

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

## Issue 19

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## Contributor Bios

**Megat Ishak** is a born and bred Klang Valley resident who dabbles in the telco industry and also writes fantastical tales of horrible people who meet equally horrible endings. He has had two books published: *Cannibal vs Ah Long and Other Bloody Stories* published by Storm Publishing and *Dark Highways* published by Fixi Novo. His works have also appeared in other compilations, such as *Silverfish Book of Short Stories 2*, *KL Noir: Red, Readings at Readings 2*, and *Esquire* magazine (twice). He loves his family, books and movies.

[Elaine Barnard](#)'s stories have won awards and been published in numerous literary journals, such as *Anak Sastra*, *carte blanche*, *Mandala*, *Apple Valley*, and others. She has been a finalist for Glimmer Train and Best of the Net. In 2014 she was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Living in Thailand for five and a half years during the mid-1960s has provided **Peggy McCaulley** with innumerable memories on which to base short stories. Now retired, she has the time to indulge her passion for writing and hopes readers will enjoy her efforts.

**Patrick Sagaram** (Twitter: @Averroes1) lives in Singapore. He works as a teacher.

[Shinta Utami](#) is a young Indonesian attempting to set the national record for "the longest distance traveled on modified scooter by a physically challenged person". Her ultimate goal is to travel all around the world and raise awareness for matters that are closest to her heart, namely equality for all people, environmental protection, education and animal welfare.

**Nathan Wakefield Taylor** lives in Cleveland, Ohio. His writing has appeared in *Puerto Del Sol*, *30xLace (Birds of Lace)*, and *Wave Composition*, among other places.

**Alis Padasian** is an aspiring writer from Sabah, the place where the highest mountain in South East Asia is embedded. A mother of two wonderful children, she currently works as a news and article editor. She has recently recovered from writer's block.

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## **"Magic!"**

by Megat Ishak

Hooray the Magician was forty minutes late for the girl's 11<sup>th</sup> birthday party. His tiny car screeched to a halt outside the heavy, ornate gate of the huge bungalow in Bangsar Park. He was sweating and out of breath; he straightened his bowtie and checked on the small magician suitcase he carried around for his shows. The girl's father, a wealthy man with a short temper opened the gate with a remote control from inside the house and glared at Hooray as he walked up the driveway past the big, dark expensive cars.

"Do you fucking know what time it is? You're late!" the dad hissed. "Everyone's waiting for you! My kid's waiting for you. Now get in there and do your job!"

Hooray scurried past the man and tipped his top hat, apologizing profusely as he made his way to the back garden where he could hear the commotion. A group of children ranging from ages of 3 up to 15 stood around in restless clumps, some sitting and some standing and all shouting. They turned to look at him as he waved at them cheerily, waddling through the sliding doors.

"Hello boys and girls! I'm Hooray the Magician, and I'm here to do magic!" he said out loud. "Wonderful!" said the girl's mother, who appeared suddenly from the crowd of children. She was a slim, pretty lady with a kindly smile. She knew how terrible he must have felt, especially having encountered her husband.

"Come on then, this way," she said.

"Sorry I'm late!" he whispered.

"It's okay. Now let's go!" she said.

Hooray hurried down to the end of the garden where a small set-up consisting of a wooden table and a blue stool was placed. A surly girl of 11 stood beside the magic corner wearing a blue glittering party dress, holding a magic wand with a cutout star attached to it.

"Hello pretty princess. Happy birthday," he said.

"You're late!" the little girl said.

"Sorry little one, I'm here now, aren't I?"

The mother called the other children to gather around Hooray the Magician to watch his splendid magic show. They took their place on the wide mat on the ground and looked up expectantly. Kids take to magicians like lions to raw meat. And sure enough, he had them eating out of his hand within ten minutes. They were laughing and participating in the magic and comedy show. The birthday girl's mother laughed the loudest and gamely joined in the show together with her daughter. Seeing how much the children enjoyed his show, Hooray continued past his 90 minutes show to a full two hours show.

"That was wonderful Mr. Hooray," the mother said.

"I'm not done yet! I have one last magic trick!" Hooray said. He spun around the garden and waved his hands about, happy and slightly tipsy with the roaring success of his show, and the kind attention of the girl's mother.

"Ooh yes!" she said, clapping her hands.

"Then come this way, kind lady!" Hooray said, bravely taking the lovely woman's hand and leading her to the magic corner. The children had gathered around the table and waited for

something wonderful to happen. Hooray turned to his small suitcase behind him and pulled out a thick, dark cloak. He shook it then swung it around to face his audience.

“Are you ready?” he asked in a loud, dramatic voice.

The children responded with a loud cheer.

Hooray cupped his right ear and said, “I still can’t hear you.”

The children roared.

“Ah, very good. You are ready then,” Hooray said. He looked around the garden, bowed at the mother, and then held up the cloak with both hands completely obscuring the children’s view of him. All they could see was a pair of hands holding up the cloak on the corner ends.

“Can you count back from 10?” he asked from the cloak.

The children shouted yes.

“Alright then, start counting backwards!”

The children, including the boy’s mother started counting backwards.

“10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!” they shouted.

Nothing happened.

“Hooray!” they shouted.

The birthday girl stood up and walked over to the cloak.

“Hooray!” she shouted, tugging at the cloak. It dropped to the grass revealing an empty space where Hooray the Magician was supposed to stand. Two fake, plastic hands dropped with a thud. The little girl screamed and jumped back. The mother grabbed her daughter and stepped back away from the cloak.

“Hooray!” Hooray shouted. He was emerging from behind the surprised children, wearing the same cloak. The children clapped and cheered.

“And that, my dear children, is magic!” he said, giving them an elaborate bow. The mother, still clutching her daughter, clapped and shouted, “Bravo, bravo Hooray! Bravo!”

The birthday cake cutting moment followed shortly after and everyone including the minders accompanying the children received a paper plate with the birthday cake, all except for Hooray. But he didn't mind, some days you get cake and some days you don't. The bottom line was that he had to wait for his money. The waiting continued until late in the afternoon as the echoing sounds of call to prayers were heard, as the last remaining child was picked up. Hooray's stomach growled as he looked out to the garden from the kitchen window to see the housecleaner pick up plates of unfinished food. The birthday table was still heavy with food; half a roast chicken, a bowl of creamy potato salad and the pink frosted cake. He was tempted to just step out of the kitchen and grab whatever food was available, but he had a reputation to maintain and if the hosts had instructed him to wait in the kitchen for the money, then that was what he was definitely going to do. While sitting and waiting, he pulled out his ancient Nokia 322 and started scrolling through the messages. No new ones came. Which meant that this gig was to last him until the end of the month, which ultimately meant he had three weeks to make the money stretch. Times were tough for a mid-forties magician, he decided.

“Mr. Hooray?” the girl's mom called out from behind him. He turned around to see the lovely lady standing at the kitchen door. She had an apologetic look on her face.

“Ah, yes. That’s me!” he said, his automatic smile popping up as he turned around.

“Do you mind very much if we paid you on Monday? My husband’s wallet is empty and he’s too tired to go out to the ATM to get some cash.”

Hooray took a moment to let the information sink in.

“Oh dear,” he said.

“It’s just two days from now,” she said.

“I’m okay if you pay me half first, you know, I might be busy on Monday, and all that,” he said, maintaining a cheery tone.

“Half?” she said.

“Yes. Then you can pay the other half on Monday.”

The woman took a few moments to prepare for what she was about to say.

“The thing is, Mr. Hooray, my husband’s sort of annoyed at your lateness so he’s decided to pay you only half. There will be no other payment on Monday actually,” she said. She was clutching and unclutching her hands.

“Really? Oh dear,” Hooray said. The five hundred bucks was already accounted for. He had to pay the electric bill before they disconnected it, and he had to buy powdered milk for his young son of five who was now, ferociously hungry than ever. And, oh yes, he remembered, he promised the landlord he’d pay the remainder of the rent by Sunday.

“He said you came unprepared and you gave a very poor performance,” the woman added.

“I gave more than 90 minutes of show,” Hooray said. He was trying hard to remain calm. Like the rich man who owned the house and the woman in front of him, he too had a temper.

“I’m so sorry Mr. Hooray. I don’t hold any money you see. My husband does. And what he says, goes.” She looked down at her hands. Then reached to the back of her jeans to pull out a wad of cash. Hooray swallowed and tasted the dry sour taste of his mouth.

“I really need the money, madam,” he said. “You have no idea how badly I need the money. Please. Maybe I can talk to your husband?”

She shook her head. “He’s upstairs watching TV. He doesn’t want to be disturbed. Please take this money.”

“One minute. That’s all I’m asking,” he said. He hated having to beg.

“One minute for what?” the husband asked. He was suddenly there, looming behind his wife. Hooray jumped a little to see the man who was now wearing shorts and tee shirt with an elaborate image of a tiger on it.

“Ah, mister sir. I wanted to talk to you for one minute about the matter of the payment. Your lovely wife here said you want to pay me only half of my rates? Is that true?”

The man smiled and grunted.

Hooray smiled back.

“Yes. That is true. I refuse to pay you the full amount because you were late and you were shit. You can either take it or leave it.” He grabbed the money from his wife’s hand and flung the notes at Hooray’s face.



“Now get the fuck out of my house, okay? Don’t know why you’re still hanging around.” The husband turned away and disappeared back upstairs.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Hooray,” the woman said. Hooray stood there for a moment without saying a word. He wasn’t even looking at the woman. He was staring into space. He snapped out of it after a while and started picking up the money from the floor. He sorted them out in order of denomination, squared them then carefully placed them in his worn out leather wallet.

“Thank you for being kind,” he said to the woman and let himself out from the house. She watched him through the window as he tried several times to get his beat up old Honda to start. After a few minutes the engine caught on and he reversed the car before speeding off into the night.

“You were pretty rude to that man,” the wife said as she slid on the bed beside her husband who was busy watching football on TV.

“What?”

“The magician, you were very rude to him. I think he was desperate for the money,” she said.

“He deserved what he got, probably a drunk. Probably going to spend that money on alcohol or some shit.”

The woman wanted to add something, but she noticed the tell tale signs that her husband was getting annoyed so she kept it to herself. Before Hooray left, he had stopped at the door, turned around and said something to her. It sounded innocent enough, but it sent a chill down her spine. Later that night, after her husband and daughter had fallen asleep, the

woman crept downstairs to check on all the doors and to make sure that they were secured.

Hooray reached home that evening too stunned to feel anything. He had to face his wife who was already angry with him for their mounting bills, and now he had to tell her he was paid only half? She would definitely tell him that he deserved it, as he was really only half a man and not a real man with a proper job. She would also tell him that she regretted marrying him and having a spastic child for a son. Then she would storm out of the house to an awaiting car. There was always that car available whenever she lost her temper with him. Hooray tried to remain calm. He needed the right frame of mind to control the situation. He released his grip on the steering wheel, unclipped his seat belt and then stepped outside his car. The evening wind washed over him and carried with it a distant scent of fried food. *Maggi goreng? Nasi goreng?* His stomach growled even louder. He doubted it that his wife had prepared any dinner for him. Normally he'd have to forage through their meager contents of the fridge to rustle up something to eat for him and his son. He was also very sure his small son had not eaten either.

"You're late," his wife said. She was standing at the doorway with folded arms. She looked clean and attractive in her short black dress. He could see his son behind her watching TV and eating noodles from a small plastic bowl. He was relieved to see that she had not forgotten to feed him.

"Extra time, darling," he said, attempting a smile.

"Yeah? I'm going out. I've waited long enough for you." She turned back inside to pick up her silver-speckled clutch bag. He caught her arm as she was stepping out through the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

“Out,” she said, pulling her arm roughly out of his grip. He watched her as she tittered down the porch to an awaiting car. He shook his head to snap out of it then shouted out to his son, who turned away from the TV to look at him. When he saw that it was his dad, he stood up and ran to him. Hooray hugged his boy hard and gently released him after almost a full minute. The boy returned to his noodles and TV, smiling happily. Hooray locked the front door and prepared for the night.

It was nearing 2am when Hooray woke up. The side of the bed where his wife was supposed to be lying was still empty. He looked over to the cot by the window and saw that his son was still soundly asleep. It wasn't a nightmare that woke him up. It was anger. He sat up and stretched. And then he stood up and walked to the bathroom. In his sleep he had planned and schemed. And now he had work to do.

The rich man's wife was the first to hear the knocking sound at the door. She woke her husband up, shaking his arm.

“There's someone at the front door,” she whispered. The husband was barely conscious when he sat up.

“What?” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“There's someone knocking at the door,” she said. The man stiffened and woke up immediately.

“At our main front door? How the hell did he past the gate?” he said. “Stay here.”

The man stood and walked over to the cupboard where he pulled out a baseball bat and, after a thought, a long, thin machete. It was part of his collection of weapons he kept in his cupboard for situations like this.

“Lock the door after me,” he said. The wife nodded and quickly got off the bed. The man opened the door and stepped out. The knocking started again, only this time it sounded more like someone banging on the door with two very large fists.

“Fuck,” the man said. He quietly moved to his daughter’s room and placed the bat and the machete by her bed before picking her up and carrying her to his bedroom.

He knocked on the door and whispered, “Open the door, its me!”

The door swung open to reveal a pair of hands holding up a dark cloak from behind it. “Honey?” he said.

The cloak was like a door, the way it stood still.

“What the hell is going on?” he said. His daughter was waking up.

“What is it daddy?” she asked. The man kissed the top of his daughter’s head and gently placed her on the floor and pushed her behind him.

“This is not funny,” he said.

The banging on the front door happened again causing the man to jump in fright. At the very same moment the cloak fell to the ground to reveal a stark, tangible nothingness.

“You owe me my money,” a voice said from behind him. The rich man yelped as he spun around to see Hooray standing there holding his daughter by her shoulder. His other hand was holding the long, thin machete. Before the man could react, the machete’s entire length slid past the girl’s throat.

Hooray's wife returned home around 4:30am to find it completely dark. Her companion was struggling to get her in a standing position but it was hard as her voluptuous body was too soft and there was too much of it to handle with just two hands.

"Shhh," she said. "They're asleep. You're not supposed to be here."

"I know. I'm just going to let you down here on this chair and I'm leaving okay?" he said. He was her lover and he was desperate to leave this small, single story terrace house.

"Don't leave me baby, stay around a while. They're both asleep, we can, you know, do stuff," she said, her voice slurred and thick.

"Maybe next time, okay?" he said. He placed her on the armchair and slowly backed out from the living room. He didn't see the tiny face at the top of the cloak at the door, until he turned around to step out from the house.

"Yes, please stay," said the little girl. But it wasn't the little girl who spoke. The little girl was dead and it was her body wrapped in the cloak, which seemed to stand there. It was Hooray's rendition of the girl's voice that was asking the lover to stay.

"What the fuck," said the lover.

Hooray threw the body at the lover as he screamed in horror. Hooray's wife was too drunk to accept the scene in front of her, but she saw the whole thing unfolding. She just didn't understand what she was seeing. Who was the small girl and why was she attacking her boyfriend? And why was there blood everywhere?

It was three days later when the police uncovered the triple murder of the family and the suspect who was caught at the scene of the crime. The alleged killer was blabbering incoherently about a flying girl and magic. According to his hysterical testimony he had woken up in the victim's house covered in blood and holding on to the machete. He had no idea how he got there and who the victims were.

Hooray did not work for the remainder of the month. He had more money than he thought was possible to have and he was quite content to live on it for the next few months with or without work. His main priority was his son and his wife. Although his wife now no longer speaks as he had placed her mouth under house arrest by removing her tongue and sewing her lips together, he knew she was happy because she never once complained as he performed his magic tricks for them. His son would clap and cheer and his wife would sit there stiff but smiling.

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## "The Flowers"

by Elaine Barnard

"Come in and smell the flowers," I called when I saw the tourists rush from the buses to be first in line to see our Revered Uncle. I have his likeness in the entrance to my water closet. They cannot miss Uncle Ho as they push open the wooden door, still sodden from Hanoi's last storm. I know they all have to come here eventually. No one can avoid the flowers.

I have been in this dank cave since before dawn. I took the early bus from the countryside. It was the only bus that would bring me to the Mausoleum before the crowds arrived. I was hours early, but it was better than being late. I could sit on my box outside my WC and watch the sun rise over Ba Dinh Square, gradually lighting the granite of the Mausoleum, soft rays of rose and gold. Inside I knew Uncle was resting peacefully.

One day I bribed the guards to get a small glimpse of dear Uncle before the mobs made that impossible. I brought him gold chrysanthemums that I purchased at the bus stop. They were too expensive but I bought them anyway. I would make it up somehow when the tourists came, when they could no longer avoid my flowers.

The guards were half asleep at their posts, white uniforms crisp as the rice pancake I hid in my pocket. "Auntie," they murmured through half closed lids, "what have you brought us?"

I slipped them the pancake I'd baked before I left my village and the fried banana wrapped in palm leaf I'd buried in my shawl. They were grateful to have their day begin with such delicacies as usually they had only sticky rice and tea for breakfast.

I tiptoed through the dim coolness, up marble staircases, along polished corridors to the middle tier of the three stories. Uncle Ho's chamber was dark except for a pale light that came from the shining catafalque of black marble. Dressed in a plain tunic and sandals, he rested within the glass-framed sarcophagus. Removing my shoes, I approached with care. No one except the guards must know I have been here.

I stood for a long while gazing at the smooth skin of his face, ageless now beneath the sheen of glass.

We are told Uncle believed in his people. The poor were always in his thoughts. I am certain this is true as he himself lived a simple life, avoiding the excess that can come with riches.

“Uncle Ho,” I whispered. “Be with me today. Make many come to my flowers. Let them leave large tips in my basket so I may buy a big catfish from the vendors at Trúc Bạch Lake. I wish my grandchildren should not go hungry tonight. They are so small, Uncle. Their parents are no longer here to guide them. They are dead from the disease, the unmentionable one. I must care for their children now, be father and mother. It is not easy as I am old, soon too withered to work, like a dried grape on a forgotten vine. I pray, Uncle, you hear me.”

I heard a click in the hall, the guard getting ready to make his visitors count for the day. His cough warned me. I fell to my knees before Uncle, bowed three times and kissed the floor before I went to my WC. I had cleaned it good before I returned to my village last night, locked it tight with a double padlock so no thieves could steal my mops, pails, brooms, soaps or whatever else they found inside. There was nothing they would not take to sell on the Black Market.

The guards smiled as I left, bits of pancake and banana between their teeth. “Smell a flower for me, Auntie,” they laughed. “Make it a big one.”

I ignored them in their stiff uniforms and blank gaze. They had nothing to do all day but stand like statues, handsome and young, admired by all the visitors while I, in my faded dress-- whose true color I can no longer recall--and skin as coarse as unpolished granite, hurried down the steps like a passing shadow.

The sun dazzled me when I returned to the daylight. A faint wind brushed the feathery leaves of the bamboo groves that cornered the Mausoleum. I drank in the sweet scent of jasmine, frangipani and dog-rose, knowing that the only flowers I would smell the rest of the day were those of the water closet, the acrid odor of the Eastern toilet and the foul smell of the Western. I would rush to clean them before the next customer arrived. “Come in and smell the flowers,” I would smile hoping their humor was good, and they would laugh at the joke I played on them.



Today a tourist arrived wearing shorts and a halter. Her upper arms flapped when she raised them to tug at her black pony tail held tight by a rubber band. Her hair was so black I was certain she must have used the special dye so popular in the market. I have used some myself from time to time in a vain effort to conceal the gray that has gradually overtaken my head, turned it into dull streaks that I tie up beneath a straw sunhat so no one could see how my once beautiful hair had changed.

It offended me to see one so old dressed like a girl. It was improper, an insult to Uncle Ho who was always modest in his appearance and expected the same from his people. This woman should be sent back to her hotel on the next bus and told to cover herself if she wished to view our revered leader. Would she visit her White House, the home of her president, dressed in such a manor?

The woman tried to pass me by without putting any dong in my basket. I stood in her path to prevent her from entering. I could see she was desperate by the way she shifted from left foot to right.

“I don’t have the correct change,” she said.

“What do you have?”

“Only this,” she pulled a 500,000 dong note from her overloaded backpack.

“Give it to me. I will have change when you are done smelling my flowers.”

She did not smile but ran inside to the first closet that was vacant.

“There is no paper,” she called

”Wait-wait I will bring some.”

I went to my cabinet where the paper was locked. It was expensive. I tried to avoid providing it, hoping the customer would have some in her purse. I knew tourists were told to carry some for such emergencies. Of course, if they would learn to use the Eastern toilet, clean themselves with soap and water, all this paper would not be necessary.

I got two small sheets and brought them to her. “Here,” I reached beneath the door viewing her long toenails, painted red like the whores in Old Town. Her white sandals were caked with the mud I would have to scrape from the floor when she left.

Her chipped fingernails reached for the paper. “Is that all you have?”

“That is your portion. There is extra charge for more.”

“I need more.”

I went to my cabinet and got another sheet, slipping it beneath the door. "This should do."

But it was still not enough so I brought her many sheets until my stock was empty. I would have nothing for my other customers and it was early in the day. No one will laugh, no tips in my basket, no catfish for my grandchildren or sole or fried rice with pork and mushrooms.

She came from the toilet adjusting the zipper on her shorts and stood waiting for her change. I knew she was new to Vietnam otherwise she would not have given me 500,000 dong, equal to 30 dollars American. She had not examined our currency. Maybe she was stupid. Maybe she was rich and did not care. But I cared for my grandchildren. They would have catfish tonight and sole with fried rice as well to fill their aching stomachs.

I went to my money drawer and opened the padlock. I withdrew many small dong, worth very little, about \$5.00 American. They fluttered in her hand.

"Your money is so pretty," she smiled at last. "I love the pastels." She did not bother to count it as she stuffed it into her pack.

Before I return to my village I will visit Chùa Một Cột, the one pillar pagoda and thank Quan Âm, our Lady of Mercy, for this gift. I will climb the Lotus Tower to kneel before her bed of lotus blossom. I will burn many joss sticks, smell deep the sandalwood and make a large donation for those who are less fortunate.

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## **"The Temple"**

by Peggy McCaulley

It was the first time Stevie had been on a plane. The little boy's eyes were wide with excitement. Marian had been thrilled when Steve told her they could accompany him on his business trip to Thailand. The date coincided with Stevie's spring break, so it worked out perfectly. They spent the first three days in a beautiful hotel in the heart of Bangkok. Steve arranged for a guide to take the two of them sightseeing while he attended meetings.

Stevie loved all the new, unusual sights, but the novelty soon wore off, and he began clambering to go to the beach. He found brochures in the hotel lobby showing a number of beach resorts a few hours away on the Gulf of Thailand. Steve eventually gave in and made arrangements for Marian and Stevie to spend the next three days at a company-owned beach house. He would conclude the business part of the trip and join them for the last day.

Marian and Stevie rode the train southward, past several bustling resorts. They disembarked at the little fishing village, which was their destination, and hired a taxi to take them to the house. They found the small bungalow charming and modern, nestled among palms and hibiscus bushes, several yards from the beach. An elderly Thai couple who acted as caretakers greeted them warmly. To Marian's relief, the wife, Ubon, spoke passable English.

That afternoon, they walked along the curving beach to a high, rocky promontory shaped like a coolie hat. They climbed a short way up the side where they came upon a shallow cave that had once held a small shrine. It was apparently abandoned for there were no fresh offerings, only the flakey remains of long dead flowers. Stevie was convinced the small mountain held even deeper caves and was determined to seek them out.

In the morning they went for an early swim. It was the beginning of another sun-filled day in the second month of the tropical dry season. They played on the beach for a while and went inside for an early lunch. After their meal, Marian insisted they stay out of

the sun for a few hours, but by two o'clock, Stevie was fidgeting and begging to go back and explore the little mountain.

"It's so boring. C'mon, Mom. Let's go to the mountain."

"It's too hot, Stevie. Let's wait 'til it cools down a little." Marian could feel the perspiration running down her back. The ceiling fan did little but stir the muggy air.

"You promised this trip would be really exciting, and so far it's been all temples to some old, dead guy, and a whole lot of shops," he whined.

"Well, who was that monkey I saw, climbing up those long steps at Wat Arun? And don't try to tell me you didn't enjoy the Sunday Market."

"I know, but you said yourself that an eight-year-old boy should spend more time outdoors playing."

Marian sighed. He had her there. That's exactly what she told him when he spent too many hours playing video games. "All right, let's go to the mountain and see what's there, but you put on plenty of sunscreen, and get a couple of bottles of water—and find your hat!" The last words were flung after him as he raced from the room. Marian scribbled a note to Ubon, telling her they'd be back by suppertime. She wrapped a sarong over her bathing suit, picked up her hat and sunglasses, and went out to join her son.

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By the time Marian got to the little shrine, Stevie was already heading around the water side of the promontory. "Hey, Speedy. Hold up there," Marian called. "Don't go any farther until I catch up."

She scrambled over the tumbled boulders, glad she'd worn her sneakers, and concerned to find that Stevie was wearing flip-flops. The water of the Gulf lapped gently at the base of the rocks. They had left the sandy beach behind. The midday sun reflected off the white rocks, burning hot on her skin.

"How about a drink before we go on?" she asked.

"Uh, Mom, I didn't bring any water," he admitted sheepishly. "I didn't want to have to carry it."

"Oh, Stevie! That wasn't very smart. Why didn't you say something?" she began, but stopped herself. No point ruining the day with a scolding, even though he deserved one.

"Come on, Mom. Let's see if we can go all the way around and back to the beach on the other side." He took off again without waiting for an answer.

"Don't go so fast, Stevie. At least let me keep you in sight."

They continued on, Stevie exclaiming over bits of flotsam and seaweed clinging to the rocks and hiding in crevices. But to his disappointment, they found nothing that looked like the entrance to a cave. He urged her on, certain they would find something sooner or later. He was determined now to go all the way around the small mountain.

They crabbed their way on, scrambling over the burning rocks. Each time they rounded an outcropping of boulders, there was yet another to go around—and then another. The relentless sun began to take its toll on Marian. She wet her sarong and tied it around her head. At three-thirty, she called out to him again.

"I think we should go back, Stevie. We don't know how much farther the rocks go on, and we've already been out here over an hour."

"Just a little farther, Mom," he called back over his shoulder.

Thirty minutes later, Marian had had enough. She was beginning to see spots in front of her eyes. She was really worried about Stevie. The temperature must be over a hundred. What if one of them had a heat stroke? How would he manage if she became disabled out here on the rocks?

"Maybe we should see if we can climb up over the mountain," she suggested. "I can see trees up there. At least we could sit in the shade for awhile, and maybe see what's on the other side."

"Good idea," Stevie answered, splashing water on his beet-red face. He had several nicks on his shins and elbows but had managed to keep his flip-flops on his feet. Marian smiled, thinking he must really be tired or he wouldn't have given in that easily.

They started to climb, the rocks burning their hands. Her sunglasses did little to cut the glare. She was no longer sweating, a sure sign she needed water. Her vision began to blur, and she imagined she could hear music. Suddenly Stevie stopped and looked back at her.

"Do you hear that? It sounds like music," he said.

"I hear it too," she answered. *Maybe I'm not hallucinating*, she thought. *Maybe there's someone up there who can help us.*

It took all her strength to reach the top. There, seated on a stone bench beneath the trees, was a monk clad in orange robes. He held out a dipper of water, motioning them to come near. They sank down on the ground in the shade and gratefully took the offered water. The monk regarded them calmly but said nothing. Marian felt a great sense of tranquility wash over her as she rested in the little glade.

Further through the trees, she could see a small, ornate temple. The sides were pure white, the roof green, trimmed in orange and gold. The ground around it was swept bare. She looked around for the source of the music but could see no one else--just the monk on the bench.

They rested in the shade for several minutes, drinking more water. Then the monk stood and walked to a path which led towards the landward side of the small mountain. As soon as they had their bearings, he turned and disappeared back into the trees.

They found the path easy going after the jagged rocks. The sun didn't seem as hot, and there was a faint breeze stirring. The ground leveled off as they continued to follow the path until they were once again on the beach and could see their bungalow in the distance.

"Can you make it, Mom?" Stevie had been pretty worried about her out on the rocks. She hadn't looked so good.

"I can make it now, Stevie. Thank goodness we decided to go up. That monk may have saved our lives."

\* \* \*

Later that evening they sat on the porch watching the last of the sun's rays lingering over the quiet waters of the Gulf. Ubon brought freshly made iced tea with slices of lime for Marian and ice cream for Stevie. As she set the tray down, Marian told her about their adventure. She described the lovely temple, so pure and clean and their encounter with the monk, praising him for being so helpful.

The maid looked at her curiously and shook her head.

"Madam," she said, "that temple burned down many years ago. There is nothing left. No one there now."

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Circa, 1939"**

by Patrick Sagaram

She has a habit of telling me her dreams when she wakes. Her dreams fade with the white glow of the sun, and she opens her eyes and resurfaces into the world. Then she'll lie in bed, staring at the window. Afterward, she'll tell me. Sometimes, I'll say to her what I thought the dream meant, if it meant anything. Other times, when she gets upset, I'll simply shrug it off and tell her no it's nothing. It's probably nothing.

So today, that's what I tell her. She is just lying there, half sobbing as her tears moisten the pillow.

I'll go get some breakfast, I say getting up. You'll feel better after you eat.

She doesn't say anything so I wash, shower and leave without a word.

I walk under the covered walkway connecting my apartment block to the car park, and there is an absolute stillness. Near the pool, the security post where the guard usually sits is empty. He is a gruff-looking man with burnt brown skin, and he is never seen without his walkie-talkie. I'd chatted with him a few times since moving in last August. Told me he was a long-retired policeman. Once he even unbuttoned his uniform to show me where he had been knifed in the abdomen during a scuffle with a violent gangster back in the day. Now only the lone walkie-talkie stands there by the counter.

I go out to the car and drive off, past the guard post, waving to the guard on duty. I decide to head toward the drive-thru, which was less than five minutes away. I go there from time to time when I am in no mood to wait.

When I pull into the entrance of the drive-thru, I'm puzzled to find myself stacked behind a long line of cars--none of them seem to be inching forward. As I wait my turn, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, it occurs to me that there is some form of confusion going on as to where to place an order and where to collect it.

When I finally place my order through the speaker, a young confused voice in a state of distress speaks to me apologetically. True enough, when I crawl forward to pay, it is a very young girl--perhaps only sixteen or seventeen--who collects my money and returns my change with trembling hands.

Sorry, sorry, she says. First time doing this. I've been mixing up the orders and giving out the wrong change.

It's OK, I say. Then I proceed to the pick up counter where the manager, a man in his thirties, hands me a brown bag.

Sorry it took so long, he tells me, looking flustered.

What happened, I ask him.

Don't know, he says, shrugging and tilting his head in confusion. But today, the old people didn't turn up for work.

*What old people?*

Ya. You know that old auntie that usually takes the orders from that counter over there? he says, nodding toward the direction behind me. She's always cheerful one, chatting with customers as she punched in the orders. You know she never screwed up ever. Not once. But she didn't come in today.



I turn around to look. At the counter, the young girl is talking to the next customer while intermittently keying in the orders on the console. The customer, a man in a blue Honda behind me, is gesturing with his shoulder and hands to the girl. His passenger, a young woman, sits with her arms folded. Lips curled in a snarl.

Sir, better check your order, the manager says. I open the brown bag and take a peek. Seems about right. He continues talking. And the uncles who work in the kitchen with me, stacking shelves and packing sandwiches, he tells me, None of them showed up for work. Didn't even call. Behind him, in the kitchen, I hear raised voices and falling crockery.

Shit, he says turning around.

A horn blasts behind me. It's the blue Honda.

Shit, I say, turning around. Better get a move on then.

I drive off, pulling away from the snaking line of cars and the frustrated faces inside.

I get home, park the car and make my way back to my apartment. I walk past the children's playroom and past the clubhouse. A broom and dustpan are left leaning against the vending machine next to the clubhouse. But I don't see the cleaning lady anywhere. Usually, I'd see her in the morning when I leave for work--a pale and bony figure moving about like a shadow. She would be sweeping the open area near the lift lobby.

When I get home, she is waiting. She seems a little better. The table is set and we eat. A funny thing happened just now, I say. And then I tell her.

Really, she says putting down the paper cup and wiping her mouth with a napkin. All of them?

Apparently so, I reply. It's just chaotic over there.

Well, there must be something to it, she says.

Must be.

We eat in silence and then she says, I can't finish this.

I say, then leave it. Then I continue eating. She drinks some more from the paper cup.

Oh.

What now?

About this morning.

Don't start. Please. Sometimes you can be so superstitious.

She makes a face. I've got to go get those things for my mom, she reminds me. You said you'd go with me. You promised. Remember?

I think it's not wrong for me to say that her mom doesn't like me. Think I met her once or twice and we never got past the pleasantries, awkward smiles and polite conversation. She sees me as an outsider--someone who's trespassed into her daughter's life, someone who's drawing away the affection and attention from her. And in her mind, she is convinced that one day, I would disappear altogether.

Sure, I say. Let's go.

After our meal, we head to the mall at Thomson Road. When we get there, I drop her off before finding a parking space. I put on the blinkers, and I wait in line. There seems to be

people streaming out from the mall. I see them coming down the escalator, some pushing their empty trolleys under lights that fall like yellow tinfoil past the exit doors.

It isn't long before she calls me on my mobile.

Where are you? she asks.

Still waiting for a space, I reply. I'll get one anytime now. People are leaving.

Well we can forget about getting anything today, she says. More than half the supermarket staff didn't turn up for work. They're closing early because they can't cope.

What? I say.

She's saying something, but I can't hear because there's static and muted voices in the background. A while later, I see her through the windscreen, phone pressed against her ear. She's still talking, but she hangs up when she sees me. What's going on? she asks me as she gets into the car. I shake my head in reply, and then spot an empty parking space. I reverse the car into the lot, but I keep the engine running.

Call your mother, I finally tell her. And I anxiously call home. The phone rings, three or four times before my brother answers, like he always does. Is Pa there? I ask him. And Ma? They're here what, why are you shouting? Are you sure? I ask him. Yes they are, he says. Then I hear him call out 'Pa' and then it was my father's voice over the line.

Allo.

Hello Pa.

Son, he exclaims. Ey how are you?

Fine.

Is everything all right? He sounds concerned. Then again my Pa always sounds like that.

Yes Pa. Just thought I'd call you up. Is Ma there?

Ya she is. Hey you want to speak to her, she's in the kitchen.

No, I have to go.

He tried stalling me, like he always did.

When are you going to start speaking to her?

Don't know.

Why don't you visit us? he says. You never come around any more.

I stammer an apology, then explain that I've been busy that's all.

He asks to try and make it during the weekends.

OK, I'll try.

And bring her.

I turn to her sitting in the seat next to me. She is on the phone, talking.

I say, We'll see.

Hey, Pa asks, like he always did, Eat already?

Yes, Pa. I just ate.

Take care. Bye.

Bye. And I hang up.

Sitting next to me, she tells me that her mom is fine. Watching some Korean drama as usual before lunch with her sister at Tim Ho Wan in Plaza Sing. Is everything OK? Why are you being weird today? So what shall we do now? Perhaps try another place? I ignore her and pull out from the parking space, turn around a bend and head for the exit. As soon as I emerge from the dimly lit car park and into the pouring sunshine, I suddenly turn to her and say, I have to go see my grandma.

What, now? she asks.

Yes. Now. I've got to go see her.

I turn the car around.

My grandmother is seventy-seven, and she lives with my aunt--my mother's younger sister. She is by herself most of the time as my aunt works on shift. It was my grandmother who took care of me when I was a young boy because my parents had to work all the time. Growing up, I was very close to her then, but over the years, I saw less and less of her. And for some reason, I stopped visiting. She'd often wondered where I'd been, and my aunt would say to her like it was an afterthought, He's grown up. That's where he's been. He's been all grown up.

I saw her again in December last year. A call from my aunt, one late afternoon saying my grandmother had asked for me.

I was in the kitchen preparing tea, my aunt told me over the phone, when she awoke from her nap, and the first thing she'd uttered was your name. She called out for you repeatedly. For a moment I became worried then I thought I'd better call you.

She must have been dreaming, said my aunt. Of you.

I'll come see her, I said.

She was waiting at the door for me, smiling like she always did. I noticed that even as she held onto to her walking stick, she'd tremble slightly, even when she was standing. She hugged and kissed me. Then she hugged some more. Her plastic framed glasses that lay perched on the bridge of her nose had endpieces held together by cellophane tape. I asked her what happened, and she confessed--giggling through the gaps in her teeth--that she had accidentally sat on them when she was about to watch TV. I helped her to her chair next to the dining table. She lowered herself slowly, trembling while holding tightly onto the walking stick. And she sighed softly as she sat down. Then I sat down next to her, and we talked for a long time, in between long, lonely silences when she would ask me the same thing, again and again.

How are you?

Good. I'm good.

Makan already or not? Eat something. I make now.

No, It's OK. Not hungry.

How's work? Everything good?

Work's good. I'm happy for now.

I'm happy too. For you.

How is your wife? Is she well?

I said, We're no longer together.

She said, What? What happened? Ay, why you never tell me?

I told you.

What about your children?

I don't have children.

You don't?

No.

How are you.

*So what else is there to say?*

That day, I left the door to my grandmother's flat ajar as I said goodbye to her. She insisted that it was perfectly safe; Aiyah who'd want to rob me. I have nothing, she said. Besides, this makes it easier for you to come see me, she grinned. No need to call, just come over ok?

OK.

\*

I pull up along the curb along the road adjacent to her flat and jump out of the car not even caring to wait for her. She is saying something, but her voice is growing distant as I vanish six floors up to my grandmother's flat. When I reach her flat, I stoop over with my hands on my knees, panting between my tears. Already, I hear cries of anguish spilling from the flat and into the common corridor.

The door is ajar, like the way my grandmother had insisted it should be. I step in and see my aunt on the floor, her legs turned underneath her. She's gone away, my aunt tells me but she's unable to bring herself to believe.

But I don't know where she went.

It was only yesterday that she was asking about you.

On the dining table, I see my grandmother's glasses. The cellophane tape is peeling off slowly. Her walking stick stood next to the chair on which she usually sat when she watched TV.

Like me, I'm sure you've seen them. Along void decks and at the playgrounds, sometimes with their grandchildren, pushing their prams around or gently holding up their arms as these toddlers, wobbling from side to side, took their first tentative steps.

I'm sure you've seen them; wiping dirty tables and clearing away plates at the food centres. And perhaps you may not have been paying any attention, but they were the ones mopping up the muck that'd you left behind in the toilet of that spanking new shopping mall along Orchard.

And I'm sure you've read about the proposition that they might be better off living in JB because it would simply be much cheaper. Besides, the scarce land over here could be put to better use.



But you probably didn't care because it didn't concern you. After all, *you're still young*.

Like me, you sit discontented and insecure, contemplating what's next for you in the life that did not turn out like you'd imagined it to be.

Today, across this island there are screams that pierce through the skulls of the dead with the realization that they are gone.

And now when I think about my grandmother, I think about how I once sat across from her in her empty flat talking about things that I should have said to her years ago when she could still remember. But now that she's no longer around, I think about all that I would give, just to sit with her, repeating the things I'd been saying to her instead of not be able to talk to her at all.

She's gone, just like that.

Can you believe it?

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"From Sumatra to Borneo on Scoopy"**

by Shinta Utami

My journey started at my parents' house, behind our family shop, in the small village of Lirik. It was the day before Eid-al-Adha, the Muslim day of animal sacrifice. A few people were already celebrating when I left the village. I had quietly planned the trip for months, however my departure was sudden. Since word spread quickly in our village, I was eager to avoid being the center of attention, and that was why I decided to tell only my father that I was leaving. Having left the village, I drove fast, because I only had a few days to reach Belitung before the bi-weekly ferry left for Pontianak on the 8th.

For many reasons, my first day felt hazy and blurry. I remember driving headlong through the smoke coming from the palm plantation fires. The fires had almost become routine here, leaving the airport closed due to low visibility and the ferry schedule permanently changing. Everybody appeared to suffer ill health from it, but unfortunately the government did not do much. The people burned the forest and yet they got away easily. Most people burned the forest in order to clear a new field, or in most cases in Sumatra, large companies paid people to do it for them in hopes of getting away with it. Sadly, they usually did. They care about money and want to convert most of the forest here to palm plantations or rubber plantations. In the past, the days used to be bright and sunny. However, now every day was a smoky.

I drove all day, completely forgetting to stop for either lunch or dinner, and eventually settled down to sleep roughly 304km away from my parents' house. My travels were slowed down because my scooter broke down three times. A day before my departure, I had visited the mechanic in order for him to tighten all the bolts on my scooter and to change my back middle tire. However, one of the guys didn't know what he was doing and ended up breaking one of the bolts as well as installing the wrong bolt. Thus, the bolt would

repeatedly come loose.

At the end of the first day, I stopped to get a policeman's signature on my record form. As it was dark already and the road ahead was only jungle, the police insisted I sleep in an empty building on their land. I enjoyed the company of a few frogs and cats. The building even had a bathroom, although it was probably not the cleanest one I have had.

Nevertheless, I was very happy to finally be able to shower after a long day spent on smoky and dusty roads. I think the police officers felt sorry for me and worried about me, since it is very uncommon for women to travel by themselves in Indonesia. What a day. But I had made it!

I woke up at 5am the next day. I felt safe inside the police station, but mosquitoes and cats had interrupted my sleep during the night. But never mind. I was on the road, and that is all that mattered! I was excited to enjoy the freedom! So I loaded my scooter 'Scoopy' and set off immediately. On the way to Palembang, everything was closed due to Eid-al-Adha. All the restaurants and petrol stations I passed through were closed. Luckily, in Indonesia you can buy petrol from small shops as well, though they tend to be more expensive. In fact the price varies, depending on the seller.

In one of the closed petrol station I found a "Vespa gembel" or "Vespa Rat." They deliberately modified their vespa to be as eccentric as possible, and I met a few of these along the way. You would be surprised how far they can travel. For some people they may be junk, but for others they are a form of creative expression. Along the way, I also found two crashed trucks. The driver of the first one even posed for me, when the driver saw me taking a picture. We both found it funny. The second one, however, wasn't so happy that I was taking pictures.

The day was challenging because the road conditions were so bad I had to drive slowly and drive around all the holes on the streets. The road looked like an earthquake had just hit it and cracked it open! It was especially difficult to drive from Palembang to the Tanjung Api-

Api seaport.

I crashed once when I hit a hole and Scoopy turned over. But I was okay and so was Scoopy. Two kind guys helped me up and so I continued my travels. At that point, I felt like crying, but instead I found myself laughing at my stubbornness. For more than 60km, I was smiling at the bad roads and talking to my Scoopy, asking her to be strong. Everyone must have thought I was crazy, because I was smiling at all of them. But that didn't stop them from smiling back at me!

Finally, I got past the city of Palembang to Tanjung Api-Api, where the boat left to Bangka. By the time I got there, the ferry had gone, so I had to sleep in the port.

All the officers at the ferry thought I was so brave for doing this all by myself, and they were all being so nice to me. The port is brand new, but it's such a shame because almost everything was broken already. But the people were nice, and I got the ferry ride for free!!!

I arrived in Pontianak by ferry from Jakarta around 5pm and couldn't wait to get off the ferry. I'd been on the ferry for 40 hours and that was probably the most boring time in my life. Because I already had a special exception from the Indonesian government, the ferry ride was again free. This ferry was different from the previous ferry because it had two separate rooms. One was just a big room with no chairs or anything and everyone just sat on the floor. I didn't mind this place so much until a lot of guys started coming in and started to smoke, even though there was a "No Smoking" sign there. It horrified me because I thought I was going to sit there for 40 hours inhaling all that smoke. But finally I moved to the other room with bunk beds and not so many people there. Maybe not more than 15 people were in there. And it did feel a lot safer and nicer.

I was the first one to board the ferry because they had to load my motor bike on first before all the trucks and the cars. After me, three teenagers from Afghanistan came and soon we became friends. I arrived around 2pm, they came around 3pm, and around 4:30pm many

people boarded. The ferry did not start moving until midnight. When I moved to the bunk beds room, I asked the officials how much it was going to be to upgrade the room. I found you only had to pay Rp31,000/person, so I asked the Afghans to come with me because they also felt unsafe there. On this ferry there were so many scams! Before we knew how much the official rate to upgrade the room was, a few people came to us and offered to upgrade the rooms for Rp250,000/2 people. The scams didn't stop there. When we moved to the bunk beds room and waited there, two people came in--one a guy in a security uniform while the other was drunk. Both threatened us and asked for money because they thought the Afghans were illegal immigrants and that I was one of them. I told them the captain knew where I was and told them I would call the captain if they didn't leave. Finally, they left. It was such a shame that I didn't get a chance to take their pictures, but I reported them to the officials.

It was almost 6pm when I finally got my scooter off the ferry, and I continued to drive toward the border because it was around a 5-hour drive from Pontianak to Entikong with car--and with my scooter, probably longer. Finally around 9pm, I stopped at the small shop where the truckers stop in Indonesia. We call this place a *warung*. The female owner insisted that I stop and stay overnight because it was late.

In that area there was not much of a signal for mobile phones. The only place where there was a little signal was from the top of refrigerators. You could only put your phone on top of one of the fridges and set it on loudspeaker mode if you want to make a phone call. I found it really funny.

After I finished talking with all the people in the shop, I got ready for bed. I brushed my teeth in front of the shop in the parking area, and the female owner said to me that there was a bathroom in the back of the shop that I could use. I usually didn't like to use bathrooms like that so much because they were far away in back of the house and were really hard for me to get there because the dirt was wet and so slippery. But at this shop the bathroom was placed right behind the shop so it was okay. But I was shocked when I found that the water in the bathroom was a funny color. I had never seen water like that before

unless it was in the roadside drains. I decided I was not going to shower or brush my teeth with that water, so I swallowed the bubbles of my toothpaste and went to bed. Later on I found out that the water around the area was always that color and that it was clean. For someone who'd never seen clean water of that color, I thought I chose the safest way, considering I still had a long journey ahead and being sick was not an option.

I woke up at 5am, and it was already bright outside, so I continued to drive toward Entikong. For the first time in forever, it was misty and not hazy. Everything surrounding me was so pretty and the air was fresh. I even got a chance to see a wild pig cross the road...but also another truck crash.

But like everything else in life, good things don't last forever. In this case the road got very bad and dusty after an hour's drive from where I slept the previous night. The truckers warned me about that so I was all prepared. After the Tanjung Api-Api seaport--with its tsunami-like roads--nothing scared me anymore.

I was happy to finally have made it to Entikong, the border town that brought me to the Malaysian side at Tebedu. The police at the border said that I was not allowed to leave Indonesia with Scoopy, but the customs officers and Malaysian Department of Transport helped facilitate it for me. Since I had begun this trip, every time I stopped at the police office, all of the officers had been nice and helpful. It was a different story at the border. While I was talking to the police officer at the border, people came and gave him money. I think it was bribe money for every signature that he made for anyone who had a vehicle and wanted to cross the border. I was so annoyed with him. So when Indonesian customs and the Malaysian side helped me, I was beyond happy. I needed a special permit from a Malaysian government office, and I couldn't go there because it was already 3pm on Friday. From Tebedu to Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, it was around a 2-hour drive.

On Monday I went to the government office in Kuching and found that the people who needed to sign my documents were in a meeting away from the office and wouldn't be back

until 2 pm. The office promised me that I could go to the border and collect Scoopy, and they would fax the paperwork around 2 pm. So we started to drive to the border at 12.30pm.

I arrived in Tebedu only to find that the Department of Transport could not receive the fax because the telephone cable had been stolen. They told me that the cable had been stolen 11 times in the previous month. Instead, the documents were emailed to them. It was a big relief. After they received the email, I had to go back to the Indonesian office to collect more paperwork and meet up with the annoying police officer again. This time he couldn't say anything because I already had the permit from the Malaysian side! The customs officers all were happy to help me again. Returning to the Malaysian side, I bought insurance for RM70 and received my special international circulation permit.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Three Orange Beaks" (Ngô Đông River)**

by Nathan Wakefield Taylor

with white bodies in tow  
slide across our path  
the solitude they chase is  
not my own on the left  
bank of the river in a room  
whose frame is just a bottom lip  
of old bricks a man cranks  
the pedal of a bike propped  
upside down I imagine  
clicking above the trickle talk  
the oars make dipping in  
and out of water the man says  
something to the woman  
is it his sister or his wife  
standing close and she tilts  
her head a small degree  
away I coast past them  
the woman blinks far beyond  
the ruins I have made of  
their home seen through  
a wall not there or was it  
eaten by time harsh weather  
or never finished we drift  
down a small fraction of  
river there's not enough



time to fill their speaking  
with my words and rhymes  
here another man changes  
a bicycle tire a new man  
new bike we bow our heads  
low as with prayer under two  
bridges first stone then wood  
the distance slips as ghost  
buildings peak through the mist  
French colonial-styled resorts  
built by the Chinese decades  
ago or in progress I don't know  
below a rising limestone cliff  
strip of bank extends out  
along the river green bed  
for stone pillars an entrance  
gate to a small temple  
beyond a graveyard this dark  
hole a tunnel-like cave opens  
up ahead and from within  
a man in a boat materializes  
not like the trail of tourists  
like us with the woman  
propels our clouds over  
the faint smell of grass with  
bare foot by foot the man  
arrived dressed in burgundy  
cloth and wears a long gray  
mustache smiles missing teeth  
his eyes shine behind him now  
a small girl in a red coat

her eyes in her lap we disappear  
in the cave it rains from what  
sounds like arms length  
above our heads my mind  
rides the upside down lunar  
surface valleys plains spires  
a face in the negative we exit  
the fish mouth of the cave  
it's truly a mouth and gray  
light washes us clean yet again  
two more by the bank lean on  
their bicycles the rims of  
their hats low to their eyes  
mist draped over shoulders  
and the heads of limestone  
hill faces tower on both sides  
white black hoofed goats  
perched on invisible lines  
of cliffs like glass figurines  
the straight vertical cliff wall  
with jagged paths cracked up  
its map we've reached the end  
she says in hers not mine  
now we go back

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Women of My Blood"**

by Alis Padasian

Your heart and blood, they are cold and hard  
Often growled by the broken part, of soul  
And so the odd shown by God and you further go  
Holding onto the fortress, with your only dress  
Though stressed by the lessons for the best  
But you face the heist with all the bless in your arms

Women of my blood, you ought to walk all your own  
And show your fathom for the wrongs I've done  
Go, and go for your hopes and stop that sobs and go  
For all the good things will come into your arms  
And will jump a charm into you hum and you will own a farm  
That rooted by a damn but fruited with a slam  
of happiness and dusted with endless strength

And women of my blood I am sorry  
For all the worry and for the paths are edgy and lonely  
But I know there will be a glory but not in a hurry  
Women of my blood I am sorry for not there for you  
But the sky is blue and always blue  
And so does my bless to you

## **"Your Love"**

by Alis Padasian

Your love for me – is like a  
raw lime – half cut – salted  
And squeezed onto my tongue  
The tongue pressed-  
Clashing with the palate  
The whole organ works  
Sucking – ‘till the sourness pierces  
along its way to my chest  
But salted – still  
So it's alright.

By chance - the seed-  
crushed between my teeth  
And a taste of bitterness  
takes over everything  
But - still I have the taste  
of the raw lime – salted  
So it's alright  
Because it's your love-  
The raw lime – salted.