the truth about his feelings."

Jeff reached for the spinach dip. "Mark and I were among the lucky ones--came home, settled our demons, went to graduate school on the GI Bill . . . well, we were *helped* by the GI Bill."

"Right. It didn't cover everything, as it did for the WWII vets. But we got through, got jobs, met wonderful women, and the rest is history."

"Oh, brother!" said both women.

"Well," Mark continued, "let me tell you about the last broadcast of Short-timer Sam. It explained how to get the University of Maryland to accept your military experience as coursework toward a college degree."

Jeff said, "Ah, yes, targeting air strikes would be geography, PSYOPs would be--well, psychology--and launching mortars would be physics. I figure most of the grunts would come out of there with at least an associate's degree. Well, assuming they got out of there at all . . ."

"It was a little better than that," Mark said, "but the university's extension office did want to have men make progress, so they concluded that some military training matched courses in civilian education. And, by the way, the faculty weren't so popular back home for helping the military. There were protests, angry voices on campus. And the professors who volunteered were not always as safe as we told them they'd be."

Ann was eyeing her husband closely. "You've always claimed your job wasn't dangerous."

"We were in a well-fortified base, the war was winding down . . . or so we were told."

"Didn't you leave the base on story assignments?"

"Yeah, but they didn't send me into hot spots. My job was to show how well the Vietnamese were doing taking over control of the country infrastructure, making it possible for the Americans to leave. Those stories were heard back in the states. So, anyway, yes, I did do field work as well as studio work, but I stayed out of danger."

Jeff added. "Nha Trang was a big base, too, but now and then we did get rockets, very rarely mortars, when I was there. You had to be very unlucky to get wasted--get killed."

"Didn't some men die from illness or accidents?"

"'Non-combat casualties'? Sure. That's how Johnny's demise was recorded. And don't forget deaths from 'friendly fire'--our own and ARVN's. That's the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the military of a country that no longer exists. Most civilians don't know how to read casualty reports and assume all deaths are KIAs. Ah, here come our entrees."

Once their dishes were arranged and the server had added cheese as desired, Mark went on. "You see, Johnny was a large man, big body, big voice. And he loved to eat. He saw coming to Southeast Asia as an opportunity to sample exotic foods--fertilized duck egg, silk worm dishes, paddy snails, bull penis, even dog, which they do cook there."

"Maybe we'd better wait until the coffee to talk about such things. I want to enjoy this all-American T-bone and an Idaho baked potato."

"Hmm. I hear you. Well, his last show wasn't about eating weird stuff. But it not only had the double entendres he'd been slipping into recent broadcasts, but also indirect anti-war material. 'Want to fulfill your college history requirement? Take Western Civilization and hear thrilling lectures on how the French fared just down the road at Dien Bein Phu!'"

"That's the battle that drove them out of the colonial business, isn't it?"

"Correct. It left a vacuum into which America was sucked. Let's see, there was something about languages, too. 'Get credits toward your degree by learning how to say 'Where is the bathroom?' in Japanese. You might be a professional translator, but you'll also be an expert in kamikaze preparation."

"Seriously? He said that?"

"Well, something close to that. And he talked fast, so a lot of stuff got past the brass, who weren't listening carefully . . . until near the end. I guess they knew the show was short before we did."

"Wasn't there something about chemistry?" asked Jeff.

"Oh, yeah. 'Not only can you satisfy your science requirement, you'll be able to identify the good plants from the weed, which can help you while you're in-country as well as back in the The World.'"

"Marijuana was the drug of choice over there," Jeff confirmed, "though there was plenty of American beer in all the enlisted men's clubs."

Ann tilted her head back and gave a sly smile. "Go back to the racy stuff Johnny inserted-- if I can use that word--into his Short-timer Sam programs."

"It was something just like that--ordinary words or phrases that have other meanings in different contexts: 'shaft,' 'going down,' 'getting some.' And it was the way he said it, pausing to make you notice those words."

Cathy laughed. "Now I'm wondering what the two of you . . . inserted . . . into your lectures all these years! It's probably a miracle charges weren't brought against you."

Mark shook his head. "Oh, we've always been most proper. Especially in recent years, with

political correctness, you have to be very careful about what you say and how it might be misunderstood by students who have an entirely different culture."

Ann said, "Well, after you finally figured out your retirement options as presented in official state policy, I don't want to hear that some bureaucratic official is reexamining your pension based on a belated student complaint." Both men had struggled with the institutional double-talk concerning health insurance options, survivor benefits, methods of payment.

"Agreed." Mark paused to let the server clear the dishes and for everyone to review the dessert menu. Then he continued. "Johnny didn't get to his retirement, of course. And his family didn't receive the death benefits they expected for a son who died in a war."

"You said it was 'non-combat.' What did happen?"

"The day after word came down that his show was canceled and he was going back to simply reading copy prepared by the rest of us, he slipped off base to eat in a little village with this family he'd gotten to know. They offered him *ô mai*--apricot covered by ginger, sugar, and licorice root slivers. He had some kind of allergic reaction--I guess, anaphylactic--to either the fruit or the spices and was dead before morning."

"His heart?"

"No, his throat swelled up. He actually suffocated."

"And no one noticed? No one did anything?"

"The family had gone to bed while he was sitting out front having a cigarette--or a joint, I guess. Mama-san and Papa-san worked on the base and tilled their small garden and made their own clothes and sold hand-made goods in a local market, so they were exhausted at the end of the day."

"And the Army? Didn't they notice one of there soldiers was missing?"

"We didn't have roll calls at night or reveille. As clerks and administrative personnel, many with college degrees, they let us pretty much police ourselves. And we knew Johnny often stayed out past curfew."

"So Short-timer Sam was shorter than he realized," observed Cathy sadly.

Jeff folded a dessert menu and then said, "You know, his shortness was real. I'm not so sure ours was."

"What do you mean?" asked Mark. "Though now that you say it, I think I may understand."

"When you and I got short--even though at different bases--we saw our whole time in the Army as near an end." He turned to Cathy and Ann. "If you had less than six months left in your enlistment when you came back from Nam, they let you go."

Mark added. "Of course, you still had four years of commitment to the Army reserves, but no one like us was every called up, so far as I know."

"So, our Army careers were officially over when we finished out-processing. We went from Short to Out, and yet . . . "

"And yet we found in some ways were still 'in.' We got out of the military, but the military never got out of us."

"Right. Only recently have we figured how different we are from those who didn't serve. And as the percentage of the population at large who volunteer for service gets smaller and smaller . . . what is it? one percent?"

"That's what I've read."

"Well, we find ourselves belonging in the multi-generational community of veterans and active duty military, not so much a selective group but one with clear criteria. And our membership in that group will last as long as we do."

"So, we were never really Short-timers. We just thought we were."

Ann gave a strained smile to Cathy. "I think that might have been something Short-timer Sam might have warned the two of you about."

"If he'd told us," said Mark, "I'm pretty sure we wouldn't have heard him."

* * * * *

"Mahjong"

by Jonel Abellanosa

The day quickly piles minutes like dominoes
Squaring in the arena crowded with discards.
No one wants balls this round. The dice dealt me
Three chows of Chinese characters numbered
1-2-3, 4-5-6, 7-8-9. Twin red dragons eye
The hemp bird whose wispy melody tingles
Three bamboo sticks like vertebrae waiting
For the two that completes the hand.
The fourth east wind finds my three in a kong.
Heart thumping, I draw from the flower wall.
My ethnic Chinese grandmother said break
A block and blood oozes. Stamping a thumbprint
On tile and feeling the etched calligraphy of
Another victory, I pray to her to be luckier.

"Ode to Green Tea"

by Jonel Abellanosa

Legend: your wind-plucked leaf finding
The golden cup, greening the cooling water,
Fragrant balm to the emperor Shennong.
Your sprouts garland the slopes of China,
Japan, India, Sri Lanka, handpicked

From dawn's dew-decked beds, shoots
Longing for rain song, buds on bamboo
Trays quenching the sun's thirst.
Small cloth or paper bags hold essences,
Steeping my mornings with jasmine scents.

I sip to wellness, inhaling good health's
Shy urgings, worries swept to the edges.
I sip to music, hearing the heart's
Hermit thrushes, arias in trees.
I sip, infusing mind with word silences

From pages: reading and writing poetry like
Cultivating my own *Camellia Sinensis* garden.
It will take years to grow a good crop,
Years of pruning, soil conditioning,
Quiet joy in the harvesting.

"Flute for His Newborn"

by Jonel Abellanosa

He asked for the bamboo's benevolence –
The plea for forest spirits to hear – sawing
With remorseful care, the form's slender
Whisper sending joy of discovery farther
Than the turtledoves. For days he hallowed;
With the steel rod's fire he hollowed the reed.
Thinking of him, he burned out the holes,
Feeling if pain's tinniest slivers would groan
To his fingers. Carving, praying for
Forgiveness for wounding the dried flesh
With his art's depths. When winds
Stopped blowing, he descended
And traveled for miles to the city
To find the kind of varnish
That deepens the sun's shadows.

If the boy picks it up one day
He'll know it pines for his breathing.
He'll have his own forest rhythms,
Or the miles of wind-raked fields
In his heart every son is born with.

* * * * *

"Remembering the Siege of Sarajevo"

by Um Aldrin

That afternoon my life as silent as the sniper
Without a sign, or a sound around

I walk the street like a ghost
I was there but i wished somewhere else
I walk the street like a ghost
I lost my heart that day forever

That night my life as deep as the sky
Without a light, or star above

I lie down with hung up dreams
I repeat the moment when a bullet pierces my lover's heart
I lie down with hung up dreams
I picture the place to remember the moment in silence

The hills always stand in beauty
Tell me to walk into the future
The city always keeps the memory
But leads me into the future

* * * * *

"A Cup of Hot Chocolate"

by John C. Mannone

I stare at the blue earthen cup
worn from so many evolutions
in a dishwasher. Its edge, ragged
as a mountain chain, rims the cocoa sea.

Sheer walls plunge into a foggy
froth of bubbles that sail to their horizons
between the wisp of short-lived dreams.

On the promenade of one of those bubble
boats, I rise and fall in the ebb and flow
merging them. Feel the ripples of their
passing through the wall to another life.

The cup, sleeping on the dishwasher,
awakens as a grumbling monster vibrating
and rumbling its java-colored ocean
as if shaken by seismic seizures.

An infinity of standing waves rise
like tsunamis rushing to the edge
where the bubbles cling to shore,
their breaths washing away

washing away from the walls
of my world where nothing like this
could ever happen.

"and then it rained"

by John C. Mannone

Sumatra 75,000 BC

The ground is rumbling harder now. And the trees shake. We scramble across the mountains toward the sea until it is too dark. We stop to rest with the others.

I gather dry needles and leaves; loosely pile them in a shallow hole. I strike pieces of flint until the pines catch the fire in the sparks.

Our shadows dance with the flames. The moon thunders and the elk skin walls of our shelter buffet in the late night wind. Rain whispering. Lulls us to sleep. I dream of the stone mural I saw last season, the paintings there, in an ancient cave. The ones showing the touching.

The morning sun seeps orange into purple, and the black mountain still bellows smoke. Air is acrid, foul. Today, we must walk faster.

My hand brushes hers... We talk without words.

Cold night comes again, but fire warms us. For a moment, the dark sky fills with heaven's star-fire. But the dark mountain spills hell. She lets me hold her. I touch her hands again, her face. Her lips. Our lips touch for the first time. And again... And again.

The moon is full of light; then darkens from explosions. Hot ash falling.

* * * * *

"Heavy Like the Ghosts is What If"

by Alex Lindquist

Unlike the paved roads that pass rice paddies,
tin mines turned to duck farms,
and shacks where covered women sell tea, we travel
on red dirt roads
littered with the discarded husks of palm fruit,
to the plantation.

There the world is smaller,
familiar, like meeting distant relatives for the first time,
we fall into
Stories, told well with cocktails of gin and fresh limes,
legends that have lasted longer than the lives they are about.
I take your picture and notice you
 looking at me through the lens
 I will look at that picture later, many times.

Everywhere the weight of the air is heavy like the ghosts of our families,
interlaced and traced
 I know your father had an affair with a native girl,
 concealed in the overgrown walls of the tennis court, for years.
I wonder if you knew this as I recall the
 sound of the smack of your
 racket, while I sipped tea on the veranda.

Your brother talks easily, while outside
lizards chirp and moths bump into the screens.
It is your silence that is seductive.

Later that night, back in the guesthouse,
 I call home, on crackled static and listen to the routine of morning
 from the family I left behind.

When I return home,
I return to that picture of you,
of you looking at me
and find myself asking,
 what if.

* * * * *

"Fireflies"

by Deborah Wong

Pecking my cheek at the verandah
Mistaken for mariposa
Attracted to my bugs pattern fit and flare
dress by Dorothy Perkins

My skin of turquoise in the morn
The saltiness on your midnight lips
We breathe Casa Mika
Sibuyan Sea has forgiven our sin

"Ghosts of Changi"

by Deborah Wong

I walk into the Old Hospital. Holding
a postcard sent by Jane Doe –
I turn when someone calls my name. Girls
in filthy lace claim to be my stillborn twins.

Disfigured man welcomes me into the Commando Barracks,
Torso growing limbs to grab and to hold,
Warring prisoners in spirited high behind bars,
A commander picks me as his ghost bride