

# *Anak Sastra*

## Issue 16

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## Contributor Bios

[Lindsay Boyd](#) is a writer, personal carer, and traveller from Melbourne, Australia. He has published and self-published poetry, articles, stories, novels, and memoirs.

[C.G Fewston](#) is an international writer/university professor who lived in South Korea and Vietnam and now holds a post as visiting fellow in the English Department at City University of Hong Kong. Fewston earned an M.A. in Literature with honors from Stony Brook University, and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and Fiction from Southern New Hampshire University, where he had the privilege and honor to work with New York Best-Selling novelists Matt Bondurant and Wiley Cash. Among many others, his stories, photographs and essays have appeared in *Bohemia*, *Tendrill Literary Magazine*, *Driftwood Press*, *The Writer's Drawer*, *Moonlit Road*, *Nature Writing*, and *Travelmag: The Independent Spirit*; and for several years he was also a contributor to Vietnam's national premier English newspaper, *Tuoi Tre*, "The Youth Newspaper." He blogs [here](#).

**Tess Crescini** was born in Pasay City, Philippines and moved to the US when she was thirteen years old. She lives in San Jose, CA near her family. She recently graduated with a Master of Arts in Engaged Humanities and the Creative Life with emphasis in Depth Psychology.

**Ratana Chulanont** (Twitter: @Ratanachu1) is a former housewife who is looking for a new role in life. Travelling and writing about it seem to be the best option at the moment. She flies out of Bangkok.

[Charlie Baylis](#) lives and works in Nottingham, England. His poetry and short stories have most recently appeared in *Elohi Gadugi*, the *Boston Poetry Magazine*, and *Litro*. He spends most of his spare time slightly adrift of reality.

[Benjamin Goluboff](#) teaches at Lake Forest College. Aside from a modest list of scholarly publications, he has placed imaginative work -- poetry, fiction, and essays -- in a variety of small-press journals.

**C.R. Resetarits'** poetry has recently appeared in *New Writing*, *Kindred*, *Kestrel*, *dirtcake*, *Weber—The Contemporary West* and the anthologies *Lines Underwater* and *Drawn to*

*Marvel: Poems from the Comic Books*. Her poetry collection, *Brood*, will appear this winter from Mongrel Empire Press.

[Changming Yuan](#), an 8-time Pushcart nominee and author of *Chansons of a Chinaman* (2009) and *Landscaping* (2013), grew up in a remote village, began to learn English at 19, and published several monographs before leaving China. With a Ph.D. in English, Yuan currently tutors and coedits [Poetry Pacific](#) with Allen Qing Yuan in Vancouver. Since mid-2005, Yuan's poetry has appeared in 879 literary publications across 30 countries, which include *Asia Literary Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Best Canadian Poetry* (2009;12;14), *BestNewPoemsOnline* and *Threepenny Review*.

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## **July 2014 featured author interview with Lindsay Boyd**

### **Q. What motivates you to write? What do you hope to convey through your writing?**

I always found writing a fantastic means of communication, a great way to get ideas and feelings across. For me spoken words were often inadequate and could miss the mark completely when it came to elaborating what I really wanted to say. I recall instances from my childhood when I picked up a pen and piece of paper and jotted something down in preference to verbally expressing the emotion running wild within. In this day and age, the written word still seems the surer means and redolent with greater truth.

In a piece of writing, whether long or short, it is the characters who are of primary importance to me. A good story is vital, of course, but it is the characters who drive my stories. Of special interest are so-called 'outsiders', people regarded as 'different' within the wider society. Through my writing efforts, I hope to convey to them, in particular, that a sense of belonging is achievable in this world.

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

I am not what might be called a 'binge writer'. Even if I am not working on a particular piece at any given time, I make sure to write every day. It may only be a diary entry, but as little as that is enough to keep the hand in, so to speak. Finding the necessary spare moments is harder when travelling, but come they do. In a throwback to years past, my first drafts of anything are always handwritten. Funnily enough I think I can write just as quick that way as I might were I composing at a keyboard (perish the thought!).

### **Q. In addition to your writing, you have worked as a personal carer. How does this personal and close interaction with people influence your writing?**

For a writer whose premier interest is people, what they dream about and how they fare in reconciling their dreams with cold, hard reality, the close interaction has been invaluable. Living with someone you really get to know them after a certain time. As a *live-in* carer, frequently in settings intended to be as family-like as possible, I have had close contact with a wide range of diverse personalities. I would hope this has made me accepting, able to take people as they

come and by extension uncritical of the characters who happen to settle upon yours truly as the author they are searching for to bring them to life.

**Q. You have written novels, memoirs, poetry, short stories, and travel pieces. Which medium of writing do you most enjoy and why?**

Probably the novels after all is said and done. I appreciate the broad canvas and the scope this allows for character development / growth. I find the things I write pretty much announce themselves in terms of the form they ultimately take. If I wish to explore a theme in depth a novel or novella is perhaps the way to go. If I want to depict no more than a moment or a mood, a poem / vignette might be perfect. A short story seems the apt vehicle for a small slice of life ... and so on.

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

Having spent a great deal of time in Southeast Asia and absorbed vivid impressions in almost all of the countries of the region, this is a hard one to answer. But if I had to choose a strongest memory it would be hard to go past the innate warmth, humility and friendliness of the people.

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## "Caught"

by Lindsay Boyd

Of late, Shigematsu's dreams had abounded with sparkling black eyes, tiny-boned delicate features and a look essentially Malay though it might, from certain angles, have been construed as European. While chatting to Hiromi over the phone in the terminal at Narita, he caught a glimpse of a group of the women with whom he had grown besotted.

How fine they looked. They had spent the last minutes of the flight inspecting themselves in compacts and applying dashes of make-up. The Pearl of the Orient Seas lay far behind them now, they thought with sadness, when the Tokyo skyline stole into view. Well, they would have to make the best of it and do what they could for themselves and the families left behind in the *barangays*.

In the new land, as 'entertainers', they aspired to make their fortunes. Considering their position, each knew it would not be right to set foot on Japanese soil looking less than radiant. To a woman, they succeeded in their aim. Shigematsu gazed rapt at the vision when it passed by, the phone limp in his right hand. He forgot his meandering conversation with Hiromi only to be brought back to reality by her mildly indignant voice.

"Yes, I'm still here ... I must go and check in ... See you on Friday ... Goodbye."

The forty-seven-year-old husband and father permitted himself a chuckle on concluding the call. He made his way to the check-in desk for the midday flight to Manila. Ten o'clock had struck. Waiting for his turn he had cause to wonder why he was going to this bother when countless beauties swept into the city daily. By the same token, did not Japanese women sport black eyes and delicate features?

Shigematsu had to grant they did, Hiromi being a good example. But the similarity ended there. In the final analysis, Filipinas and Japanese women had about as much in common as chalk and cheese. In many ways, Hiromi remained indistinguishable from other Japanese wives. Those of his business colleagues came to mind.

The Filipinas' exotic natures assuredly set them apart. But how would one such as him ever appreciate them to the full in monotonous Tokyo nightclubs, where his colleagues smoked and drank to excess in his midst. He wanted to meet them on their own turf, so to speak, convinced this would be an unforgettable experience.

Shigematsu boarded the craft – the same one the entertainers had entered the country in – at the requisite time. A stewardess, benign smile on her face, showed him to his aisle seat. Departure came on schedule. Chilly, snowed-in Tokyo left his mind to be replaced by the humid, blue skies of the tropics.

At the first opportunity, he affixed the headset the stewardess handed him. But no matter how much he fiddled with the volume dial, or how many times he ran through the spectrum of channels, he could not make out a thing. Other passengers fared no better. Shigematsu signalled to the woman who, unaware of the situation, continued to distribute the headsets elsewhere.

"Excuse me, miss. These aren't working."

"Oh." At her approach, Shigematsu inhaled a lungful of her perfume. She leaned close, tried the headset and then fixed her black eyes on the contented man. "There was a problem with the audio this morning. They must still be working on it."

He cradled the headset on his lap and smiled as he watched the retreating figure. Undaunted by thoughts of the silence blanketing the channels, she and her colleague went on doling out the sets. In front of Shigematsu, blurry lines on a blank wall in the centre of the cabin signalled the commencement of a transmission.

Despite the lack of audio, the images flashed up on the makeshift screen retained his interest. Head back, Shigematsu allowed them to float by. The short film featured pictures of iridescent blue waters, white sandy beaches and leaning palm trees, evoking a lifestyle characterised by delightful indolence. A raven-haired enchantress sipping tropical juice through a straw while disporting her well-rounded figure in a swimsuit appeared at regular intervals. From time to time, she turned her bewitching eyes on the camera and spoke.

Even the kindly face of the country's president, a smile brightening his features, appeared. He evidently spoke with as much deliberation and poise as the woman. Of

course, Shigematsu and the other passengers could not hear a word they uttered though the beauty of the destination they were about to enter needed no verbal elucidation.

He received a stamp on one of the blank pages of his passport within minutes of arriving at Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Manila. He obtained Philippine pesos at an outlet near the main exit and made a hotel booking at an accommodation counter. Wandering around the baggage claim area, he noticed numerous people and vehicles outside the building. To his surprise, however, no one appeared to be awaiting passengers disembarking from incoming flights.

Making his way through the doors of the main exit, he stopped the instant the tropical heat assailed him. He put down his bags, removed the leather jacket he was wearing and brandishing a handkerchief wiped beads of perspiration from his brow. Shigematsu spoke in a jocular tone to no one in particular.

"Where is everyone?"

A wiry, brown-skinned man with a high forehead stepped forward. "Are you meeting someone, sir? Your girlfriend?"

The Japanese laughed delightedly at the notion. "No. But I've never been to an airport where no one's waiting."

The Filipino stroked his thin moustache and nodded toward the other side of the road. "Over there, sir."

"You mean down the tunnel?"

"That's right. Where are you going?" Shigematsu showed him a piece of paper bearing the name and address of his hotel. "Ah, Makati. I can drive you."

He introduced himself – his name was Antonio – as he led the way to his taxi. He deposited Shigematsu's luggage in the trunk and then ushered his passenger into the front seat. Grinning from ear to ear, he took his place in the driver's seat and pointed at the meter. "This doesn't work, sir. I'll have to charge a flat fare."

"How much?"

"For you, my friend, very good price. Six hundred pesos."

To Antonio's scarcely concealed delight, Shigematsu indicated approval. The driver adjusted a tiny Madonna figure hanging from the rear-view mirror and pulled out of the airport. A short time later, he manoeuvred into the traffic edging along the South Super



Highway. The chaotic afternoon gridlock brought with it a barrage of noise. Most drivers had little use for lights and indicators, and there might have been no lane markings on the road for all the observance paid them.

The city sat beneath a pall of smog on a muggy late afternoon alternating sunshine and oppressive humidity with occasional showers. Buses crammed with passengers dominated the roads. Horns sounded with abandon and the drivers who used them frequently resorted to furious hand signals at the same time.

Shigematsu looked long at a Ford Fiera, adorned with bright paint, away to the right. It boasted a variety of eye-catching designs and decorations. The driver had wrapped a towel around his head. His eyes were three quarters shut against the smoke drifting into them from the cigarette dangling between his lips. The pounding music emanating from the Ford's speakers drowned all other noises when the vehicle pulled in front of the taxi. Shigematsu marvelled at the press of humanity in the rear.

"Jeepney, sir. Very popular."

"So I see."

Antonio turned on to E De Los Santos Avenue. Shigematsu caught sight of several Filipinas at the side of the road. They were holding umbrellas, an item as effective against the sun as the rain. Hands or handkerchiefs at their mouths offset the noxious fumes. The driver leaned toward his passenger. "Sir, there are places where women are available for sex."

The colour rushed to Shigematsu's cheeks. "Not right now."

"Whenever you want, sir."

Unwilling to pass on the veiled offer, the Japanese nominated a time the following afternoon. The traffic crawled along EDSA. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, a glut of vendors weaved in and out of the disorderly lines. The smudged face of an urchin appeared in the driver's window, her tiny palm extended. Antonio went to wave her away with an instinctive movement, but changed his mind after glancing sidelong at Shigematsu. His raised hand instead lowered to his money box, from which he drew a two-peso coin.

"Salámat."

The girl ambled along to the car behind the taxi and Antonio turned his face round to the front, shook his head and pursed his lips as if to hold back tears. His display moved Shigematsu.

"It's a hard life for many in the Philippines. I've four children – two of them tiny tots like her – and a wife. We live in a *barangay*."

Antonio turned off EDSA and on to Ayala Avenue, assuring his passenger, who was perspiring freely despite the air conditioning, they would reach his hotel in an instant. About three quarters of a mile along the street they neared a statue of a man apparently falling down a flight of steps as a dove took wing from his left shoulder.

"Ninoy, sir." A tear rolled down his cheek and he repeatedly struck the steering wheel with his right hand. Shigematsu looked in astonishment at the other, stunned by the outpouring of grief. "That bastard had him shot. You'll know who I'm talking about. He could've made this country great instead of turning it into the shit hole it is. But all he did was hoard money. His wife was worse. She was only interested in shoes!"

Shigematsu handed Antonio his perspiration-dampened handkerchief. The taxi-driver blew his nose and reined in his performance, pulling up out front of the hotel on Pasay Road. He brought the two bags from the trunk and received two five hundred peso notes for his trouble.

"I can't change that."

"Never mind."

Antonio again shook his head and pursed his lips. "You're a kind man."

"You've a large family to support and it's not so much for me." Shigematsu walked away, stopping to execute a bow at the door of the hotel.

"I'll be here tomorrow, sir."

Shigematsu acknowledged this with another bow and went inside.

He woke early the next morning and made his way on to the sticky streets around eight o'clock. On Paseo de Roxas he saw two uniformed men stationed either side of the entrance of a bank. Both were holding tightly on to weapons. Noticing the foreigner's indecision, the smaller of the two men called to him. "Where are you going?"

Shigematsu had closely scrutinised his reflection in a mirror on rising and decided he needed his hair trimmed. The guards pointed out the way to the nearest barbershop. With no patrons to attend to, the two young men who worked there had made themselves comfortable in the chairs intended for customers.

One of them had his head buried in a newspaper while his colleague had reclined so far back on his chair he had dropped off to sleep. A full minute passed before the lad with the newspaper spied Shigematsu. With a start, he launched himself out of the seat and set to work with scissors and clippers.

As the job neared completion, the sleeping one too roused himself. Bleary-eyed, he took Shigematsu's money and handed him his change. The Japanese bowed and left, watched by the youngsters, who at once resumed the positions Shigematsu had found them in upon stepping inside the premises.

He obtained more local currency at a bank, where a female teller attended to him. But it was the stunning woman on her right, busy counting and recounting multiple wads of cash, who well and truly caught his eye. Shigematsu admired the nimble dexterity of her fingers and her habit of gazing left and right with fashion model-like indifference. Every once in a while she pouted into a small mirror positioned in front of her.

The manager of the hotel where he had elected to stay had pointed out he would find much of interest in Intramuros and the Luneta. Shigematsu took a jeepney to this part of town after completing the banking transaction. For the duration of the ride in the crowded van, he sat squeezed between two long-haired Filipinas.

The huddle, the unavoidable brushing of thighs, elbows and shoulders, intoxicated him. The romantic songs blaring from the speakers further intensified the feeling he had known since leaving Tokyo and arriving in the country. Alighting near Intramuros, he chuckled at the sight of a passing garbage truck and the lettering on its side: Project of Mayor So and So ...

When Shigematsu had had his fill of the sights offered by Intramuros and the Luneta and laughed many times at the repeated inquiries of complete strangers as to where he was going, he wandered into the Ermita district. He stopped behind a group of people gathered in front of the window of a store. Pictures of smiling, swimsuit-clad contestants in a beauty pageant adorned the glass.

Entering a bar near Padre Faura, close to Roxas Boulevard, he ordered an exorbitantly priced mango juice, unaware at first of the two Filipinas seated opposite. They interrupted the quiet chat they were having among themselves to ogle the Japanese. Soon, the youngest of the pair, a pretty woman who looked not much older than a schoolgirl, approached on dainty footsteps.

"Hello." Shigematsu, who had been sitting with his head bowed, looked up in surprise and blushed, delighted nevertheless to be this near one of the objects of his fancy. He sipped more of his drink and returned her gambit. Her lovely eyes glittered. "Do you wanna be my friend?"

"Of course. I like to say ... there are no strangers, only friends to be!"

The Filipina smiled. Her companion joined them and Shigematsu treated both to expensive drinks. But time pressed and he excused himself with a bow after thirty minutes. At the appointed hour, Antonio appeared out front of the hotel, leaning against the driver's side door of his taxi. He drove to a massage parlour near Crossing.

"I'll be back in an hour and a half, sir. This will be enough time for you?"

The Japanese believed ninety minutes would be sufficient. Antonio indicated the bulge of his money belt around his waist. "You ought to leave that with me, sir. This place is okay, but just to be sure."

Shigematsu brought an amount of cash from the pouch, which contained not only money but also his credit cards and passport. He then handed the belt to Antonio. "Enjoy yourself, sir. Maybe you'll meet the woman of your dreams!"

The Japanese chuckled and wandered toward the darkened doorway. He stopped to read a notice affixed to the window of the unoccupied building adjacent, a former nightclub: patrons will please check in their weapons at the door.

Within ten minutes, Estelita, a veteran of the game, had led Shigematsu upstairs. Alone in a small room, he propped on the edge of the bed. On the ground level Estelita had worn a short white dress. Now, she reappeared in black lingerie. "You haven't taken off your dress!" Smiling, the Japanese began removing his clothes. "Where is your wife?"

"Japan."

"She doesn't travel with you when you go on holiday?"

"I told her I was going to south of Japan, to Kyushu. For conference."

Estelita laughed at the deception, a measured, carefree laugh that was music to Shigematsu's ears. "Naughty boy!"

Once undressed, she took his hand and walked him to the shower near the bed. Tall for a Filipina, she shaded the five foot four inch man by an inch and, like so many of her compatriots, looked rather more European than Asian. She spoke while washing her client down. "I've had Japanese customers, Swedish, German, American, Australian, Taiwanese, Chinese ... "

"You've made love round the world!"

Estelita laughed again. At the conclusion of their time together, Shigematsu presented the seasoned professional with two thousand pesos before taking his leave with a bow. Returning downstairs, he spotted a number of her co-workers preparing their doe-like faces.

Feeling warm right through, he left the building, expecting to discover Antonio waiting for him. But he could not find the little man and his taxi anywhere. When the night drew on with no sign, Shigematsu began reconciling himself to the unthinkable.

He had no choice but to contact the Japanese consulate the next day. He opted to walk from his hotel, both to conserve his remaining funds and to collect his thoughts. But the further he walked along Makati Avenue the more uncertain he became of the consulate's location. A stranger verified the address and also took pity on the foreigner's careworn mien. "Don't worry, mister. God blesses our journeys."

Shigematsu took heart. At the consulate, he noticed a long line at the foreign nationals' window. Filipinas intent on applying for entertainer's visas far outnumbered people of other nationalities. To enhance their prospects, many of the women repeatedly peeked at themselves in mirrors, added make-up and smoothed down errant locks of satiny soft, aromatic raven hair.

A consular official gave him the expected news: to obtain a replacement passport he would need to provide a number of pieces of identification. Back at his hotel, he arranged to make a call to Japan. The familiar ringing at the other end unnerved him. He forgot the dire sound only for a fleeting instant when four strikingly beautiful Filipinas entered the building foyer. Soon enough Hiromi's voice resounded like a clap of thunder. Why such a tone? Had she found him out?

"Hiromi, it's me ... !"

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"New Saigon Rising"**

by C.G. Fewston

The slow stir of Saigon waking reminded Abbott of an old tune his grandfather would hum as the old man readied the horses in the cover of darkness. The melody of life vibrated rather than sang, and it always created in Abbott a home he had lost. He sat and drank his early morning ice-coffee out on the balcony of Café 39. After drinking in his quiet thoughts, he stamped out his cigar in the glass ashtray. Abbott reached over in the adjacent chair and grabbed his Bailey Ronan Center Dent Fedora, admiring the Cordova brown color and satin lining inside. He routinely slipped the worn hat on and left the cafe.

Down below the coffee shop a pair of twins, a girl and a boy, stood quietly against a wall. Their dirty identical faces became lost in the bricks behind them. Barely clothed and no more the age of seven, the twins wore soiled black shirts and shorts, torn in a few places. The boy's right foot was mangled from exposure to dioxin.

Abbott knew that Vietnam constantly struggled against the effects of Agent Orange, named for the color of the striping on the barrels that housed the deadly defoliant. Among the effects included birth defects, cancer, reproductive problems, and countless other ailments. Over the course of ten years, from 1961 to 1971, the United States sprayed eighty million liters of the deadly chemical over some thirty thousand square miles of Southern Vietnam. By 1975, the end of the war had come, and with it four hundred thousand deaths from Agent Orange, including nearly five million people exposed to America's harsh ability to do the unthinkable once again.

Abbott carefully observed the ragged children covered in sweat and all he could consider was how they could stand on bare feet upon the walkway. He felt the girl appeal to his inner soul, while the boy looked on waiting for Abbott to make a choice. Their darkly

brown hands and blackened fingertips protruded outward small plastic buckets as though they were seeking donations for an undivined charity. And upon the two innocent children sufferance had been bestowed, holding Abbott transfixed and cemented into the sidewalk.

Abbott's thoughts rested unsteadily in the pillow of their countenance. History had long been etched into the lines defining the buildings, as Abbott found it hard to distinguish between the children and the structures, faded only by the ambiguity of hopeless strife and innocence that filled the presence before him. The twins' gaunt faces stared out against an ash-smearred brick wall and the gaze had first struck Abbott as ghostly, incapable of holding such departed artifacts as history and blame.

The twins were far too young to be responsible for their position in life; rather the status fell abreast swiftly in the acknowledgment that it could never be within them to be ghosts. Abbott felt as though he was the ghost, a phantom as his father had been, and the faces were a mirror reflecting back at him. The reflections, the images, he absorbed told of stories deafened by the masses, no longer wanting to be read or heard, and the sad songs of lost causes were becoming a fact of life. Today was everyday for the twins. Abbott twinged beneath the inescapable prolix behind mankind's redundancy and inability to hold valuable the invaluable.

The haughty essence of daily life, had in Abbott's mind, infected all corners of the free world, and any sincere reconstruction had averted itself from the nature of honest intention and had somehow befallen to the desperate levels of the monetary suffix to living. He had been right all along.

A few clouds above began to darken while the two children remained silent. Abbott told himself, this was the way of all things. There were the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, and it was all a matter of living. In his thoughts, Abbott recalled the wisdom of the poet, Dante

Alighieri, who had lived between the years of 1265 and 1321: "He who sees a need and waits to be asked for help is as unkind as if he had refused it."



Abbott then alerted himself to the irrepressible ineptness alone and awake from within. He fumbled for a few small bills to give the children. A spark caught the American's eye and he glanced over at an older man, white whiskered and tooth snagging, wearing a greasy ball cap. The suspicious stranger reclined indolently upon a motorbike stationed at one of the street corners nearby. The man closely eyed the twins from beneath the brim of his cap.

The more Abbott became aware of that man an intense pressure suppressed the urge to give; and it fortified the fact that if he would give any donation to the children, another more dominant, sentient being, would surely come along shortly after he was out of sight and take the money for a profit. Or perhaps, the children would give it freely. He pulled the bills back inside his wallet and continued walking down Le Loi Street. The siblings quietly shrugged off Abbott and resumed their devoted tasks of begging.

Walking down Le Loi Street Abbott took notice of the abundant languages already in play among the tourists. He could decipher some French, occasional German, and one man with a strangely strewn straw hat speaking something not entirely unlike Russian; and these languages were simultaneously amalgamated with the more abundant and common tongues of English and Vietnamese.

Meanwhile wisps of wind filtered through the palm trees lining the roadway and around the department stores and cafes. On the adjacent side of the street there were still peddlers filling the sidewalks and the government had yet to evict them. The vendors still sold soft drinks, beer, and water all the while carrying ice-chests against their flat bellies. Souvenir shops lined themselves in the aging buildings of cement, selling local trinkets of beads and dolls, Zippo lighters, pipes, army knives, wooden carvings, paintings of women and iconic scenes of Vietnam, and all the manner of infertile goods of materialism sold to enchanted tourists.

Abbott walked on, un-phased by the organized chaos to Saigon. He needed to meet Maddox at Ben Thanh Market at eight that morning, and though it was half past the time, he knew the other would most likely be late as well.

Inside the market was a frenetic nest filled with cramped working women sitting on tiny plastic stools. The women were mostly jocular and snacking on dried fruits or checking their cell phones. As thousands of inquisitive tourists passed by each day, the women would ask, "Mister, want a shirt? What you lookin' for, mister?" and chirping, "Very cheap, cheap, mister!" Indeed. Bargains waited to be claimed. And it continued as the flocks of travelers brushed beyond the silks, devouring the fresh Robusta coffees, a plethora of spices, seeing the dragon fruits, *pitaya*, for the very first time with pink peels as flames of fire rising and fleshy white juicy insides riddled with small black, indigestible seeds. On sale were pieces of wood carved in the shapes of eagles and squatting fat Buddhas smiling silently, knowing the secrets of the dead.

Directly across the market was King Le Loi's Circle where the 15th century General Han was centered and erected, engraved in tarnished gold, astride a horse. Around him a tumultuous view of Vespa motorbikes zoomed in and around white taxis. Positioned by the traffic circle Abbott saw the bus station where smoldering faded olive-colored buses idled, waiting for monolithic passengers to climb aboard. Across the Quach Thi Trang there's the September 23rd Park with its gallant deciduous trees rising above buildings, creating cool shade for the badminton players, sight-seers, joggers, and the dark illegal roamers from South Africa, meandering daily throughout.

Abbott waited for Maddox and the great gray gods began to sweep the land clean, bellowing across the land in its ancient volition of nature. A single drop descended on his warm cheek, then another coming up from beneath, stinging a little. *Mua* began to come more heavily, rain falling steadily. He stepped inside the market's front arch. Maddox was still not there.

About five minutes later a young, petite Vietnamese woman came up to Abbott. “No thanks,” Abbott told her. He assumed she was selling lottery tickets.

Slightly wet from the rain, she wore a blue jean mini-skirt and her pink t-shirt portrayed a picture of a cute baby pig in the center. Her hair supported pig tails and Abbott gave a wry smirk.

“Are you Abbott?” She asked, looking up at the giant of the man beside her tiny frame. The young woman looked about Abbott’s bearded face with curious eyes, and he felt the impression that she wanted to kiss him. He often felt strangeness near women; as if he were a magnet and they were pulled to him.

“Why?” Abbott replied. He stared off into the traffic, anything to keep him preoccupied. There was no sign of Scott, only more rain.

“I’m Jinnee. Maddox tell me to give you massage.” She continued to look into Abbott’s eyes, seeking some form of familiarity or recognition. None could be found in the American.

“Massage?” Abbott questioned. “Really?”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry.” She giggled. On Tuesdays and Thursdays she studied English, and had been doing so for over six months. In that time she had improved dramatically. “I mean *message*. Maddox want me to give Abbott a message.” One of Jinnee’s most admired traits remained in her ability to charm with two dimples. She could also fold her arms behind her head and maneuver her legs into a triangular shape. People often trusted her more than they should have.

Then Abbott looked down at her and warmth filled his lungs. “Yes, I am.”

“Good,” she said. A motorcycle cop in a raincoat looped the traffic circle. “Maddox want me to tell you he’s not coming. And, that you should buy a cell phone.”

"I hate those damn things," Abbott remarked. "Thanks anyway."

"Maddox also say he want me to give you this." She reached inside her skirt pocket and pulled a yellowed parchment out and handed it over to Abbott.

"What's this?" Abbott took the folded paper and turned it over in his hands. The rain was coming down slower out in the street. "Did you read this?" His voice was clear and direct, but not sure of what was to have been read.

"I don't read English good," Jinnee replied. Her eyes were whimpering and Abbott couldn't make out anything from her actions. Abbott had seen a hundred girls like her since he arrived in Vietnam, but he felt Jinnee was definitely hiding something behind her innocent countenance.

"Maddox tell me he have bad dream too. He says strange woman came to him last night and try and take him away. He get scared."

"Alright," Abbott replied dumbly. He didn't know how to respond. "Women are always trying to do that to him, one day one might actually succeed."

One of Jinnee's fingers went up to her lips in thought. "No," she answered. "The woman, I think, was the widow ghost." Her face was blank but her eyes were wild with imaginations. "She come and kill men to be her husband. Maddox needs to dress like woman and fool the widow ghost. He better watch out." Jinnee remained standing for a moment below Abbott and then she offered out her hand toward Abbott. "What do you give me?" Ben Thanh Market's clock tower moved toward nine and Abbott glanced up into the rain to check the time.

“Give you?” Abbott thought to himself for a moment. There were a thousand things he would have given her for her trouble. Instead, he reached into his pocket and gave her a five thousand dong coin. He flipped it to her and she smirked.

“You’re an angel,” she said. “And you look like Jesus.”

“If you say so.” Abbott had heard it a hundred times.

“I do say so,” she replied. Her shirt was getting wetter, revealing her most feminine of parts, and Abbott did his best to avoid her. “Would you like my card?” She asked.

Abbott’s eyes were searching the rain and thoughts, trying to desperately figure out where Maddox had gone and what paper he would have given him. “Damn it, Maddox,” he mumbled to himself. “You’re always doing this.” And with silence he swallowed the anger rising. Abbott knew his friend quite well and shrugging off a coffee was no more an important gesture of notice than turning down the shoe shine boys in the city parks.

The sights and sounds of Vietnam flowed in once more as he walked away, back up Le Loi Street, leaving Jinnee in the busying market filled with waking tourists.

As he walked up the street he opened the paper and found a map on the inside and on the back were inscriptions. Maddox was supposed to meet Abbott to discuss a movie deal concerning Abbott’s book, but nothing was ever mentioned about a map. The professor tucked the map into his leather satchel and continued walking in the rain.

Abbott was guarded from the rain. Trees hung over the sidewalk and provided some relief from being drenched. Le Thanh Ton Street was a few blocks away from the Quach Thi Trang and on that street there still resided the French colonial café called La Fenetre de Soleil. On certain mornings the light came in perfectly through the white curtains and large

windows, lighting the room in a dream-like state. Vietnam had already been waking as he arrived at the coffee shop, dripping wet and frustrated.

Abbott needed to meet Mỹ Linh and he knew she would already be waiting, but as the Vietnamese suggest: “You’re not Vietnamese unless you’re late.” He knew she would understand. Abbott laughed to himself because the Koreans had a similar saying when people arrived late and they used to refer to it as going by “Korean Time.” Regardless, Abbott hated being late, even as much as he hated Koreans, and he felt it to be rude and very avoidable; that is if someone really wanted to try and keep the promised meeting schedule, then they most certainly would.

“It rains quite often here,” Mỹ Linh said. Abbott sank down across from her in a sofa chair. Her eyes lifted themselves up through the bay windows and out beyond the high trees. “It’s the rainy season, you know?”

“I imagine so,” Abbott said back. He elated, not quite laughing. The cool of the shade swayed in, rain easing. He wiped his thighs with his hands, spreading out wet creases. “There’s no telling how long those trees have been there.” A waitress brought Abbott a towel and he began drying himself.

Outside on a limb Mỹ Linh spied a tiny wet pigeon. “Did I ever tell you about the ‘Undiscovered Wing’?” She placed her hand on his arm gradually. Mỹ Linh’s slanted eyes were searching the man’s chiseled-bearded face. Her legs twinged beneath her dress. He didn’t look at her.

“I don’t believe you did.” Abbott reflected backward to September 2, 1945 when Ho Chi Minh, a man born on May 19, 1890 under the name Nguyen Sinh Cung, gave a speech in Hanoi proclaiming independence and that “all men are created equal,” the very day aboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay the end of World War II commenced, and the day the Vietnamese leader and forefather would die in 1969. Uncle Ho, the people had called him. September second had come once again.

Set in his thoughts Abbott watched as the waitress brought their drinks over to the table. An ice coffee with milk, the popular *ca phe sua da*, was sweating on the table. The quiet American picked it up, stirred it, and swallowed the slow dripped mixture of coffee, thick cocoa and cream. He lived for coffee, and he knew that Vietnam had been the second largest exporter of coffee in the world. Abbott sat trying to capture the meaning of Saigon.

“A very, very long time ago,” Mỹ Linh began, dazzling as she always did in the bright array of morning, her brown skin reflective, hair curling to the shoulders, eyes wondering over the American’s face, needing to know. “A mother wren, perhaps it was a splendid fairy-wren decorated in her blue coat, sat on her small eggs with anticipated affection. Within her delicate frame of a chest her little heart beat rapidly and desperately, wanting her babies to come into a safe life. Perhaps it was her love that strangled the creation process or the temperature had been a little too cold or a little too hot, either way the stars decided her children’s fate.”

“Can you tell me another time,” he said. Abbott wasn’t in the mood for one of Mỹ Linh’s stories. She had a way with telling a story and it always felt for what seemed like hours. Instead he scrolled over M Linh’s lean body displayed beneath a white sundress decorated in stargazer lilies. A tan chest sat plump, resting in a lavender bra, exposed between an opening slit. She convulsed with bliss and it reminded him of another time and place, a movie or a play, and he believed she was Saigon. He wanted it to never end.

Abbott glanced over to the entrance and noticed a tall Vietnamese model strutting into the café with an entourage and a bald photographer. She wore blue jeans and a crumpled orange t-shirt, but gathered a pink one-piece skirt from her assistant and headed to the back of a supply room to change without a word. Meanwhile the crew began to unpack and assemble the lighting stands. As the French photographer loaded his camera he spoke to a translator. “*J’ai besoin de cet équipement ici.*” A stocky Vietnamese man decoded the message and the equipment was then arranged. After a few moments the model, legs streamlined, emerged out of the backroom; heads turned and hers went down.

“Wow,” Mỹ Linh remarked. “I’ve never seen a live photo shoot for a magazine before; how delightful!”

Abbott pondered whether or not the model provided personal entertainment. The *Thanh Nien Daily* recently reported a model from the Miss Sea 2006 contest had been caught in a hotel pleasuring businessmen for profit, along with a team of three other young ladies. Perhaps, Abbott thought.

“*Donnez-moi plus de confiance,*” the photographer said. He pointed to a corner of the room. “*Regardez maintenant là-bas comme si votre meilleur ami est juste mort.*” The camera shuttered as the model reclined on the couch, pillow embraced, staring solemnly down at her bare feet. Her sadness grew to Abbott.

The American pivoted toward the window and began watching a red flag with a gold star waving in the wind outside. Another bright flag, blood-colored, contained a golden sickle and hammer. Distant communism, current socialism, theoretical Marxism, he debated within, reproducing socialism, undemocratic and democratic, thriving and growing upward from burnt devastation, oppressed but not depressed; how much for how long? He felt like America was so very far away. It was.

“How was your morning?” Mỹ Linh asked. Then noticing Abbott was very far away in thought, she added, “Sometimes it doesn’t matter how much you love something or someone.” She took a sip of her daisy tea, *tra xanh*. Mỹ Linh drew herself away from the quiet commotion, everyone in the room was chattering softly, drinking their hot tea or coffee, reading a book or magazine, but their eyes always found their way back to the model on the white sofa. She displayed herself as a broken clock, chiming in a dying throng of benevolence.

“We can always choose our loves,” Abbott said back without turning to look at Mỹ Linh. He had heard her but he silently enjoyed the model, ogled her secretly, and wondered. He



strayed away from her and back to the national flags swaying gallantly and unattached to fear as he had known and expected them to be. Instead, they seemed free and patriotic.

“What about that story?” He tried to connect back with his companion.

“It was a story my mother told me a long time ago,” Mỹ Linh said. She looked away into the pure blue of the sky. No mua now. “My mother used to tell me many stories when I was a child in Cambodia. We lived there because of the war. She was a very special woman, but that was a long time ago, and things are better now.”

Breaking away, he added, “I didn’t know.” He could think of only silence. Tragic stories were commonplace in Vietnam and the American wasn’t used to it, not after all the years of hearing and knowing the facts. “We all lose the things we love sooner or later.”

“Yes,” Mỹ Linh said. “Sometimes, though, we lose things before we ever have them. Life or people or the stars isn’t fair sometimes. It’s hard, but we manage, don’t we?”

“We have to,” he said. He watched the trees, the flags, and the sky. The environment was transforming, rotating gradually around something greater than him. “I need some fresh air. Shall we go to the palace now?”

“Let’s,” Mỹ Linh said. She paid the bill and the two left the model and the photographer, each exploring the other, considering a change in position. Heads swiveled and watched as the couple exited. Abbott led Mỹ Linh down a flight of stairs, curving, ghetto scrolled, and one might never know that a romantic *tiem ca phe* lay hidden above.

Outside the crisp air was clean from the morning shower, washed and drying; the traffic was gently buzzing and the city thriving. The couple were walking up toward the April 30th Park, when Abbott recognized two *gai mai dams* in tight skirts, thin waists, gliding past on sleek-

red motorbikes, pink helmets releasing long straight strands. He watched as the sirens targeted two foreign men strolling on the adjacent sidewalk, reached their sensuous hands out to stroke the hairy arms. Shaved heads nodded and dainty hands stroked, walking and riding. The men joined the women on the back of the motorbikes and they slithered off down the crowded streets.

Mornings calm themselves fairly quickly in the economic capital. After a tremendous roar of rushing motorists fighting to get to work, the impulse fades and eases into a lackadaisical putter. Morning was gradually drifting into early noon. Naps were being prepared to be taken all across the city: in schools, in offices, in parks; and if one remained awake, the charm of Saigon would begin anew. "Stay awake, thou art alive!" It consecrated. "Dream deeply, thou art asleep!" It chanted. Eyes began to close for a short rest.

Mỹ Linh and Abbott heard the morning call but evoked a higher power; it burned in their veins as though scorpion wine filled them, strolling up Nam Ky Khoi Nghia Street.

The trek was along many restaurants and cafes and clothing shops buried below stately trees. Cool shade floated down gaily into the tender Saigon streets. Up the road, the Reunification Palace still sat as an altar of independence; the place where the North had united the South in April 1975. Locals had called it the Independence Palace. The building was located in the same vicinity as the Saigon Notre-Dame Basilica which abided in Paris Square, once known as Kennedy Square before 1975. The cathedral in Paris Square had been a pagoda once, abandoned and built of stone in 1863. Virgin Mary's statue, in front of the cathedral, was erected in 1959, guarding the cathedral and the city. Similar to Queen Niobe of Thebes, in October 2005, eye witnesses reported tears coming from the sun warmed Madonna.

The American recounted the fight the Vietnamese still continued to that day against the deadly Agent Orange creators. On January 31, 2004, Agent Orange victims filed a lawsuit in U.S. court against thirty-seven American manufacturing firms. Over a year later on March 10, 2005,

Judge Jack Weinstein tossed the case out of court, claiming that private companies cannot be responsible for how the U.S. Government used their product. Two years later, June 18, 2007 came with the Circuit Court of Appeals in Manhattan upholding Judge Weinstein's previous ruling. And only recently of the previous month, in August of 2008, the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court. The Vietnamese victims continued to wait and fight for proclamation of their injustice.

Abbott was thinking backwards on the facts and dates, not paying attention when a bald monk in a brown robe on a motorbike collided with a schoolgirl riding her bicycle, books were in the front basket. The girl was dressed in the required uniform, a milky *ao dai*, wearing a conical hat, *non bai tho*, plaited with dried palm leaves. Toppling over, she landed on her hands, the *non bai tho* askew over her face, books asunder. Screaming came from an on-looking woman. Abbott and Mỹ Linh focused on the accident.

"That girl's lucky," he said.

"It doesn't seem to be that bad of an accident."

The two strangers gathered themselves and offered their sincere apologies and returned back into the flow of traffic. The pace resumed to normal. Police interference on traffic accidents was still a new thing to the Vietnamese drivers, much like the new helmet law, and they liked best handling the situations themselves. The old days were still hanging by a thread.

"Driving is very dangerous in the city," Mỹ Linh answered. "That's why the government started making people wear helmets because of all the accidents and deaths."

"The girl shouldn't have been in the road."

"The man should've been more careful."

“You have to be crazy to drive in Saigon.”

“Yes,” Mỹ Linh said, “if you can drive here, then you can drive anywhere in the world.”

After a brief ten minute excursion the palace loomed out behind stone walls and an iron fence, sprawled back among a field of lush grass and guardian trees. At the ticket window, they paid the gate attendant fifteen thousand dong each, equivalent to about ninety cents. They then went over into a security checkpoint. Both dropped their personal items onto the conveyor belt and into the x-ray machine. Uniformed soldiers surveyed the items in a viewfinder and directed Mỹ Linh and Abbott through a metal detector. The two collected their belongings on the other side, exiting to a four-story, white-washed building previously called Norodom Palace. In 1868, French Governor Lagrandiere laid the foundation. Three years later it was inaugurated. Le Duan Boulevard and fountain were centered ahead of the palace and surrounded with empty red flags lofted high. The only flag with a gold star on it was positioned above the entrance to the palace.

Mỹ Linh led Abbott up the stairs and into the anachronistic building. They passed the cabinet meeting room layered in emerald carpet and lined with lime colored curtains. A large oval table presented a gaping oval hole in its center. Padded green chairs lined the table in the focus of the room. The ghosts were seated, discussing, arguing the war. “How much longer?”

The dead voices echoed.

The next room, adjacent to the cabinet room, was the banquet room outfitted in gold. Lining the room on wooden stands were several white vases with eccentric blue paintings. The laughter was evident. The previous occupants must have had lunch and dinner there after their meetings. Displaced images of men in black suits with ceramic plates in hand were roaming around the rectangular table, picking away with chopsticks and forks at several boiled chickens and vegetables. Emptiness flowed back in, ghosts departing, when the couple walked away.

On the second floor, the third room visited was the president's international reception room with its elephant tusks glazing ivory up and outward several feet. Abbott continued to roam the halls and he allowed himself to shift between the times.

Further along, on the third floor, following the red movie theater was the gambling room, piano mute outside in the hall, stationary, un-played, and the men's voices were chattering across the decades. Women from the motherland were in ao dais, traditional slit-gowns curve-tight. Vigorous young ladies were roaming and carrying drinks from the bar to the round couch in the center of the room. Abbott shook his head at the images of the past. Mỹ Linh followed alongside, explaining the history as best as she could.

The attraction that excited him the most was the heliport, the very roof where a camouflaged helicopter still resided, commemorating the defeat and retreat of the South. Down below, hidden in the trees, proudly sat the F5E fighter jet once flown by pilot Trung, the man that bombed the palace on April 8, 1975. Alongside the jet, two army tanks were stagnant, 843 and 390 models; they were some of the first tanks to attack the palace two days later.

From the rooftop, peering down at the jet and tanks, Abbott asked Mỹ Linh, "The life we live is very different to the ones your parents lived, isn't it?"

"I imagine it is and was." She curled her arms around his waist, both searching across the treetops and into Saigon. A breeze satiated the humidity. "We try not to think about those things, even if there are things that remind us. We see it very differently than you do. For you it is a tragedy, and rightly so. For us, as a nation, as a people united, we view what happened as a fight we had to win, a struggle that had to decide a winner and loser, and our freedom came out of all that suffering and sacrifice."

"It must have been damned difficult for them." Abbott imagined the tanks crashing down gates, crude bombs exploding, the helicopter swirling behind him. "Respect is worth a great

many things, especially when you've never had it." He paused, leaning on the edge. "You know something; my people see the war very differently than you do."

"I know, but truth can be subjective," Mỹ Linh said. She rubbed Abbott's hand, aching. "When I went to Boston to study for my doctorate degree, I was told art and beauty must come from within, an internal portrayal of the world. If beauty is this, then tragedy must be as well."

"Maybe you don't see it, but I do." He fell inward, thinking back and not forward. "The other day the paper reported four children abandoned by their father after their mother had died. They're living alone in a house with a dirt floor. People shouldn't be exposed to that kind of living, no matter how subjective you think it is."

"You see those things, but I don't." Mỹ Linh released him and walked away to a corner of the roof, away from the tourists. He followed her instinctively. "You Americans only see what's wrong with the world and how you can try to fix it. I see much more than all of that. I see the artists down below in the parks that come to read or draw. Diamond Plaza sits there, across the park and cathedral. We have our romantic beaches in Mui Ne and Nha Trang and countless other beautiful places like Da Lat or Phu Quoc Island. The life is very rich here. There are the lovers who come to sit and enjoy peace; yes, we have peace here, regardless if we are rebuilding. No one ever said it would be easy to have freedom, but now we are trying to have it, and we are making the best of a very bad beginning."

"I'm sorry," Abbott replied. "I didn't mean that. We all try to make a difference."

"Some of us are not trying to make a difference." Her eyes glazed, watching a remote scene far back in her mind. An air of disdain rose between the two. "Some of us are trying to make a life."

"You're right. Forgive me."

“There’s nothing to forgive.” The couple stood quiet on the rooftop, examining and beholding two Saigons. The heat was layered upon the emotions, the defense and offense of life, two opinions battling and only one truly mattering. Eventually the thickness of the atmosphere overwhelmed the two and eased them into hunger, appeasement.

“How about we go down to the café and have lunch?” Mỹ Linh asked. Abbott nodded and took her hand. Winding down the stairwell they peaked inside a dusty radio room echoing lost calls. Finally, descending to the underground floor they glimpsed where the shooting gallery remained abandoned with no more guns to shoot. The shooting galleries still sat across the hall from the Chinese, English, French and Vietnamese video rooms. The couple continued out the tunnel and into endless blue sky and giant trees.

The two made a turn and headed behind the palace where the canteen waited next to the tennis courts. Walking on a stone pathway, they reached the restaurant and took a seat at an outside table beneath a small canopy. Abbott ordered a red bull with ice and Mỹ Linh requested a *ca phe sua da* and two bowls of *pho*, traditional beef soup with noodles. The day was beginning to feel long, as often it did in Saigon, because time didn’t remain relevant or repetitive as it did in other corners of the world. Vietnam was drowsing.

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” He clasped his hands, leaning back in the chair, looking over at the rear of the palace. Across a small drive path was an old tree, twisted and veined into the earth. A photography crew was taking pictures of a bride and her groom. The flowing white dress, westernized, stood poignant against the deep shade of the tree, glowing as a ghost. He could sense a joy rising from the scene. The voices were moving but silent.

“People often come here to take pictures for their wedding,” Mỹ Linh said, rubbing her bare ring finger. “It’s a very popular place. They might be heading to the cathedral next.”

“I can tell,” he replied. “Will they have children, you think?” He looked into her eyes.

“One can never know,” she said, looking away. She was watching the bride radiate into the direction of the camera. The waiter came with the drinks and retreated. “Many women are unable to have children because of the war. A.O. carried no prejudice; a substance which is cruel beyond mercy. It knows no mercy but through the release of death. Now, many lovers can’t share the greatest thing, giving life to their love. It seems death comes in many forms.”

“I cannot know the nature of such a thing.” Abbott contorted up to view the harmony of the azure sky. Where had the rain gone? Vietnam was able to change from tempest into beauty all in one instant. That was who she was and would always be. How many people died under these beautiful skies, he asked himself. “Sadly, it seems no one will be held accountable. I lost my faith in the system a long time ago, before I left America. We all have our faults.” He paused, trying to breathe. “I’m sure they’ll have children,” he said. He leaned back and watched as two backpackers took a seat at a nearby table. Simultaneously the waiter returned, bringing the steaming bowls of *pho* over.

The female backpacker was sweating as she dropped her bag. She exclaimed nonchalantly, “Oh that smells good!” Two heads coiled and both nodded, but it was only Mỹ Linh to respond in thanks. Awkward silence came again, separating the two tables, and the two tables seemed as though they were lands separated by vast unconquerable oceans.

After a time Mỹ Linh said, “Children are a blessing, but one cannot expect them. They come if the time is forgiving. Sometimes it never forgives or forgets. Sometimes women are not as fortunate as others. But that’s not why I wanted to see you today.”

“What’s the matter then?”

“Nothing’s the matter.” She took a sip of broth from the bowl. “It’s about your father. Remember a few weeks ago, I told you I was doing some research about the war and orphaned children?”

“Barely,” Abbott said. “What does that have to do with me?”



“Apparently your father had a son before he died in the war.” The words sank as if it had been a stone thrown into the ocean of time, carrying itself to places never before imagined.

“Can’t be,” he said. Abbott’s thoughts raced down a maimed corridor of ill-dressed incertitude. Scratching his forehead he sat back, drinking, and ignoring what had been said. He thought back to the ranch, to his grandfather, and to all the memories that were fading within. He wanted them that way-to remain hidden. That was the way he had wanted it. Let the dead dogs lie dead.

“From the records,” she began, trying to choose the best words possible. “And they could be wrong, but from the copies of certificates I found, it appears that Lieutenant Abbott from the United States had a son named Nguyen with a very young woman named Chi.” Mỹ Linh took out a copy from her purse, unfolded it, and slid it over to him.

Abbott grabbed the documents and stared at them blankly for a few brief seconds. “How old was she?”

“Eighteen.”

“And they had a son?”

“It appears to be that way,” Mỹ Linh said, pointing over at the documents in Abbott’s hands. “The son grew up and he has a daughter named Phuong now.”

“Where’re they living now?”

“Don’t know,” Mỹ Linh said. She simpered at the tourists and looked back at Abbott. He was entrenched in reading each line of the form written in Vietnamese. He rubbed his finger over the official seal. “But the city on the form,” Mỹ Linh added, “is Cao Lanh. It’s near the Mekong.”

“I know where it’s at,” he said, carelessly throwing the papers on the table. The limp wind caught it and tried to carry it away before Mỹ Linh grabbed it and placed it back in her purse. He added, “When did you want to go?”

“We don’t have to,” she said. “But if you want, we can go when you’re ready.”

From behind them an ignoble cough stammered. Mỹ Linh and Abbott swung about to spy a dirty and worn doll-like face with matted hair jutting between two iron bars, complacent and steady. A pygmy hand presented her empty cup.

Abbott spun back to Mỹ Linh, locking eyes, hand reaching into his pocket. “It’s never enough, is it?” He dropped a crisp green hundred thousand dong note into the little girl’s cup. She revealed a tremendous grin of pleasure. With crumbling satisfaction she said, “*Cam on, Anh.*” Walking away with cup still stretched outward she found a group of three tourists. Each of them brushed passed the child, shaking their sweaty heads, sunglasses avoiding, walking quickly, and backpacks weighing them heavily. There must have been more for the backpackers to see for them to have been in such a hurry. They’re probably American, Abbott thought. He knew he was a sincere misanthrope, being closer to that of misandry, but he truly cherished the innocent.

Mỹ Linh descried the shoeless girl, thinking of the model, of Cambodia, of the bride to be and the historical palace across the lawn. Resolutely she said, “We can always do more, John.”

“Sure, but how much for how long?” He methodically pulled out a fresh Cuban cigar, cut one end off, and lit the other end. He blew fresh pillars of smoke into the thick early-afternoon air.

Mỹ Linh revolved back to the bride beneath the twisted tree. “As long as it takes; that much is for sure. When I was a kid, I would wake up at four in the morning to go with my

brothers to collect wood in the rubber tree forest near my home. On the weekends we sold the wood for money. I bought my own school books back then. My parents wanted me to quit school and work with father in the field. Not everyone can be as fortunate as you.”

“Didn’t say they had to be,” he said, spying two small boys and a different girl, tallest of the three, standing firm at the fence. The two boys had ragged caps while the girl extended a similar plastic bowl as the girl before. All three seemed to have been emboldened with confidence, betrayed only through their timid expressions.

Abbott suddenly belted out laughter which created bemusement upon the faces of the begging children. The small kids looked at each other and then back at the American. Regardless of the uncertainty of the chuckle the children remained steadfast.

“Go to school.” He jeered at the children with his lit cigar. Ashes fell from the cigar and onto the bricks below. The children’s voices remained silent, eyes scratching together meaning from misunderstanding. Empty handed, the children finally walked away.

“There’s more to Saigon than this.” Mỹ Linh’s eyes lit with grief, refusing to behold the misbegotten. “Wait and see,” she said. She stood to leave.

Abbott grabbed Mỹ Linh’s arm. “What of my father’s son?”

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## "Tropical Storm"

by Tess Crescini

Rosario lay on the mat with her brothers and sisters listening to the liquid bullets hitting the tin roof. Unable to sleep, she turned to her side and faced Mama who was breastfeeding Lila, the youngest child. Mama's skin seemed translucent, showing the blue veins underneath like broken spider webs. Lila sucked the milk. Warm comfort glowed on her face. Rosario felt jealous. She ignored the growling of her stomach by looking up at the exposed beams and the dull silver underside of the roof. Like gossamer wings over them, the mosquito net made everything look soft, the serrated edges gone. A bare lightbulb strung over the cross members glowed down at the center of the room. A small transistor radio broadcast updates of the typhoon which blew so hard that it ripped the roof off a nearby house and the flying tin had sliced a man to death. Rosario made the sign of the cross. The walls of their own house quivered from the gusts of rain pounding against it. A chill went up her spine. She snuggled her sister, Sonia, who was sound asleep. Music came on the radio and soothed the fear that their house might not be able to stand against this storm. She breathed in the warmth of her little sister and held her, smelling the sun-baked skin.

The ballad, *Dahil Sa Iyo*, oozed from the transistor radio, "*Dahil sa iyo, ako'y lumigaya. Pagmamahal ay alayan ka.*" Mama hummed along on those parts she couldn't remember the words to. Rosario listened to the sweetness of her voice and smiled. The rumbling thunder, the flashing lightning luminiferous through the holes and cracks of the thin walls seemed distant. Rosario harmonized the song with Mama, drifting in and out of the words about dreams and waking landscape amid the chaos of the rain and the terrible wind.

Rosario thought Mama looked beautiful: skin the color of two continents, not yet old, except when she was crying; her face went gray. Her short, reddish-brown hair framed her delicate face and the thick glasses that magnified her eyes like sharp knives. Mama sang,

eyes closed, as if a spirit was calling her to sing an unspoken magic. Something about the song stirred Rosario inside, moved her like holiness that could save her from harm.

The storm raged on. Ripe mangoes falling with a thud-thud-thudding on the roof and occasionally, the wind threw the mangoes against the side of their house, yet Rosario felt like a moth cocooned within the song. Her ears drank it all. Just like the way she paid attention to Mama when she talked about Rosario's luck. She was not only lucky in being chosen to go to America with Papa, but she also had the greatest chance to succeed among the rest of them. Her fluency in English would make fitting in there easy. And when Rosario becomes the big shot from America, the whole family would be too. Mama reassured her, singing softly in Rosario's ears of the bright, sunny days ahead.

As the song on the radio ended, the time was announced. Mama's face changed to concern. "Papa's going to be home soon. Hurry, heat the fish stew and set the table."

Rosario sensed the urgency, so without complaint crept out of the mosquito netting, leaving the warmth of her sleeping brothers and sisters. The wind whistled in between the holes of the thin wooden wall. She rubbed her shoulders and arms with a fast friction-producing-motion.

"I think there's still some fuel left in the kerosene stove. Try using it first. It'll be faster than using the clay stove," Mama instructed.

"Yes, mother," Rosario answered, shivering slightly from the current of air that touched her skin. Walking a few steps through a gauze-thin floral cotton sheet, Rosario entered the kitchen. She poured water from a red clay jug to a plastic cup and drank without pause until her stomach quit growling. The bamboo curtain on the kitchen veranda slapped the wet walls allowing rain to come in through the window. Her bladder suddenly feeling full, she lifted the hem of her dress, pulled down her white cotton panties, and went down in a squat. She winced at the feel of her pubic hair, still not sure about this hormonal changes going on, feeling hot and cold surges of energy. Through the slatted floor, she tried to let the pee out in dignified little squirts, but finally allowing it flood out of her, then sighed with relief. She shook herself, pretending like a boy shaking his thingy. She washed herself with a cup of water and watched her urine blend with the rainwater flowing underneath their house.

Finding the kerosene stove under the sink, she placed it on top of the kitchen table, then pumped it with as much vigor as she could muster, until she felt the pressure inside the canister. Then slowly turning the valve, she released the gas that hissed into flames as it invisibly kissed the lit match. Placing the clay pot carefully on the wobbly stove, she held the pot as she stirred the white *miso* broth with mustard greens and the meatiest part of the fish, its back and belly. Her stomach growled again from hunger. It had been at least three to four hours ago when she had shared this same meal with her brothers and sisters, splitting one small fish between all seven of them.

The best part of the meal was always saved for Papa. The table had to be set as if a king were sitting down for dinner. Rosario wondered if he knew how Mama and she had to go to the market early this morning to buy a live milkfish and picked the freshest greens and the ripest guavas for this stew. And how her eleven-year-old brother, Jose, had to stand in line for well-water with a five gallon tin can and carried it at least five blocks home. She only hoped that it would make Papa smile deliciously after eating it.

Mama had talked about Papa and how hard his job as a truck driver for Esso must be, what with all the deep cliffs, and hours upon hours on the hardly-maintained-narrow roads, through heat and rain, driving on and on. How they hardly saw him around because of that. Rosario could tell that Mama must have once loved Papa.

"Where did you meet Papa, Ma?" She couldn't help herself anymore. She must know more about him. Soon she would travel with Papa to America.

A smile grew out of Mama's face as she spoke, "Oh, he lived a few houses down from my family. He was in the U.S. Navy at the time and he looked really handsome in his uniform. His eyes deep and dark. His smile melted my heart. He reminded me of Frank Sinatra, you know, the American crooner. Must be that Italian blood in your Papa. That's why our last name is Francini, you know." Rosario felt Mama's surge of pride for marrying someone of European heritage. The Europeans, the conquerors of this island country who mixed their blood with the natives, civilized their primitive, warring, tribal ways and united them into one central government -- Rosario learned that in history class. Mama's mother, Rosario's grandmother, was from Spain. Rosario considered the Spaniards the masters in the art of God. Everywhere they went, they erected churches stressing God's omnipotent power.

Rosario also knew about the fifty-year-American rule, and how when the American soldiers left the Filipinos to govern themselves, the American teachers stayed behind to educate them and to teach them to speak English. English, the international language of economics. Although she was punished by the nuns several times for slipping and speaking Tagalog at school, Rosario didn't mind. She wanted to be fluent in English--for that day when she'd be in California. If one were allowed to have a favorite conqueror, the Americans would be hers. Ever since she could remember, Rosario had always wanted to be like an American. The Americans made movies, walked on the moon. She desired not some boy to love or marry, but to be a part of the greatest country in the world. The greatest.

Rosario believed that her oncoming trip was a gift from God, a miracle bestowed upon her as a reward for her vigilant praying on her knees to the Blessed Mother. Or perhaps, a stroke of luck. Papa's sister, Delia, who lived in California had petitioned for all her brothers and sisters to come and live near her. Rosario heard gossip that Papa's drinking buddies pushed their papers faster and put them in the right places as a return favor for his generosity. Payback time for all those San Miguel beers they shared in the corner store, even sometimes forgetting to hold some money back for his family. Tomorrow always took care of itself. *Bahala na*.

Mama's voice trailed back in Rosario's consciousness. "I used to wait for him to walk by. I'd sit by the window with a fan to hide my delight when he looked at me. Him walking with a sway, a sexy grin on his face. He serenaded me at night, strummed his guitar, sang songs sweet. *Harana*." Mama's voice turned warm pink. After a pause, she sighed. "Those were the days when a song had real melody, harmony, and romance. You know how we Filipinos love music."

Rosario couldn't remember the last time Papa sang. She heard Mama patting her belly. "We also love our food. Even when we know it's bad for us. My own father died of high blood pressure. He wouldn't give up his *lechon kawali* for anything. He said, 'life is short, might as well enjoy it'."

The door blew open and Papa walked in bringing a big gust of wind with him. The mosquito net billowed and dampness settled in the fabric. Almost stepping on the sleeping children lined up like crayons stuffed in a box, he cursed, "*Putangina!*." He shook the rain

off his shirt and pants and took two steps to the right where a cot, a dresser, and piles of folded clothes in boxes stood. "Where's my clothes? I can't find anything in this stupid mess."

Rosario could hear the slurring of his words as he fished clothes out of boxes. She felt as if a heavy weight pressed down on her chest. The light bulb flickered and blackness followed for what seemed like eternity before it came on again.

"It's in the dresser where it belongs," Mama answered with an edge to her voice. She unhooked Lila from her breast.

"Oh, it's in the dresser, huh? You mean in here?" He pulled out the dresser drawer all the way and dumped the contents on the floor.

The children woke up from the noise and the baby whined. Rosario felt her knees go rubbery as Papa emptied more drawers. The noise of glass breaking, the lightning crackling, and the rain beating against the house made her heart pound. She watched her brothers and sisters huddling in the corner: Lila crawling after Mama, Sonia holding on to Jose, suppressing a cry, making faces of a child drowning in the sea.

Frozen in the kitchen, Rosario could only witness Mama pulling up the mosquito net to attend to Papa's needs. She picked up the clothes and handed him a clean shirt, pants, and underwear, without saying a word yet looking at him like a drawn switchblade. Rosario remembered Mama saying, "Peace at any cost. Storms don't last forever. Just learn to ride it through." She thought of Mama as a courageous woman.

"Don't ever talk to me like that again." He aimed his index finger inches away from Mama's face. Rosario grew afraid. She had heard that tone of voice from Papa before, when he was itching for a fight.

"You're probably hungry. Why don't you eat something. Rosario's warmed up the food. It'll make you feel better," she said, clenching her jaw. She picked up more clothes off the floor and stuffed them in the drawers.

At the sound of her name being mentioned, Rosario quickly set the table: a plate of rice, a bowl of fish stew, a glass of water, fork and spoon. Her heart seemed to beat faster than usual and her knees felt rubbery again when she heard him coming closer. She kept her eyes down as a sign of respect. The scent of alcohol and stale cigarette smoke overpowered the aroma of the fish stew and white rice. The bamboo curtain rattled against



the window. Through the slatted floor, she stared at the muddy waters, at the junk floating by.

Papa stood across the table from Rosario who was standing, waiting for his command. He seemed pleased with her manners. From the corner of her downcast eyes, Rosario watched a twisted smile surface on his lips. Daring not to move a muscle, she stayed alert for a sign that would allow her to breathe easy: a kind word, a pat on the back to run along and play. Her stomach growled loud. But the cacophony of the wind, rain, thunder, lightning, mangoes falling on the ground drowned out her body noises.

It seemed that she stood there forever with the fear of offending him before she heard him speak. Or was it the thunder she heard first, she thought, confused.

"What the hell is this? How many times am I going to tell you people that I HATE FISH!" With one swift motion, he pushed the food off the table with the back of his hand, splattering most of it on Rosario. She screamed as she felt the hot liquid against her skin. The white mosquito netting caught the rest of it, sparing the younger children from getting it on them.

Papa reached across the table and slapped her face. "*Ang arte-arte mo*. What the hell are you over-acting for! This food's not even hot!" His jaw moved back and forth with a furious force, grinding his teeth. His arms coiled back. Before he could make a fist, she ran outside to the rain, taking off her clothes soaked with hot food. Tears were in her heart, leaking from her eyes, warm as the rain, but the blood running through her veins felt cold as steel. She ignored the cries issuing from the house. She pretended not to hear the commands to come back attached to her name. Tasting the blood in her mouth like a sacred poison, she took shelter under the banana leaves, torn at the roots.

A frightened green, luminescent frog with bulging celadon eyes leaped on Rosario's shoulders. A succession of brief, amazing movements each one making possible the next. Escape. America. Freedom. Tomorrow always took care of itself. *Bathala na*.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"I Did Nothing in Indonesia and Loved It"**

by Ratana Chulanont

My first trip to Indonesia was a confusing time for me. My cat had died under mysterious circumstances just a week earlier. My divorce was finalized two weeks earlier. And I had read that my favorite television show was going to be canceled. A trip to get away from all of that was very much needed.

It was to my great shock that I did just that. I bought an airline ticket to Indonesia. Why Indonesia? Well, the airfare was cheap. And it wasn't too far. I also didn't need to buy cold-weather clothing; they are of no use in Thailand. But the main reason is that my ex had no interest in ever going there. Looking for a break from my past, I thought this would be a good start.

Now don't confuse me with Elizabeth Gilbert. I wasn't going to Bali to look for love. And I rarely prayed at home; it would be silly to go far away to just to do something that I could do anytime I wanted in my own house. I was interested in trying some of the different foods down there. So I think she got that part right in her travel memoir-cum-movie.

Actually, my Indonesia trip did not include Bali. Strange, I know. But Indonesia is so big, and Bali is such a small part of it. I had many friends who had travelled there before. I needed something different. Something exotic. Something like...(flipping through the pages of my travel guide book)...Sumatra!

From the pictures, it looked like they had an obsession with buffalos. The people wore horns on their wedding day, their houses had horns, and, browsing through the food

section, there was a lot of beef dishes on the menu. I'm vegetarian; beef is a big no-no. But that doesn't mean I can't enjoy the smells of the beef dishes!

I flew into Medan, the biggest city on this huge island. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to explore much. I had already booked a tour straight to Lake Toba. I was going to stay in a chalet (with horns) on an island in the middle of a volcano lake on an island. Sounds convoluted, but the sights were amazing. And I didn't even see all that many buffalos either.

The small town on the island was pretty empty actually. It was definitely set up for tourists. There just weren't any tourists. Not many, at least. And I didn't look like the other tourists. They were big and hairy and kind of looked like they hadn't showered in a few days. Eeew! The backpacking lifestyle is not for me, but I'm happy for anybody who does it and enjoys it.

This trip felt like roughing it for me as it was. The drive from Medan to Lake Toba took several hours through some rough roads (like many back home) and through some uninteresting towns. But the area around the lake made up for the wasted time getting there. It was clean (mostly), and the people were very nice.

After taking the ferry to the island, I checked into the chalet and spent most of the afternoon just lounging around the side of the lake and the nearby gardens. I read a novel (a friend had lent me a romance novel; 2 weeks after a divorce is not the right time to be reading one of those--I was too cynical to get into the story). I also just sat and started out across the lake. Kids swan, women washed clothes, and ferries would occasionally pass by, dropping off more locals than tourists on their way. I didn't do much of anything, but it was perfect.

Food on the island largely catered to tourists. There were lots of Western food on the menus. Sometimes I saw a Thai dish...or a dish with the word 'Thai' in it. But I didn't come to Indonesia to eat Thai food. No offence, but it probably wouldn't taste as good as

what my mom would make back home. So I ate lots of basic Indonesian dishes. Fried rice, fried noodles, and many, many variations on those dishes. And without any beef in it.

Oftentimes, I was the only person in the restaurant. Tourists who walked by the restaurant while I was eating would later pop up again, usually as I was walking by the restaurant that they were eating at...a few buildings away from where I ate. They would also be the only ones in the restaurant. But I'm not self-aware. I could eat my meal on a stage in front of a stadium-sized crowd. If it was delicious, nothing would make me feel out of place while eating.

While Lake Toba was relaxing, it also gave me lots of time to think and reflect on my failed marriage and dead cat. I didn't want that. I needed something more lively. Something to distract me. A big city. Back to Medan? No. As much as I would have liked to have seen more of it, I hate backtracking. No sir. It was forward, full steam ahead for me.

I continued southward down Sumatra. A northbound route would have taken me to Aceh. Too conservative, most likely not very lively or exciting, and I also didn't want to be reminded of the tsunami disaster that hit both Aceh and the West Coast of Thailand very hard. Those images will never leave my mind; I don't want to add more faces of suffering to that. Besides, once I finished in Aceh, there is nowhere left to go beyond that. I would have to backtrack.

So South it was. I had two options. I could go to Padang where lots of tourists go, or I could go to Pekanbaru, where not too many tourists go. Naturally, I chose the less popular route, knowing for sure that I would find a gem. Whether or not I found said gem is debatable. What I did find was a surprise of other sorts.

Pekanbaru was a medium-sized city, but not too exciting. In its defense, I would say that part of the reason is because it is completely surrounded by the jungle. That may make for a swinging good time for the orangutan, but it does not augur well for tourists looking for something fun to do.

But Pekanbaru's lack of a real thrill was nothing I should have been surprised about. A city of this size in such a remote location in *my* country would also be pretty boring. The language difficulties I had in Pekanbaru gave me something to work toward at least.

Tourists did not flock to this city. And the locals did not use much English. Since I sound like I'm Thai when I speak English (hey, I have a good excuse), they really couldn't understand me. This probably led to the confusion I had over the empty restaurants here as well.

My overnight bus to Pekanbaru arrived in the morning. I got breakfast at the hotel, but there weren't many other people eating. A few hours later, I got lunch at a local fast food restaurant (don't ask me why, but I love foreign fast food restaurants--they are all so different, yet the same worldwide). But even that was empty too. The staff looked so tired and groggy. And the city was not very bustling. I felt like I was stuck in a slow-motion town.

Dinner changed my perception completely. I stumbled across a rather unattractive mall as I walked around the city. Since it was getting close to dinner time, I walked inside to find a place to eat. Most other restaurants I had seen around the city that day looked like they were closed. Bad economy? I had no idea.

But the mall would be open, and it would have food for sure. I went to the top floor looking for the food court. Sure enough, there it was. But what shocked me was finding every single table completely full. There was not even a single seat available. To make it all the more weird, nobody was even eating anything.

Waiters and waitresses were bring out the food and drinks to the tables, but once they were placed in front of the diners, they pushed it a few inches away from them and continued talking to their friends or playing with their phones. This was a dining concept I was not familiar with. Was it Indonesian culture to let your food get cold before you ate it? How strange!

I walked around the food court looking for a place to sit. I received quite a few stares--nothing bad, nor exactly inviting though--and found a small, two-seater table near the bathroom entrance. Of course, the least desirable table. But since I needed a place to sit, I took it. A waiter came over and got my order, and I had my food in front of me within 10 minutes.

Everybody else had their food, but I still didn't notice anybody actually eating! But following my mantra of never being shy around food, I started scooping mouthfuls of the delicious soup (whatever it was called) and rice into my mouth. That's when I really noticed that I was being stared at. I looked around but was not sure what I had done wrong by eating. I chew with my mouth closed, after all.

I started to eat more slowly, wondering if that was what had caused so many people to stare at me. I couldn't help it; all the walking around made me hungry. And I was hoping to finish dinner early enough so that I could enjoy a late night snack--if I wasn't too full.

I kept eating, but also kept looking back at all the people who were staring at me. It wasn't as many as at first, but even if 2 people are staring at you, it doesn't exactly make you feel comfortable. I started to think if I should ask someone why they were staring. I wasn't mad; I just wanted to know if I had done something wrong. Or if living in the middle of the jungle makes you extra wary of foreigners. Or maybe I had a big booger hanging out my nose. I just wanted to know!

As I started to slowly ease out of my chair, not yet sure what I would ask and which staring person I would ask it to, a strange but melodic song started playing on the PA system, cutting off the song that had been playing. There was commotion around the room, but it also meant the end of staring at me. They all got quiet, said a quick prayer and started to eat and drink.

What the hell had happened? I was clueless. I started to think that they had a proscribed dinner time, and I was being stared at because I was eating before that time had come. But at least people stopped staring at me. I was not as interesting as their dinner and conversations with their friends. So I was OK with that.

That evening, the city finally came to life. Sort of. There were many roadside vendors selling all sorts of foods. Junk food and fried foods mostly. But those always taste the best. And I indulged. Later that night, I went to bed feeling fat and bloated. But satisfied. And I was happy that Pekanbaru had turned into a semi-happening place.

The next morning, however, I was back in the twilight zone. Almost nobody was there for the breakfast buffet. And all the restaurants around my hotel were also closed during lunch. I went back to my hotel to see if I could get lunch there or a recommendation for a place that was open.

It was only then that I was informed that it was the month of Ramadan. I know. That didn't mean anything to me. But the hotel receptionist explained that it meant that the Muslims (which is like almost all Indonesians) would not eat all day until sunset. Interesting, but I was not going to follow that routine myself. At least I found out why I was being stared at though. I decided I would be more discreet about where and when I ate from that point on.

Sadly, there was not much time left for more travels in Indonesia. My return flight was a fixed date, and I had to return to Medan before my flight left me stranded in another country. But again, I stubbornly refused to backtrack. So I took the bus southbound again, but this time, to an even less touristy city named Jambi.

I read that Jambi had been an important city a thousand years earlier. A lot can happen in a thousand years though. And it was clearly no longer significant. I left Pekanbaru thinking that this poor city in the jungle was suffering from isolation. But Jambi was worse.

For better or worse, I only had one night in the city, and I arrived just 2 hours before sunset as it was. The build-up to the sunset dining hour had already started by the time I hit the streets to see what there was to see in Jambi. I settled on a Pizza Hut of all places! And even that was nearly packed full!

But the hustle and bustle of Jambi in the evening was replaced by almost a complete halt to life the next morning. Few shops were open and no restaurants--except for the Pizza Hut. But at that point, it did not matter. I was going on my way to the tiny little airport to catch my flight back to Medan, only to catch an even bigger flight back to Bangkok a few hours after that. It wasn't enough time to explore Medan--which admittedly looked more promising than Pekanbaru and Jambi combined.

Next time? The jury is still out on that. After all, Indonesia has thousands of islands to explore. And I picked one that was too big to explore entirely on a single, weeklong trip. So much for my pre-trip planning.

As I flew back home, I let my mind wander. Not to my ex or my cat. And not even to my favorite television show. I started thinking about my trip, and what I had accomplished. I travelled many kilometers across Sumatra but didn't really do anything. And I came to accept that that was perfectly fine with me!



\* \* \* \* \*

## **"My Night in the Jungle with Sophie Damay"**

by Charlie Baylis

Left, right, left, right  
Sophie sinks through the canopy  
My weak eyes seek

Leaves in green sweeps  
Waves of flesh, lines the mainline meets  
In swings and sways

The night's chastity  
Shaken by shakes, tip-toe sashays  
Sparks the light sprays

Over lifted  
Ballet legs; unfurling the curls  
Of her majesty

In Javanese bells, a light breeze  
Whips the jungle's phloem and xylem  
Her thighs at my feet

Unholy matrimony  
Figures chopped from mahogany  
Ripping out the raindrops

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Paris 1920: Ho Chi Minh Reads Lenin's *Theses on the National and Colonial Questions*"**

by Benjamin Goluboff

There were political terms  
difficult to understand  
in this thesis.

But by dint of reading it  
again and again,  
finally I could grasp  
the main part of it.

What emotion, enthusiasm  
clear-sightedness and confidence  
it instilled in me!

I was overjoyed to tears!  
Though sitting alone in my room,  
I shouted aloud

as if addressing large crowds:

Dear martyrs, compatriots!

This is what we need,  
this is the path to our  
liberation.

\* As quoted in *Ho Chi Minh* by William J Duiker, New York: Hyperion, p. 64.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Songs"**

by C.R. Resetarits

Saturday night, long awaited songs from Love Market. These songs are seeds and earth: girls hide and sing, boys search and sing, mothers and fathers wait, hum, remember. Only grand ones and surrounding hills know these songs in full bloom.

The hills rising above Sunday Market are terraced like grand faces – sun-softened, furrowed ground. Sunday Market songs are fragrant, windborne petals. These songs are shared through tea and smoke, through slow walks home, and the star-stitched seeds of yesterday's market.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Would or Wouldn't: The Variations of the Wing"**

by Changming Yuan

If every human had a pair of wings  
(Made of strong muscles and broad feathers  
Rather than wax like Icarus')  
Who wouldn't jump high or become eager to fly  
Either towards the setting sun  
Or against the rising wind?

Who wouldn't migrate afar with sunshine  
And glide most straight to a warmer spot  
In the open space? Indeed

Who would continue to confine himself  
Within the thick walls of a small rented room?

Who would willingly take a detour  
Bump into a stranger, or stumble down  
Along the way? More important

Who would remain fixed here  
At the same corner all her life  
Like a rotten stump, hopeless  
Of a new green growth?

## **"On Another Rainy Day, Granville Street"**

by Changming Yuan

Again, water splashing against walls  
And windows with each car  
Passing by, colored umbrellas moving  
Above unidentifiable human legs  
Red light blinking towards the storm and  
White noise, every cherry tree skeleton  
Trying hard to find a shelter, a long-necked man  
Hopping around with yesterday's  
*Vancouver Sun* on top of his bald head  
An oversized truck full of  
Thick cement pipes making a large turn  
As a bus is waiting for strangers  
To get off or on, all in wet catharsis

## **"Y.E.S."**

by Changming Yuan

Y

You are really obsessed with this letter  
Yes, because it contains all the secrets of  
Your selfhood: your name begins with it  
You carry y-chromosome; you wear

Y-pants; both your skin and heart are  
Yellowish; your best poem is titled  
Y; you seldom seek the balance between  
Yin and yang; you never want to be a  
Yankee, but you yearn to remain as  
Young as your poet son; in particular  
You love the way it is pronounced, so  
Youthfully, as a word rather than a letter to  
Yell out the human reasons; above all  
Your soul is a seed blown from afar, always  
Y-shaped when breaking the earth to greet spring

*E*

born to be a double reed  
that can be bent into a long vowel  
the most frequently used letter  
in english, echoing endlessly in silences

if pulled down, it offers two doors  
one leading to Soul via will, the other  
to Him via wisdom; if turned up right  
it forms a mountain with three peaks  
like three holy swords, pointing high  
one against the sun  
one against the moon  
one against the sky

Facing always towards the east, it embraces  
existence, equality, eternity, emancipation...

*S*

with a double hook, the sexist, the most charming shape  
looking more like a naked woman  
in postmodern art than folded cloth used  
to cover her body in an Egyptian tale

always ready to  
seduce

## **"Seasonal Stanzas"**

by Changming Yuan

### *October*

Burning, blooming  
Like spring flowers  
All tree leaves  
Giggle, guffawing  
With the west wind  
In their fierce defiance  
Against the elegy of the land  
Recited aloud  
In blood-throated voices

### *November*

Most monotonous month:  
Each passing day is depressed  
Into a crow, its wings

Its body and tails  
Newly glazed in the mists  
Of thick dusk  
Though its heart still  
Lingers in the memory of  
Summer's orange morning glows

*December*

As the sun sinks deeper every day  
Into the other side of the world  
The shadow is getting longer, darker  
Making our lives slant more and more  
Towards night, when nature  
Tries to balance yin and yang  
By covering each dark corner  
With white snowflakes  
Ever so softly, quietly

As each twig frowns hard at twilight  
Why not give it smile and thus  
Book a space in heaven?