

# ***A n a k S a s t r a***

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## Contributor Bios

[Chris Wilkensen](#) is the editor of the e-journal [Rock Bottom](#). He is trying to figure out what he wants in life, while being careful not to let life pass him by. He has trouble winning both battles simultaneously. His work has appeared in *Thoughtsmith*, *eFiction*, *The Story Shack* and others.

[Elaine Barnard](#)'s stories have won awards and been published in numerous literary journals, such as *Anak Sastra*, *Emerge*, *carte blanche*, *Diverse Voices*, *Florida English*, *Southword* and many others. In 2014 she was nominated for the Pushcart Prize and was runner-up for Best of the Net Award in 2010.

**Delfo Baroni** has recently written a novel about a modern anti-hero in Korea who feels marginalized and finds it impossible to adapt in a postmodern world. During his extensive years of traveling, he has also written a number of short stories in both Spanish and English that have appeared in various journals throughout South America. He is working on a series of vignettes about Saigon. The first in this series called *Jack and Lenny*.

**Philip Dean Walker** (Twitter: @philipdwalker) holds a B.A. in American Literature from Middlebury College and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing (Fiction) from American University. His fiction has previously appeared in *Big Lucks*, *Collective Fallout*, *Obsession* Lit Mag, *Jonathan*, *Glitterwolf* Magazine and *theNewerYork*. His personal essay, "The Other Side of the Game," was anthologized in *The Other Man: Twenty-One Writers Speak Candidly About Sex, Love, Infidelity and Moving On* (JMS Books, LLC, 2014). His story "Three-Sink Sink" was named as a finalist for the 2013 Gertrude Stein Award in Fiction from *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review* and appears in the anthology *Pay for Play* (Bold Strokes Books, LLC). He hails from Great Falls, Virginia and currently resides in Washington, D.C.

Ten years ago **Don Adams** was a Fulbright scholar in Vietnam and has been returning to live there every summer since because he loves the city of Saigon. He has published other creative nonfiction essays about Vietnam in the *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies*, *Crunchable*, and the *Harrington Gay Men's Literary Quarterly*. Nine months out of the year he is a professor of English at Florida Atlantic University in South Florida, where he teaches modern literature, and on occasion is a visiting professor of American literature and culture at universities in Vietnam.

[Pauline Fernandez](#) is an analyst and a photographer hailing from Lake Forest, California. Although it has been years since she last published a piece, she has recently decided to return to the world of writing after focusing on photography. Her last nonfiction piece, "Bittersweet," appeared in *Mosaic Art and Literary Journal*. "Gradual" is based on her parents' account of a family secret and how they had rescued a single mother and her unborn child, a distant cousin of mine, from near poverty.

From January, 1962, to July, 1967, **Peggy McCaulley** lived in Bangkok with her husband and six children. She has written extensively about her experiences there. "Driving in Bangkok" is one of them. She is also the author of [two short story collections](#) and a [memoir](#).

[Gonzalinho da Costa](#) is the pen name of Joseph I.B. Gonzales, Ph.D. He teaches Methods of Research in Management and Managerial Statistics at the Ateneo Graduate School of Business, Makati City, Philippines. He is a management research and communication consultant and managing director of Technikos Consulting, Inc. A lover of world literature, he has completed three humanities degrees and writes poetry as a hobby.

**Romalyn Ante** has recently been shortlisted for The Asian Writer Chick-Lit Novel Competition. Her poems have appeared in *Souhlight* literary magazine, *The Poetry Fence*, and *Ink, Sweat, & Tears*. She also blogs at [Ripples of the River](#).

Ipoh-born **Paul GnanaSelvam** is the author of [Latha's Christmas & Other Stories](#) (2013). His short stories and poems have been published in e-magazines, anthologies, and the biannual literary journals--*ASIATIC* and *The Lakeview International Journal of Arts and Literature*. He is currently lecturing at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman in Kampar, Perak, Malaysia.

**Anne Carly Abad** recently placed in the the Diogen Winter Contest for Haiku, Senryu, Tanka & Haiga. Her work has appeared or will appear in *Magma Poetry*, *Apex*, and *Strange Horizons*. She blogs at [The Sword That Speaks](#).

**James Seals** earned his MFA in Fiction at Southern New Hampshire University. His stories have been published in *Amoskeag Journal*, *Forge Journal*, *Rio Grande Review* and others. SNHU's MFA faculty awarded James' master's thesis the Lynn H. Safford Book Prize.

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## **October 2014 featured author interview with Chris Wilkensen**

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

Quite simply, I write to express myself by putting characters into situations and seeing what choices they make and how those choices affect their livelihoods. Some of my writing comes from personal experiences, and some comes straight from my mind. I love having conversations and telling stories in real life, so writing is just another platform for me to do what makes me happy.

I am motivated and influenced by reading others' work, primarily. When I feel that a story needs to be told and could positively impact someone, I begin working on polishing those ideas into ways that could be understood by open-minded readers.

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

I'm sure my process is much different from other writers. A story doesn't come to me as coherently as it may for others. I usually write by hand before typing, and this allows me to write more freely at first, whereas if I typed them all, I would hit the delete and backspace keys more frequently than the letters that come to me.

I usually have paper around me – at work, at home, in my car, in my pockets – so that whenever I think of something I think of as 'cool' or worth writing about, I can get it down before the thoughts pass from my consciousness. But at the same time, it takes longer. I usually go through at least five drafts of a short story before I feel it's finished. Some stories I've started years ago that I still feel aren't finished. As I've matured as a writer, I've come to realize that writing isn't a race. I wish I had known that earlier.

### **Q. As the editor of the e-journal *Rock Bottom*, what do you look for in a work of fiction? And is this something that you try to incorporate into your own writing?**

I look for conflict and resolution. Though the name of the journal sounds dark, I like to see light within that darkness. I like to see characters who are at 'rock bottom' find ways into the light and out of the darkness. Too much darkness culminates into tragedy, and reading too many

tragedies would turn me into a depressed person, which I don't want to be. In other words, I look for stories that could be seen as inspirational.

I try to use the same philosophy in my own writing. Though characters may be overwhelmed by negative energy, I try to show their strength through their hopes and outlets of reaching better days. I also try to use humor as often as possible because I, like some of my characters, realize that life is short – too short to be miserable, if one can help it.

**Q. The theme of writing about the effects of mental illness on those who are not ill appears repeatedly in your works. What is it about this topic that you enjoy expressing through the written word?**

This is a particularly personal passion of mine, as I've had many people close to me who have been diagnosed with mental illnesses. People with mental illnesses are often stigmatized, and I think that is utterly unfair. The fact is, more often than not, that many people who don't have loved ones who are mentally ill misunderstand what life is like for those involved. Writing fiction about mental illness is just something small I hope to contribute in order to de-stigmatize the struggles that the mentally ill and their loved ones go through.

At the moment, I am working on two longer projects about mental illness. The first one, "Chats" is about the struggles of a psychotherapist and his patients. The second one, "Lucky," is about how a suburban American family copes with the effects of bipolar disorder.

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

Having travelled to Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, I believe my favorite experience was in Malaysia. In Malaysia, so many different types of people seemed to coexist peacefully with each other, putting differences aside and respecting everyone's beliefs. I was also able to visit the beautiful Petronas Towers, try some local food, attend a book fair, check out cool museums, and learn some of the culture during my short time there. I would certainly recommend Malaysia to anyone who is interested in traveling Southeast Asia.

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## **"Not a Backpacker"**

by Chris Wilkensen

At the guesthouse, Jake met many backpackers. Initially, he found it odd how so many had stayed for so long. He, in fact, was not a backpacker. They thought it odd he wasn't a backpacker and questioned why he was in the Philippines.

"You definitely don't look like a businessman. It's not like they could afford business here anyway," one said.

"I got it. You're a volunteer. Or a missionary," another said.

"Not yet," Jake said. "I'm here to see if this is the right place to volunteer. This is the country where the Peace Corps wants me to go. I wanted to check it out for myself before I went away for two years."

"How noble of you. And I mean that in a non-sarcastic way."

"Thanks, I think."

After they deemed Jake to be normal, the backpackers started reminiscing about past travels. In the Philippines especially. Different beaches. Different cities and small villages. Good for the most part. Stories he could read in travel magazines. For hours. Jake just listened, having no cool travel stories to tell. This was his first time out of the U.S.

Jake liked hearing the stories. These guys were living lives, YOLOing more than any of his other friends.

"It's not often we meet a non-traveler. Bear with us," Edward said. Edward and Jake clicked almost instantly.

Still, he was more comfortable when he first arrived. When Jake stepped outside the airport to find a taxi, his heart pounded harder than he could recall. The lack of teeth on the dark-skinned driver was the first thing he noticed when he got into the taxi. The hotels he passed sported security guards standing outside with machine guns. His particular guesthouse's security guard was only using an Old West-style pistol. When he complained

about how uncomfortable this made him feel, the guests countered, mentioning how it was part of the culture and nothing was wrong with it.

While the other backpackers were napping, he went for a walk in the daylight. Strippers outside clubs accosted him, and he wanted to go home alone. Like drugs, condoms had to be smuggled into the country. While fruits, like women, seemed to be the country's most lucrative moneymakers.

That night, they went to a nightclub. The group was Jake, Edward, and Marissa, whom Edward invited. Rum was dirt cheap at about \$3 a bottle, and Jake drank far too much of it. He left the club to sit alone outside, just watching people. Many people, but not a single cop. Even in fast-food joints they have security guards.

Someone sat across from him. A woman, maybe in her 30s. After a couple of questions, he figured out she was a hooker. Instead of thinking on it, he was 'drinking on it.' The rum kept pushing the idea of him to take her back to the guesthouse. Before they left, the two 20-something guys sitting at a nearby table walked up to him and silently put half a bottle of rum on the table. He was confused, but too drunk to care.

On the cab ride back, she made out with him. At the guesthouse, the security guard asked for her ID. It took ten minutes before they let her inside.

She went down on him for a few seconds for a "sample," as she called it. He didn't feel comfortable at the cheap guesthouse. Despite her being a hooker, he felt inclined to provide a decent place to tap what'd been tapped time and time again. Retrieving his wallet for the second cab, Jake noticed his cash had decreased. Significantly.

She took him to her place in a ghetto. He asked for his money back. She played dumb. He stormed out, seeing twenty Filipino guys staring directly at him. Perhaps they thought there was a domestic disturbance. They had to know their neighbor was a hooker. Another American, they must have thought. She probably preyed on those dumb Yanks. Born so rich, yet so stupid.

"It's dangerous out there," she screamed.

He continued walking.

"Let me at least tell the cab directions," she said.

"The least you could do is get away from me," he said. "I wish I never came here."

The cab knew the guesthouse. After the cab ride, Jake had the equivalent of \$20 left. He blamed everything: the nightclub, the hooker, the security guard, himself for what happened. She'd taken the equivalent of \$300.

"What happened today, brother? Why are you so sad?" a guesthouse worker asked.

"I was robbed. Three-hundred dollars."

"Someone can do a lot with that money," the worker said, nodding.

Jake woke up with an intense desire to kill himself. He slept, convincing himself it was a dream. He punched the cheap guesthouse pillow. He threw the cheap guesthouse fan to the ground, breaking it. "Piece of shit."

He bought a pack of Marlboros from a little boy outside the guesthouse walls. He found it pitiful, and hoped the boy never smoked. The security guard for the hotel across the street sat on a plastic chair, a machine gun weighing him down.

Things would get even worse. The security guard from last night pulled him aside and said, "That ladyboy from last night was very dangerous."

"Ladyboy?" Jake asked.

"The one you brought over. Her ID was strange. It had a man's name on it, but a woman's picture."

Jake tried to recall the moment when the whore took the money from him. When she took out his wallet to pay for the first taxi? When she went down on him? When she went to the bathroom after the sample, before the second taxi?

"That was very dangerous last night. Someone loves you up there." The guard pointed to the sky and walked away.

The more Jake thought, the more he wanted to cry/die/fly back home immediately. So, he used the Internet on his iPhone to book a flight leaving the following morning, the sooner the better. He ranted on Facebook about how he was robbed in the Philippines. One 'friend,' soon to be unfriended, commented, "I told you not to go. It's your own fault."

All his research on the Philippines hadn't prepared him for this. No way anything could happen on the rest of the trip to make up for the robbery.



Jake saw Edward getting out of his room. Jake confessed what had happened to him last night, through the course of three consecutive cigarettes.

“Why didn’t you just stay with us inside?” Edward asked.

“I hate dancing,” Jake said.

“Well, that’s quite a story. You’ll remember it someday.”

“Yeah, I know. I just want to feel better. I just want to stop thinking about it.”

“Then stop thinking about it. Come out with us tonight. We’re going out with a native family. Rich people. Real estate people. High-class Filipinos,” Edward said.

Marissa approached. She talked Jake into tagging along. Jake confessed to getting robbed, but not by whom. She asked if he had enough money for the rest of the trip. He waved his Citi debit card.

“Then don’t let it spoil the rest of the trip,” she said.

Jake didn’t mention that his flight left tomorrow.

“Most backpackers never get the opportunity to visit a native’s house. This is a first for me. You better be game,” Edward said.

The Filipino couple picked them up and drove them to a festival on a tall, tall mountain. They were a friendly bunch. It didn’t matter what they said or did, though. Jake’s mind was focused on what went wrong the night before, his soul forever tainted because of that. The laughs, smiles, food and beers at the festival brought him no consolation for yesterday. They all told him to loosen up. He smoked ten cigarettes in two hours. He felt like a dragon.

“I know what’ll get him talking,” the Filipino man said. He took out a bottle of aged rum, “saved for a special occasion.”

They had a dinner – rice and chicken – Jake didn’t remember eating, although he tasted it in his vomit the next morning. His headache dissipated with water.

Marissa showed a hungover Jake the pictures. He was nothing but smiles last night. He hadn’t noticed how sunburnt his skin was. Still just smiles. Better than crying, he thought.

“I’m sorry about what happened when you first got here. You told us all about it yesterday, but you were laughing about it. You said you thought you were going to die. But

you survived and you're alive. And then you started laughing. And drinking more. Ha-ha," Marissa said.

"Wow," Jake said.

"There he is." Edward reached out his hand. "Props to you. If I drank as much as you did last night, I'd be in a hospital. You just need a coffee and you're good. You're a pro."

Marissa and Edward planned to visit a neighboring island for the night. Jake needed Marissa and Edward's company. The two were falling for each other, and it was great for Jake to see something good happen on the trip.

Jake called the airlines, hoping to again reschedule his flight. He pretended to be a dumb tourist.

"What happened? I don't remember making that flight change. I didn't know that change was verified. I didn't receive a verification e-mail."

The phone attendant became self-conscious of her English skills.

Jake acted confused. Being an American abroad was sometimes better than being an American in America. The attitude of, "I'm stupid, I'm American and both are okay." Served him well.

"Mm. Hm. Aw." Then, perfect English: "You changed it, sir, at 11:24 yesterday." Jake supposed that was local time.

"What do I do?" he pleaded.

"Please hold," she said. Tropical music played. He got lucky: \$40 to reschedule his flight.

"Cool beans," Marissa said. "Would never happen in America."

At the ferry terminal, several white people waited for the ferry. They covered their bronze tans with T-shirts and colorful swimwear. They paced the dirty floors in anticipation of the ferry, their flip-flops echoing with each step.

"Get used to this." Edward looked at his watch.

"What?" Jake asked.

"Nothing is ever on time over here," Edward said.

"How late is the ferry?" he asked.

“Thirty minutes.”

On the hour-late ferry, Jake spotted an entire empty row of seats and abandoned the others for sleep. Instead, he went outside for a cigarette. Edward and Marissa flirted and laughed with each other. They all pretended not to notice each other.

Jake snapped some pictures but felt stupid because no one else was photographing the water. He went back inside, now unable to find an empty seat.

Once they arrived, Marissa went off to use the bathroom. While she was gone, Edward asked, “You weren’t into her, were you?”

“No,” Jake said. “I got other stuff on my mind.”

“You’ll get over it. Three hundred dollars isn’t the end of the world. To these people, that kind of money is like a month’s salary.”

A perk of being with experienced travelers, Jake realized, was that they were able to negotiate with the taxis and beach resorts for the most reasonable prices. This let Jake ease his stresses a tad and enjoy the views of palm trees, light sand and blue waters.

Marissa and Edward initially wanted to put three beds in one room, but Jake dismissed the idea. He wanted his own room.

After quick showers, they walked along the beach to the restaurants. They ordered grilled pork and chicken, along with some vegetables and fruit cocktails.

“Decent beach,” Edward said. “I’ve seen many better, but this one is all right. You know *The Beach*? The movie with DiCaprio? Well, the writer was actually in the Philippines when he thought of the idea.”

The two backpackers compared the different beaches they’d experienced. Jake finished his plate completely while they barely touched theirs, lost in conversation.

Marissa asked how the food was.

“I’ve had better-tasting Spam,” Jake said.

“What’s Spam?” Marissa asked.

“You never had Spam? You must’ve never been poor before.” Jake laughed.

She slammed her fork on the plate.

“No, of course not. I’ve never been poor. Are you kidding me?”

“OK, Jake, you’re cut off from alcohol tonight,” Edward said. “Ha-ha.”

The two backpackers planned to explore some other sites the following day. They tried hard to get Jake to come. Jake's mind was made up, with no changing it. He needed to go home and plan the next phase of his life.

He didn't have the opportunity to spend Mommy and Daddy's bucks, as much as he envied his fellow backpackers who did. The three had a final breakfast together and exchanged contact information on each other's phones.

He spent the majority of the next day at the beach. Thinking. Playing that drunken night in his head and what he would've/could've/should've done to prevent the disastrous result. He looked around. Almost everyone was with another person. He was one of the only loners. Did he deserve to be alone?

Jake arrived at the ferry terminal to find out that his roundtrip ferry was canceled. His flight left in six hours. No refund. He watched a woman yell for five minutes at the ticket agents. She didn't get her money back. Jake asked a person in line what to do. He had to buy a ticket from another company. That ferry company sold him a ticket, and he left an hour later.

The ferry returned to the mainland with three hours before his flight. A mob of maybe fifteen people rushed toward Jake when he exited the terminal's doors. He pushed forward, gripping his backpack and securing his wallet in his back pocket. They shouted at him in Tagalog, and he caught the word "taxi."

"No! Go away!" he yelled.

The crowd scattered. One small man offered "a metered taxi."

He got in. The taxi drove away. The driver asked how Jake was.

"Terrible."

"Why? Because you're leaving paradise?"

"I was robbed here. Banana Avenue."

"That's too bad. There are bad people. Here, there, everywhere. At least you're okay. Always be careful. And always be thankful."

That advice hit his brain with a rush of blood. Pretty good, sound, helpful advice from someone Jake would never see again. Jake's heart started beating faster. They arrived at the airport with time to spare.

"Be safe, brother," the cabbie said. "I'll watch you until you get inside."

Jake paid and thanked him. He lit up a cigarette immediately after he closed the door. He walked away from the car. Not waiting for customers, the driver looked over at him every other minute to make sure Jake was still there. Once Jake finished, he waved and walked inside the airport. The cab took off. Jake went back out for another smoke.

Somehow, it was all okay. He survived. Several good experiences and good people mixed with one bad time and one bad person. He needed some time to recover. As for the Peace Corps, his experience left revenge and regret subliminally lingering in his mind. Far from peace.

For him to bring about peace, he needed to find peace within himself. That was first. His first step to finding peace was to forget.

The airport required all tourists to pay an exit fee. He rested in the terminal, an hour before the flight boarded. He greeted safety as soon as he buckled his seatbelt on the plane. The sooner he landed, the sooner he could start forgetting.

He stared at the memo pad in his phone, at the email addresses of Marissa and Edward. Although his heart still pounded, weakened by the drinks, cigarettes and bad memories, he managed to crack a smile before falling asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"The Driver"**

by Elaine Barnard

I wait for them in the alley behind Phan Ngu Lao street, around the corner from Nha Bac Co, the National Museum of Vietnamese History.

"What's that?" They always ask, pointing sweaty fingers at the museum's octagonal tower, gazing at its brilliance, shielding their eyes from its golden reflection as if it were a mirage.

"I will wait for you," I call as they plod the steps to the archway, entering the cool depths of the museum. I offer to be their guide but they do not respond, probably thinking that I know nothing of the museum and that sleeping in my trishaw has made me stupid. And maybe it has. Who else would be crazy enough to cycle this city year after year, until their bones crack with fatigue? But I have done this work for as long as I can remember and so must continue to do it. It's a sunset occupation and will not exist much longer. Tourists prefer the comfort of cars and buses, particularly when the rains come. But the work is in my blood and my father's before me.

I know this museum as well as I know my own body. I've trod its stone steps a hundred times or more, cooling myself on a balcony or on a slow day, settling for a brief nap on the great couches of the second floor where tourists rarely come, the effort of climbing being too much for them after the mid-day heat. I feel safe next to Buddha, our god of enlightenment, with eleven faces and forty-two arms to hold my prayers. "Protect me Buddha," I implore, closing my eyes. Such is the power of this god that when I wake I feel strong again, ready to face the traffic, to cycle to Saigon if need be. I would like to see Saigon. All I have ever seen is Hanoi. Maybe that is best. I hear there is danger in Saigon, but nevertheless I hope someday to cycle there, to pack my meager belongings and head south. I must do this before I die.

There's a beautiful screen on the second floor of this museum that inspires my dreams. It has three panels of wood and oyster decorated with landscapes, citadels, horses and noblemen. They say it was influenced by the art of the Chinese. Everything elegant is said to be Chinese rather than French. But it was the French who constructed this building. It remained their consulate until 1910. We like to think we have rid ourselves of the French but that is a myth. We buy their bread in the markets, long crisp baguettes, fragrant in the heat rising off Truc Bach Lake where my favorite French bakery is located.

You may have noticed my shack in your walks around the lake. It's near the little bridge that separates the lake into two unequal portions. Soon, I'm afraid my shack will no longer exist. I'll be forced to spend the night cramped in my trishaw. I wake every morning now to the roar of machinery erecting another high rise as if the dying lake were a glorious place to be. As if there were no dead fish in its waters or garbage from the vendors along its shore.

I cover my head with a bag from the bakery to blot out the sound, to give me a few minutes more rest before I cycle to the museum. The machines are like monsters from nightmares ravishing the lake shore. For years I've been allowed to dwell in this cardboard shack, have been respected by passersby. No thieves have come in the night because there is nothing to steal. Sometimes the would-be thief has left me a baguette or an orange and occasionally a banana as well.

At one time, when I was younger, I could cycle more miles in a day than my body will allow at present. Then I could afford a coffee from the vendors, sit on a straw mat along the shore and offer my services to the tourists, but no more. My throat is dry now. It aches for the taste of coffee on my tongue, its aroma flooding my nostrils.

I've been warned by the authorities that my shack will soon be gone, will slide into the lake one night when I'm asleep. I'll wake in the morning chilled by the fog rising off Truc Bach Lake, no roof over my head, no coffee or baguette to nourish me. Oh Buddha, I pray again, save me from the machines, protect me in the darkness.

When I open my eyes, the sun has begun to fade. The light inside the vast halls of Hebard's architectural masterpiece is soft and comforting. I glide down the staircase past the ancient lime pots that served for mixing ceremonial betel, the Chu Nam books of

geography and poetry containing the oldest map of Hanoi. Holding my breath, I hurry past Siva, the Hindu god of destruction, hoping I can escape his gaze.

The security guard is my nephew so he lets me pass. "Uncle," he says, "dream well and often." He smiles at me, a lopsided smile, as his face was scarred in childhood. A gang of boys had battered him until he could hardly breathe. I found him lying still and helpless beside the lake and nourished him back to health. His parents had died the year before from the unmentionable disease that plagues our city.

I go back outside to the alley where my trishaw is parked. A small boy waits for me. He's thin as a rice noodle and just as slippery. His palm is outstretched. He has guarded my trishaw while I napped. I place a few dong in his hand, not enough even to buy a baguette, but he's grateful. He's a street boy who has eluded the authorities. He should be in school. It's compulsory and free. When I was a child, this was not so. I had to learn by myself. My parents were illiterate. I tell him this. I tell him education is a great blessing. But he will not listen, darting into the alley when the police arrive on trucks to harass the unlicensed vendors, mostly women from the villages selling their surplus crops to support their families.

I wait in the shade of the alley for a long time before a couple passes. The man beckons me from the shadows. I climb down from my trishaw and rush to him. "Hotel Hanoi Luxury," he mutters.

"Hanoi Luxury?"

"Near Truc Bach Lake."

"Yes-yes," I say pretending I know his hotel. There are so many on little side streets, new ones all the time.

"60,000 dong," I blow some leaves from the seat of my vehicle.

"30,000," he counters. I see he relishes bargaining.

"50,000," I answer, thinking his hotel is near the lake so I will be almost home when I deliver them.

"40,000," he replies nudging his wife in the opposite direction.

"Okay-okay," I call after them hoping he'll tip me much more when he sees how hard I must pedal to insure their safety, how careful I must be not to collide with cars and buses, not to injure tourists crossing against the light.



He turns to his wife and gives her a sly smile. With effort he boosts her into my cab. Her haunches are wide, like slabs of beef hanging in the market. She's not young, not old, that indeterminate age that coincides with bleached hair and makeup so thick it only emphasizes the wrinkles it is intended to conceal.

I smile at them. "Hanoi Luxury," I repeat, edging carefully into the traffic.

"Would you like to go by Old Town?" I call back. "I can show you the historic house, N87 Ma May Street where the tradesmen purchased bamboo and rattan. You can go inside, see how they lived back then."

"I don't think so." His wife suppresses a yawn.

"Or I could take you to see The Water Puppets. The puppeteers stand up to their hips in water telling old tales. You will laugh. They are very funny."

"Yeah, well maybe next time." He brushes a fly from the tip of his sunburned nose. "Damn insects'd eat ya alive."

"I think maybe you are tired. We could see some of the original houses now preserved for massage."

"Legit?" he shouts over the traffic.

"Who's to say?" I smile back at him.

"What do they charge?"

"You can bargain."

His wife looks straight ahead, her gaze deliberate, as if this question had arisen many times before. "Take us to the hotel," she snaps. "We can see Old Town another time."

"Okay-okay," I laugh.

She looks pleased as we pass the silk shops. "Let's come back tomorrow. I bet they can make me something wonderful."

"You're wonderful enough." He squeezes her swollen fingers bursting with amethyst and emeralds.

"You're hurting me," she whimpers.

We round the corner only to find the road blocked by police, a bicycle accident. The woman lies on the ground, her basket of fruit rolling in every direction. No one gathers the fruit. Perhaps they are afraid the police will accuse them of stealing. The motorcycle she collided with is parked at the curb, its driver stricken. The vendors pay no attention, keep

frying bananas, shining shoes, selling maps of the city or rip-offs of *Lonely Planet*. These accidents are a daily occurrence like a change in the weather or a forecast of more strife between North Vietnam and South despite the union of the country.

The ambulance arrives, crushing fruit in its path. I steer us into a side street. "Good thinking." The man pats my shoulder. "I thought we'd be there forever."

"Okay-okay?" I smile back.

"Okay," he wipes dust from his sun glasses, placing them gingerly back on his sun burned nose.

I cycle on, sweat dripping into my eyes even though my straw hat provides ample shade. There's a milky veil over my eyes these days that I must take care of. Perhaps on a slow day I'll visit the clinic, wait in the hall for my number to be called only to be informed that I'm old and that such eyes belong to the elderly. There is no cure.

We finally reach the lake. I knew we were there long before I turned the corner. I could smell the fish, the rotting chicken, dregs of coffee from morning's breakfast.

"Close enough." He taps my shoulder.

"I can take you right to your doorstep," I reply, thinking that would earn me more dong.

"No, close enough. We're just around the corner." He climbs from my cab helping his wife descend. I jump down to help her also. As I said, she's a big woman pushing the extremities of the seat. Her husband is small and sprightly. It must be hard to have your way with this woman.

He removes a huge pile of dong from his leather wallet. I could see it is genuine leather, prized in Vietnam and costly. His wife looks on with interest, silently counting the dong as he unfolds the pastel notes and slips them into my hand. I recount them and smile, "40,000?"

"Yes," as we bargained.

"So we did. But you see the distance I have taken you, clear across the city with no mishaps. You could easily have lost your lives on such a journey. Is there no reward for such diligence?"

"A bargain is a bargain." He propels his wife toward their hotel.

“May Siva reward you!” I call after him. Clouds darken the sky with a distant rumble of thunder.

But he does not turn. It’s as if I never existed, never cracked my bones to avoid the cars and buses, cabs and bicycles that might have ended their holiday.

I felt tired, wanted only to rest myself, return to my shack and lie on the cardboard floor with a market bag over my head, blot out this journey, return to my daydreams with Buddha holding my prayers in his forty-two arms.

Mounting my trishaw, I head toward my shack on the other side of the lake. “Coffee?” the vendors call, “mangoes, sweet coconut, banana?”

I was too tired to eat. Even with the dong in my pocket I had little interest in their wares. The 40,000 would buy me a few baguettes maybe, an orange or two and a coffee if I’m careful.

I rounded the lake where my shack stood on the other side of the little bridge, opposite the house with the chained dog that growled as I rode by, his fangs ready to tear me apart for his dinner.

Carefully, I examined the shoreline, not seeing anything that resembled my shack. I rode closer to the machines and motioned to the driver who paid no attention. Finally, I parked my trishaw under one of the few trees still standing and stood in the path of the monster. He screeched to a halt cursing me. “You crazy?” he yelled. “You want kill yourself?”

“Where is my shack? What have you done with it?”

“It floats in lake. We warned you. Jump in. Maybe you save it.”

He started his motor. The roar deafened me. He rolled his machine in my direction. I would have jumped in only I couldn’t swim and the lake was foul. Surely I’d catch some disease that would end my usefulness.

For hours I watched the lake for signs of my shack, for remnants floating on the silt. Darkness approached. Lights glimmered from hotels on the other side of the water. The milky veil covering my eyes developed a halo that blinded me. I climbed back into my trishaw. “Buddha protect me,” I prayed. “Let me rest in your arms.” In the morning I’ll cycle to Saigon.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"The Tragic Love of Janice 'Peeples' Gentry"**

by Delfo Baroni

Janice "Peeples" Gentry lived a busy life in the heart of District Seven in Saigon, a woman who equated restless occupation with an optimal sense of well-being, of decency, making the most out of "life," this blessing in disguise cut so unfortunately short. Working from Monday to Friday as senior director at a recruitment firm, she also took dance classes at 8PM on Tuesdays and Thursdays, exercised at a 24-hour gym before her shift each day, regularly entertained friends at her home with music and balanced meals, and took her employees out numerous times a month for dinner and drinks, all of which she paid for. She possessed a special talent for finding new, recently opened restaurants in crevices throughout the city, and admired herself for introducing the diligent employees to the diverse spices of international cuisine.

Once married in New York to a Vietnamese-American real-estate contractor, the couple moved together to Saigon, where further business interests were pursued. Though after three years, to her great chagrin, the marriage failed, and he went back to New York to remarry his former high school sweetheart, while she stayed in the apartment in Saigon.

She blamed herself for the failure to make the marriage work, though she would never understand why. Why should she be held culpable for that unaccountable fissure that would render both mere victims of circumstance? It had just ended, without reason, and she knew without a doubt she had done everything possible to make him happy.

At the moment, she found herself in her apartment, slouched on her side on the yellow sofa, head against the arm pillow, brooding about the ugly rumors being spread at work, something about "old" Janice having a "loose" reputation, the gossip rampant, though kept guarded from her. *What else were they saying?*, she thought. And why would they

insinuate such nasty things when she constantly went out of her way to treat them as friends, as equals.

It would be another five minutes before the cupcakes were done, the homemade mint-mango frosting already on the counter next to the oven. And they would prove to be so delicious, she thought, her employees would have to reevaluate their feelings for her after tasting them. If there was one thing Ms. Janice Gentry hated, aside from idleness and solitude, it was people thinking ill of her. Not only did she despise confrontation, she also felt they had no right to feel that way, their assumptions unsubstantiated, for she hadn't done anything wrong.

Tori Amos played at a low volume from the stereo in the living room, and having not heard this music since she was in high school, she smiled, and sang along . . .

*Every finger in the room  
is pointing at me  
I wanna spit in their faces  
Then I get afraid of what that could bring  
I got a bowling ball in my stomach  
I got a desert in my mouth*

The egg-timer chimed. Janice got off the couch, put on an oven-mitt and moved the cupcake tray with a graceful swipe of the arm from the white metal inferno to the top of the stove, now singing along with the chorus . . .

*Why do we  
Crucify ourselves  
Every day  
I crucify myself  
Nothing I do is good enough for you*

Leaning over the stove to catch the marvelous scent of the now fluffy vanilla cakes, she willfully suppressed those vicious rumors that had been bothering her all afternoon,

and told herself that everything was fine, even intoning to the melody of the song, "Everything is just fine," and believing it. Janice liked it when everything was fine, because . . . she thought, 'The world was better that way.'

She looked around at the spacious apartment, the walls painted yellow, the floors now meticulously scrubbed and the furniture fastidiously dusted, and felt an overwhelming rush of pride. In the bathroom mirror, she brushed her long auburn hair, fifty strokes in all, counting one at a time.

And from the corner of her eye something caught her attention: the picture to the left on the toiletry shelf framed in oak with decorative yellow tulips. Only yesterday had she put it behind glass, the photograph taken recently at the Suoi Tien Park with her current boyfriend, Bonn Mann. And picking it up, she would grin from ear to ear, recollecting that beautiful day spent together in matching red T-shirts only a week ago. The day they would coin those adorable nicknames for each other, Mr. Mann and Ms. Peeples.

'A week already!,' she thought, 'and like it just happened! But I guess that's how it is when you really love someone, the hours passing like minutes.' Love a supernatural sort of reality, and something everyone deserved in life. 'If only everyone had love,' she pontificated, 'it would solve all the world's problems, everything would be fine, and everyone would be happy.'

Almost an hour had passed since she had last talked to Mr. Mann, and at the very least, she wanted to say "goodnight." The phone rang more than six times before he would finally answer it. *What was he doing?*

"What is it, honey?" He said, "Are you alright?"

"I just wanted to hear your voice before I went to sleep. What were you doing while the phone was ringing?"

Embarrassed, he replied, "I was, um, indisposed in the bathroom."

"Ohhhh!" She said, laughing, a wave of reassurance washing over her.

'Don't be paranoid,' she reminded herself, 'He's a decent man.' And, "I see," still laughing, "in the bathroom, that's funny. Mr. Mann in the bathroom! How cute."

"Anything else?" He said, a hint of impatience in his delivery.

"No, sorry, don't wanna bother you, or anything," the sarcasm leaking through, her feelings hurt, "just wanted to say goodnight."

"Okay, goodnight, Ms. Peeples," he said. He could sense her fragile disposition breaking down and was now comporting himself more thoughtfully. "You're so good to me, Peeps, my sweet lady."

"Good night," she said again, this time through a sparkling white smile.

"Good night," he reiterated, politely. "I love you."

"I love you, too." And they would hang up at the same time, as was now routine.

Before going to sleep, Janice surveyed her apartment from her seat at the edge of the bed atop the yellow comforter, and thought about the doll house she had as a child. A two-story dollhouse, open at the front, with a piece of plastic dividing the floors. The tiny plastic family members, mother father boy and girl situated wherever she wanted them, either on the carpet or miniature furniture, placed sporadically around both floors, two sofas and three recliners. Sometimes the family all together on the little chairs around the kitchen table, but only during meals and tea time.

A dollhouse she would keep in pristine condition, wiping down with rag and wood-cleaner the inner and outer walls daily, and after that the furniture and figurines, all glittering when she had finished. The same, however, could not be said about the rest of the house. Outside her own room, which was never neglected, the rest of the house was most often in a state of squalor and disrepair, as her mother worked so often. "Honey!" Her mother would say, "I need you to clean the bathroom. You promised to clean the bathroom."

And little Janice from behind her closed bedroom door. "It's NOT MINE. I don't clean the bathroom, because it's NOT MINE!"

"Janice, honey," he mother would say, "Open the door."

But Janice refused. "NOT MINE! I don't clean it. It's NOT MINE! YOU clean it!" And if she persisted, crying and tantrum-screaming, pounding viciously the door to her room, she knew her mother would eventually give up, and do it herself.

Janice chuckled a bit, now lying down, pulling the covers over her petite body. She supposed she could have been nicer to her mother, but even after all these years, she thought, 'she wasn't wrong, was she?'

The cupcakes were an outstanding success at work the following morning, as Janice had imagined they'd be - the employees each taking one, devouring it and going back for another. While chewing, they would lavish her with those obsequious "nice-isms" she was previously so familiar with: "Janice, you're an angel." - "Janice, thank you so much." - "Janice, you're such a wonderful person to think of us like this." Now see if those jerks would say one more negative thing about her, she thought.

Into the office with the door locked from the inside, and two cupcakes remaining on the middle of her desk, Janice looked over to see the Vietnamese cleaning lady standing with mop in hand, looking forlornly in the direction of the green-frosted cakes from behind the glass. Janice opened the door, and smiled, but stood rigidly within the doorframe so that the janitor could not get inside. "Yes," Janice said. "Can I help you?"

And the cleaning lady motioned with a point of the index finger towards the cupcakes.

"Oh," Janice said, smiling, "Those-not-for-you. Only-for-office-workers."

And again the janitor would lean against the side of the doorframe, looking around Janice, the cupcakes in sight, and point to them.

"Those cakes for my boyfriend. Do you understand? My boyfriend. Saving cupcakes for boyfriend," and with that, she would shut the door in the face of the cleaning lady, still smiling, and wave politely from behind the glass.

She immediately called Bonn to tell him about the cupcakes, but the conversation was cut short on account of Lenny being at his house. "I'll be done early today, around two, then we can go to the park and have our picnic," she told Mr. Mann over the phone, adding,



"Goodbye, love you," at the same time. Janice sat down in the office chair with arms folded at her chest, unusually pensive. If there was one person Janice hated more than anyone else in the world, it was Lenny Alexander. *Why did her sweet man have to be friends with such a scummy, disgusting weasel of a human being?* She couldn't for the life of her understand how two people of such marked polarity, of good and evil, could be friends. Such a rotten influence he would be on her boyfriend if the friendship continued! She knew she couldn't insist that Mr. Mann stop being friends with Lenny. That kind of thing had never worked out in the past, and she knew it wouldn't work with Bonn either. Men didn't like it when you told them who to be friends with, but perhaps a friendly suggestion during sex?, she thought, or a loving insistence that she was worried about him? The options rushed through her head, and she considered each one in her always careful, circumspect manner, before discarding it and reflecting on another. Perhaps focusing gently on the negative qualities of Lenny, while highlighting at the same time the redeeming qualities of Bonn. Yes, she thought, that would work, and obviously in Mr. Mann's best interest. With that, he would come to understand that he was better than Lenny, and would eventually stop fraternizing with that horrible guy.

She remembered the last time they were all together, the three of them at Mr. Mann's house. Lenny sat on the couch in one of his bad moods. He was always in a bad mood, like some poisonous fog that choked all the enjoyment out of the life of anything it touched. It was raining hard that day, a downpour yes, but not so hard that it would be dangerous to drive. She wanted a snack, and suggested they order something to eat.

"We just ate lunch like two hours ago." Lenny said.

"But I want a snack now." Janice said.

"You barely touched your lunch, and now you want to subject some poor nameless delivery guy to the typhoon outside?"

"Sorry, but that's his job."

"Look out the window!" He said. "Those trees across the street are almost bent to the ground."

"That's not my problem! It's THEIR job! I'm paying for it, they deliver it!"

"Fine! Call, order your stupid snack; why should you give one single shit?!"

And following that, Mr. Mann would interject, tell them both to stop fighting, "Could you two shut up, please?" She didn't like that Mr. Mann had told her to "shut up," but in the end, she ordered what she wanted - a small Greek salad with feta cheese and cherry tomatoes.

What a lovely day for a picnic!, Janice thought, a gigantic smile across her face while looking at the cloudless, blue sky outside the office. At the crosswalk, she saw a young expat mother with her baby in a stroller, waiting to cross the street, and Janice approached. "You adorable thing," Janice said, as she stroked the baby's fine blonde hair, and "Aren't you cute! I'm going to have a baby just like you one day." And with that, Janice started down the street toward the parking lot where she kept her mini-yellow Honda scooter.

Almost skipping, Janice glowed, her cheeks reddened, beaming radiant at the prospect of a beautiful picnic with Mr. Mann in the park. But approaching her on the sidewalk was a middle-aged Vietnamese man passing in the opposite direction, a gentleman in business suit who saw her smiling, and so returned the smile, even said "hello," which brought Janice out of her daydream, grounding her. And when she saw the 'motivated' smile of the older Vietnamese man, she huffed and turned her head, shifting her field of vision toward the buildings on the right, mumbled the word "pervert" under her breath. *How dare some people!*, she thought, so unabashedly forthcoming. But what would follow was even worse.

Michael Dathmon and Rick Fiortino were standing outside the entrance to the parking garage, and she would have to pass both of them to get to her scooter. Michael was an old boyfriend whom Janice imagined marrying in the future, a man of such promise who didn't smoke and always dressed well, a man who satisfied all her needs in bed, regularly bought her chocolates and other thoughtful gifts he would pick up after his shift, a man who also followed appreciatively all of her sound dietary advice.

But not to be, it had all ended rather abruptly, and Janice preferred not to think about it. Even when she tried, she couldn't quite recall the exact reason for the unexpected ending, only remembered that she had found his sudden lack of interest discourteous.

Rick, his friend, was someone she shared a bed with in the aftermath of the relationship with Michael. And though Rick was generally a nice man, a man who had consoled her in a time of need, she knew he would never prove to be a long-term substitute for Michael. And so the brief relationship ended, with no hard feelings felt by either party.

And yet, how unfortunate to pass them both at a time like this, when all she wanted was a simple, unimpeded path to Mr. Mann. *Was that so much to ask?* Janice squinted her eyelids over the typically wide, brown irises, and kept her attention fixed to the sidewalk in front of her. Quickening her pace, she would push herself with casual, business-like velocity past the both of them and make her way onto the black ramp and down into the parking garage. "Was that Janice?" She heard one of them say, though she couldn't be sure which.

Janice was glad she had circumvented the obligation of being forced to engage herself in one of those awkward conversations, but they had still seen her. And though she desired nothing of the sort, she imagined the litany at lightning speed all the unfavorable things they might say about her, those hurtful exchanges that would elicit a deleterious effect on her newly restored image.

"You slept with her too?"

"Sure, she was great in bed, just kind of boring as a person, no interests or passions, or anything really."

"Yeah, she never reads, does she?"

"She didn't seem to find anything sacred outside the relationship."

"Her entire life is consumed with trivial concerns."

Janice applied the yellow motorbike helmet to her head and fastened the strap beneath her chin. Straddling the seat with one leg on either side, she pushed the start-button next to the handbrake and sped up the ramp out of the garage, peeling out into the road without slowing down or watching out for the other motorcyclists. She disregarded the furious honking heard as she came to a full stop at the traffic light, blocked out of her mind the angered stares she received on all sides while waiting for the light to turn green.

On the other hand, she considered, perhaps it was all paranoia? Why should they have anything negative to say about her when there wasn't any bad blood among them? She had been a wonderful girlfriend to Michael, devoted her entire life to him. The sum of her emotional being invested in him alone! The sacrifices she made for him! And she smiled; "Sunny Janice," she whispered. If they were saying anything, she told herself, it was most likely positive, for they had no reason to do otherwise.

"Janice was so good to me."

"The one who got away."

"My one regret was letting her go."

"I can't get over her."

"She's always so cheerful."

"She took care of me."

"She really cared, didn't she?"

"Her earring has been on my dresser for months, and . . . I don't know, I can't bring myself to throw it away."

Forging a short cut on her way to the park, Janice drove down an alley that would take her to Le Duan, and along this small street littered with wet trash and the asphyxiating odor of death, Janice caught in her periphery a number of the homeless in rags and emaciated strays on either side of the street. She knew they were there but refused to look, as it hurt too much to think about others in this state. *Why would the government allow this?*, a transient thought passing ephemerally through her mind. *If they would only make me the queen of this rotten place*, Janice thought, entertaining the fantasy. She would make everything right, and the people would love her. Janice imagined herself on the throne, a golden crown atop her head, and how devoted she would be to those less fortunate, to those who needed her help the most.

Janice parked her motorbike across from Highlands Cafe, and stopped inadvertently on the sidewalk in front of two pedestrians taking a stroll, who had to pause and go around her. "Ticket, please." She told the guy in uniform without making eye-contact.

Janice surveyed the park from the crosswalk at the other side of the road, looking for Bonn, who promised to wear the red shirt she had bought for him at Lotte Department Store. The dew that had recently dried, following the midday rain, lent to the grounds a vibrant green hue at Coffee Park behind Saigon Cathedral, the foliage of the bushes almost diaphanous. The sunlight sparkled against the manilagrass in the unshaded areas out of reach of the large, imposing trees, while birds, animated and full of life, chirped on their branches.

All the locals out with their families. Janice Gentry at one with the world, yellow basket in hand, a spiritual integration with Mother Earth, who bestowed to all. Janice brimmed with the same rush of rejuvenation experienced by nature come spring time. She smiled at everyone who passed, the mothers and fathers, and especially the children as she pranced down the concrete walkway towards the bench where she would meet Mr. Mann. It was the very same bench they always shared when coming to the park, and it was on this bench where Bonn would kiss her for the very first time.

She found Mr. Mann waiting for her on the bench, donning the red shirt he had promised to wear. "I hope you're hungry," she said, taking a seat and opening the picnic basket to reveal the cornucopia of low-calorie delights, the kim-bop rolls, pickled ginger and mangosteen. Mr. Mann made an affirmative grunt, and she settled her fingers between his, against his hairless knuckles. "Isn't this nice." Janice observed aloud. Hundreds of people, innumerable families together on this Vietnamese holiday, and yet, it was as though the world existed for Ms. Peebles and Mr. Mann alone, a fairy tale bubble of perfumed wonder, floating above the rest . . . but where to go? All the ideal spots of grass were already occupied by other families, as if they didn't care, didn't understand how important this day was to her.

But the seas would part, an Eloisa James sort of coincidence, as Janice imagined the stars aligning, an opportunistic moment that shone serendipitous in slow motion, a spacious area of dry grass next to the evergreen tree, and she would jump toward her vision of momentary perfection, clinging to the sweaty hand of Mr. Mann as she ran, now in close proximity to the vacant plot of picnic space, and upon arriving, unfold her patterned

blanket on the available expanse of park, rightfully marking her territory, "Oh, honey, what a nice spot!"

And everything would have proceeded as it should have, had Mr. Mann not intervened. He had a nasty habit of ruining moments that could have been perfect, but until that day, it was only a minor flaw that could have easily been remedied, or so she thought.

There was a family of four - mother, father and two children around five and three - that had been waiting for that very same spot, unpacking their own basket in anticipation of occupying the area that rightfully belonged to Janice Gentry. By all accounts, it was hers, for she had gotten there first, a public park that abided by the first-come-first-serve-principle, and from their nonverbal reaction, shrugging and backing away, they would appear to adhere to the same unwritten social rule, but Mr. Mann had to intervene, as he always did, the party crasher, the stick in the mud.

"I'm sorry, did you want this space?" He said, in Vietnamese.

"It's alright, you've already got everything arranged, and laid out," said the wife.

"We'll find another place," said the husband in such harsh and ugly Vietnamese, thought Janice.

The kids were hanging their heads, exhausted and hungry, and the father put a comforting hand around the back of each of their necks. "C'mon," he said, "Let's look for another spot to eat lunch." And the family left.

"I think they wanted this spot," said Mr. Mann. "They were waiting for this spot."

But Janice would have none of it. "Just sit down. It's fine. Don't worry. It's ours. They'll find one of their own," straightening out the blanket, unpacking the cellophane wrapped edibles and smiling from ear to ear. And though she would never lose her smile, they dined in silence the entire meal.

Feeling soured, Janice went to bed early that night, close to 9:00PM. She chewed some valerian root, climbed into her yellow sanctuary, and closed her eyes. But she awoke when Mr. Mann called to say "Goodnight," and more importantly, that he was sorry.

"Are you alright, Mr. Mann?"

"A bit under the weather."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine, just got a flu, or something."

"I'm coming!"

"Don't come. It's fine. Just a cold, or whatever."

"Never mind! I'll be there in thirty minutes! (A few seconds of silence) I want to be there with you."

"It's really no big deal."

"You're sick, it's MY deal!," and with that, she was getting dressed, and making her way out of the apartment.

"Get out of my way!" She screamed at every traffic light. Stopping at a pho restaurant while on her way to Mr. Mann's house, she ordered a bowl of noodle soup and reiterated the urgency of the request. "Yes, hurry up, take away . . . just put it in a plastic cup, or something, I don't know!" She said, pacing before the proprietor, adding: "I'll be right back. Here's the money."

As the soup was being prepared, Janice ran across the street to the pharmacy on the other side of the block, where she found a couple of women lingering in front of the entrance and talking, blocking her way. "Excuse me." Janice said, nudging them aside, and pushing her way into the drug store, letting them door slam on both women. Now a line of five, and Janice stood at the back, nervously fidgeting with the strap of her purse, while the person in front, completely oblivious to Janice Gentry's emergency, talked idly with the pharmacist, "I have a sore throat and a headache, and my chest is congested," he said in Vietnamese.

"C'mon! Just buy something, it's all the same!," Janice said while shuffling past the other four to the glass counter. She looked coldly at the man who stood waiting for his medicine. "I need to go first," she said, "It's an emergency, you don't understand. Just let me buy what I need and get out of here. Then you can get whatever you want!" She said. The others in line were silenced, but nodded in agreement. If this was urgent, Janice Gentry

should go first and get what she needed before anything disastrous happened. "Yes, thank you." She said, shoving the pills and dissolving tablets into the bag, and marching back across the street.

"I'm coming," she said, doing 80 KPH along Duong Cach Mang Thang Tam, speeding around and cutting off the other motorcyclists on the road. Upon arriving, Janice parked in front of the gate, removed her helmet and grabbed the bag of soup and medicine.

She rang the doorbell once, twice, and nearly a third time before he would eventually open the door in his pajamas. "Come on in, Janice," he said, his nose clogged with infected mucus.

"Oh, Bonn, you look terrible. Why aren't you lying down?"

"I had to answer the door," he said.

"Of course," she smiled. "But now I'm here, so go lie down, and I'll get all of this ready for you."

In bed, Mr. Mann lay on his side with his arms wrapped around the pillow. When Janice came into the room holding a tray containing soup and a tall drink of water, she put it on the bedside table and dropped a pair of fizzy tablets into the glass. "You need to finish this whole bowl and make sure you eat all the leaves in there, because they're good for your health, and will help you get better. Also, drink all of this, and take two of these green pills three times a day.

"You're a very good woman," said Mr. Mann, gazing upon Janice's worried countenance. Now on his back, Mr. Mann took a sip of water and looked away, turning his sickly expression from Janice to the air conditioner at the top of the wall near the ceiling. "Listen, Janice, I'm sorry you went through all this trouble to take care of me."

With two fingers, Janice gently grabbed his chin and guided his face back towards hers, so that he might witness the sincerity of what she would say next. "I love you, and I want to take care of you."

But Mr. Mann would only sigh, turning away, which left Janice feeling that something was terribly wrong.



"What is it?" she asked.

And like an unclean blade to the viscera, he said: "I don't think we should see each other anymore."

Janice didn't know how to respond, mouth agape in shock, wasn't sure she had heard him correctly. "Of course we should, why shouldn't we? Do you still love me?"

"I'm not sure anymore." He said. It was happening again; she had heard those words many times before, and yet they never failed to inflict that white-hot degree of unparalleled pain, destroying her from the inside out, as a dead baby in the womb.

This time, though, she would not show him how she felt, refused to make apparent the agony, or give him the satisfaction of seeing her broken. If there was one thing Janice regretted from the past, it was staying around long enough to witness the faux-sympathetic look of the victor, as she lay emotionally crippled inside, helpless. Not this time, she thought, she would not give him that opportunity, and so picked up her purse, and without saying a word, walked quickly down the stairs and out of the house.

Janice 'Peeples' Gentry was a proud woman, and Mr. Mann knew he would never hear from her again. As he lay in bed, now tucked in the fetal position, he tried reading to take his mind off what had happened, to indulge his guilt no further, and so picked up *Family Happiness* by Tolstoy from the floor next to his bed, and began where he left off, page 122 in the collection of short stories. The voice of Sergey Mikhaylych. *I can not praise a young lady who is alive only when people are admiring her, but as soon as she is left alone, collapses and finds nothing to her taste - one who is all for show and has no resources in herself.*

Mr. Mann felt a few tears escape from the corners of both eyes. He hadn't meant to do anything cruel, never meant to hurt her, but it was the only way, and it was now time to move on.

In a fit of tears, Janice could barely see the road ahead of her. She wanted desperately to stop crying, but the sobbing persisted involuntarily, and incessantly. To calm herself, she pulled to the side of the street and put the bike on its kickstand next to the curb. She sat on the sidewalk and put her hands over her head.

Wet and red around the eyes, and cheeks now smeared with mascara, Janice sat alone, destined to be unloved, a barbaric joke played by a merciless and sadistic god. Each passerby on the street went around her, indifferent to her suffering, some of them embarrassed, some of them laughing. But no one helped; no one leant any loving support. *How can people be so monstrous, so uncaring! We're all human, aren't we? Can't they see I'm dying?* And yet it seemed to make no difference to anyone, this wicked and bloodthirsty species.

No longer hyperventilating, she managed to calm herself. The tears became less frequent as the minutes passed. She thought back to the cat she had as a child, reminiscing on the curb. The black and white kitten that ran away. She remembered crying alone in her room all afternoon, as her mother knocked on the door, reassuring Janice in that maternal voice of concern that they would get a new cat. And how Janice screamed and pounded the walls with mini-fists. "I don't want another cat! I want MY cat!" And how the following day, her mother would bring home another kitten, Mr. Feely. And how Janice learned to love Mr. Feely as much, if not more, than the kitten that had run away. The walks they would take together, and how she kept Mr. Feely away from the other cats they encountered along the road. "Don't play with those cats," she would say. "Those are dirty cats." And how Mr. Feely lived to be an old feline, a faithful cat who always shared the same bed as Janice and loved her unconditionally.

There would always be another, thought Janice. Perk up, she told herself. Get off this filthy sidewalk. Go home and take a bath. Have hope for the future, for another. Yes, there would always be another.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"A Cup of Fur"**

by Philip Dean Walker

When Tetsuya reached into the top drawer of his desk at work, his hand brushed against the breast. It reminded him, with a surprising fondness, of his mother back in Tokyo. Shortly after his father had died, when Tetsuya was a young teen, she had fallen down the stairs and broken her arm. The cast she wore was so big that it covered the middle of her left shoulder all the way down to her wrist and was held in place not only by its own plaster mold, hard as drywall, but also a metal rod that ran diagonally to support it.

Getting around the house was difficult at first, but she quickly picked up the twists and turns through doorways and negotiated the side tables populated by villages of ceramic figurines. She became agile, adopting a confident yet bulbous swagger while gliding through the house. With the recent crack in their family, it seemed fitting to Tetsuya that she should emerge from the battle of a marriage that had ended in suicide with such a magnificent wound.

On a lazy Sunday morning, Tetsuya had been sitting in the kitchen of his mother's house eating a grapefruit while she showered upstairs. Then he heard a loud crash of glass breaking, still falling, and he was up the flight of stairs as fast as she'd fallen down them. Concern taking over his usual sense of privacy, he opened the bathroom door. The sliding glass door of the shower displayed a hole the size of a mammoth fist; sharp slivers of glass dangled precariously then fell to meet the bits below. His mother stood there, naked and dripping, staring at her cast, amazed at its sheer, solid bulk. When she saw him, her hand fluttered in a panic, and with the choice of two places on which to land, it went down below to cover the dark patch, of which Tetsuya had caught only a brief, blurred glimpse.

The cast covered one of her breasts, but the other was prominently exposed. Before he had enough sense to leave with his mother's safety verified, he got a look at that breast, and his mind took a picture of it that would project onto the white screen at the back of his head at random moments for the rest of his adolescence. Until he finally had a breast of his

own to gaze at without restriction, his mother's would be the only female nakedness he knew and, like some prototypes, the origin of his concept of perfection.

As Tetsuya's hand reached inside the desk, he at first mistook it for a hardened apple or a paperweight someone had left behind. He lifted the clay breast delicately, as if it might hatch. True to Mei Ling's Greek passion for detail, the aureole was slightly darker, glazed perhaps, with small bumps surrounding a finely shaped erect nipple that begged to be pressed like a button. The note attached to the bottom said simply, "A piece of me." She never had mentioned anything about doing sculptures of her own body. As he studied it, he saw only a dim resemblance to her breasts. He put the clay piece back in the drawer.

Tetsuya was new to Singapore. His Tokyo office had transferred him there two months before, and as was customary to his nature, he didn't complain. Things in Tokyo hadn't been going well. He'd been living with his mother since graduation. As he was twenty-two, this had seemed a convenient choice for both parties. Rent anywhere in the city was ridiculous, and his mother was lonely. The food was overpriced and had become a bore. Tetsuya never would admit it to anyone, but he wasn't a fish person, which severely restricted his choices in most Tokyo restaurants. His mother, a housewife her entire adult life, doted on him. She loved to cook foreign dishes for him, particularly Mexican and Korean.

He'd always considered himself lucky to have such a reliable mother. They'd been on their own for years. In the beginning he resented her, secretly blamed her for having driven his father to suicide with her suffocating kind of love, her unreasonably high expectations. His father had lost his job when the asset bubble burst in 1991 and the next day stepped in front of the *Shinkansen* at Ueno station, as so many did.

Tetsuya's mother had been the one harmed most by his father's sudden exit and had handled the ordeal with a silent, admirable grace. If she'd been tormented, she dealt with it privately. She'd refused to exhibit any shame, which was what practically everyone—including her own parents—had thought was called for under the circumstances. She was the one upon whom Tetsuya always could lean.

The longer Tetsuya had stayed at home, however, the more intense his mother had become. She was suffocating. It was as though his time away at school had given her the necessary fuel to create new reasons he should stay at home, dire needs only he could

meet. Who but Tetsuya, for instance, could possibly accompany her to the cinema? What about her shopping trips to Ginza? Was she expected to hold her own shopping bags? And with whom was she to take lunch? She longed for his company and held him prisoner; she hated for him to go out.

“Where is there to go? What is there to do?” she’d plead.

“Mother, I have friends outside of this *house*. I have to leave.”

On the rare nights he left her, he’d return home to find her in his room sitting on the floor, waiting. At twenty-five, Tetsuya decided it was time to move out.

His friend, Kazuo, had asked him to move into an apartment with him in Tokyo’s Shinjuku district. It was an expensive area, but Kazuo’s uncle owned the building and was prepared to offer them an apartment at a very reasonable rent, granted his nephew and Tetsuya occasionally cared for an infirm, childless woman who lived on the top floor. The lady had been something of a mentor to the man in his youth. She had taught him *ikebana*—Japanese flower arrangement—and conversational English. She’d opened up her doors to him, keeping him out of the streets, and had shielded him from an almost certain troubled future. Tetsuya welcomed the change moving there might bring. He liked meeting new people.

His mother, of course, wasn’t thrilled with the idea. She insisted he visit her three times a week and call with even more frequency. And of course, he complied. After all, he did owe her.

Keiko, the old woman on the top floor, wasn’t a pleasant human being. Her apartment was rank and untidy, and two minutes into Tetsuya’s first visit, he suddenly understood why Kazuo’s uncle no longer had time to care for her. Although the agreement had been a joint one with Kazuo, the burden somehow had landed solely on Tetsuya’s shoulders.

He visited with her in the mornings before work, did light shopping on the weekends, and even changed her linens when she had the occasional accident. He saw slight traces of the chipper woman she had been, happy to guide his friend’s uncle as a boy. But what had possibly been eccentric and entertaining in her younger years had become cloying and irritating. What Keiko said and did disturbed him at times. She seemed to resent him for not being someone else (whom, Tetsuya could not say). Once, when he came

through the door unnoticed, he found her muttering something about a cat of hers that had run away. Instead of feeling remorse, she appeared vengeful, as if the cat were now an enemy that must be sought out and destroyed.

When Tetsuya's company, a burgeoning chemical manufacturing outfit that specialized in women's fragrances, proposed a promotion and a transfer to their Singapore office, he quickly agreed. When he informed Keiko of his plans, the news instantly resurrected what he assumed was her former self. She advised him to stay off the streets at night. One time, she told him, on a vacation to Singapore, she and a friend were attacked on their way home from a restaurant. "They are jealous of Japanese people. Our freedom is very desirable to them," she warned. She told him to write to her and even jotted down her address, although the only difference from his own was her apartment number.

He told her he had to leave, so she kissed his cheek gently and said she had enjoyed his company and thought she'd probably miss him. Then she turned away, as if he were already gone, and stared out the window at the street below. Tetsuya showed himself out, clutching the slip of paper with her address.

At first, Tetsuya was convinced he'd made the biggest mistake by moving to Singapore.

His mother called him every day in the beginning. She spoke about the most commonplace things. She said that she needed to be reminded to pick up eggs for the week because there was a special or that she'd found a stone shaped like a face in the park near Sugamo and what did he think that meant and should she send it to him? Her voice sounded far away, forced into unnaturally high tones he'd never heard her use before. Tetsuya imagined her excitement while she dialed his number and then the slow, steady letdown that came halfway through their conversation as she realized that her son no longer needed her, that he surely could get by without knowing the price of bread for the week or the hair appointment it had taken her weeks to book. Sure, he needed a mother like everyone else, but now she seemed to be just another thing to return to nostalgically from time to time in his mind. She was part of the same fading photograph, the details of his life receding into the background and becoming part of a great, white wash. He knew everything and everyone in his life eventually would find its way to that place.

Singapore smelled. Tokyo had been no great joy, but there at least had been a certain charm to its odor: old, wet flowers waiting to be tossed. The Singapore smell was decidedly different and made him think twice about going outside.

His first day at the new office was a welcome change from the time he'd spent in the surrounding environs. The building itself was brand new and located in a high-end business district—both gloriously smelling like nothing. If he had to package the scent as one of those dangly car trees, he would've called it "Corporate Chill," and the tree would've been a light gray, the color of fresh cigarette ash.

Tetsuya's office was at the end of a long hallway with the restrooms for the floor right around the corner in their own niche. The company had given him a secretary, Mei Ling, whom he shared with one other employee, a man named Ji Min. Tetsuya and Ji Min met only briefly upon his arrival.

Everyone used English in the office, and Tetsuya was comfortable with that. The years he'd studied with native-speaking tutors had given him a mastery over the language and a bit of a New Zealand accent, as his primary tutor had been from Wellington. He'd even managed to triumph over the unconquerable "r-l" confusion by making the word *licorice* part of his daily vocabulary.

Never having had a secretary in the past, he wasn't sure what to do with Mei Ling. Fragrance research and development wasn't something he necessarily needed assistance to perform. Having worked on the chemical-manufacturing side of the business in Tokyo, he had more than enough experience in carrying out market research and conducting fragrance field trials and whatever else needed to be done. That's why he'd been promoted to his position. Ji Min was an obsessive perfectionist and worked Mei Ling long, inconvenient hours. Tetsuya was happy to just let her proofread his reports and get the occasional coffee.

At first she seemed to have taken offense to the limited duties, as if he didn't trust her to perform the simplest office tasks. However, she spent only a couple days around Tetsuya before this notion was dampened. His intentions and demeanor were too kind. He was spectacularly unjaded and without agenda. Most people found him refreshingly odd, almost like a tourist, withholding judgment until the end of the trip.

One day, with Ji Min out of town, Mei Ling came into Tetsuya's office earlier than usual. She wore a white carnation in her hair and brought two cups of coffee. She had begun to put more effort than necessary into making the perfect cup after finally coaxing out of him the way he took it.

"Thank you, Mei Ling," said Tetsuya, as she handed him his black mug. He invited her to sit down.

"Everyone is very pleased that you're here, Takeda-san. They wonder how the Tokyo office ever saw fit to let you go." She wore a white skirt and a black blouse that was unbuttoned to reveal the edges of a brassiere of the same color. The carnation nodded along with the movement of her head, as if in agreement.

"I needed a change. Honestly, Japan can be a bit monotonous, you know. Have you worked here long?" he asked.

"Only a year. This isn't where I really want to be, though. I consider myself an artist. Chemicals and fragrances are so predictable. They follow such a rigid formula."

"What's your medium? As an artist?"

"I sculpt in clay," Mei Ling said. "Small, abstract pieces mostly. Right now, though, I'm working on a study of my roommate. I've done her arms, neck, and four fingers of her left hand. But I'm having trouble getting the thumb right. It's such an odd shape. She works on the fifth floor of our building. That's how we met."

"Why your roommate? Only willing model?" he asked, his hands running through his coiffed, gelled hair, something he almost never did.

"She has body-image problems. I want to show her how beautiful she is."

Tetsuya watched as she rubbed the space below her neck, that hollow. So sexy. She noticed his eyes and brought her hand up to the carnation as if it had been disturbed.

He spoke next without much forethought, another uncharacteristic move. "Would you like to get out of here for a little while? Maybe get a cup of coffee?"

"I'd love to," she said almost immediately.

So caught up was he, in that moment and with Mei Ling, that he forgot, right on the spot, what he'd already been drinking.



Mei Ling didn't just sculpt clay; she seemed to mold the lives around her. During that first date, although it really had been no more than an extended coffee break, Tetsuya had witnessed what kind of a woman Mei Ling was. As they sat across from each other, people in the café stared at her, somehow immobilized. He received a clear message of intent from each of them. The women weren't jealous, just curious, as if staring at her deeply enough eventually might yield all her secrets. The men all seemed to appreciate that someone was with her, even if it wasn't them. It was entirely possible that Tetsuya simply was projecting this onto people based on his own attraction to her, but he didn't think this was so.

When Tetsuya was with Mei Ling, he felt imbued with a calm, tranquil energy, almost as if he were in the presence of a great mystic. He seemed to be discovering firsthand the powerful satisfaction that comes from pursuing a relationship. Immodestly he felt validated as being some supreme judge of character.

Walking back to the office after coffee, he tossed his cigarette to the ground. When Mei Ling noticed he was no longer smoking, she quickly doubled back, intent on finding the butt. When she finally did, she stubbed it out then tossed it into a nearby trashcan. It was all done with such swiftness, the carnation in her hair never moving out of place, that Tetsuya would've forgotten the episode altogether had it not been for the words she uttered as she linked her arm back through his. "Please be careful," she said.

They spent their first night together at Tetsuya's apartment. Mei Ling told him she was embarrassed about the possibility of keeping her roommate awake and suggested they go to his place. Her roommate had enough issues as it was, she explained. There was no need to bring around a man she was seeing.

That first night they sat on the sofa drinking a Malbec and talked into the early morning about everything. Tetsuya opened up to her about his father's sudden death and why his mother was especially attached to him now. They discussed art, and Mei Ling was impressed to hear that Tetsuya was familiar with many of her favorite artists, such as Kinji Akagawa and Madeleine Boschan, the latter of whom she commended for her use of found objects. She considered the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, that great Hellenistic masterpiece, to be the most formidable image of woman ever, made even more powerful by her lack of a head.

“With the absence of a head and therefore brain, it’s almost like something else is propelling her toward us. The spirit of her body perhaps.”

“Didn’t the statue originally have a head, though?” Tetsuya asked.

“Possibly. But no one—that we know of—ever has seen it. She triumphs without it. She doesn’t need to see us to know who she is.”

As the dawn light peeked through the slats of the blinds, Mei Ling brought Tetsuya’s head toward hers and kissed him lightly on the lips. His lips, she said, were the softest she’d felt on a man. She slowly removed his clothes and traced her fingers over each muscle. It felt to Tetsuya that she was reading his body, committing to memory the trails of veins that ran up and down his forearm. She told him to tense his abdomen so she could lick the lines of his muscles. Tetsuya watched her as he brushed her hair through his fingers. She treated his entire body with the same level of worship, investigating each piece of him with exquisite care and authority. When she slid his underwear down to his ankles, she stared at him in wonder. She whispered to him, almost a warning of what she was about to do. He caught the words *love* and *pieces*, but her voice was too soft for him to make out a full sentence. He didn’t care. She kneaded his cock gently with her small hands then took him in her mouth.

After they made love, she wriggled out from beneath him and reached for a clip, which she used to tie her hair back from her face, though a few stray hairs stuck to her forehead. She lit one of his cigarettes and went to stand on the balcony. She drew a blanket around her breasts, although she seemed confident enough in her own nakedness. The blast of heat from the open balcony door came to him instantly, and he pushed the duvet down to the edge of the bed with his feet, writhing into the mattress with a reserve of energy. The foam mattress was the kind that retained the shape of the body on top of it. Tetsuya imagined himself poised above, looking down at the outline their bodies had made on it, like lovers immortalized in chalk at a crime scene.

The street smells from outside didn’t reach up this far. The only scents Tetsuya made out were the hot air, cigarette smoke, and his own spilled sex, which all had combined to create an anxious odor—a forbidden flower recently plucked. He wouldn’t mind that awful street smell if it came. He might lie back, breathe it in, and wait—perhaps only seconds—to become even dizzier.

As far as they were both aware, no one in the office knew. Tetsuya and Mei Ling had a discussion about their affair and considered it a good idea to be as discreet as possible. With Ji Min in town, Mei Ling went back to working almost full-time for him. Tetsuya felt crazy in her presence around the office and found it increasingly difficult to keep up their boss-and-secretary act. He kept imagining his office door closed and the glass fogging up and her screaming while he took her over his desk.

He'd argued with her after they'd been together two weeks. "I don't care what people think. I've never felt like this before," he said.

"We can't be like that here, Tetsuya. You can't flaunt your personal life and expect people to take you seriously." She leaned closer to him, her eyes darting around to make sure they were alone. "If we keep things between us, they'll be that much more ours. Don't you want that?"

She was right, of course; he just found himself incapable of acting professionally around her. They walked side by side to the lab to consult with the chemist on a new scent he was developing. All the while, he had to stare straight past her into the spaces around her, to the side, never head on, because he would have to sleep with her right there if he did. It was like a scene in a play he had to rehearse to perfection, convincing the audience night after night but never himself.

He decided to actively lie about Mei Ling. He went out to lunch with Ji Min and told him about a girlfriend back in Tokyo whom he was hoping to bring over as soon as he had established himself in Singapore. He said she was perfect, with a stunning body, but she wore expensive clothes she couldn't afford and shared an apartment with a friend in Shibuya that wasn't within her budget. When Ji Min asked her name, he said it was "Keiko," the name of the old woman he had befriended back home. It was the first time Tetsuya had even thought of her at all, and he was surprised how she'd finally turned out to be of use to him. It wasn't like him to lie, but he found it easy and gratifying. He rationalized the lie to himself with the knowledge that the imaginary girlfriend almost certainly did exist in Tokyo because there were thousands like her living there.

Mei Ling told him her roommate was asking so many questions about her whereabouts lately that it would be easier if Tetsuya just met her.

He showed up early with a bottle of Shiraz and white roses for both of them.

“What a wonderful gesture, Takeda-san. Just perfect,” Mei Ling said, accepting the bottle and one of the bouquets. She wore an apron that was clearly not hers, as she was swimming in it. She kissed him and brought her arms up around his neck, as if she needed to mark him for the night. As she clung to him, Tetsuya spotted someone descending the stairs with careful deliberation; Mei Ling turned around and met her at the foot of the stairs.

“Tetsuya, this is Yan Fang,” she said, taking on the new role of chaperone.

“It’s nice to meet you.” He brought the flowers to her in a gallant motion.

He saw where the body-image issues Mei Ling had mentioned came from. Yan Fang wasn’t fat, but her big-boned heftiness made her seem larger than her weight. Standing next to Mei Ling, who was small and petite even in high heels and the roomy apron, Yan Fang seemed like her weathered, older sister, an exchange student who’d been improperly matched to her summer host. She had a round, globular face and lips she hastily had smeared with an unflattering shade of cherry-red lipstick. She was gussied up in a way that showed the infrequency with which she must’ve attended formal events. Her hands were beautiful, though: white and smooth, well cared for in a way the rest of her seemed not to be. Tetsuya imagined they must have inspired the most lifelike of Mei Ling’s sculptures.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” Yan Fang said. “You sounded so perfect that I was beginning to think Mei Ling had made you up.”

He heard the precision with which she chose her words and thought she might’ve had few chances to practice English in the past.

“Let’s sit down,” said Mei Ling. She opened the wine in the kitchen and returned with three glasses. She filled Yan Fang and Tetsuya’s then her own as an afterthought.

“I understand we all work in the same building, Yan Fang. What do you do?” asked Tetsuya, keeping to the comfortable basics.

“I’m in advertising,” she said.

“Yan Fang is putting together the ad campaign for Jame Vu, that new fall fragrance Ji Min is managing. She also headed the campaign for Chingta Biscuits you see all around the city,” added Mei Ling.

“It was much better before it went to committee,” Yan Fang said. “My sexy teens on the beach were turned into a bored housewife in minutes. They said young people have no interest in baking. Whatever.”

Tetsuya thought she used the last word with a peculiar amount of gusto, seeming to imitate the way she might’ve heard it in a movie.

“They say she can sell anything,” said Mei Ling.

Glass in hand, Tetsuya stood and wandered to the mantle. He fingered the ledge over the fireplace, digging his nail under a part where the cream lacquer had chipped. A small, rectangular mirror that was propped up at an angle surprised him when he met his reflection in it. It leaned against the wall on top of a red cube. Perched upon the cube was a silver cup with a small handle, like something that might’ve once held a child’s first milk. He peered inside the cup and saw it was halfway full of dull brown wisps, some matted and clumped together. He stuck his finger inside. Fur.

“What is this?” he asked, looking at Yan Fang in the mirror.

“My cup of fur,” said Yan Fang with a certain amount of pride.

“Her childhood cat wandered away and was caught in a hideous trap in the woods. She chewed her way out but never came back. The fur was all she left behind,” Mei Ling explained, as if it were a story she’d heard so many times that she could now lay partial claim to it. “Isn’t it morbid?”

“A bit, although people do keep ashes in the same place,” he said. “How did you know it was your cat?” he asked Yan Fang.

“I just knew. I’ll never forget the color of her fur. I loved her,” she said, with a finality that ended the discussion.

Mei Ling’s cooking skills weren’t up to par with the rest of her winning attributes. She had attempted char kway teow, an ambitious dish for even an experienced cook—something Tetsuya’s mother used to prepare on anniversary nights for his father. It was made with thick, flat noodles stir-fried in dark soy sauce with prawns, eggs, bean sprouts, fish cake, cockles, green leafy vegetables, and Chinese sausage. But she had burned the sausages at the end so that small, hardened black bits stuck to the vegetables and swam in the sauce like flecks of dirt.

The two roommates ate it heartily, so Tetsuya followed their lead, praising the food with each satisfied moan. He looked forward to the coffee, an area in which he knew she wouldn't disappoint.

Yan Fang followed the conversation with her eyes, occasionally offering a brief opinion or a question. At one point, she asked Tetsuya if he'd ever been married.

"Of course not, Yan Fang," Mei Ling answered for him. "Don't you think I would've told you?"

"I thought maybe you didn't know," she said, tossing back the rest of her wine.

Later, over coffee, Mei Ling related a story from work to them. Tetsuya watched her closely, a brief wave of amazement washing over him. He smiled to himself, childishly, as if momentarily discovering the delight of his relationship for the first time. He glanced at Yan Fang who, while nodding along at everything Mei Ling said, seemed to be squinting at her. When she caught Tetsuya looking at her, she affected a wide-eyed concentration.

After dinner, Yan Fang was eager to do the dishes. She was up and into the kitchen before either of them could protest.

"Just let her," said Mei Ling. "She's acting strange tonight. This might not have been the best idea."

"She's just jealous. You could make a paper bag look sexy. And your bad cooking was adorable."

"You didn't like my cooking?" she asked coyly.

"I sat through it for my chance to be alone with the cook." Tetsuya moved her to the couch and kissed her, cradling her head in his hand, delicately manipulating its position with the grip of his fingers. Because he was kissing her, the sounds of the apartment had receded into the background. But he suddenly noticed the sink was no longer running, and the dishes, clinking and crashing before in a way that almost had sounded deliberate, were now silent. "Where's Yan Fang?" he asked.

"Gone to bed, probably. Should we do the same?" Her eyes were half closed, and she spoke with a smile that was just short of being self-satisfied.

"Where can I find the bathroom? I had a lot of wine."

"Upstairs. I'll be right here, waiting."

When he reached the top of the stairs, a long hallway of blond wood stretched out before him with five doors, two on each side and one at the end, all closed. He tried the first one on the right, but it was locked. He thought it must be Yan Fang's room. *Good*, he thought. *She must already be asleep*. The opposite door opened too fast, but he stopped it before it banged into the wall. It wasn't the bathroom but a multipurpose area devoted to Mei Ling's clay work. A table stood near the center of the room, covered in a white sheet; the tallest piece underneath held the brunt of the teepee structure. Tetsuya saw the pinkish clay of one piece exposed in the corner. He pulled the sheet back and picked up Yan Fang's hand.

It was an amazing likeness. Mei Ling had captured the long, slender fingers that were so at odds with the meaty girth of the rest of her body. The details were incredible—fingernails set in relief with cuticles and even a hangnail on the pinkie, giving credit to the whole piece by showing its willingness to record imperfection. The veins of the hand connected like roads on a map, visibly raised and alive. The hand looked as if it had been caught in a moment of pressure, perhaps dangling off a padded stool with a model's fatigue, the blood rushing to the fingertips. Mei Ling had been right about the thumb, though; it was too fat, exaggerated, out of proportion and set at an odd, impossible angle. It made its own evolutionary statement; it was so out of place that it seemed unnecessary.

Tetsuya shut the door carefully, summoned away from further investigation by the more immediate need to relieve his bladder. He pushed open the next door. At first the heap of clothes on the floor utterly confused him. Was this Yan Fang's bedroom? No, there were black-and-white tiles on the floor, a sink, a pink razor. He took it all in, seeing Yan Fang last, resisting an initial instinct to avert his eyes.

She was red faced and panting, her legs in a full straddle over the toilet seat. Her wide hips bucked, and three fingers of her left hand glided in and out of her vagina, lubed and glistening in the harsh overhead light.

A look of instant horror flashed in her eyes, her brain telling her hand to stop. But she was too close, and the damage had been done. She came in quick jolts, knocking her knees together, the caps as big as saucers. When the whites of her eyes settled back in their sockets and she was able to focus on him, he noticed an involuntary fluttering of her eyelids, something that often happened to him during his own climax or the moments just

afterward. Her glazed look was desperate, and she stuttered indiscernibly between shame and enticement. She opened her legs back up as some sort of last-ditch invitation; they were shaking. Suddenly she looked very cold. She opened her mouth as if to say something but then brought her hand up to her face, which was red and splotched with strain.

He quickly pulled the door shut and came down the stairs, staring straight ahead in a regal pose. His bladder still pushed up against his other organs. Then he felt a small click inside where he knew some urgency had been rerouted. He found Mei Ling in the same position on the couch, only she had removed her skirt and unbuttoned the top of her blouse.

“Relieved?” she asked.

“Yes,” he croaked out, unprepared to speak.

Mei Ling reached for his belt buckle, but he pulled away from her and sunk to his knees to pull off her underwear. There was something he would do for her, both hot and sweet like an unexpected favor. With their lovemaking of late so mapped out in its events, the novelty of the act completely jarred her. In the throes of a sudden panic, she clutched his shoulders, possibly urging him to stop, if only half-heartedly. Pillows flew off the couch. The coffee table moved inches, revealing ancient indentations in the carpet. He peered over her mound of hair and took a breath before going back down. He saw the mantle, the propped-up mirror, Yan Fang’s cup filled with fur. Sounds were loud, vibrating somewhere, maybe all around him. He’d accessed a moan from Mei Ling so deep that even the mirror seemed to tilt away from them in avoidance of their reflection.

The next day, Ji Min came into Tetsuya’s office. “We’re going out tonight with a couple of the bosses. They’re asking for you to come,” he said.

“I was going to leave early today.”

Ji Min stared him down.

“I guess I can change my plans,” Tetsuya said.

They went to a Japanese hostess bar. He didn’t choose it; he just got swept up along with the group, everyone clad in dark suits carrying their briefcases in one hand, cigarettes in the other. Tetsuya felt as if he were part a pack of marauding corporate raiders propelled by their own noxious fumes, subsisting on nicotine and alcohol—a trail mix of wide,



checkered ties. The drunker you got, the more your boss accepted you. That's how things had been in Tokyo as well; Tetsuya was well aware of this. Matching your boss drink for drink displayed more loyalty than good work or showing up on time.

Somehow he had managed to avoid this initiation in the past by ducking out the back of the building to meet Mei Ling for a taxi ride to his place. The route to his apartment through the packed roads was so familiar to them that Mei Ling would wait until they'd passed the noodle shop on the right to light her cigarette, knowing she would reach the filter just as the doorman opened her side of the taxi. They always talked on their way up the elevator and fondled each other casually, dancing around the idea of pushing that little red button and doing it right there like they'd seen in a movie once. It excited her; she became much more daring once they left the office. He'd take her straight to his bedroom and let it all out, the stress, those fleeting moments of panic that made up every day. And there was Mei Ling moving with the rhythm of this feeling like she knew what he was thinking even before he did. Like she knew him better than he knew himself.

From what Tetsuya had gathered, this was a special night, a departure from the normal routine. There were girls everywhere, and the place smelled like a hot mix of perfume and anxiousness. The hostesses swam around the tables of men, never staying in one place too long.

To Tetsuya, Ji Min seemed like a different person. He hung on every word of anyone who was even slightly his senior, kissing ass so blatantly that his mouth moved indiscernibly from glass to cigarette to butt cheek, making him look busier than he ever did in the office.

He sloshed his drink down the front of his suit then ordered another round, urging everyone else to empty their glasses. Tetsuya tossed back the rest of his Scotch and loosened his tie. He felt a little sick, like he might throw up. So he calmly sat at the table for a moment, focusing on a spot behind the lit bar until his stomach settled.

Their glasses blended into the black, lacquered tables, and the dancing ends of cigarettes gave a fluctuating head count as men drifted in and out of private backrooms. Cerulean lamps lit from above made the entire place seem as if it were underwater. Everyone looked dead. A dull buzzing sound erupted from the speakers with just enough

variance in rhythm to be passed off as music. The hostesses weaved through the tables, invisible to each other, just daring for Tetsuya to touch one of them.

Ji Min whispered in his ear, "You're so busy, Tetsuya. You never come out with us." His breath was a horrid mix.

"Yes, well..." he stumbled. His tongue was loose, and he felt terribly unfocused.

"It's funny how I can never find Mei Ling either, after about seven thirty or so. I always think she's doing extra work for you, but you're usually gone as well," Ji Min said cryptically.

"We're both quite busy."

The discussion stopped, and everyone looked at one another. A couple of men glanced nervously at Tetsuya's boss.

*They know, Tetsuya thought almost instantly. They all know.*

As if on cue, the lights dimmed, and the room suddenly became unnavigable. A chill filled the air once Tetsuya lit a cigarette to give his hands something to do. For the first time, he noticed bars on the windows. The club was underground, but he didn't remember having walked down any stairs. He looked around the table at their half faces, indistinguishable from one another but all bluish in pallor. There was no one he could trust here. Not even someone who'd make apologies for him if he decided to go home and be sick, which, at this point, was all he wanted to do.

Suddenly a blue arm emerged from behind and encircled his neck. The polish on the fingernails looked deep purple in the light. The buzzing sound that was now unmistakably music was all around him now and not just inside his throbbing head. At some point, a horn slowly had snuck its way in sync with the other sounds. A jazz beat that had made his heart jump when it first entered the song gave the blue arm something to move to. The hostess picked him up from the waist like a toddler and placed his arms on her shoulders, leading him deeper toward the dark center of the room. He tried not to step on her toes, but she wouldn't let him look down, so he stopped trying to follow where they went. With one hand she grabbed his face; her nails felt sharp against his cheek. In a second's worth of light, he caught a cursory glimpse of her face. She was older, thirty-nine maybe. Or even forty. Her mouth appeared as a straight line painted on in the same shade as her nail polish. Her eyes

were wide, unnaturally so for an Asian woman. Bulging out of her face as they were, her eyelids were pulled tightly against the temples in a way that looked surgically assisted.

The lamps dimmed even more, and Tetsuya knocked into a chair. “Excuse me,” he said to it. The woman laughed and pulled him closer to the center of the room, where the light converged into a hollow void. He sensed a sneeze coming on but lost it and felt extremely cheated by everything. The jazz beat was techno, having shifted again so seamlessly. He felt himself being watched by the dull-lidded, rheumy eyes of his colleagues all around the room, slightly goading him on. He was fearful, yet curious, of what the sad tune might turn into next.

Tetsuya remembered his first earthquake, a relatively large one for Tokyo at 5.4. He’d been getting ready for school, and his glass of water had slipped off the sink. Watching it skip its way off in a jittery journey to the edge, he’d felt no urge to save it from falling. He’d been too caught up in the drama of it all, the visible wreckage, however small, needed as proof that he’d actually been through this. As he stood in the doorway as he’d always been taught, he tried to recall the list he’d once compiled of things to take from the house in case of an emergency. His coin collection; a love letter he’d written to his second-grade teacher but never sent; a framed picture of his family, the three of them caught in a moment of rare togetherness, standing next to a fountain in Yoyogi Park, his father’s eyes the only ones looking away, focused on some offstage diversion he was soon to follow. He knew there’d been more he wanted to save—things he would later discover were so easily replaceable.

On Tetsuya’s way to school, his mother had turned up the radio when the announcer was reporting the news of the earthquake. No major damage or direct casualties. But he did report a strange side note—a story about the death of a man who apparently had tripped down the stairs and broken his neck minutes after assuring his wife over the phone that her antique set of Limoges had survived the quake. It was almost too absurd to be tragic, yet it struck Tetsuya as extremely unfair. Who had phoned in this ridiculous piece of news? Certainly not the wife. Would she ever look at that Limoges the same way or even dare use it again? Would she destroy it as a penance? Then there was the man himself. He’d gotten up that morning thinking it was just an ordinary day, and only hours later it was an amusing footnote to a disaster, a tidbit hurriedly crammed between the weekend weather

forecast and the baseball scores. News of the weird, fodder for the water cooler. It was then Tetsuya saw the honor in death by natural disaster, the way it saved you from personal fault, instantly enshrining your own history with that of the earth's.

It was a feeling felt, at some point, by everyone: the intense, immediate need to escape to the restroom. Had he paid more attention to his regularity the past couple of days, he'd have known he was more than overdue for such a boiling unleash. It was easier to think it was the lunch he'd eaten only twenty minutes before, probably stuffed with some raw mess of meat, or the three cups of Mei Ling's coffee he'd guzzled down that morning when he first got to the office than to admit that yes, indeed, a horrific bout of constipation was about to come to an end.

The indignity of such a base bodily function embarrassed him, like a child who gets up early to wash the sheets in order to keep his wet, nighttime accident a secret from his mother. Tetsuya didn't care why he was so desperately in need of a toilet or even who saw him creep toward the bathroom, his buttocks clenched and his face in a grimace. All he knew was that if he didn't find a toilet soon, he would have to leave the office with his jacket tied around his waist then dispose of a very expensive suit—that, or jump out of the twenty-third story window, soiled but noble.

The men's room on his floor was quiet but not in the way he'd hoped. It was the forced silence of public defecation, the desire to stifle even the slightest break of wind. He'd done it himself, of course. Coughed when he knew there'd be noise, pulled the paper roll down to the floor before carefully tearing the serrated edge, dashing out with only the most cursory hand wash in order to avoid having anyone look him in the eye. He hated having to do this in a public restroom, always had, even at school where he'd wait until after the last bell, knowing full well he'd be late but who cared, just as long as he'd be alone. Some of the stalls hadn't even had doors on them, and that was its own separate nightmare. He'd take a side-by-side urinal buddy any day, even if they peeked, which some did naturally, or jiggled at the end like they were masturbating.

He squatted and swept the floor with his eyes, praying for an empty stall. What he saw were eight pairs of polished shoes and a newspaper's ripped edges; in addition, the physical position he was now in certainly was not helping matters. Without thinking much

about it, he exited the men's room and hurried across the hall into the ladies' room. No one was in the hallway, which he counted as a minor blessing. The smell was different in this bathroom, lemony and sterile, as if an army of cleaning women recently had scoured it. He also inhaled a sweet smell of perfume he recognized but couldn't quite place. The lingering scent of Shalimar perhaps. All the stall doors were shut. He pushed in the one at the end and found that it was empty. With his buckle already undone, he sat down in a rush.

Tetsuya was relieved, and a cool, congratulatory sweat formed on his forehead as he felt a great block move out of him. He moaned overdramatically and hoped to all gods that he was as alone as it had appeared. Barring the custodian's recent visit, as evidenced by the smell of lemon cleanser, the place did feel vacant.

He left the stall and was glad to see he was still alone, but as he passed the oblong wall mirror, he noticed an eye watching him through the crack of the first stall door. For one unmistakable moment, it looked at him, wide, full, and in a strange sense, trained to remember. Was it Keiko's cataract-riddled eye watching him? Was she there to alert him to danger? To spy on him? As soon as he noticed the eye, it was gone, and then he was out the door without even washing his hands.

He walked down the empty hall feeling a desperate need to be seen, to be noted as a person who could be found in many different parts of the office at any time of the day. A man he'd never spoken more than two words to stood at a desk, comparing figures on an Excel spreadsheet with a tall, focused-looking woman. Tetsuya passed by his office offering a smile, his hands in his pockets. He lingered a few moments too long, though, enough time for the man's face to change from conciliatory to suspicious. So he pressed on quickly around the corner and settled back into his office, forcing himself to answer e-mails. His hands dripped with sweat.

Mei Ling came in with a stack of folders. She brushed her fingertip along Tetsuya's palm as she passed them to him. She stared at her wet index finger with a puzzled look, as if a stray dog accidentally had licked her.

"Yan Fang is on our floor today. She came to meet with Ji Min on the upcoming perfume launch. She's going to join me for lunch. Would you like to come?" Mei Ling moved some things around on his desk in a familiar manner. If she had looked at him right then, she would have seen a face confused then scared, as if a dreadful question were being

answered too quickly. If she'd been there later, when the local police arrived to take him away to be grilled in a boardroom, she might've had to look away, embarrassed at the sight of the man she loved being so easily humbled into a boy.

Yan Fang appeared in the doorway dressed in an ill-fitting light-pink business suit. She pursed her lips defiantly and said, "I am ready to eat."

In Singapore, as Tetsuya learned from the police, using the bathroom of the opposite sex was tantamount to a kind of visual sexual assault, public voyeurism with the intent to commit molestation. He found out that men in the past had been taken in for doing nothing more than stealing a roll of toilet paper from an empty ladies' room. They arrested men all the time as examples, inventing new definitions of lewdness along the way.

He cried when the police first entered his office, with expressions that suggested he was some sort of pervert. The tears erupted from a deep, hidden source within—the part of him that responded to irrevocable change. Nothing moved on his face, just the tears running in silent streams down both cheeks. He'd felt a conspicuous lack of surprise at their almost too prompt arrival, how they'd come so equipped to deal with him. Hadn't he known that the bathroom door he'd shut on Yan Fang had cracks, certain ways of letting things through? And what had set her off exactly—the moaning he'd indulged in privately in the stall, or had it been Mei Ling's that night after the dinner? So inconsiderate; so grossly, sexually human.

The police ransacked Tetsuya's desk and produced the clay breast as further evidence of his sexual perversion. As he sat in the small room at the station looking at it, he finally was convinced it was based on Yan Fang. Mei Ling wouldn't have sculpted herself. He couldn't imagine her standing in front of the mirror with one eye on her chest, the other fixed to an unformed piece of clay. She might've been too afraid that the mirror would distort her perspective somehow, detracting elements of perfection from her body she wasn't ready to confront in order to produce an abstract lump with only the faintest resemblance to her own body. Maybe she'd simply confused the two of them. Roommates tended to meld into each other if they lived together long enough. It was possible that she'd sculpted so many pieces of Yan Fang that she really did think of them as pieces of herself

too. Maybe Tetsuya had misread the meaning of the gift entirely and, more important, who had given it to him.

A slap on the wrist. A suspension without pay. Some corporate branding he'd take months to put behind him but eventually would, and he'd be stronger for it. These were the possible outcomes he allowed to play out in his head as he waited at home to learn his fate. He sincerely believed he could get out of it. They'd respect him again; they would. He could win them over. Still, it didn't look like any of this would come to pass.

The more time he waited at home by the phone after the arrest, the more likely a severe disciplinary action would be taken against him. It was the waiting that was really doing him in. The speculative scenarios running through his head and all ending up pretty much the same way: a flight back to Narita Airport in economy class and his mother waiting for him at the gate with a genuine smile because, despite the shame attached to the whole episode, he would come back to her, and she wouldn't be able to see it in any way other than how she might benefit. Then they'd take the express train together back to Ueno station. He felt a dull horror over the inevitability of the vision, like just imagining it had suddenly made it true.

He picked up the phone and checked the dial tone, letting it run until silence came and then a ringing to the operator. He hung up and glanced at a scrap of paper in a hodgepodge dish with the address and phone number of Keiko, the old woman in Tokyo. She was the one person he could think of who was least likely to be waiting by the phone for anyone. It was only the second time he'd thought of her since coming to Singapore. He knew she'd understand what had happened to him here, the cruel, draconian way Singapore had of making examples of outsiders. A person could be caned for throwing out a cigarette butt on the street. Now he could see the appeal of her sad apartment and empty life where no women patiently waited behind closed doors to ruin him.

He imagined it was people Keiko feared, not loneliness. The loneliness she could bear. She could mold it into whatever she wanted because, in the end, it was of her own making. People, though, were uncontrollable. She had put her faith in them once before, and the returns were paltry, unrecognizably pathetic in their terrible morsels of almost kindness. She flung them back with spite, the only defense she had left.

Tetsuya walked up to his open window and peered at the street below. He ran his palm along the window's ledge, carefully, gently. It would be so easy to jump. He was high enough that there would be no question that his life would end. And wasn't that exactly what was expected of him? A Japanese man shamed into a somewhat obvious yet completely noble suicide? Wasn't that exactly how this was supposed to play out? He could avoid returning home to his mother. He could turn his life into the great tragic drama it deserved, sealing Mei Ling's love for him eternally. It was the quickest way out of the sticky trap in which he found himself ensnared.

What if his father had had second thoughts as he fell toward the approaching *shinkansen*? What if, in that last moment, he'd seen a picture of his wife and son in his mind and realized that they would still love him without a job and that this—this man standing too close to the platform's edge—wasn't really him, that he shouldn't do this? What if it had all been too late? Tetsuya couldn't do it. He couldn't turn his back on life. Gratifying as it might be in the moment or in theory, suicide was permanent. There was no changing your mind once you took that last step.

Poor Keiko's solitude was a defeat, he realized, not the triumph she pretended it to be. She acted the way she did because she had to. She hadn't lost the fight; she'd given it up years ago. She was her own miserable understudy rehearsing a play that had long since closed.

Tetsuya still had a choice. He could choose to turn his back on this place with its unrelenting heat and the rotten smells of cooked garbage and sweat dripping down the closed, locked thighs of women unfulfilled.

As he reveled in the finality of his decision, the phone rang at the moment that he could've least cared what the voice on the other end had to say about his future.

Mei Ling opened the door wearing a Mickey Mouse T-shirt and faded jeans covered in damp streaks of clay.

"Ji Min told us all what happened." It came out of her in one quick breath, like the excuse it was. She hadn't spoken to him in more than ten days.

"Is she here?" he asked flatly.

"No."



“May I come in?”

“Yes.” She closed the door, adopting a jealous tone he knew didn’t suit her. “Yan Fang said you tried to continue something that started the night you came here for dinner.”

“And you believed her?”

“Well, no. But then Ji Min said you had sex with a girl one night in front of all these guys, and it sounded so unlike you, but it all added up to something, something I couldn’t make any sense of.” She sat on the couch, careful not to touch the fabric with her wet hands.

“We danced. I was very drunk that night at the bar, but I’m quite sure I didn’t do *that*. I wouldn’t do that.”

“And Yan Fang?”

“I didn’t start *anything* with her. Ever. You must know that.”

“I know you didn’t. I guess I knew it before.”

“You were upstairs when I knocked. What were you working on?” he asked.

“Nothing, really. I was fooling around, trying to make a plate, but I got bored with it. Too functional,” she replied.

“Show me,” he said, already leading the way upstairs.

The door was open, and Tetsuya noticed that the large, white sheet that previously had covered the table was gone. All kinds of body parts were spread out on the table, like the recent findings of a mass grave during an archeological dig: a varicose thigh severed at a sharp angle, almost where one might imagine a short tube skirt had tightened its way around the flesh in a tourniquet; a pair of calves, one leaning toward the other, modestly; a foot in a perfect ballerina flex; the top of a bare head, lobotomized; a finger bent at the first joint and pointing down; and at the far end of the table, a lone breast, full and familiar in shape.

He saw an ill-formed plate on a work stool. It was bumpy around the middle and curved, wobbly, at the edges—a Frisbee perhaps or a large ashtray, something into which any clay piece easily could devolve. Mei Ling was undoubtedly an artist who needed a model; anyone could see that much.

“What’s the first part of me you noticed?” he asked quickly.

“Your arms,” she said. “Your strong arms.”

He took off his shirt slowly and encircled her hand around the peak of his biceps. “Do me,” he said, motioning toward a lump of fresh clay that lay next to the stool.

Mei Ling pulled his biceps toward her and tossed the plate onto a stained blanket in the corner of the room. She moved her hand up and down his arm, getting the feel of it, gripping it in a pressure of points. After she’d made some sense of it, she dipped her hands into a bowl of water and went after the clay as if Tetsuya weren’t there at all.

As he watched her work, he felt like he had before this moment; he had known only a slight, unfocused part of her. In the tapered light of the room, he finally saw something beyond the shell he had worshiped. She seemed half caught in a searchlight, holding a rope and wanting to be tied to something—searching for an object to devote her energy to. She glanced up from the clay and stared at him discerningly, picking him apart with her eyes, separating the bones underneath the skin, from the muscle groups that connected in the fine maze that gave him shape. Baked and hardened to life, this was the piece of himself he’d leave behind.

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## **"Chicken Soup for Breakfast: Eating Out in Vietnam"**

by Don Adams

When it comes to food, I know a serviceable amount – enough to get by on living alone in America. I certainly am not a connoisseur. It is not unusual for me to fail to remember what I had to eat even earlier in the day or the day before. American food seems destined to be, if not necessarily forgotten, then at least not particularly noticed. But the food in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam, is conspicuous and interactive. One cannot ignore it for long. In the mornings I am awoken by the sound of the food vendors working my alley, calling out the name of their product as they walk or pedal or push their cart slowly along. I am particularly drawn to the hot corn vendor who peddles his product with an oddly circumspect yet penetrating call of “bop” -- the word for corn. He somehow manages to convey in that one soft-loud word a resigned wistfulness worthy of an aging film star. Or am I imagining that? My instinctive cultural responses are highly suspect here.

Like millions of Saigonese on the go, I eat most of my meals on the street, before one of the innumerable store-front prepared food or noodle shops, or at one of the noodle, rice, or sandwich stands that spring up all over the city throughout the day. You can hardly walk ten steps in Saigon without passing a restaurant or food vendor. On my block, there are ten or twenty of them, depending on the time of day. In the little town in America where I grew up, there were two. Our family was on a tight budget and we rarely ate at those restaurants. But as a child I always longed to do so to break up the monotony of meals at home. Perhaps that is why I so like living here in Saigon, where the streets are littered with diners dining and the fare is priced to move. You can get a filling bowl of noodles for fifty cents and a large bottle of beer for forty cents. Even the low-wage earner can afford an occasional night on the town, or at least on the sidewalk. Generally speaking, an individual can feed himself fairly well eating local food in Vietnam for as little as three to four dollars a day.

Although there are purportedly between eight to ten million people in Ho Chi Minh City and its suburbs, the place retains the feel of a smallish town. The county-fair atmosphere of the teeming food vendors and street stalls no doubt contribute to this, as does the fact that almost all of the service workers in the restaurant industry seem to come from the provinces, from whence they have made their way to the big city to earn two hundred dollars or so per month working long-hour six- or seven-day weeks. Most of the service workers whom I have gotten to know have been sent as emissaries of hard-pressed rural families and are expected to contribute a large portion of their “city” wages to taking care of the folks back home. Those who work in larger establishments often sleep and live in the restaurant in which they work.

One condition of the restaurant culture in larger eating establishments that the foreigner has to get used to is that when you want a server to wait on you after you initially have been given a menu, you must call him or her over. By no means should you wait for them to come back on their own, as this is something that they generally will not do, except at tourist-frequented places where they are trained to do so. The servers are prompt and efficient in responding to hails and summons and don’t seem to mind in the least being bossed around like this. In fact they expect it and in any case the situation requires it. To the average Westerner, the Vietnamese seem to order each other around an inordinate amount, but it is just the way the system works. When I first arrived in Vietnam, I was shy about hailing service workers, feeling that to do so would be tantamount to commenting publicly and critically on their poor service, but finally I realized that the perceived criticism and possible impoliteness of such interactions were wholly in my mind, as was the perceived laziness of the servers who were standing idly by waiting to be summoned. It was one of the first of many lessons learned in cultural relativity.

When dining on the street or even at many restaurants, one sits communally at a table. At the higher end of the lower-end establishments, one sits on plastic chairs or stools of a more or less normal height drawn up before rectangular tables of a similarly normal height that seat four to eight. But at more humble establishments or those particularly pressed for space, one sits on mini-stools or chairs at mini-tables. This diminutive furniture – or

versions thereof – may be seen in any number of daycare centers and nursery schools throughout the world. One thing I have learned is that it is impossible for a person of six feet plus in height (187 cm), sitting on a kiddie stool, to maneuver his legs under a table that stands at eighteen inches (45 cm). And so I sit in a sort of side-saddle position, trying not to take up more space than I have to from my suitably-sized fellow diners.

Many of the food stands and tables that set up on the city sidewalks and streetsides throughout the day and night are, strictly speaking, illegal, and on occasion a police jeep followed by a large-bedded cargo truck used to haul away confiscated sidewalk eateries drives slowly down the street, setting in motion a full-scale evacuation of soup stalls, food stands, and tables and chairs. On several occasions I have been instructed to hold my bowl of soup in my hands while the table it was sitting on and the stool I was perched on are both whisked away before the approach of the marauding police vehicles. Apparently there is nothing illegal about simply standing on the sidewalk while enjoying a bowl of delicious Vietnamese noodles.

Vietnamese food is remarkable for its freshness and simplicity. The soup stocks are generally watery, rather than fatty. Much of the taste is derived from the fresh herbs, seasoning sauces, and chilies you add to the soup when it is served. Likewise when you order, say, chicken ginger, what you get is chicken pieces steamed or fried with ginger slices — and that is all. Vietnamese food is rarely cooked in a sauce other than the standard soy and fish sauce that are used as seasoning. The Vietnamese seem to have an aversion in their cooking for anything that would cover up the pure taste of the plain food itself. Meat in the Vietnamese diet is more of a flavorizer than a main course, exemplifying the citizenry's talent for making do with less. While parsimonious with the meat, however, they are magnanimous with its accouterments, and even a simple noodle soup dish is generally accompanied by two or three dipping and seasoning sauces and as many fresh vegetable garnishes.

It is a healthy and low-fat diet and you consequently rarely see overweight people here — although some of the Vietnamese children, indulged with western-style snack food and

colas, are beginning to plump up. But the adult population is largely small and compact, even fragile-seeming. For a visitor from an ever-more bloated and gargantuan America, this is one of the country's chief attractions. It is a simple pleasure to be driven in a taxi by a middle-aged adult who looks like a teenager with a learning permit, his head peeping just above the wheel. Compare this, if you will, with the picture of myself at the communal soup-stall table, a head and shoulders taller than the average Vietnamese around me and half again as hefty. But that part is subject to change, thanks to my newly-discovered talent for clean living prompted by the healthy local diet. I am counting on my extended sojourn here to flush out the old arteries as well, and to that end I am administering to myself nightly doses of red wine from a box from France, which I drink back at the house, after my street-food meals of noodles and rice. As far as my industrious liver is concerned, we might never have left home.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Gradual"

by Pauline Fernandez

Amihan came to the capital city of Manila, carrying with her much hopes and dreams along with her *bayong* of clothing and a toothbrush. It was only for a short time, supposedly, until she could make enough to help her family's *sari-sari* store business back in the provinces where she came from, and maybe even save a little for herself. In the meantime, she was in the city, absorbing the lights, the streets and the glamour. They had malls everywhere and cars jamming the roads. She could wander to all these places she'd seen on TV, taste the very essence of the city she had often and only heard about. And once she's done, she could go back home with these armful of memories she could share with her mother and younger sisters. Show them how it was done in the city. Then perhaps in time, she could marry a local fisherman, like her mother, and pass the remainder of her simple life in peace.

But sadly, it was not meant to be.

Instead, she had found herself alone and scared. Pregnant and unmarried.

She first came to work as a *katulong* or help to a certain Mrs. Lastimososa, a widow of good standing. And then she met Martin, the youngest child of Mrs. Lastimososa.

She had never considered herself an exceptional beauty. She was short like most Filipinas, but not plump at least. Her skin wasn't too dark and her nose round, but not squashed.

He was young, like herself, quite handsome, a business student from the university. Within a few months of working, she was in love. He wasn't. But he liked her enough to woo her into having his child, albeit unintentionally.

She thought she was set. A wealthy, Catholic woman wouldn't want her son to shame his family with an illegitimate child. How lucky she was to have met such a wonderful man from a well-established family in the city, she thought. He could take care of her, her family and their child.

But she was wrong.

She was to be erased as if nothing ever happened.

Mrs. Lastimosa, not wanting a girl of her background tainting her family, had her sent away. Where was she to go? A girl carrying an illegitimate child will not be able to find work so easily in a predominantly Catholic city. Who would want to hire someone with baggage? She could not head home. Being labeled a pariah will be difficult, but bearable. But her family was relying on her in the first place to support them. How can she turn to them?

Would she have to sell herself on the streets? Where will she go?

She was lost.

\* \* \*

It was only a few years ago that Dr. Menendez and his wife finally completed their residency and began their practice. They had converted the second front entrance of their home into a clinic, a freshly painted sign of their names in "M.D." hanging on the front gate. While his wife worked at a local hospital, Dr. Menendez took in patients into their home, and on occasions, drove to their homes.

Although both were professionals, their income was quite modest. Instead of picking a home in the wealthier areas of Greenhills or Ayala Alabang, they chose instead to live in the projects of Quezon City.

As they learned early on, living in the heart of Quezon City like an unconnected piece of a puzzle was not that easy and the only way to thrive was to link themselves to the bulk of the city. To the folks they knew would be of valuable help, they would allow the fee to slide for treatments. No return favors, no strings attached, not even when insisted. Though they made no earnings from this, the strategy managed to build them several connections that proved to be very beneficial in the long run. Not only had they received several recommendations, but when the hard times came, when typhoons or floods struck the city or when another government uprising threatened the area, they were the first to receive warnings and aid.

In time, their practice flourished. Their household on Dungon Street remained small, but relatively peaceful. It wasn't long before they were able to afford their own *katulong* to



help with the housework and watch over their two young children, 5-year old Analiza and 2-year old Adam.

Then on one ordinary day, after finishing several house visits, Dr. Menendez found himself on his way to a relative of his. Mrs. Lastimososa was having difficulties with her arthritis and was wondering if he could perhaps prescribe her something to ease the pain.

Dr. Menendez drove his old, bronze jeep through the narrow, jagged streets of the city, passing through peddlers and traffic before turning into a quiet neighborhood of huge, colorful houses of bright pinks, yellows and blues. He came upon a lengthy, newly-painted white gate and honked. The gates clanked opened by a lanky teenage boy, one of Mrs. Lastimososa's *katulong*. He parked his jeep on the driveway and entered the extensive, peach house through an ornate double doors, black medicine bag at hand. Another *katulong* led him to the living room, an area that would have been spacious if it wasn't for the bulky furnishings and mismatching decors.

"Misses will be coming by soon," said the *katulong* before leaving a small tray of orange juice and crackers.

Dr. Menendez sat down on the oversized couch and took out his prescription pad. The house was the same as all the others he'd visited in the city: large, pastel and seemingly overcrowded. A huge contrast to his narrow home in the projects.

"Hi! Good morning!" an old, cheery voice piped from the open doorway. Mrs. Lastimososa, a woman in her sixties, sauntered in. Her short, permed hair shot unruly atop of her head, her russet face devoid of make-up and slacking down like watered clay. Her thick frame wore a T-shirt with green shorts that reached to her mid thighs and her small feet in rubber slippers.

"*Pasensia na!* Didn't have time this morning to prepare myself. I'm sure you can tell. I had a late night at our Bridge Club reunion last night and I'm still so tired," she bemoaned. "I've been having trouble getting out of bed. My knees are killing me."

"Let's take a look then," said Dr. Menendez.

"No, no. Finish your juice first."

They talked for a few minutes about family gossips, his two children, his practice, her church activities. After a while, he began to examine her ankles and her knees, while continuing with the small chatter. Minutes passed by and a *katulong* came by to pick up the

empty glass and plates left on the coffee table. Mrs. Lastimosa fell into silence as she watched her walked away into the kitchen.

“*Ay naku,*” she sighed. “You probably already heard about Martin.”

Dr. Menendez kept his focus on her right knee. Yes, he had heard about it, he answered. He didn’t want to bring it up for obvious reason, but now it was out in the open.

“So what’s the plan?” he asked cautiously.

“I’m so disgusted by the whole situation. I couldn’t stand to look at her.”

“I take it she’s gone?”

“*Ay,* of course!”

“Where is she now?”

“Somewhere in Cubao. She has some relatives there, I think.”

Dr. Menendez didn’t ask any more questions. But Mrs. Lastimosa continued on, carping about Martin no longer having access to their car, getting his privileges revoked and how he was now working part-time. Dr. Menendez, in the meantime, continued on with his examination before finally writing out a prescription.

She walked him out to his jeep. Outside, the morning sun burned brightly and the air thick and moist. He looked down, pensively thinking before looking up.

“Why don’t you send her to us?”

“Amihan?”

“Yes”

“Why in the world should I?”

“Because she is carrying your grandchild.”

That was enough to convince her. Though she couldn’t bear the idea of having shame reside in her opulent household, blood and religion trumped over her misgivings. She wrote out Amihan’s current address and contact and handed it to Dr. Menendez.

“Thank you. God will bless you for this.”

She nodded; a hesitant relief flickered slightly in her eyes.

Dr. Menendez drove home that afternoon, spoke to his wife before finally dialing the number from the cast-offed, crumpled piece of scrap paper.

\* \* \*

Amihan came to the Menendez home, quiet and reserved. The house was much smaller than Mrs. Lastimosa's, but had enough space and commodities to accommodate her, unlike the makeshift house she lived in with her distant relatives the past few months. For such a small residence, it had quite a few fruit trees. A coconut tree guarded the front, while a jackfruit, a bayabas and a kamias tree, overlooked the back.

She was given a room with their two children, Analiza and Adam and was set to work after a few days of resting and adjusting. She was to be their *yaya* and watch over them while the Menendez were gone. She was also to work as a *katulong* and help with the cooking, the cleaning, the laundry and all other housework. In return, she was given an income, care for her unborn child and a home.

She never said much. She went about her days, completing her tasks without complaints. No one who ever came by the house, friends, relatives or patients, would have ever thought anything about her.

There were moments, however, like when sweeping the floor or putting the children to bed, when she desperately found the need to pause. To put everything down and stare off into the distance as if one small movement will break her insides into a million pieces. The Menendez were kind, but even their kindness was not enough to loosen the grip tightening in her chest. Though not as taut as before, it was still there, more constricting when she lived with the squatters of Cubao. Now the best she could do was lock her lips to keep it from pouring out all the pieces of sorrow broken inside her frigid frame. Someday, it will all go away, but for now they were prickling within like shattered glass.

But over time as she continued to work, she found herself thinking more and more of the two Menendez children. Analiza, though frail and thin, was headstrong and constantly hounding her younger brother, Adam the curious and fidgety one. She worked silently at first, watching over the two, but slowly as the days went by, the tightness in her chest began to ease. She began to teach them songs from her childhood, tell them tales of her hometown, a quiet fishing province. And when they grew restless, she would share ghost stories of the white lady roaming the fish ponds at night or the terrifying *kapre* guarding the tamarind trees down the street.

As the days turned to weeks which in turn became months, as the trees began to bloom and gather fruits, the tiny shards of what was left of her past was squeezed out by

the quiet anticipation over what was growing within her. She packed Analiza and Adam's old baby clothes, bottles and toys, along with Adam's old crib given to her by the Menendez into the back room of the house, next to the kamias tree, transforming what was once a storage area into a nursery. The name of Martin no longer occupied her mind and instead was filled with names like Miriam, Emmanuel, Liza or Diego. She still did not know whether she was having a boy or a girl.

Then the day came when Dr. Menendez's wife took her to the hospital. She performed the delivery herself and handed Amihan a baby boy. He was beautiful. Thick bank of black hair, luminous skin like his father's and a set of small, brown eyes. He whimpered and tightened his eyes, his small fists flailing until he settled in her arms.

"What's his name going to be?" asked a nurse.

She had thought about it. She had come up with several names for a boy, but couldn't decide which one to use. She already had the last name. It was hers, not Lastimososa. Dr. Menendez's wife had insisted on it.

"He needs to know his mother and who he belongs to," she had said as if forewarning.

Amihan thought for a moment. She remembered a statue she had seen and admired so much at church of an archangel triumphing over the devil. There was also that singer with the beautiful voice and amazing moonwalking skills whom she had always adored. She smiled and looked down at the scrunched-up form by her chest.

"Michael."

\* \* \*

Mrs. Lastimososa, still drowsy from jet lag, eased her head on the back seat of her Lancer. The car jerked to a stop before moving again, only to repeat the same pattern over and over again.

"Iloy, can you try to avoid Aurora Boulevard? There's too much traffic there," she said, her voice irritated.

"Yes, ma'am," replied her driver.

It had been only three days since her return from abroad. Two weeks of touring Southern California with a quick stop to Las Vegas with her two youngest. Martin had behaved well these past three years, graduating with high honors from the university, even

saving money from his part-time and then landing a job at a bank. As a reward, Mrs. Lastimosa took him with her on a leisure trip to the United States. She had returned earlier while he stayed behind for another week.

“Is this the house, ma’am?”

She peeped up from her sunglasses. The confining street was lined with gray and white concrete houses standing side by side with no gaps in between and electrical wires hanging loosely above. They were waiting by a tall, serrated white wall with rusty barbed wires crowning the top, a house hidden behind.

“That’s the one.”

The driver honked. The gate swung open before them and a smiling Dr. Menendez waved by as the car drove into his driveway.

“How was the States?” he asked as he opened the car door.

“Very good! Nice and cool. Your sisters gave their regards.” She picked out a large box from the trunk and handed it him. “This one is from Aileen.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you were able to meet with them.”

“Of course, of course. Aileen has a very beautiful house.”

Dr. Menendez took her to the second entrance into their living room where his wife greeted them. There were only windows to the front and the back of the house by the kitchen, nothing in between, but the gray, marbled floors and white walls eased by the fluorescent light at least brightened the area. A brown, paper bag filled warm *pan de sal*, a container of cream cheese and a glass liter bottle of soda were already laid on the coffee table. They sat together on the wooden benches, Mrs. Lastimosa proceeding to share with them all the stories about her trip, the glorious cold weather, the abundance and the silence of suburban neighborhoods in California. Upstairs, they could hear giggles and small voices of children.

“How are your kids? Analiza doing better?” Mrs. Lastimosa asked.

“She’s doing better. Her asthma has gone down.”

“Wonderful to hear. We’ll continue to pray for her.”

“Thank you.”

A girl’s laughter squealed from above followed by a soft cry.

“Analiza!” Dr. Menendez’s wife yelled out. “Quiet up there!” The soft crying continued.

“I’m so sorry about that”, she said turning to Mrs. Lastimosa. “Their *yaya* is out at the marketplace right now.”

“No, that’s alright. The boys were the same at that age, with or without their *yaya*.”

Feeble footsteps shuffled from the staircase above. A small face peeped between the wooden bars.

“Adam did it,” Analiza whispered softly and intently.

“Did what, Ana?”

“I did not!” cried Adam pushing behind her.

“You did too. You did it last”

“What did you do?” said Dr. Mendendez’s wife more sternly.

Just then, a timid set of feet appeared atop of the stairs followed by the rest of a three year old boy.

“Michael! What happened to you!” Dr. Menendez’s wife got up and swiftly swept him up. His cheeks were covered in round pinks, black lines drawn clumsily from the corner of his eyes like claw mark lashes. “I’m so sorry,” she turned to Mrs. Lastimosa. “Those two really have no sense sometimes.” She tried to wipe the smudges off, still leaving a trace, but revealing a quiet face with watery eyes and a swollen, red nose.

“It’s ok, Michael.” She wiped off the tears. “You can stay here with me. Your mommy will be home soon.”

Analiza and Adam looked on with spite.

“You two,” she turned to them. “By the stairs! Stand in the corner!”

“But it was Adam...”

“Now!”

Though they did not protest, they turned and walked away begrudgingly with pouting faces.

“I’ll be right back.” She walked away with Michael in her arms towards the bathroom.

“Ay, those children,” said Dr. Menendez. “Sorry about that.”

“That’s ok,” said Mrs. Lastimosa. Her thoughts and eyes fell towards the direction of the little boy. “So that’s Michael, huh?”

“Yes, that’s Michael.”

“He looks healthy.” Indeed he did look more than healthy. There was something warm and radiant about him despite his runny face. Something that made him different from all the other dark children in rubber slippers and worn out clothes playing out in the streets.

“How’s his mother?” She hadn’t seen her since the day she left nor had she heard about her since Dr. Menendez had notified her about Michael’s birth. She had only politely asked about the baby’s gender and health then. That was all. The following couple of months were spent trying to re-erase this episode from her family. Just when they were close to forgetting, it resurfaced again like a ruined plastic doll submerged in flood waters.

Now it unraveled once more into the open, right before her eyes. But this time, there was no more bracing for the embarrassment, no more need to claw it back into silence. Only wonderment and curiosity. This was the first time she had ever seen him.

“Ami’s at the marketplace right now,” Dr. Menendez replied. “She shouldn’t be back for a while.”

“I see.” Mrs. Lastimosa couldn’t really care any less about her. Her mind was too preoccupied with the child a room away. Her first and only grandchild. The one who didn’t live with his father, let alone met his father. He only lived here, wearing secondhand clothes and being picked on by his cousins. Soon his mother will be moving back to the provinces and taking him with her. A beautiful boy like that living in the provinces? That was absurd. He could grow up and become a successful businessman like his father or better yet, his grandfather.

But no, he will be gone soon. She couldn’t let that happen.

Mrs. Lastimosa came home that day, carrying with her much hope and dreams for a young boy along with her imported Dooney and Burke bag. She spent the next few days thinking through, even visiting the Menendez a few more times to observe Michael a little more. She watched while he rubbed crayons on his coloring books, fiddled with Adam’s old toys or curiously gazed at a grasshopper while his cousins squealed in fright.

Then she began to make arrangements and few phone calls. Once all were in place, she made the last call.

“Hello, Dr. Menendez? Lastimososa here. I need to speak to you about Michael.”

\* \* \*

*Everything will be ok*, Amihan thought as she cleared out the remains of a cabinet she shared with Michael. By tomorrow he will be at his new home and she will be on her way back to her province as if the past five years had never happened. The Menendez offered her to stay and continue working for them, at least to be close to Michael, but she declined. Mrs. Lastimososa refused to even acknowledge her.

She was no longer obliged to help her family’s store as it had been thriving well throughout the past few years. She could have gone home a long time ago, but chose to stay instead. Her immediate family still didn’t know about Michael. Not yet, anyway. She wanted to stay long enough in the city to save enough for him. For his school, his clothes, his birthdays. Then when the time was right, she planned to visit her hometown and proudly show to everyone her son, born and raised without a father, now a fine-looking and proficient, young man.

But instead, she will be returning alone.

It should work out. She had more than enough saved, now that Michael will no longer be under her care. She will return home, bearing neither shame nor trace of ever having him, the fatherless child. He, in turn, will be in a better home. He will have newer things, nicer clothes and much more toys. More than that, he will go to a good school and learn so many things Amihan never dreamed of ever knowing. Then he will grow up and become something better than what she could give. He will not have to settle.

She repeated this mantra over and over in her head as if reciting a litany of prayers. She will convince herself of this, someday.

The door to the room opened and Michael walked in, fresh from an afternoon of chasing and running with Analiza and Adam with a Dr. Seuss book at hand. He approached her kneeling form and maneuvered himself onto her lap, opened his book and began reciting the words aloud. He leaned back without a care in the world, the soft tendrils on the back of his head touching her lips. She kissed his head, inhaled his tender scent and for



a fleeting moment, heard a soft breath of contentment exhaling from the little form on her lap. Her arms enfolded him as he carelessly pointed then flipped through his picture book.

*Everything will be ok.*

\* \* \*

Twenty seven year-old Michael was ecstatic. This could very well be the first time he will travel outside the country. His architecture firm was recently selected by a Hong Kong based company to design a commercial structure and he was one of the few architects chosen to be part of the project.

With his visa application already mailed out and his passport on the way, he was almost set. Years of architectural school were finally paying off and he couldn't wait to tell his family. His girlfriend, Angeline and his friends already knew, but he wouldn't be announcing it to his family until the dinner party that coming Saturday. They will be thrilled.

His grandma should also be there. She always had high expectations of him.

"You make me so proud!" she would always say to him after completing a project. "The only one in the family with the creative gene!"

The only one with the creative gene, according her. It seemed unusual to some, but his grandmother often told him he inherited it from his great grandfather. He apparently also loved to build things. The rest of his family, on the other hand, were all in the line of business. His late grandfather and his own father were businessmen. His mother went to business school, but stayed home after having him. His younger brother and sister, both nearly a decade younger, were still in school. *Who knows?* Maybe they too will have that creative side.

He came home early that afternoon, intending to celebrate with Angeline. She had insisted on taking him out for a first class steak dinner, but he preferred her cooking instead, something she was more than happy to comply with.

He grabbed the mail along the way and browsing through it, walked into his apartment. *Strange*, he thought as he picked out a small envelope from the embassy. *That was a quick reply.* And short too. He ripped it open and swiftly perused through the letter. His visa application had been rejected for a very vague reason. *Documents provided insufficient? What did he forget to include?*

He skipped all the way down to the phone number on bottom and quickly dialed it. Two hours and several other phone calls later, he had his answer. There was something about his birth certificate.

*Welps, no matter*, he thought, keeping his annoyance in check. This was just a minor delay. He was still going to Hong Kong.

He sighed, looking at the time. It looked like he will be announcing the news to his family earlier than planned. He and Angeline will surprise them tonight with a visit, relay the good news and then settle this whole business with his birth certificate after.

At least Angeline will not have to cook, he chuckled to himself.

\* \* \*

“Who was that, dear?” Dr. Menendez’s wife asked.

“Mrs. Lastimosa,” said Dr. Menendez hanging up the phone.

“Everything alright? Why in the world would she be calling us?” It had been nearly ten years since they last heard from her. They had long ago moved out of Quezon City and migrated to the United States so it was rather a little unusual for them to be receiving a long distance phone call from her.

“Everyone is alright. Michael finished his masters in architecture.

“Good for him,” she said. “Analiza had been such a bully when they were growing up.”

In addition to her and Adam, the Menendez had four more girls, all born in the Philippines. It was a difficult transition when they first moved. The girls were young then, and of course, they couldn’t hire a *yaya* in the States. But now with Analiza and Adam all grown up and the girls all in high school, the load was much lighter.

“Is that all? She’s just catching up then?” she asked, moving the clean plates from the dishwasher into the cupboards.

“It’s Michael. He was asking about his birth certificate.”

“Oh.”

*It was only a matter of time*, she thought.

It wasn’t long after Mrs. Lastimosa brought Michael into her home that Martin had gotten married and adopted him. A forged birth certificate was issued for Michael under the Lastimosa last name with Martin’s wife as the birth mother. The original was hidden

somewhere only Mrs. Lastimosa would know. Now the years were catching up on her. She was not getting any younger. The truth, Dr. Menendez always knew, would eventually come out.

“Well,” said Dr. Menendez. “You might finally have the talk with him. You prepared?”

“Always.” She was the one who delivered Michael, after all. She had long been waiting for this. Every critical information written on the original birth certificate, she remembered. Amihan’s hometown province, her full name, first, middle and last.

“Good. We’ll just have to wait and see then.” He pulled up the newspaper and picked up where he left off.

It was only a matter of time.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Driving in Bangkok"**

by Peggy McCaulley

A vast network of elevated highways and overpasses create a sense of perpetual twilight; supporting pillars obscure traffic signals, and street names are buried amidst advertisements. Exhaust fumes hover and horns blare as small, grey taxis, unyielding lorries, tuk-tuks and darting motorcycles, fight to get ahead of one another on the crowded streets. This is Bangkok today, but it was not always so.

On the road from Don Muang Airport into Bangkok in January of 1962, there was little congestion, traffic flowed freely, and we encountered only one traffic signal at the intersection of Sukhumvit Road where a policeman stood atop a small tower manually signaling "stop" and "go."

For the first few months I was provided a car and chauffeur. My driver was a mild-mannered man we called "Sweet," which was the closest we could come to pronouncing his Thai name. He was slight of build, always neatly dressed in a white shirt tucked into crisp, white cotton trousers. His English was quite good, and he patiently answered my many questions as he drove me about the city.

By November I felt confident that I could drive myself, having adjusted my reactions to driving on the left. First, I needed to obtain a Thai driver's license. Sweet volunteered to assist me. He procured the Thai Drivers' Handbook for me and translated pertinent information. I was an experienced driver and felt that I would have no problem passing the test so long as I had an interpreter available. On a sun-filled Wednesday morning we set out for the official Bangkok DMV.

A great crowd of men jostled about in ill-defined lines before the eight or nine open windows of a long, grey building. Telling me to remain in the car, Sweet strode into the melee, brandishing a piece of paper in his up-raised hand. Shoving his way to a window, he exchanged his paper, and several hundred baht, for a new piece of paper, which would

allow me to begin the testing process. Alas, by then the doors were closed as the officials retired for a two-hour lunch. "Come back later," we were told.

Two hours later, forced to leave Sweet behind, I was ushered into a small, hot office. The only occupant was a grim-faced officer of indeterminate age. He was seated at a small desk, the top of which was completely bare; no paper, pencils, coffee cups. An ancient oscillating fan, creaking with each revolution, stood in the corner, moving the muggy air around. I tentatively offered my hand, which he ignored.

To my great relief, he spoke flawless English. He began with questions about speed limits, which I answered with assurance. It immediately became apparent, however, that my confident attitude was not acceptable. The ensuing interview was more like an inquisition, for each question seemed poised to trap me into a confession.

"Where can you not park?"

"Where the curb is painted red or yellow."

"And where else?" he asked, his expression impassive. Confused, I shrugged to indicate I didn't quite understand what he wanted. "*In* an intersection; *on* a railroad crossing; *on* a bridge," he said with the hint of a sneer.

"Where can you not pass?"

"Where the white line is solid,"

"And where else?"

*So the game's afoot*, I thought.

"Oh!" said I, slipping into the role of a mere insignificant woman, "I'm so sorry. I don't know the answer."

"In an intersection; on a bridge; on a curve," came the reply, this time with a knowing smirk.

To all the remaining questions I pleaded abject ignorance, humbly begging his forbearance for this presumptuous female *farang*. Satisfied I had learned my place, he stamped my paper and shoved it towards me, indicating he was finished with me.

"Thank you so very much for your kind assistance," I said, and beat a hasty retreat.

Next, I was ushered into a large room filled with tables and chairs. It was occupied by only two men, who were smartly dressed in suits and ties. They invited me to sit and asked: "Was the test difficult or not so difficult?"

“Oh, it was *very* difficult,” I said.

“Ahhh!” they beamed at each other. My paper was stamped again, and I was told my license could be picked up on Friday as they ushered me out the door.

I emerged to find Sweet nervously pacing up and down beside the car. I hadn’t realized until then that my passing the test was a matter of “face” for him. When he learned that I had succeeded, he broke into a huge grin.

We bought a used 1940 British Standard. It was a small maroon-colored roadster with a black canvas top, the struts rusted in place. It had right-hand drive, a stick shift on the floor, two bucket seats in front, a small bench seat in back, removable side-curtains, and a faulty electrical system. How we loved that car!

In the 1960s Thai women did not drive. Only the upper class could afford to own cars, which were always chauffeur-driven. For nearly two years I appeared to be the only woman behind the wheel, and I fell in comfortably with the chauffeurs. They would wave to me, chat with me at the gas station, and, on more than one occasion, came to my rescue to change a flat tire.

By mid-1963 we had five children, the youngest an infant. The three older children had to be delivered to different schools in separate parts of Bangkok each morning. The baby, in his infant seat, was carefully strapped into the front, the two older boys occupied the rear bench seat, while the other two perched atop the wheel wells, careful to keep their feet off the older boys' uniforms. There were no seatbelts in those days.

One morning the children brought my attention to another car just like ours, painted black with a white top, filled with Thai school children going in the opposite direction. Thereafter, much to the delight of all the children, we greeted each other with waving arms and honking horns as we sped by on the morning school run.

There were times when the car simply died in the middle of the road. The children would pile out the sides and push us out of the traffic, enjoying the horn honking and laughter of passing motorists. A vigorous tapping on the dashboard was usually enough to jiggle the wires together so it would start up, and we would continue on our way.

Rainy season presented a host of other problems. The electric windshield wipers never worked and had to be operated manually. The side curtains severely limited visibility, and turned the car into a rolling steam bath. We usually left them off, but the car

sat so low to the road that passing trucks threw up gouts of water, drenching us from both sides. We draped ourselves with towels, attempting to keep uniforms and book-bags dry. Once parked, whether at the curb or in a parking lot, we stepped out into ankle-deep water. Consequently, we wore nothing on our feet during rainy season but flip flops.

When our sixth child was born, we graduated to a Volkswagen bus. We all missed the little red roadster, but the improved visibility was a great boon. Traffic had increased four-fold and spotting trouble ahead often made the difference between getting to school on time or missing the first bell. By then there were two other American women driving the school circuit. It was comforting to know that now there were three of us in this city of over a million.

On a visit in 2008, the traffic in Bangkok scared me half to death, while my Thai daughter-in-law, all ninety pounds of her, relaxed and confident, drove us around the city in her new sedan. I cinched up my seat belt and white-knuckled the armrest as I complimented her on her fearless and expert maneuvering through the congested streets. She giggled a little and said, "Yes, mom, I've had my license four months now." I forced myself to keep my eyes open, and sent up a silent prayer - *Thank you, God, that I don't have to begin again driving in Bangkok.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Supremo"

by Gonzalinho da Costa

*To Andres Bonifacio*

Your bones may be lost forever,  
But we are possessed, fortunately,  
Of your photograph, in which  
You glare—proud, sullen,

Belligerent, yet also brave, staunch,  
Inspired—*Supremo* indeed.  
I do not doubt your genius,  
Testified by, for one,

Your marvelous capacity  
For self-education, though  
You must admit that  
Your keenness is blunted

By your weakness  
In the aspect of strategy:  
Your inability to ride  
Rapidly transforming events

So that they instead  
Rode you, shamefully,  
To your wretched execution—



Unjust, no doubt,

Still, result of your failure

To play your cards well.

Unyielding to a fault,

Prickly, reckless,

Flawed by fatal hubris,

You forecast your own fate

In the red and black flags

Of the *Katipunan*.

Now, standing in dust and smoke

Beclouding your monument

By the illustrious sculptor,

Guillermo Tolentino,

I see the Great Plebeian

Brandishing bolo and gun

And wonder about the message

He purportedly signifies.

Is there wisdom in violence?

Behold, the sword that liberates

Is the selfsame weapon

That tragically destroys!

## **"Planting Rice"**

by Gonzalinho da Costa

*To Fernando Amorsolo*

You capture the special quality  
Of the light of our land—  
Brilliant but blinding,  
Vitalizing yet enervating,

Turning fields green  
When the rains arrive,  
Roasting grass brittle  
When skies are dry.

Beneath broad sun hats,  
Sheltered faces shine  
As they labor cheerfully  
In your pastoral idyll.

Truth be told, planting rice  
Is like shoveling coal  
In the boiler room,  
Bowing constantly.

No matter, art is license  
And vision is heritage  
Of which we all partake:  
We celebrate your genius.

Yellows, radiant pears,  
Reds, multihued plums—  
Your palette, a fruit bowl,  
Vivid feast for hungry eyes.

Your virtuoso brushstrokes  
Travel boldly all around,  
Testifying to your mastery of oil,  
Not to mention draftsmanship.

Your deep rich browns  
Bind us to the soil.  
Your radiant light  
Keeps our sun blazing.

## **"All Souls"**

by Gonzalinho da Costa

The day of the dead is short respite for the living.  
The tumult of life is stilled by the remembrance of the dead.  
The living remembers the dead as the silence of the grass.  
The grass is the dead ever present among the living.

The dead have not forgotten that life is breath and water.  
They hover in the air, waiting for rain.  
Water is the prayers of the living for the thirsty.  
The living sometimes forgets, the dead ever remember.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Sabong"

by Romalyn Ante

The man we called 'Kristo' tossed his copper arms to the right,  
to the left,  
as if begging to be nailed on the cross.  
Clipping peso notes between gnarled fingers,  
he howled, "To the red or to the white?"  
He memorised each man who was betting,  
and at which rooster, and at how much stake.  
The cocks' combs were cut, their spurs were replaced  
with sharp, glistening blades.

Their striking wings fluttered, fiery feathers cluttered;  
jerking like kick-boxers, clawing each other like suave samurai.  
Screams of spectators crashed down -  
a hook in the neck and the white wrenched away!  
Claret blood dripped around the asphalt.

The doomed warrior would be cooked,  
served as *adobo* at the nearby eatery  
and the winner would bring his owner  
some kind of majestic pride -  
his awaited monetary prize.

## "When I Was Born the Whole Town Celebrated"

by Romalyn Ante

My mother was convinced  
she'd name me after our patron saint, San Sebastian.  
When I close my eyes I can still see  
the flamboyant *parada* - marching musicians, swaying crowd,  
the multi-coloured *banderitas* festooning above  
like the jumbling wires of electric poles;  
I remember the sparkling *perya* - the tarnished laughter,  
and the sour scent of Ferris wheel.

On a bamboo table there's the sheen, succulent *lechon* –  
a charcoal-roasted pig, a claret *mansanas* in its mouth.  
Everyone drooled just by looking, yearning for the host  
to start chopping the humongous treat.  
My mother tells me how my uncle lifted her into a tricycle  
and hurled his arms like a traffic officer,  
in an attempt to break the string of devotees.  
Once, a whole town celebrated and I was born,  
  
and at times I still wish I was named Sebastiana. . .

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Corporate Jungle"

by Paul GnanaSelvam

TWO monkeys O' Krishna,  
hunched on their heels, intent  
two brooded--lush canopies--of,  
sturdy tree-tops,  
troops stranded--down the grasslands of  
seed picking, watched  
a hundred eyes aglow--  
black coated, fair coated,  
piercing stares, against--  
sagely air,  
perched high, perched low--  
hooting, barking, fangs bared--  
enamored for battle--for  
definite rebuttal,  
white helmets, cawing calls,  
armies frolicking, attentive, for  
boisterous displays--  
dancing, fooling and clowning--  
awaiting--signs and noises,  
tree tops swaying,  
leaves exploding--and,  
down in the meadows still  
troops, calculating  
tugging wits and will--

the tree tops remain, of  
frivolous decisions--  
back biting, slithering--  
of vines and vipers  
changing fate--of  
unknowing legions,  
squeezed, tampered and bamboozled,  
for what it is to come--  
monsoon clouds or  
the never dipping sun,  
and what is to come--absurd  
displays asunder--of  
the corporate jungle.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Breaking Plates"**

by Anne Carly Abad

There are many ways to break  
a plate. Let children hold it,  
or leave it at the edge of the table

wait for it fall, get knocked over,  
or wash it when you're in a hurry  
let slip from soapy hands.

This one is the last  
of the set, blue and white china,  
from our wedding.

All I know when I found it broken,  
had to put the pieces back together.  
Did you have to see me get cut?

You could have let me be silly, instead  
you took the shards, threw them out  
to shatter on the driveway.



## "Everywhere's a Marketplace"

by Anne Carly Abad

Every place feels like home,  
a market for bodies set in stone—

alabaster legs buffed  
and lightboxed,  
billboard breasts implanted  
guessing games,  
statued brawn insured, passed  
off as art—

check first if it's real  
bite until it bleeds

if it doesn't, let it be

because what should have been  
sprayed on our walls:  
there isn't a poem lovely  
as a ~~tree~~ eye candy.

## "Crying Cop Asks for a Burger"

by Anne Carly Abad

The weevil digs into the foray  
and in capturing a story  
asks why  
the cop sobs:

*order me to stand  
for days on end, with  
barely a drop to drink  
just a crumb to eat,  
flame of sun overhead  
the fire of protest ahead  
and I'll crumble come  
the first to call my mother whore;  
I'll burst into water,  
salt, and wet confetti*

indeed his humanity  
dribbles down his cheek  
for the weevil to drink, for

cops cry too.

But now that enemies console him with hugs  
he might as well ask for a burger to boot.

## "A City Washed Clean"

by Anne Carly Abad

We saw the man  
lying there, with the dust  
that lay still as a wake.

We were mere

commuters, students,  
peddlers, passersby.

We looked on  
or away, and we prayed

for rain, wash the man away  
turn the dust, and the rusty  
pedicab he drove  
into mud. Rain, rain

please come.

They found no pulse  
and no help, save  
for a CPR attempt

half an hour too late.

But the rains came  
and we sighed relief  
as the man, his pedicab

and the dirt soaked up,

softened into mud  
drained into troughs  
and gutters of forget.

Keep walking.

Turn to mud.

The city is washed.

The city is clean.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "White Man Dreaming" -- a 'book reaction' to Jess Row's novel [\*Your Face in Mine\*](#)

by James Seals

The motif of Jess Row's just-released novel, *Your Face in Mine*, resonated throughout my inner recesses: "inner" being the prime word. *Your Face in Mine* is a story "about cultural and racial alienation and the nature of belonging in a world where identity can be a stigma or a lucrative brand." For me and for most of my life my lack of true racial identity has been my self-imposed stigma. With that in mind and from reading the words on the page, I struggled to believe that Jess Row had the expertise to write a novel about individuals who felt "a strong desire to reduce [his or her] feelings of isolation and stigmatization through a change in physical appearance so that [he or she] may 'pass' in that community." There were too many coincidences and too many fake-seeming relationships throughout the novel that hindered its thematic flow, making the story seem cerebral and false.

While reading *Your Face in Mine*, I wondered how Row had imagined a story with such a controversial theme. Maybe the need for "diversity" in literature was a motivating factor. If so, it paid off for Row. Anyway, I kept whispering to myself as I read: how can this white dude (somewhat) know my story? I am half-Filipino and half-Caucasian. But when clothed, I look Mexican, and I must admit that I feel embarrassed and ashamed each time I enter a Mexican joint and have to confess: Sorry bro, I don't speak Spanish. Nor do I speak Tagalog and I certainly struggle to converse in "proper" English (whatever that means today) to whomever I am speaking.

But I soon understood why the novel felt counterfeit as Row referenced throughout the book the must-read "Black" canon – for example, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, more than once – and he gave props to "Black" writers such as Rebecca Walker in his acknowledgements for her book *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness*, which looks at the roots of Black Cool and attempts to name elements of the phenomena that have

emerged to shape the global expectation of cool itself. *Your Face in Mine*, for me, became nothing more than a guide to black culture (as Row named all the black literature and musical elements) of the seventies, eighties, and nineties, and it too became an excellent refresher of Eastern (especially Chinese) philosophy.

Readers tour the novel with Row's protagonist, Kelly: a down-and-out radio producer whose Chinese wife and half-Chinese daughter were killed in a car crash. I hate to give too much away, but I knew the ending, the inevitable outcome, once I read (within the first thirty pages) about their deaths. In *Your Face in Mine*, Kelly was hired by Martin to tell Martin's story about his "Racial Identity Dysphasia Syndrome," RIDS. Martin used to be a white man until "after years of immersing himself in black culture, [he] had a plastic surgeon perform 'racial reassignment surgery'—altering his hair, skin, and physiognomy to allow him to pass as African American." Many things about Martin's transformation bothered me but Row's precise writing and the idea of changing one's self to join a new or the village one most related with satisfied and intrigued me. Why shouldn't it? This thought of "racial change" is as old as the Bible: Jeremiah 13:23, Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?

Row's novel reminded me that I have always felt like an outsider observing, occasionally allowed to participate with, my group of Pinoys. Like I said, *No hablo español, hermano* (I had to use an English-to-Spanish translator to ensure phrase accuracy). Unlike Martin, though, I don't need racial reassignment surgery to pass in that community; I need racial *assignment* surgery that would actually define my racial identity in the first place: for me and to the outside world.

For Martin, he always knew he was a black person in a white person's body (Trans-racial), like a transsexual who knows he was born the wrong gender. For me, I have lived confused about my identity for many reasons: one being that my father forbade my sister and me to act "ethnic." I wasn't allowed to speak in his house of my Pinoy-ness. Today, I am unsure if I have ever felt Filipino. I sat jealous of Martin when he told readers about when he first felt his blackness, which was during his early-school years in El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Elementary:

How else can I explain it? It wasn't just that I was happy. It was that I felt human, as if for the first time. Let me refine that statement. I felt part of the

human world. And so when Willie (Martin's childhood friend) told me it was okay, because I would turn black one day, too, I wanted to believe him. Part of me did believe him.

This confession led me to wonder if Jess Row knows this "human" feeling because I certainly know the feeling of cultural disconnection. I wanted to believe the things that my mother said to me. She acted as my Willie, secretly telling me that I am Filipino. But I looked nothing like her and my father's word was gospel so I struggled to trust her, my *ina*. For me I looked more like . . . I don't know.

If I were one-hundred percent Pinoy, I would either have Indonesian attributes: short, dark, with a large nose and thick lips, or Malay attributes: medium height, brown skin, dark eyes, flat nose, and straight black hair. But of course I would have to ignore the Negritos and Spanish feature that came before and after the Indo-Malay people. If I were pure-blood white, I would have what German philosopher Christoph Meiners termed the "Caucasian race" traits: the "whitest, most blooming and most delicate skin" and so forth. I am neither Pinoy nor Caucasian though. At least this is what I have been trained to believe.

In *Your Face in Mine*, Martin gives Kelly some cassette tapes that he used to document his life prior to becoming a black man. Martin considered writing his own books but he needed Kelly to complete his "project." On one cassette Martin revealed to readers when he recognized he was a white person, when he wasn't yet a physically black person. This realization happened at "Roland Park, at Willow, where there were other white people." Like Martin I know am not a Mexican or Korean or Puerto Rican, but unlike Martin I am unsure if I should call myself white or Filipino.

My skin and features deceive me: my arms and face are caramel, my chest and thighs are (super) white, my eyes are nearly almond-shaped, my nose is long and thin, my hair is salt and pepper, and I stand taller than my white father. All of which adds to my confusion.

So racial *assignment* surgery would certainly give me and others a better understanding of my racial identity. My six-foot height and large bone structure, my skin tones and my inability to speak Tagalog, likely added to my identity confusion. I believe that my appearance isolated me from my mother's race, the race I am more drawn to. Pinoy kids my age, for reasons they alone knew, have almost always refused to chill with me

(except that every b-ball team wanted me to play power forward for them in the Filipino Basketball League). Perhaps those same kids didn't like that I had declined to drive a souped-up ride or because I showed up on time to parties or because I rarely shouted "Psst!" and "Hoy!" across supermarkets. I don't know and I'll never know.

What I do know is that I feel culturally and racially alienated. On page 120 of *Your Face in Mine*, Kelly says to black Martin: "what you're really asking me to say is, you're not a freak. You're not a monster. You are, authentically, who you say you are . . . No one else. No matter what the explanation happens to be, in the end." I feel as though I am a monster, a Frankenstein-sort-of monster who is an amalgamation of white and Pacific Islander pieces that became muddled and undefined. Am I my monster under my bed? Shoot: *Your Face in Mine* could be Eminem's story: will the real Slim Shady please have racial reassignment surgery, racial reassignment surgery, racial reassignment surgery?

The events in Jess Row's novel seemed too convenient and predictable. But Row's story will lead many to consider the "what if" scenario. I did. I considered what if I had actually been bred one-hundred percent Filipino. I wouldn't be the person who I am. I understand I would likely not have my beautiful white wife (I am the first "Asian" she dated). My kids may have to deal with or be the stereotypes I listed above. There were many thoughts that passed through my brain regarding the "what if." But I am okay with my racial misrecognition, the unknown me (heck, I'm even learning Spanish). Eventually we will all look similar anyway. I had hoped for more from *Your Face in Mine*. It was good enough and I will suggest that others read it. I am grateful though that the book introduced me to Zhuangzi's famous parable:

Once upon a time, I dreamt I was [Filipino], fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes [as a Filipino]. I was conscious only of my happiness as a [Filipino], unaware that I was myself. Soon I awaked, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a [white] man dreaming I was a [Filipino], or whether I am now a [Filipino], dreaming I am a [white] man.