

A n a k S a s t r a

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Contributor Bios

Lakshmy A. Krishnan was born and brought up in Malaysia and moved to Singapore in the late 1980s. She grew up rooted in the fictional world of books in the rustic backdrop of Kangar and Alor Setar. Her story-telling parents further fuelled her imagination by sharing personal tales and Indian folklore. Her personal history with a liberal sprinkling of imagination inspire most of her stories. She is coauthor of an anthology of short stories entitled *Truth or Fiction* (Silverfish Books 2017).

Frank Beyer is from New Zealand and has a degree in history, mainly specializing in WWII and the Mexican Revolution. Subsequent life experience has made him very interested in Asia and South America. Recently his story “Dog Breeder” was pick of the month in *Fiction on the Web*.

[P. Maheswary Ponnusamy](#) is a Malaysian, female, 60. She used to teach English at various levels in public and private schools in Malaysia and Brunei. These days she still teaches English on a voluntary basis to disadvantaged children. In her spare time, she tries her hand at writing fiction. A few of her short stories have been published online locally. Much earlier, she published a collection of short stories for children in Malaysia. She has also written and edited English workbooks for students in primary and secondary schools in her country.

[Mai Hoang](#) is a sophomore at Phillips Exeter, where she serves as writing associate for *Pendulum*, an annual literature publication. She originally hails from Saigon, Vietnam. Her works have been published in *TeenInk*, *Clairemont Review*, *Cadaverine* and *Anak Sastra*. She recently garnered two national gold medals from the Scholastic Writing Award, and she has also been recognized by Lamont Younger Poets’ Award. Mai participated as a mentee in the *Adroit Journal’s* 2017 Poetry Mentorship Program. She also founded [Littlebookies](#), an online resource that publishes simplified versions of classic literature for young English learners worldwide.

Prema Arasu’s professional life spanned biomedical research, higher education and academic leadership. Molded by her upbringing in Malaysia and work in the U.S., she is using her recent retirement to explore self, culture and the intersection of science and spirituality. Her previous positions included CEO of Kansas State University’s campus in greater Kansas City; vice provost of international programs at Washington State University;

and director of global health and professor of molecular biomedical sciences at North Carolina State University.

Teffy Wrightson (Twitter: [@belledujour208](#)) writes poetry and prose on many topics and has been published online in *Riggwelter* and *alfiedog.com*.

Chris Palmer's poetry has been published in *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Brasilia Review*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Meanjin*, *Quadrant*, and the *Weekend Australian*, among others. His first collection, [Afterlives](#), was published by Ginninderra Press in 2016. He lives in Canberra, Australia.

Peter W. Morris has been an international photojournalist/writer for decades, much of this work handled for various Christian mission agencies serving throughout Asia, Africa and South America. He and his son have long been enamored with Asia, which they've both visited repeatedly...China, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, India, etc. They both especially like Southeast Asia.

[Myrtle V](#) is a poet and electroacoustic composer from the UK living currently in Tashkent with plans to open an arts venue in Brazil next year. She lived in Hanoi for a year in 2011/12, travelling afterwards in Southeast Asia and South Asia including one month in Myanmar. Her "Vogue Poetic Justice cut-up" was shortlisted in the PoetryKit 2017 Summer Competition.

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"The Indian Girl Next Door"

by Lakshmy A. Krishnan

We appraised each other. Across the fence.

The girl-child's plump face and palms were pressed against the steel mesh fence that divided our houses. Her face took on the markings from the metal mesh, distorting her otherwise cute face. The fence started sagging into our garden as she pushed against it with all her weight. And that was the first time I saw Meena.

29 January 1967. A Sunday. She was about three, and I was six.

She was wearing a frilly yellow dress with sequins on it that glittered in the ten-o'clock sun. Tiny gold studs shone in her ear lobes. There was a small black dot between her eyebrows. It looked like a slightly large mole, but I noticed it was somewhat scratched like a paint mark. She stuck her tongue out at me. I retaliated, and she burst into tears. Babbling something in a language which I later came to know was Tamil, she ran indoors.

I strolled back into my house with a grin, not sure why the sight of the girl made me happy. Mother was cooking sambal and the whole house was steaming up with peppery, pungent smells.

"Ibu, siapa orang baru sebelah?" I asked my mother. Mother explained that the new neighbours were an Indian family from Penang. They had moved in the previous day—the Lingams. Mr. Lingam had been transferred to Kangar, our little town, which was more like a village in the north of Malaysia, to teach at the Derma English School.

The next day, there she was again. Waiting by the fence. I was walking into my house compound after playing with some friends. She was in another frilly dress—blue this time. She called out in Tamil, "Ingge vaaa, vaa..." gesticulating wildly, urging me closer.

I held out my right palm through the fence mesh. Without hesitation, she put hers into mine. Meena looked at me with her large luminous eyes; serious, assessing. Suddenly

she smiled, her cheeks dimpled and her eyes twinkled. It was like the sun peeking out from behind the clouds.

She pointed at herself, "Meena."

I copied her action. "Jaidin."

"Jom, main," I prompted her in Malay to play outside, nodding and pointing to the road. But she shook her head. I supposed that she was not allowed outside alone as she was too young. It wasn't until much later that I found out from my mother about the tragic road accident that had claimed Meena's older sister when she was just three. Since then, Meena's parents had become extremely protective of her, allowing her to venture out of the house compound only with them.

Meena became my unwavering playmate despite our age difference. Though I had other friends, she had only me to play with. So I indulged her in across-the-fence games. Thus began my friendship with the Indian girl next door.

She would sit on the grassy patch next to the fence with her tea-set, serving me make-believe food and tea. I would humour her by making slurping and chomping noises. I would play ball over the fence with her, ensuring that it landed neatly into her plump palms. She, on the other hand, would deliberately throw the ball haphazardly. And collapse into a giggling fit watching me run wildly after the ball. Jamal, my younger brother who was Meena's age pointedly ignored her, preferring to play with the boys. Somehow, I was drawn to Meena.

When she was about nine, Meena exclaimed one day, "I want to look like you!" By then, we were both communicating in English.

"You cannot look like me! You look like that *longkang* cat."

She had lost her puppy weight and was thin and scrawny. Laughing at her, calling her a drain-cat did nothing to appease her. To pay back for my taunts, when we played makeshift badminton over her house-gate, she hit the shuttlecock into the drain. She sniggered each time I had to crawl into the deep drain to pick up the dank shuttlecock. Though I ranted and protested, I always made sure Meena won the game.

When she was ten, her parents permitted her to play just outside their house gate; no further. Though the other children called out to her, she insisted on playing only with me. There was a bond between us that was indefinable. We played marbles. She liked the

colours when the glass balls spun. But I never let her play with my favourite red marble. One day, Meena challenged me to a game.

“Jaidin, let’s see if you’re really good at playing marbles. The winner gets your favourite marble.”

I hesitated. But a teenager loved a challenge. I accepted. Much to my chagrin, she had learned a thing or two over the years and won the red marble. Jumping up and down, she chimed repeatedly, “I am the champion...and you are the loser.”

I felt my face become hot, “You cheat! No wonder no one plays with you.”

As soon as the words had leapt from my lips, I regretted it. It was too late. Her face crumpled as she ran away crying. But half an hour later, Meena was standing at our gate, with her mother.

The remnants of her tears still visible, she thrust the red marble at me through the opening between the metal grill.

“Jaidin, here. I know you love your red marble. So can we be friends again?”

Her stricken face made my heart constrict. Mrs. Lingam was watching me expectantly.

“Okay Meena. Are you ready for badminton? It’s 4:30.”

As we both eased into our teens, Meena and I had moved on to our own set of friends. But we still played with each other. Others found our relationship odd and teased us - the Malay boy and the Indian girl next door. But I felt no compulsion to break off our ties. The girls who flirted with me did not find Meena a threat. Or at least not until she metamorphosed.

Every afternoon, after school, I would hang out with my gang of friends, riding our scooters together.

“Hey Jaidin! Come on lah! Take me for a ride!” Meena begged one day, striding towards her gate in her gawky tom-boy clothes.

Meena was then fourteen and I was seventeen. To me she was still the cute girl next door.

I reached out through the gate grille, chucked her under her chin. “No, Meena dear. Not today.”

“Byeeee...” I waved, speeding off laughing with my friends. I beamed as I saw her flailing fists and red face reflected in the side mirror. Somehow irritating her was becoming a favourite pastime of mine.

“I never get a chance to have a party. My classmates always have birthday parties with lots of gifts. It’s not fair! Now we are off to India as always.”

Her lips were pursed and arms akimbo.

It was mid-October, a few weeks before her sixteenth birthday. The Lingam family usually left for India in early November and returned in late December. And her birthday fell on the 15th of December.

I was nineteen. I was done with my STPM, a local exam that would allow entrance to the university. Awaiting my results.

“Hoi, your Convent school is so snooty. We don’t have such parties and gifts. In any case, you are so lucky to be able to go overseas,” I reminded her, but Meena just pouted.

I placated her with the promise of a gift. “Don’t worry, I will get you something.”

She pulled a face, “No you won’t—you never have.”

I felt sorry for her. Though nobody made a big deal about gifts and parties in my home, it was clear that she envied her friends at her school who threw lavish birthday parties and received gifts. So in her absence, since I had time to spare, I took on some odd jobs to earn extra money. I bought the latest *Dandy Annual Book 1980*. It contained a collection of comic strips and puzzles.

The Lingams finally returned from India. Like clockwork, at 4:30pm, Meena called out from the fence. Her tone was impatient, “Jaidin! Where are you? It’s badminton time.”

I sauntered out with the gift and my racket, ready to tease her, but stopped dead in my tracks. In place of the gawky, skinny girl-child was a slim, curvaceous young lady. Her raven hair hung heavily behind her in a single thick plait. Her expressive eyes were highlighted with kohl, mesmerising me. She looked stunning in an Indian outfit. I had not seen her in anything but her boyish, baggy clothes before.

Stammering stupidly, I stumbled tentatively towards her, “Y-y-you l-look so different.”

“Ya, ya. You like this dress huh? My mother lah. Wants me to wear ‘ladylike clothes’. Ugh!” she rolled her eyes theatrically while circling one side of her head with her pointer finger.

Awkwardly, I reached over the fence and thrust the gift into her hand, “Happy birthday Meena.”

“What a surprise! You actually kept your word,” she replied sarcastically, although her eyes sparkled and her lips stretched wide across her face.

Whatever else she said that afternoon went over my head. The Indian girl next door had transformed into a beautiful young woman. I was smitten. Like a typical hormone-raging youth in love.

I started spending an inordinate amount of time grooming. I stationed myself in front of the small mirror which hung on a rusty nail in the kitchen area right next to the damp bathroom for a very long time. I tried to shape my hair P. Ramlee style, using some hair-gel. I wanted to look like the heart-throb actor that most of the Malay girls swooned over.

My mates and brother took turns teasing me. “Amboi bang, Wow bro. Apa ni? What’s this? Impressing someone?”

My parents and grandmother were not unaware of my new interest. One day grandmother called me to her side. “Cucu, jaga jaga ya. Kau ni pemuda. Jangan tersilap buat sesuatu.”

I was surprised at grandmother’s perceptiveness. She cautioned me not to do anything in a moment of youthful passion. Her insinuations were crystal clear.

I brushed her concerns aside. “Jangan khawatir. Meena kawan baik aja.”

I reassured her that Meena was just a good friend. I caught grandmother exchanging a meaningful glance with my mother. I rushed out of the house before she could say anything else.

Soon it was January. The month when the lush paddy fields were slowly turning golden in the intense sun. I was still awaiting my exam results. This gave me ample time to spend with Meena.

One hot morning, I saw Meena sitting on the side of the huge drain beside her house, reading the book I had given her. She was glowing like the ripening paddy as the sun glinted off her shining raven hair. She looked up, spotted me and waved me over.

“Hey this book is soooo good. I’ve not had much time to read it before now. School-work so *teruk*, really terrible. Thank you so much for the gift. It must’ve cost you a lot.”

Beaming, Meena held out her hand to thank me. My treacherous hand took it and pulled her up against me, movie-style. Meena gasped and opened her mouth about to say something but our eyes locked. Her eyebrows shot up. Her lips formed an “o.” The sudden shift of emotion was palpable. I heard her quick, short breaths. Everything I mocked about soppy romantic scenes in Malay movies was happening in front of my eyes. The moment was interrupted by wolf whistles from my friends who had just arrived on their scooters. I let go of her hastily. She stumbled before fleeing indoors.

“Hey guys! Not cool lah. Meena and I are childhood friends,” I stated with bravura, an attempt to cover my embarrassment.

But I knew the dynamics had changed forever between us.

Meena avoided me the whole day. The next morning I saw her beside the fence, kicking grass blades absently. As I moved towards her, she pushed her face against the fence as she had done the first day we met. Except that now it was a stunning face that was contorted. She slipped her hand through the fence mesh and held out her palm.

We began spending time together discreetly; away from prying eyes. Fortunately her parents trusted me, and by then she was also allowed out of the house on her own. While we experimented with youthful ardour, grandmother’s cautionary counsel was always at the back of my mind.

Days fled into weeks and soon it was time for me to join the university in Kuala Lumpur. It was my last day at home. As I was getting on my scooter to meet my friends, Meena sauntered towards me, her red Indian *kurti* shimmering in the sunlight. She was striking, like a red Hibiscus against the golden paddy fields beside the house.

She grinned boldly, her smouldering eyes inviting. “Hey Jaidin, how about that ride which you denied me two years ago? After all you are leaving me all alone after tomorrow.”

Her lips curved tantalisingly, leaving me no choice but to allow her to clamber coolly behind me onto my scooter. Dangling both her legs on one side, she leaned against me and

calmly encircled my waist with her slim arms. I looked down at the shimmering, coloured glass bangles tinkling on her wrists. I felt her warm breath against my back. With the swelling heat, I caught her scent. The mild perfume of Lux soap mingled with the fragrant jasmine flowers that she wore in her hair. Alluring and intoxicating.

I revved my red scooter into action, showing off my prowess. Her hot body pressed against mine. We were rapt in our own little world. Meena leaned forward and mouthed loudly in my ear. "Jaidin, I'm pregnant. Will you make an honest woman of me?"

I felt my heart jump. I turned around to face her. "You'll always be my woman."

A typical scene from a movie. Sudden screeching of tyres. A dull thud. The smell of petrol and acrid smoke. Unbearable heat.

And there she was, the Indian girl next door, waving from across the fence.

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“The Battle of Ternate”

by Frank Beyer

Ternate is one of a string of volcanic islands just north of the equator in the Indonesian province of Maluku Utara. Before the Portuguese reached them in the 16th century, Europeans had been searching for these islands for centuries. They were the source of the then precious spice—cloves.

The Sultan of Ternate allowed the newly arrived Portuguese to build a fort on his island. He was ever in need of allies, because Tidore, home of a rival sultanate, was just a short boat ride away. The two islands had been enemies since time immemorial, vying for the riches of the clove trade. Tidore featured a conical volcano; Ternate’s peak was asymmetrical but no less beautiful. The slopes of both were covered in clove trees.

The Portuguese wanted the locals to sell cloves exclusively to them. However, the sultan’s acquiescence to this demand was only of a Machiavellian nature. Why would he stop trading with the Arabs and Javanese who had been coming to his island for centuries? His successors felt the same way.

By 1570 the Portuguese presence was not only limited to soldiers of (mis)fortune, but priests had arrived too. The Jesuits urged the Portuguese governor on the island, Mesquita, to do something about Sultan Hairun selling cloves to Javanese traders. Hairun was breaking the agreed upon monopoly. These priests hated the sultan, as he backed Islamic groups who blocked their proselytizing efforts.

Mezquita took action. He sent out a force of twenty men, who burned several Javanese trading ships docked on the far side of the island. The sultan was furious. After several

scuffles between the sultan's soldiers and the Portuguese, Mezquita invited the sultan to the fort for reconciliation. To the shock of all present, Mezquita managed to separate the sovereign from his bodyguard. Then, in an act of rather bad political maneuvering, he stabbed the sultan to death.

The bodyguard broke out of the fort and spread the news. Chaos ensued. The locals laid siege, yelling for Mezquita to be turned over to them. Inside the fort there was rebellion. Mezquita was stripped of his title and sneaked outside at night. He was sent back to Malacca on a supply ship that'd been waiting offshore. When the locals learnt that Mesquita was gone they lifted the siege. Instead they focused on guarding the two sailing ships at anchor nearby, so there was no escape for the Portuguese. The new sultan, Babullah, was a stronger, more ruthless character than his father, and the people loved him. What a mistake to murder the old man, who at least had been somewhat malleable.

Vitor Paulo Rocha became the new Portuguese governor. A man of some ability, it was a shame he became a leader in such a dire situation. A better choice than Mesquita, nevertheless, he had a shadowy past. He'd been accused of corruption back in Portugal, but was granted a pardon on the condition that he joined an expedition to the Indies. They said men who went to Goa were fortune seekers and those in Malacca adventurers. To end up in Ternate, that furthest Portuguese outpost, you had to have done something criminal.

A few months after the assassination, food became a problem for the Portuguese. They had a lot of cloves and other spices inside the fort, but very little dried meat. Going out to collect water was a daily trial. At first the locals just took pot shots at them. But then one day, the sultan's soldiers attacked a party getting water from a brackish stream. One man received a deep sword cut to the leg. Rocha then ordered that every time they left the fort, the men must wear helmets, breastplates and quilted leggings. This command was unpopular as that gear was almost unbearable to wear in the tropical heat. The next supply ship from Malacca did not appear when due. Rocha knew there could be many reasons for this, but their situation was getting desperate.

Every evening Rocha did his solitary rounds—checking the guards up on the turrets were in place. The other men went to sleep early inside the stone barracks; Morpheus was their only comforter. Sometimes Rocha came across Padre Goncalves pacing about inside the defensive walls. The priest genuflected incessantly as he walked. Rocha knew he didn't do this from religious fervor. The truth was the priest's mind had gone from being holed up in the fort. Goncalves was a restless man; he'd roamed the world, and of late the island, incessantly looking for converts. Rocha had seen something similar with an Indian tiger in Malacca. The beast was kept in a large cage and would pace back and forth within, using exactly the same swing of the head on every turn. The owner of the tiger, who eventually couldn't bear the dead eyed pacing, had it made into a rug. Rocha had given up confessing some time ago. Confessing to Goncalves was like throwing your sins into the abyss to multiply. The other Jesuits in the fort weren't much saner.

Rocha thought about their chances of making it off Ternate. Even if they defeated the men guarding their ships, they would need time for repairs to make the vessels seaworthy. This would allow the Sultan a chance to regroup. What awaited them in Malacca anyway? Chains for some disobedience he was not yet aware of most likely. In theory they were the glory of Portugal, conquering faraway lands, spreading the faith and making the king rich through opening new trade routes. In reality Muslim traders had arrived first and embedded themselves, and the majority of Christian adventurers who set out for the Indies came to a bad end.

The people of Ternate kept up the pressure until the Portuguese garrison was reduced to a state beyond miserable. Rocha sued for peace, and the Portuguese were allowed to leave. The locals then occupied the fort themselves, Rocha knew that wouldn't last for long, because the island was cursed with wealth. If not the Portuguese, some other group would arrive to make trouble.

Against the odds, Rocha made it back to Portugal in 1577. He became a fisherman, one of the better results out of any of the Portuguese adventurers from that age of exploration. When out fishing, Rocha had the habit of looking back at the skyline of Lisbon. He knew the

beautiful palaces and churches he saw had been made reality by distinct garrisons of criminals in miserable forts, trading for the spices that Europe was crazy about. Not only did cloves do simple things like preserve meat and sweeten the breath, they performed miracles. For instance, if mixed with oil, they could ward off the plague.

As a fisherman Rocha's days were of physical labour. A stark contrast to those idle tropical days, when his men did not care about life or death and slept as much as they could. In 1577 Rocha was not yet old, he got married a year after his return. Given his new profession, he became pescatarian, but his wife occasionally liked to cook meat. That was fine, but he begged her never to use cloves as flavouring. The slightest whiff of that substance reminded him of the fort...the sweet fragrance of cloves contaminated by gunpowder and sweat.

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“Two Barbers and a Tailor”

by P. Maheswary Ponnusamy

“Aiyoh saarr, why not waiting for me? You like the way he cutting your hair. You happy?” Arul, who was both the barber and proprietor of the hair salon, asked Samy.

“Oh yes, very nice. New style. OK Arul, my wife is waiting at Jaya Grocer.” Samy paid the fixed rate of ten ringgit and now, with a sparkle in his eyes, looked again at the mirror to examine how the top was trimmed short to balance the tapered sides. He said his courtesies to Veloo, the tailor who operated from the front portion of the hair salon, and walked out feeling young, refreshed and energetic.

“I took only twenty minutes to eat two thosais and one cup of masala tea at the stall, and this fellow has already touched my scissors,” Arul complained in Tamil to Veloo who was painstakingly sewing more darts to the saree blouse so that Mrs. Samy could have that extra lift to support her saggy breasts.

“Inder, apasal cepat cepat potong rambut?” Arul questioned the extra hand whom he had hired about a month ago. The terms and conditions orally spelt out for the new recruit were to dust the furniture, sweep the floor and discard fallen hair into the rubbish bin placed outside Lorong PJS 3. Termination of service was on the spot if the work was deemed unsatisfactory. Inder, who was without a job at that moment, had accepted the offer.

“Dia cakap tak boleh tunggu. Saya cakap sikit jam awak mari. Dia mau cepat.” Since Samy was in a hurry, Inder explained that in order to secure the customer he had to take over the hair cutting job. He continued sweeping the floor as a young Malay man walked in.

He approached Arul. “Boleh potong macam itu uncle baru keluar”? Apparently the gentleman had been at the nasi kandar restaurant which was a shop away having his nasi lemak when he spotted the high spirited Samy. Now he too desired a similar haircut.

Arul looked at Inder and signaled him to take over without showing his mounting agitation.

“Nanti saya cuci tangan boss,” the buoyant Inder opened a door and went to the washroom to scrub his hands.

The Malay man smiled at Arul and gestured at the hair scattered around the barber chair.

“First, he started with my scissors. Now I am the sweeper. You cannot trust this fellow from the North. If I’m not alert he will bundle this whole business,” the already suspicious and irritated Arul made an astute remark about Inder for Veloo to hear.

Arul and Veloo, while in their early twenties, came from South India to Kuala Lumpur twenty years ago to escape unemployment in their homeland. Over the years they had survived the steep competition from the modern hairdressing salons and dressmaking boutiques mushrooming in malls by keeping the hair cutting and tailoring services affordable. Their shared roots in their homeland had sealed a camaraderie that could never be broken. They always operated their businesses from the same shop, the former taking the inner portion, and the latter the front part.

Inder came out and inspected the Malay customer’s physiognomy. He surveyed the left side and then studied the right and made a suggestion. “Saya boleh potong style macam Bollywood starr Hrrithik Roshan. Banyak suiting awak punya muka.”

The Malay customer was already grinning from ear to ear when he heard that Inder will soon transform him to look like a celebrity. “Betulkah?”

Inder took out his Samsung phone and showed images of Hrrithik Roshan hair styles and reassured his new customer that it can be done very easily.

Arul was shocked at the sharpness and wittiness the new hair cutter possessed. Furthermore, the uncanny way Inder captivated customers gave him the jitters. Veloo who had been noticing Inder’s performances remarked, “The longer you keep this fellow, the sooner he will send you begging in the streets.”

Arul waited for the right time to give his new employee a quick exit, and it came when the beaming customer with the Hrrithik Roshan hair style left. He not only paid the fee to Arul but slipped a handsome tip into Inder’s pocket.

“Ok, awak juga boleh keluar. Awak punya kerja sudah habis sini.” Arul gave Inder the termination order.

“Boss, saya boleh buat earr candling, hairrr colorrring dan macam macam lagi,” Inder expanded his resume, offering additional services to Arul’s business.

Arul, who was not only threatened but now envious of Inder, told him to leave the salon immediately. The newly terminated Inder, clueless over his sudden layoff, scratched his head and went to the nasi kandar store to figure out where he went wrong over a cup of strong BRU coffee. He was sure that he had learnt the trade from every street hair cutter in his homeland and, after a year of savings his first choice to try his expertise abroad, was in this country of flimsy borders.

“Aiyoh yoh, that blue uniform fellow is coming again,” alerted Veloo.

“So fast his hair grow already,” sulked Arul.

A burly man with a stomach that equaled a fully pregnant woman walked in. He took off his jacket and gave it to Veloo to brush off any fluff and instructed two loose buttons to be sewn. He sat on the barber chair, and Arul knew exactly what to do. He gave the walk-in customer the usual straight and neat cut that befitted an officer on duty. The two had always put up with this oppression stoically. When the job was done, the jacket was returned. Veloo had surreptitiously slipped a twenty ringgit note into the front pocket of the blue uniform. The man of authority checked his pocket and felt the money. There was no guilt on his face as he took it as a weekly gift from Veloo and Arul.

“This blue monster is eating up our money every week. We must make more money if we want to survive. Go get Inder back before some other salon owner grabs him. Mr. Samy and the Malay customer will ask for him again. He is also telling he can do earr treatment and hairrr colorrr too,” Veloo rationalized.

“But I sacked him already. It is too much shame asking him to come back,” explained Arul who truly felt his dilemma.

“Arul, who is Inder? Our brother from the north. He is coming from our country just like us. There is no shame here. Go now. Get him?” Veloo cajoled Arul.

“You are right. We are not giving the job to the fellows from Indonesia or Filipin or to the Banglas. It is for our countrymen.” With that nationalism in his voice, Arul went off to bring back Inder.

It was not easy to coax Inder to leave his Bru coffee and rejoin Arul's service immediately. The re-employment discussion dragged on with proposals and counter proposals.

Inder wanted his RM 800 monthly salary to be readjusted.

"Tak da banyak customer potong rambut sekarang. Saya boleh tambah empat puluh lima ringgit." Arul suggested a limited salary increase.

Inder requested for the increment to be rounded up to sixty ringgit despite Arul's claim that business had slowed down in recent times.

"Passport sama airrr ticket balik India sendiri bayar," insisted Arul.

Inder agreed to pay for his passport renewal and purchase of air tickets to fly home, but made it clear that his work permit was Arul's responsibility.

He also requested for every Sunday as his off day as he had plans to hang out with his buddies at Leboh Ampang.

"Sorry, Sunday banyak customer datang. Awak ambil cuti hari Wednesday," Arul suggested as an alternative.

"Itu tips customer bagi mesti kongsi sama sama." Arul sensed that Inder would likely receive substantial tips from customers. He made sure the rehired staff agrees to share the extra cash with Veloo too.

"Boleh. Tak da problem. Kita tiga masuk tips dalam satu botol besar. Semua tips kita kongsi bila tutup kedai hari-hari," Inder replied.

He was careful to fine-tune the tip-sharing request from Arul. All tips received from customers either from hair dressing or tailoring were to be shared out when business closes for the day. He wanted transparency and thus wanted the tips to be dropped into a glass jar.

"Boleh." Arul gave his affirmation hesitantly as he did not expect Inder to include Veloo's tailoring tips for equal sharing too.

With that assurance from Arul, the rehiring package was sealed.

Inder gulped his coffee, paid the cashier and scurried ahead of Arul to the salon. Inside, Inderprasad Pal—that was his full name—from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh swept the fallen hair from the Blue Monster while whistling an upbeat Hindi song. Arul and Veloo listened. For now they had to get accustomed to this new beat for their survival.

* * * * *

“42 Nguyễn Huệ”

by Mai Hoang

apartment (n): a run-down building where Saigonese get their café

The waiter passed by my table, booted feet tap-tapping on linoleum tiles, a piece of moss-colored dishcloth in one hand. *Anh*, can I have iced café with condensed milk? I asked. He stopped, whipped out a notepad from under muslin apron and began to scribble with a stubby-looking pencil. Five minutes, *em*, he replied. He had eyes the color of jacobean wood, lanky fingers, brows that nearly touched. With clean movements, he dropped a single rose into the vase by the railing, gathered up a dirty tray and turned away, closing the balcony door behind him.

Everything was still but for the faint beepings of motorcycles from far down Nguyễn Huệ Street. Dark clouds started to form in clear blue Saigon sky; on this side of town, splatters of rain had begun pelting tin roofs. Three crystal drops stood still on the white rose petal; even more lodged themselves into the crevices of cursive wooden signboard lines. *Saigon Oi*. A familiar smell filled the air—mélangé of exhaust, petrichor and ancient rotting pulp. The café came with wisps of spiraling steam; I blew across its rich brown surface and set the cup aside to cool while logging in for free Internet connection on my laptop. August twenty-sixth, the digital calendar read. Seventy-two hours before departure. Perhaps another poem.

I scanned the room behind me with misty eyes while my hands hovered over the Macbook keyboard. The wind chimes jingled as another group of young people entered the café, chit chatting as they jabbed fingers at the ten different milkshakes on the chalkboard menu. What I would like to remember: in the corner, a woman, silver-streaked bouffant on tilted head, alone at her table flipping a book. Pre-liberation music, French syllables whispered between fragments of Vietnamese song. *Je t'aime. Je t'aime. Je t'aime* floating in the enclosed space like remnants of a broken promise. String lights, grey and dusty in the morning air, watching me from their throne of copper wires. They were watching when I

pulled wet feet from sandals on this balcony rug. They were watching when I pulled a badly lit picture from old Messenger chat box, watching, also, when we set down our phones the previous Tuesday evening and gripped each other's hands, he and I, pressed our wet mouths onto burning skin as the city below us dissolved into a whirlwind of neon. His fingers on my belly and my lower-lip on his neck. Aftertaste of tiramisu on my tongue.

The chair next to mine was empty. A sparrow hopped onto the woven bamboo arm to pick at leftover crumbs, its twin legs slim and smooth as needles. I stirred my café slowly, drank a mouthful to relish in the sweet bitterness of Southern Đăk Lăk's choice roasted. On the other side of apartment 42, the habited side, a door popped open, revealing old men cross-legged before tea mugs and chess games, milky eyes glued to water drip dropping from shirts on the hanging line. The splatters of rain had sizzled down to erratic spurs; I approached the railing, leaned against vertical steel bars and wiped away traces of water with an index finger. Below, a *bánh mì* vendor passed by, crooning her chant of pickled *daikon*, crunchy baguette and pig ears. Crumbling the last fifty-thousand note in my jean pocket, I averted my gaze. The sparrow hopped from the bamboo chair to crisscrossed power lines before taking flight in the wind.

I drained my cup, gathered up the Macbook, pencil case, backpack and re-entered the room behind the balcony. A teddy bear sat on the bay window's faded linen cushion, all velvet fur and pointed nose. It could very well be the same one I had buried my face into the day after his departure, crimson motorcycles running around and around in my head like scenes from a favorite movie. Whispers of rain. Windows of sunlight. Leaning wet cheeks against his back as we rode among workers returning to home-cooked meals after eight long office hours, parents rushing middle-school kids to extra classes, lovers, hand in hand, basking in the bright city light and always, always the loners. Young souls with nowhere to go except for the art cafés on tip top apartment floors, ten by ten rooms with du jour decor covering up mossy walls as cracked as they were. Inside.

I raised my head as the waiter passed – *Anh*, where is the restroom? Funny how I had never used it during my thousand previous café retreats. Ignoring the odor of coagulated dirt-urine I took off my glasses and splashed cold water onto drooping eyelids, pressed cold water into tired skin with circular motions to wipe away the dull ache underneath temples.

He pinched his own cheeks and took off the gold-rimmed glasses. I guess Saigon is my home now, he had said while squeezing my hand, this boy fresh from green northern plateaus whose sonorous voice intonated *em* in a way I could not emulate, the *m* an exclamation mark, the *e* a mellow purr. Some sweet melting spot between /æ/ and /ə/.

A day later, he boarded the plane.

Of course, we do not blame him, do we? Apartment 42, you and I, we have seen this happen before—children rushing to Saigon, drinking the nurturing sap from alluvial land only to leave as soon as *English* and *global market* touch their tongue. We have been through summers of reckoning and autumns of separation, as the city blossomed for three months with young blood from four corners of the earth only to dwindle into colonial relics when they departed, again. Some leave never to return. And they grow old, they forget, they speak to parents in a pidgin tongue that is neither here nor there. *Cảm ơn mom, con doing fine, how is Saigon?*

I apologize for being a hypocrite. I am walking now, down the boot-worn steps where he kissed me for the last time, where my hands cupped his cheeks, and he had *I love yous* dangling from open lips but I said no. I said do not promise.

I do not promise. You know, Apartment 42, I also am boarding the plane, and a week from you will be nothing more than a rotting miniature building stashed away in this box I label *Saigon*, which is a dot on the map, which is negligible. You have outlived your time anyway, hundred-year-old rubble of mechanical elevator, rusted steel, peeling walls; sooner or later, they will tear you down.

Dear friend, you have been shelter in heat and storm.

Xin chào. Goodbye.

* * * * *

“Shaped beyond Control: A Scientist from Paramount House”

by Prema Arasu

“My daughter is doing genetic engineering,” my father would say, proudly—not really knowing what that meant but liking the implied complexity. Years later, on one of my trips home to Malaysia from my other home in the U.S., I found my letters to him. He had carefully bundled and stashed them in a small, well-worn leather bag used to store all his important documents. Unzipping the bag and browsing through a few envelopes—yes, he saved everything—I found one where I had tried to describe my research as a budding graduate student.

“Remember how Uncle Ram came back from his field trip in the jungle and had severe headaches, fevers and chills? The doctors said he had contracted malaria. Under a microscope, his blood would have shown round rings of Plasmodium parasites, foreign invaders in his cells. It not only makes you sick, thousands of people die from this disease.”

I described how, as in our worst nightmares about blood-sucking monsters, he had been bitten by an infected mosquito, its mouthparts sunken into his arm, drawing up a drop of his blood, while the devious parasite traveled in reverse direction using the insect’s saliva to get into his body, brilliantly making the jump from one host to another. How the parasite needed the human so it could use the cells of his liver and blood to multiply and produce hundreds of clones of itself. How the female mosquito also had her own agenda, needing protein and iron from human blood for her own eggs to mature. How, through

bites from other mosquitos, the parasites would journey back from human into insect to complete the sexual phase of their intricate life and start the cycle all over again.

Parasite, mosquito, and human in a co-dependent and intertwined dance of life, made possible by evolution's seemingly mysterious methods of ensuring survival and reproduction, a relationship as complex as that of a daughter's bond with her father. But in that letter, I had simply concluded, "I am among the first scientists who are cloning and studying the genes of Plasmodium so we can find a way to stop this terrible disease." He would have read and re-read my words, determined to understand what I was studying so that he could brag to relatives, friends and really anyone who would give him the time of day.

* * *

It was late that evening of Thaipusam, February 8, 2012, when my parents and I were gathered in our sitting room. My visit coincided with this religious festival of thanksgiving, penance and sacrifice observed in different ways by Hindu devotees. My father, now ninety one, had been preparing for this celebration for days, a priority on his calendar for over sixty years. On the second day of Thaipusam, the *ratham*, a brightly lit carriage transporting the holy statue of Murugan, would travel from a temple at one end of our home town, through the city center, to its final residence at a temple at the other end. I remembered earlier years when the carriage would be pulled by two cows. Their necks adorned with flower garlands and heads anointed with vermilion and sandalwood paste, the sanctified animals would seem oblivious to their hefty burden and the heat, loud drums and throng of sweaty devotees and curious bystanders. These days, a small engine powered the carriage over the five-mile track and a wooden replica of a horse would be strapped at the front.

“No, leave it alone,” he said, earlier in the evening. “I’ll arrange the tray. Where’s the garland? Just put it here, next to the tray, with everything else.”

My mother and I stood by impatiently, restraining ourselves from hurrying him along. “How has he been?” I asked.

She ignored my question and whispered instead, “The *ratham* may arrive at any time, and he has yet to bathe and get dressed.” She had laid out his white *veshti* and shirt, the clothes he wore only for special religious and traditional events.

My father moved slowly, examining each piece before gently but precisely setting it down on the well-polished round brass tray. The long fingers of his wrinkled hands delicately wrapped around and picked up a flower, a fruit, some betel nuts and leaves. He finally placed a single coconut in the center. It would be cracked by the priest sitting within the carriage. Breaking the fruit and revealing its thick white flesh is believed to purify, shower blessings and bring good fortune to a Hindu.

I watched him continue to fiddle with the tray and adjust each piece by millimeters so he could have everything just right. Minutes went by. We had to be ready to jump into action if he needed any additional item. Despite his age and encroaching symptoms of dementia, he held himself steady and all his attention was on that tray.

My father had from my earliest memories always prayed—before he got out of bed and when he went to bed; after his morning bath, before his lunch, and after his evening bath; when he opened his shop for business in the morning and when he closed it in the evening; and whenever else he thought it necessary. He prayed more often than the Muslims who were reminded five times a day by the public loudspeakers around our town to halt their activities and worship God.

His little prayer room was decorated with framed photographs of the elephant god, the god with the flute, the goddess sitting on a lotus flower, Murugan with his spear and others from the pantheon of Hindu gods representing our myriad of human desires from health, happiness and

prosperity to knowledge, power and salvation. He also had photos of Christ and the Virgin Mary and statues of Buddha. I remember him often saying, “God is in everything and everywhere.” Was he trying to make us behave like good little kids, implying that someone was always watching and judging? Or was this his way of teaching us about the unity of all things and beings?

Fridays called for even more ceremony and vegetarian meals, going meatless as a small measure of sacrifice. He burned incense with *chambrani* tree resin and camphor, and the complex, sweet-smelling smoke would fill our senses as he walked around blessing and purifying all four corners of our home and his shop.

That Thaipusam day in 2012, as the carriage finally reached the road that had been cordoned off from other traffic, my father was dressed and waiting. Because of his longevity, perceived piety and generous donations, the temple elders always orchestrated one of the carriage stops at the front of his shop. I watched him walk carefully out into the crowded street with purpose and deep concentration. Curious onlookers and devotees, a mix of different skin tones and features, stepped aside, giving him a path to extend his ceremonial tray to the priest sitting atop the carriage. The priest, as designated intermediary with God, would bless his offering and complete the ritual for the continued wellbeing and prosperity of his family and his business and for everyone else. I knew there was genuine concern for others because the last line of my father’s daily prayers, said in Tamil, always ended the same way: “Dear God, please protect everyone in the world.”

* * *

When he was just five, my father had been sent to live with his uncle in Malaysia—back then it was called Malaya. He was part of a big family from a small village in Sri Lanka with not enough to go around. I don’t remember him talking much about my grandparents, but even years later his reserve didn’t really mask his sense of loss and attachment to his ethnic roots. That pride,

interlaced with nostalgia, was inculcated in his children and shared by the many other migrants in our local community.

“Your granduncle was tough on me so I ran away when I could.” It meant that he didn’t finish high school and had to learn to fend for himself. He liked tinkering and fixing machines ranging from bicycles and cars to smaller widgets like cigarette lighters which were the cool thing in those days although he told us that he never smoked.

My father was reticent about the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. He often said, “I don’t remember much now.” Perhaps his reply didn’t surprise me based on what I had read and heard about those times; survival depended on shifting loyalties. I remember an older “uncle,” a polite honorific we frequently used for older males whether or not they were relatives, saying disparagingly, “That chap who’s now a big-shot lawyer, he used to buy cigarettes for the Japanese soldiers and help them get things that they wanted.” Other accounts were horror stories about torture and death. The post-war period was marked by conflicting ideologies of nationalism, communism and democracy within a country that also had ruling sultans and, later, a constitutional monarchy.

I was a year old when Malaya gained independence from the British in 1957. It was during this tumultuous time of renewed optimism and commerce—the economy fueled by expatriates and tourists who were eager to spend—that my father homed in on his entrepreneurial talent. He started bartering daily necessities, then selling newspapers, comics and textbooks. His retail business grew from a small half-store into a full shophouse, the second floor of which became our home. Paramount House, the House of Novelties, as he tagged it, became a landmark in town. Over the years, the merchandise in his store evolved into an assortment of handicrafts, personal and household luxury items, and toys with brand names from then-exotic places like England, Germany, India, and Japan. I recently found a blog about my hometown, *Saving Yesterday for Tomorrow*, where a writer named Ken had reminisced: “Paramount House was every child’s wonderland.

Christmas was extra special in this store because Santa Claus would make surprise appearances and give away balloons and small toys.”

Living above a toy store was a slightly different experience for me.

“Keep them upstairs!” my father angrily admonished my mother many a time. Contrary to what my schoolmates thought, he didn’t want us treating his store like a big playroom. We were allowed to linger downstairs only late in the evening while the store was being closed for business. Careful to not scratch a toy car, ruffle a doll’s hair or damage a game box of Snakes and Ladders, we could examine and then had to put things properly back in place. My father would be busy tallying the day’s sales and completing his ledger accounts. The shop assistant would hover nervously while he checked and re-checked each sales receipt. “This doesn’t add up, this tally is ten cents short and the numbers are not lined up. Why can’t you keep proper records?” My brothers and I kept a wide berth from his desk, knowing we would soon hear his stern voice demanding, “Did you finish all your school homework?” “Have you practiced the piano today?” and when he was especially tired, “I’m sweating my *blood* for this family and nobody cares.”

My father also had a habit of checking in on us, coming up from his store, softly creeping up the stairs, his face slowly appearing through the railings as he scanned our living room. What were the children up to? More often than not, I would be comfortably tucked in an arm chair, knees huddled up to my chest, head buried in a story book hidden within a large text book. My older brother, however, had a preference for siestas.

“Wake up, Papa’s coming!” I occasionally worked in time to save him from a yelling and beating. I don’t remember if my cry of “Papaaaaa.....!” for leniency to my brother was audible or just a stifled internal plea. His outbursts of anger were not predictable, and I remember that uneasy tension stalking my childhood memories.

By the same token, “She’s Papa’s pet,” my younger brother would often state. My features and quiet habits apparently reminded my father of his mother, or the little that he could remember

of her. That was probably why I often escaped his wrath when the other kids were being disciplined. How much was I conditioned by this preferential treatment? Did I grow up to be better behaved and disciplined and to work harder at school simply to justify his leniency towards me in the eyes of my siblings? In my deepest self, I questioned why the pious man whom I looked up to and dearly loved also had an irrational temper and controlling streak. Didn't prayer, lots of it, make you kind and loving? Was the God he was praying to overseeing and protecting anyone if neither him nor us? It made me wonder what temples, statues and prayer were all about.

But my father could be generous. For many years, I treasured a Spanish gypsy doll he'd given me for my ninth birthday, and my two other favorite gifts were a small microscope and chemistry play set. I loved the little test tubes filled with different powders, mixing them up and seeing the magic of reactions through changing colors.

And he could be very caring. One day when I was in Standard 6, I walked home from school thinking about an art project that I had to do with just pencil and paper. I was inspired by a picture in a storybook—perhaps it was one by Enid Blyton—of a young girl climbing up a tree and showed it to him. He immediately cleared a space at his desk and, sensing his approval, I started drawing.

“Did you estimate the height of the tree and the position for the girl and mark those to scale on your paper?” he said.

I nodded.

“Did you?” he said.

I nodded again.

As I worked, he continued to give occasional suggestions while keeping one eye on the store front. An older, well-coiffed Chinese lady walked into the shop and he immediately went to greet her. While she looked around, he kept a polite distance. Then,

sensing that the moment was right, he asked, gently probing, “Who is it for? How much would you like to spend? Would he perhaps like a pewter beer mug? Would you like me to engrave it?” After looking at a few more choices, she finally decided on a picture frame. I stopped drawing and watched my father carefully measure the correct length of paper and finish the wrap with colored ribbon and a small bow. I saw him bend slightly as he offered the package to her like a token of love. I watched her face, smiling with pleasure, and heard her thanking him effusively. This was not just a commercial transaction; there was courtesy, humility, civil exchange and connection. He knew she would shop at his store again.

He then came over to see how I had progressed.

“That looks really good!” he said.

The image of that drawing has stayed with me all these years. A young girl, climbing the branch of a tree with wide trunk and sprawling, gnarled roots, her head focused upward and eyes ahead and intent.

And my father could also be prejudiced. One afternoon when I was around ten or eleven, the fan suddenly stopped whirring in our living room. It probably was a Sunday since he was casually dressed in his sarong and singlet, not his crisply ironed pants and starched white shirt with cufflinks. He checked the overhead light; it didn’t work.

“I’m going to check the fuse box,” he said, and nodded for my two brothers to follow him down the stairs. I heard him start to tell them about the flow of current and what it meant for the fuse switch to have flipped. I remember creeping down the stairs and listening from a few steps away. I didn’t quite get the gist of all that he said, but I do remember feeling excluded—female, someone not likely to find this interesting or have the

ability to be trusted to fix things correctly, that girls weren't inclined to understand mechanical things, that girls were to be coddled and dressed up, that girls were to be taught to cook and clean and, in the future, care for a husband and have children and be the uniting force in the family. I didn't want to be just that kind of girl. I wanted to be as good as if not better than my brothers. I wanted to have the freedom to choose.

* * *

School helped. I loved all the bits of information whether about wheat production in far-away Saskatchewan, the vivid imagery of Genghis Khan conquering Central Asia and especially the details of biology from diagrams of flowers with elaborate stamens and pistils or learning about the four chambers of the heart, it was all fascinating. The public, all-girls convent that I attended for twelve years was run by French and Irish nuns of the Roman Catholic order. At general assembly each morning, we sang the national anthem and recited the Lord's Prayer. I don't remember all the words for our school song, but I do remember the Hail Mary prayer from attending Friday masses with my classmates. The local teachers, many of whom had trained in the U.K., were rigid torch bearers for the English standard of education. A command to "sit up straight," a sharp pinch on the cheek, a rap on the knuckles or a stern look in response to uninvited questions, all instilled a strong adherence to authority and discipline.

While my father and school exerted strong influences, there was also the larger envelope of Malaysia's mix of races, histories, foods, languages and faiths. With independence from the British colonialists, special privileges had been incorporated in the new constitution for the indigenous people and native Malays, with Islam as the national religion. Immigrants were tagged as non-Malays, a category that included many of my

classmates who were second- and third-generation Chinese, Indians and a few other nationalities. Malays and non-Malays, all of us seemingly respectful of our differences, all of us seemingly connected by a universal sense of faith in the divine. My father's prayer room and his inclusive belief of "one God, many paths" reinforced this notion.

* * *

Though just a two hour drive away, it was college that gave me some distance and perspective from all that was familiar. Reckless drivers and speeding trucks overladen with timber on the main trunk road resulted in many fatalities and meant my visits home were infrequent.

Due to a scarcity of local academics with doctoral credentials, the newly established national university engaged a number of professors who were American Peace Corps volunteers. I remember field trips with Drs. Dan and Barbara, addressing them by first name as is the norm in Asian cultures, a husband-and-wife team who were the definition of geeky in attire and in their passion for zoology and botany. We went to the beach and learned to really observe our surroundings. Walking on the sand, gingerly picking up and examining horseshoe crabs and talking about their structure and habits was a new way of study. I had seen these ancient helmet-like creatures before but never dared to touch and engage in deep scrutiny. We visited the virgin rainforests that Malaysia was noted for, but few of us had previously entered. They taught us how to collect and catalogue gargantuan beetles with huge pincers. We marveled at the colors of many varieties of butterflies and learned the basic rules of invertebrate taxonomy. At the convent school, I remembered how my biology teacher would walk in with several pieces of chalk and start writing from one end of the blackboard to the other; she would break the monotony of white letters with elaborate diagrams done in colored chalk. We furiously copied her notes till the bell rang for the next class. In contrast, the American lecturers pushed us to question, seemed to enjoy interacting with students and had an obvious passion for their fields of expertise.

Thinking I was free of parental scrutiny, I also hopped on my little 60 cc Honda scooter and explored the city. This didn't go unobserved by well-meaning relatives.

"She shouldn't be riding a bike. It's not proper, and it's also not safe for a girl to be out alone!" My father certainly heard about these escapades but surprisingly, never reprimanded me.

Aware of my naivety, I was searching for meaning and direction. I found books in the university library that looked interesting, like Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*; I didn't comprehend much of her writing, but its central theme of female empowerment resonated deeply. And I studied hard for my courses in chemistry, mathematics and biology. There were foundational principles in these subjects and the pieces of knowledge added up and fit together. In science, there was method and order.

"Asmah's started wearing a head scarf and *baju kurong*," said one of my Chinese friends, referring to the traditional Malay dress of long skirt and loose top. I was on the varsity field hockey team, and it wasn't long before the coach casually announced, "I know there'll be complaints about the heat and humidity but please come for your next practice in long-sleeved shirts and baggy pants." Newspaper stories and casual conversations pointed at growing racial tensions. While we recognized that the country was adapting to new lines of political power and economic development, the friction between Malays and non-Malays, between Muslims and non-Muslims trickled from the practices advocated by different religious and cultural norms. I felt like the world that had just opened up was closing in ways beyond my control. The country was changing, people were cautious about their opinions and there was the threatening Internal Security Act for voices of sedition.

I was a year from completing my bachelor's degree. My mother had come to visit her sister, and I took the opportunity to ask, not without some trepidation, "Can I go to the U.S.

for graduate school?" I had already applied to several universities for the master's in science, and the University of Wyoming was the only one that had offered me a half-tuition scholarship. Her reply was curt and swift: "Ask your father."

So I did.

"Aachi," my father replied, calling me affectionately by a pet name, "I want you to continue studying. What will you need?"

It might seem like a story book response, but I had found the easiest route of escape—higher education was a revered and well-worn path for Sri Lankan migrants. There was no mistaking the look on his face, a combination of joy, pride and awareness that I was after all a product of his being. I was fulfilling his own unmet ambition and more so, proving to his community that by yet another measure, he had done all right.

* * *

Before my flight, we visited his prayer room and he put three stripes of holy ash on my forehead. I was torn between respecting his beliefs and authority as my parent, and my sense of being a fake Hindu. Courses in evolution, genetics and organic chemistry had unwittingly begun to frame a new perspective on creation and divine intervention. When I had said my goodbyes and was out of sight, I casually brought my wrist up and lightly brushed the ash off my forehead. I took strength from my father's faith in me and the faith he drew from his God. What neither of us realized was that my own faith had been growing away from his.

* * *

Wading past stern-faced and unwelcoming immigration officers at the Chicago airport who examined my documents, I somehow figured out the next connections and

finally found myself in the little college town of Laramie. I still get incredulous looks when I tell other Americans that I landed in Wyoming, the cowboy state with its harsh winters and stark landscape. My academic advisor and his Mormon family took me under their wing like their sixth child. I felt secure but also squirmed after stupid mistakes like not knowing that a shower curtain had to drape within the bathtub to prevent a small flood!

Being in a laboratory with humming machines and precision instruments, these “toys” of science opened up a different kind of space, one that allowed for intellectual tinkering and few barriers to focused exploration. It was my kind of fun and I was oblivious to the long hours, caught up in designing and repeating experiments in search of reproducible results and the onslaught of new questions and more experiments. With growing confidence about becoming a scientist, I was ready for the adventures of a big city when another tuition scholarship landed me in Philadelphia.

My doctoral advisor was a researcher in the emerging field of biotechnology. In those early days of the eighties, there were new tools for studying genes, reverently described as the codes for life. I was one of his first graduate students, and he gave me a choice for the focus of my research. I didn't hesitate in choosing the parasite that caused malaria; it was endemic in Malaysia and working with genes was cutting-edge biology at the frontier of biomedical research.

* * *

When I first left home, I didn't feel any desire for religious or cultural ties to my roots. I had come to look at my father's prayer as formulaic, tied to ritual and tradition. I learned to copy and replicate while in his presence without understanding the “why” or feeling any deeper emotional or intellectual connection. In the U.S., I didn't seek out either a Hindu temple or a Catholic church. As I embraced science, I was driven by inquiry and exploration and felt a yearning for objective analysis and direct experience of who I really was.

In my second year of doctoral studies, I learned about a nearby Transcendental Meditation (TM) center. While its founder has long since fallen into disfavor, TM was touted as a good technique for delving within oneself. On a student's budget, I couldn't afford their fee, but the teacher allowed me to pay in kind; I typed up correspondence and did some accounts for the local office. At my initiation ceremony, he gently touched my forehead with his thumb and uttered my secret mantra, just once. Did I hear right? What exactly was it that he wanted me to silently repeat each day for twenty minutes while sitting still with spine straight and mind focused? He seemed so solemn, the ceremony so brief, that I couldn't bring myself to ask him to repeat the sacred sounds of my personal mantra.

I practiced TM for several months, always with some uncertainty. Since it was rooted in Hinduism, I had hoped that meditation would help me understand aspects of the religion through a different lens, a version different from that practiced by my father. After TM, it was Ki-Aikido and later it was yoga and other approaches of self-inquiry, all in a quest for clues to some bigger meaning, this mystery of our existence.

* * *

The method of science entails intellectual engagement, procedure, analysis, repetition, dedication, and persistence. I could add a whole lot of other nouns including the oft forgotten dollop of sheer *luck*. My direct contribution to finding ways to combat malaria only spanned the duration of the five year doctoral program. But, as sometimes happens in research, some of the genes that I had identified were studied by my advisor's next batch of students. Many experiments, false starts, promising data and research grants later, one gene that I had discovered almost thirty years ago is now leading to a new type of anti-

malarial drug. It is especially gratifying when science results in a practical contribution, beyond the years of work that *merely* result in the publication of incremental pieces of new knowledge.

About twenty years after I had completed my PhD, I was at a national conference where I overheard my advisor refer to me as “his firstborn.” In science, there is also family and lineage connected by mutual interest, shared endeavor and intellect, and a bond that is not unlike that of parent and child. Just as I had cherished my father’s guidance as a young child and then wanted distance to find the next turn in my path, my advisors had guided my training as a scientist until I eventually set up my own “shop.”

I started climbing the academic ladder to professorship, began training aspiring students and repeated the cycle of mentor-trainee, parent-child, teacher-student. Like Plasmodium, like mosquito, like my father and professors, I had carved out my own intricate and unique path in life. I had also progressed on my own spiritual journey and was becoming more aware of the different traditions, philosophies and beliefs fueling my need to seek and experience some aspect of fundamental truth.

* * *

As the carriage pulled away on that Thaipusam Day and continued its track down the road, I observed my father. He was standing on the edge of the pavement with feet together, hands in prayer position. He stayed there till the carriage disappeared from sight, winding its way back towards the temple at the other end of town. He was oblivious to everything and seemed to be far away from us, as though in deep meditative union with his God.

My mother and I had to gently coax him back into the shop and up the stairs to our home on the second floor, the place where all his children had been born and where he started making a living to raise and sustain his family. This was the father I remembered. Perhaps it happened this day, this moment when I truly realized how much he had shaped my life. In my mind, his faith in a God had anchored his life and work. Through him, I had learned the power of faith. Through science, I had learned the power of reason and also found the tools to bridge my spiritual quest to that something that is larger than a sense of self.

Three years later, the morning of my fifty-ninth birthday, my father passed away. My mother, two brothers and I were at his side when he miraculously swallowed the drop of water that my mother had asked me to place on his lips, a custom when someone is close to dying. Then he took his last breath. I told my siblings to not alert the nurses as yet.

“Let his soul have twenty minutes,” I said, even though I didn’t have any evidence to believe in the concept of a soul. It felt right, however, to observe the Hindu ritual of passing. And it felt right to have some time together with my family to honor his life and grieve his passing.

I remember the evening after that Thaipusam festival just before I was leaving home again to return to work and life in the U.S. and asking my father, “Papa, do you remember what a terrible temper you used to have?” and him replying with a gentle laugh, “No, I didn’t have a temper,” his eyes shining clear with innocence, so much forgotten. I wish I had also asked “Why did you pray so much?”

[This narrative was born out of the “Think-Write-Publish: Science & Religion” fellowship through Arizona State University.]

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“Skype Touring”

by Teffy Wrightson

(For Adrienne)

Many times I’ve been to Angeles City and
watched the rain pour down the street, ankle deep
heard it thunder on the roofs
without ever feeling a drop on my skin

I’ve shared your lucky birthday pancit
never tasting a single mouthful
admired your tower of twelve round New Year fruits
but never smelled their exotic fragrance

I attended your wedding. A pixelated ghost on a black screen
look carefully, I’m there in the photos, puzzling at the ceremony
everyone hugs and kisses while I weep at home alone
adoring your film star dress, never to touch its laciness

by a miracle, our cruel government may relent
or my frail health (and budget) will improve
allowing my body to reach the Philippines
till then I must love my daughter-in-law intangibly

* * * * *

“Nuat thai”

by Chris Palmer

It begins with closed eyes and a shallow bow
in greeting and recognition: my body is her temple.
Nothing matters here but the press of flesh on flesh
and she kneads and pulls, bends and folds
taking my limbs to where they've never been;
reshaping me into an image of her choice.
I ask if she trained at Wat Po, but she just shakes her head
having no need for words; she moves in a language
I'll never know.

Then she climbs on top.

Shuffling on her knees until reaching her rubicon
she leans forward, hands down, toes pointing
and gently rocks as though in prayer
working legs and back in one motion.
A sign says strictly therapeutic massage only
but what else would I want? And no need for a pill or needle
to make everything go away; to both still and accelerate time
reducing it to a single, unfocused point of light.
Moving slowly to a stand, she's a thespian
treading hallowed boards. I feel her weight lightly
as she performs her little ballet
shimmying along a tightrope.

A simple exit, quick pirouette
and she's standing on the floor. A gymnast's final act.

Gradually, I am released
to a green tea jolt and whole-body stretch—
I'll be hungover and sore tomorrow.
She looks at me, asking without speaking.
Yes I say. *Same time next week.*

* * * * *

“Desperate Love”

by Peter W. Morris

Whitewashed wooden structures
Nestled amidst green, tropical foliage
A screen door opens
We enter
Overwhelming stench
Rotting flesh
Gown-clad residents
Uniquely foreign
Death denying hope
Reality, dashed dreams
Soft mummings, blended
With resignation, pain
Hopelessness
Short, labored breaths
A woman in a mosquito-netted bed
Reclines
A man, missing his right forearm
Beckons
A nose-less girl against a wall
Sobbing, quietly, at recent loss
A young man, perhaps a soccer star
“I’ll only be here a while...”
“No, my friend,
You will die here.”

Just like your oldest neighbor
Their youngest children
Nobody here is touched
By ungloved hands
Until we come...
Speaking in an unknown language
We hug in defiant faith
Having come from afar
To visit fathers, mothers
Brothers, sisters
In this sad, evil place
This leper colony.

* * * * *

“Ayeyarwady Fisherman”

by Myrtle V

Shore shadow
stretched
ferry six hour
land horizon
fisherman stands

at the end
his craft
no need
for balance.

Stretched big toe pressure
arcs the mud sand mooring
boat's obeisant rhythm
to fire-crescent's scream.

His frame gradually immersed

sunk feet rise
 cross the bank
I see the sundial slowly swallowed
by the endless small release
of his always more perpetuating green.