

Anak Sastra

Issue 33

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Contributor Bios

Daniel T. Emlyn-Jones is a microbiologist turned medic turned private tutor living in Oxford, UK. He enjoys visiting as well as writing about Singapore, and has several short stories published in the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, as well as in *Anak Sastra*.

[Charles Lo Sin Yee](#) is a teacher in Miri, Sarawak, who was exposed to creative writing in 2011 through a workshop conducted by Robert Raymer, an expatriate writer. He loves to portray underdogs in society as they are the most beautiful people with genuine feelings.

Katacha Díaz is a Peruvian American writer. She earned her BA and MPA from University of Washington. She was a research associate at the University of California, Davis. Wanderlust and love of travel have taken her all over the world to gather material for her stories. Among the children's books she has authored is *Carolina's Gift: A Story of Peru* for Soundprints' "Make Friends Around the World" series. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *The Pangolin Review*, *Anak Sastra*, *Galway Review*, *Barely South Review*, *Westview*, *Visual Verse*, *The MacGuffin*, *Medical Literary Messenger*, *Flash Frontier*, *Gravel*, *Skipping Stones*, *Foliage Oak*, and elsewhere. She lives and writes up in her perch with a wide view of the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest USA.

A native of Bangkok, **T.S. Kul** alternates her time between Thailand and Canada. After several decades of travel, she picked up a pen and found joy in writing. Her stories aim to capture the variety behind simple existence in the snapshots of ordinary lives.

Azlan Mahmud is an occasional amateur who writes from the heart (even if it's not his).

A.J. Anwar is an Indonesian poet who also writes short stories and essay. He writes in Bahasa Indonesia (mostly) and English. He is based in Jakarta, having lived for about a decade in Brisbane, Beijing, and Los Angeles.

Mary Shanley is a poet/short story writer living in New York City. She has four books of poetry published and is also published in many print and online literary journals, including *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood*, *Underground Voices*, *StepAway Magaine*, *Poydras Review*, *The Zine Will Change your Voice*, *Grabanso Journal*, and *Long Shot Magazine*.

Christina Petrides (Twitter: [@CEPetrides](#)) is an expatriate American living on a small Pacific island where all the palm trees and the magpies are imported, but the rice wine is indigenous and delicious.

[John C. Mannone](#) has work in *Artemis Journal*, *Poetry South*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Peacock Journal*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pedestal*, *Wordgathering: Journal of Disability Poetry and Literature* and others. He's a Jean Ritchie Fellowship winner in Appalachian literature (2017) and served as celebrity judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018). He has three poetry collections, including *Flux Lines* (Celtic Cat Publishing) forthcoming in 2018. He's been nominated for Pushcart, Rhysling, Dwarf Stars and Best of the Net awards. He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex*, *Silver Blade*, and *Liquid Imagination*. He's the president of the Chattanooga Writers' Guild and a retired professor of physics in east TN.

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"The Durian Eaters"

by Daniel T. Emlyn-Jones

Madame Cheong Lei Fa placed the pieces of Mao Shan Wang durian into the black jade bowl, placed the bowl on the altar, and sprinkled a pinch of her husband's ashes onto the fruit. She had been tweaking the spell for several weeks and knew she was close. The previous night he had appeared in the shadows at the foot of her bed. A silhouette only, almost indistinguishable from the surrounding darkness, but she knew the shape of that head and the slope of that back anywhere. The fragrance of his favourite eau de cologne had filled the room, together with the lingering scent of the Montecristo cigars he liked to indulge in. She called his name, reaching out into the darkness, but the chasm was still too wide. The bridge needed to be strengthened. The crack in the door needed to be widened.

She rang the ritual bell, burned a paper amulet inscribed with incantations, and began the invocation:

返来, 返来, 张作乐的灵魂快D返来

我系你老婆张梨花

你快 返来

四面八方的鬼神

请你带 张作乐的灵魂返来

She finished and bowed to the statue of King Yama, Lord of the Underworld.

"Durian? Then what?" came a voice behind her.

Madame Cheong jumped and turned. "Don't interrupt me!" she snapped at her daughter.

"What you doing now ah?" said her daughter, pointing aghast at the altar crowded with statues, bowls and incense burners.

“None of your business,” retorted Madame Cheong. She hated the way her daughter spoke. It was always so Singlish. So common. Madame Cheong believed in either speaking Chinese or speaking English, but not letting the two languages engage in inappropriate hanky-panky and give birth to monstrous mongrel offspring. She pointed a finger at her daughter’s disgruntled face. “You know you look really ugly when you’re scolding me. It is fortunate you look prettier when you’re in a good mood, or you’d never have found such a good husband.”

Her daughter scowled even more. “What you doing ah? It’s my flat.”

“Just offerings to your father,” Madame Cheong lied.

Her daughter tutted. “I don’t like. It’s not Christian.”

Madame Cheong was sick of being lectured by her children in matters of religion. She had been brought up Taoist, her mother had been brought up Taoist, her grandmother had been brought up Taoist, and it hadn’t done any of them any harm. Now all she heard from her children was, Jesus this and Jesus that. They talked down to her as if she were stupid. Well, the idiot got himself crucified so he couldn’t have been that clever.

Her daughter forced herself to draw close to her mother. “I know it’s difficult, but you have to accept that Baba is gone already lah.”

“It wasn’t his time!” Madame Cheong shrieked, thumping the altar so hard that the statue of King Yama jumped.

Her daughter backed away against the wall, the blood draining from her face, her limbs trembling. “It is,” she said quietly. “He gone already.”

Madame Cheong ignored her daughter and turned back to the altar. She carefully arranged silver chop sticks next to the durian on the rim of the black jade bowl. She then ran her thumb over her husband’s photograph. “There,” she said to the man smiling back at her from some distant holiday in Taiwan. “Best durian for you. Mao Shan Wang. Your favourite.”

Later that night, Madame Cheong scoured the darkness of her room for the shadow of her husband, but there was nothing. "Stupid girl," she spat. If her daughter hadn't interrupted the magic with her nagging, her husband may well have taken on corporeal form that night.

Early the next day, when Madame Cheong went to the altar to make morning offerings and prepare the magic, she found it stripped, and in place of the statue of King Yama was a cross and a bible. She tore into her daughter's room. The young woman was doing her makeup.

"What have you done with my altar, you stupid girl!?"

Her daughter stood and faced her mother, clasping the back of the chair to stop herself from trembling. "It's my flat and I told you already I don't like what you're doing! You've change. Last time you never shouted at me one!"

"It's none of your business what I'm doing!" Madame Cheong screamed, slapping her daughter around the face. "What have you done with the offerings?"

Her daughter began to cry. "You never slap me before."

"What have you done with them," shrieked Madame Cheong, her voice hysterical, her hand forming into a fist.

"They're downstairs, on the void deck," whispered her daughter, cradling her head with her hands.

Madame Cheong tore downstairs and rushed around the void deck. To her relief she found a rubbish bag containing the sacred items, but as she examined the contents, she realised that the black jade bowl with the durian was missing. It was a valuable bowl, so she assumed someone had stolen it. She was just about to return upstairs and put her daughter's cross and bible into the garbage, when she noticed the unmistakable smell of durian on the air. She followed the fragrance and reached a small boy in a school uniform sitting on a concrete bench. He had the jade bowl in his lap and was devouring the fruit and licking his fingers. She was about to scold him and snatch the bowl back, when he looked up at her with a sudden jerk of his head and gave her a look which was not that of a small boy. In a flash he grabbed her wrist with a bone crushing grip. She fought to free herself.

“Foolish woman!” he said, the voice a deep growl. “Did you think you could command us?”

“Where is my husband?” Madame Cheong yelled through her pain.

“He is in a higher realm. But we thank you for your invitation. We have not tasted durian for so... so... long.”

* * *

“Just shut up!” Beatrice hissed at her husband. She’d downed several gin and tonics during the twelve-hour flight from London to Singapore, and while drunk it seemed as if his endless fussing were coming from some distant place, perhaps a far-off sanatorium nestled among mist-shrouded mountains. As the hours passed, the gin had turned into a hang over, and his voice was now like a physical pain.

“Ah, you feel that?” said Paul, a finger in the air, a worried look on his face. “That judder. That’s the gangway being attached to the plane. I imagine they’ll have to depressurise the cabin before opening the doors, though during the descent the pressures would have equilibrated pretty much.”

“I think they’ll manage it without your commentary,” said Beatrice, massaging her temples.

“Now, remember which bags we’ve got,” said Paul. “We mustn’t forget anything. There’s the blue rucksack with the camera, and the canvas bag with the presents. They’re very fragile, so do be careful. We’ll have to wait for people to move before we can properly get to the storage compartments.”

“Yes, I know! Will you just shut up!”

“I don’t know why you have to get in such a state about everything,” said Paul.

“Me get in a state? It’s you who can’t shit without understanding the precise anatomy of your rear end.”

“Oh, really Beatrice! Must you!?”

Beatrice made an indescribable sound and counted to ten. She’d had inner child therapy, gestalt therapy, Jungian psychoanalysis and hypnotherapy, but her grandmother’s method for dealing with her husband still worked best. They had a three day stop-over in

Singapore, followed by another long-haul flight to Australia, and she was sure she would fatally garotte him before she reached the relative respite of their daughter in Sydney.

His commentary continued through Changi airport immigration, customs, baggage collection, and into a taxi driven by a cheery Chinese man called Adrian.

“You’re from the UK ah? Welcome to Singapore!” A statue of Kuan Yin gazed serenely at them from the taxi dash board and a laughing buddha twirled on a golden thread from the ceiling.

“And, do you know the way to our hotel?” Paul asked Adrian.

“Of course he does!” snapped Beatrice. “He’s a sodding taxi driver.”

“Don’t you worry sir. I have sat nav,” said Adrian, grinning. He tapped the hotel address into the machine.

“He still won’t believe you,” said Beatrice. “He’ll go on and on for the whole journey just like the sat nav does, except he won’t give you a single piece of useful information.”

“I was only asking!” yelled Paul. “I don’t see why you have to get in such a state about everything.”

“How long have you two been married ah?” smiled Adrian.

“About ten thousand years,” said Beatrice.

Adrian grinned even more. “Oh, you don’t have to worry about anything here then. Leave all your troubles behind you in the UK! This is Singapore! The Lion City! First world mega utopia metropolis!”

“What is a mega utopia metropolis?” asked Paul.

“It means...no need to worry sir,” said Adrian.

“It’s surely some kind of tautology,” said Paul.

Beatrice looked at her husband’s worried face, and for the first time on their journey, she laughed. She looked out of the taxi window at the highway speeding past. Blood red Bougainvillea tumbled from concrete bridges, lipstick palms bathed in the midday sun, and not a single whisp of cloud sullied the bright blue heavens. The problem was she and Paul

weren't used to being cooped up together for so long. At home she had her coffee mornings with the girls, her rambling club and her Sanskrit lessons. He had his photography, his philately and his writing. It was quite possible for them to go through an entire day without seeing each other.

The car screeched to a halt, almost hitting the vehicle in front. "Aiyoh! Why like that?" barked Adrian. "There's never traffic jam on this road."

"Well, there is now," said Paul. Minutes passed. The queue of traffic ahead of them didn't move. A man got out of his car and wandered about, craning his neck to see what was happening. He gave up, leaned against a tree at the side of the road and lit a cigarette.

Paul began to recite all the possible reasons for the jam, including increases in vehicle density and variations in road topology. Beatrice told him to shut up. He didn't. Adrian turned up the radio so loud that Grace Chang singing 'Wo yao ni de ai' drowned him out. A large object hit the car in front of them so hard that the vehicle rocked on its suspension. Adrian swore and switched off the music. Another object hit their car window with a thud so loud they all screamed. Adrian peered out as the object bounced and rolled to a stop on the tarmac between the queues of cars. Its impact had left a little spider of cracks in the glass of the window. "It's a durian," he said, a look of bewilderment on his face.

"What's a durian," said Paul.

"It's the king of fruits," said Adrian, perplexed.

"And what on earth is the king of fruits doing flying through the air?" said Paul.

"Maybe there's a tree above us," said Adrian, trying to peer through the sun-roof to the green canopy above the road, "but then they will fall from above, not hit from the side, and not so hard. Is there a joker somewhere?" He looked around them between the queues of cars.

Outside, a young slim man in a suit suddenly pounced on the durian and tore frantically at a crack which had formed in its armoured shell. He snarled like a dog, his eyes wide with hunger. The sharp spikes of the shell punctured and serrated his hands as he grappled with the object, so that blood dripped down his shirt and onto the road. With a laugh of joy, he

parted the two halves of the fruit with a crack and began to gouge the exposed flesh into his mouth, sucking on the large seeds, a look of bliss on his face as the golden juice drooled down his chin.

“Is he mad or what?” said Adrian.

“Quick Beatrice, get the camera!” shouted Paul.

“Will you shut up! This is no time for photographs,” hissed Beatrice.

Outside, a woman and another man joined the first, and they growled and fought over the fruit, shoving each other out of the way, clawing at the golden flesh and licking morsels from the tarmac of the road.

The man who had been smoking a cigarette at the side of the road made a dash for his car. At that moment a snarling grinning figure came running over the roofs of the queued cars brandishing with both hands a durian above his head. With a scream he hurled it at the man. The man tried to dodge the fruit, but it grazed his leg. He fell immediately to the tarmac and lay still. Moments passed and then he began to twitch, at first slightly and then more violently. With jerking movements, he pushed himself to his feet. His face was twisted with yearning and he made a lunge for the durian which had hit him, tearing at the shell.

Adrian was shaking. “I have a wife and kids leh. I’m not staying here.” He revved the engine and tried to drive his taxi through a gap in the queue of vehicles. The gap wasn’t large enough and there were the unpleasant sounds of scraping mudguards and scrunching bodywork, accompanied by the muffled protests of the other drivers. Adrian reversed and rammed into the gap again and again until the other drivers were forced to back away to prevent further damage to their cars. Durians were now raining down thick and fast as deranged Durian Eaters clambered over the cars to the broken fruits, their dripping pink hand prints on the car windows a mixture of blood and durian flesh. Adrian finally managed to get through the gap, mount the pavement and leave the jam. “You won’t get to your hotel for a while,” he said, swerving past flying durians, unaffected bystanders trying to flee, and Durian Eaters hunched on the ground gorging on the fruits. They passed a school. Teachers were hurriedly locking the gates and rushing the children out of the

playground and into buildings. An old auntie ran alongside the taxi and pounded on the windscreen, her jade bangles clanking on the glass.

“Don’t let her in,” said Paul. “She could be deranged.”

“Look at her face. She’s terrified,” said Beatrice.

Before any discussion could be had, Adrian slowed down, leaned across and opened the passenger door. Auntie dived in and slammed it after her.

“Thank-you sir! Thank-you!” She gasped, dabbing her perm.

Adrian swerved down a turning on the left.

“See the durian stall!” said Auntie, pointing across the road. Large stacks of durians on display were disappearing into a ball of writhing Durian Eaters. Some were hurling the fruits. Others clawed at those which had been cracked, trying to get at the flesh. Unaffected people were trying to flee the scene. Those who were hit could be seen twitching on the ground, changing into the Durian Eaters.

Adrian reached a stretch of clear road and put his foot down. The engine roared as they raced and swerved along street after street, like a Formula One car at the Grand Prix, before finally drawing up at the side of a main road close to the central business district. People were walking along the pavement quite normally, apparently oblivious to the growing chaos just a few blocks away. For some minutes no one said a word. Paul was the first to speak: “Beatrice, do you suppose Singapore Airlines put LSD in those gin and tonics?”

“It’s magic,” said Auntie.

“Rubbish!” laughed Paul.

“What you think it is ah?” snapped Auntie, turning around in the passenger seat and fixing him with an angry gimlet glare.

“Well it’s like one of those films,” said Paul. “With zombies. Except they’re eating those horrible fruits instead of brains. It must be a virus or some such thing.”

“Your logic is quite overpowering,” said Beatrice.

“Well, what do you think it is then?” yelled Paul at his wife.

“Do you go to church?” Auntie asked Paul with a sharpness of voice which cut easily though his yelling.

“Yes...” replied Paul.

“Then you believe in God, right? You believe in spirits, right?”

“Well, yes, I suppose so...”

Auntie smiled. “If you believe in spirits, why don’t you believe in magic ah? You answer me that.” She looked pleased with herself.

“Why do you think it’s magic?” asked Beatrice, shushing Paul with her hand.

“I just know.”

“She just knows,” said Paul, shrugging.

Auntie pointed a finger at Paul, a finger festooned with gold rings. “Magic has a smell, just like durian has a smell. I can smell magic, and I tell you this is no ordinary magic.”

“What sort of magic is it then?” asked Paul with a grin.

Auntie put a finger in front of her mouth and looked around as if someone might be listening. “You won’t find people talking about it,” she whispered. “You won’t find it in books or on the internet. But it’s powerful, very powerful magic.”

“I see,” said Paul “So why is it so powerful?”

“Because only women can do it.”

Paul guffawed. “I see. So a kind of magical feminism!?”

“It’s passed down from mother to daughter, from auntie to niece, from grandmother to granddaughter. In secret. We call it Auntie Magic.”

“I call it old wives tales!” said Paul.

“You are a very stupid man,” said Auntie.

Beatrice looked pleased.

“OK!” said Paul, irked. “Just supposing you’re right, why would any woman want to make all those people eat those dreadful fruits?”

“I’ll tell you what happened,” said Auntie. “I bet someone was doing a powerful spell, and it went wrong. A spell can be like defusing a nuclear bomb. If the intentions are wrong and the auntie makes a mistake, boom!” she raised her arms to mimic a big explosion.

There was a distant sound of breaking glass, scrunching metal, and the screeching of skidding cars. They looked in the rear-view mirror to see durians fly out of a distant street and clatter into the road. People began to scream and run past them along the pavement. Adrian put the car into gear and drove off.

“Where are we going?” asked Paul.

“I don’t where you’re going, but I’m going to collect my kids from their school and then I’m going back to my flat to make sure my wife’s OK,” said Adrian.

“No, no! I must do a counter-spell. You must take me to a Chinese temple!” shouted Auntie.

“We hired this taxi to go to our hotel!” yelled Paul.

“Oh, you really do beggar belief,” hissed Beatrice.

Adrian slammed his foot on the brake and the car swerved and screeched to a halt. “If any of you want to leave my taxi now, go!” he yelled. “I won’t charge you.”

He looked at them each in turn. They were silent. Behind them the flying durians were getting closer. A durian hit the car roof with a thud.

“OK, OK, just go lah!” yelled Auntie, waving her arms in a frenzy.

Adrian drove off again, but in front of them a large articulated lorry was skidding across the road, out of control. The driver had been hit with a durian through his open window and was twitching in his seat, transforming into a Durian Eater. They all screamed as the lorry swept in their direction like the hand of giant clock. A Durian Eater unfastened the back door of the vehicle and durians cascaded out into the road like a torrent of big green grenades. Durian Eaters fell on the fruits, hurling them and tearing at their shells. Adrian mounted the pavement and winced as they drove through the storm of durians, just

managing to avoid the tip of the swinging lorry. They reached clear road and Adrian put his foot down. Most of the cars had been trapped behind the articulated lorry, so the road ahead was virtually empty.

“If I don’t do a counter-spell, this chaos will continue! It will spread!” pleaded Auntie.

Adrian ignored her.

“Your children will be safe inside the school and your wife can lock herself in the flat,” said Auntie. “They’ll be fine. But if this spell isn’t stopped it will spread throughout Singapore, then it will spread across the Straits of Johore to Malaysia where the durians come from, and from there it will spread to the entire world! Those people are possessed. Possessed by spirits of the dead. Those spirits want to live again so badly. They want to live and they want to taste durian again. There are enough souls in hell to possess every single person on this planet!”

Adrian paused and sighed. “You really know how to stop this? You’re sure?”

Auntie smiled and nodded.

“OK, which temple do you want to go to?”

From her bag, Auntie took out a clump of fortune telling sticks, mumbled something in Cantonese and threw them into her lap. She took a fraction of a second to examine the pattern they made. “We must go to the Chinese temple at Lorong Halus,” she said.

Paul tutted.

“Provided we get away from here, that’s all that matters,” Beatrice whispered to him. “A temple is as good a place as any.”

“You’re not seriously going to listen to her, are you?” Paul said to Adrian.

“You got any better idea eh?” yelled Adrian over his shoulder.

“Good point,” said Paul.

As they continued their journey, Adrian put on the radio. There was an emergency broadcast. The army had been mobilised and all forces were attempting to contain the

problem within the city centre. It was presumed to be an unknown contagion or toxin having acute and dramatic effects on the human nervous system.

“There you see!” said Paul, a satisfied grin on his face. “It isn’t magic. It has a perfectly rational explanation.”

Auntie removed a wooden pen and long scrolls of paper from her bag and began scribbling. Paul peered over her shoulder. “What on earth are you doing?”

“Don’t interrupt lah!” snapped Auntie. “I have to concentrate! I’m preparing amulets for the spell.”

“So, all that scribbling is going to stop the chaos?”

Auntie put down the pen and turned to Beatrice. “I don’t want to be rude about your husband, but can you please tell him to shut up or not? I have to concentrate now, and he won’t listen to me.”

Beatrice turned to Paul and mouthed *shut up*.

As they continued their journey to the north-east of the island, the traffic on the road increased with other people trying to flee the city. Finally, on the Punggol Road, it became gridlocked. Radio broadcasts repeatedly told people not to panic, and to remain in the shelter of their flats or their cars. Auntie, followed by Adrian and a reluctant Paul and Beatrice, disobeyed this advice and left the taxi to continue their journey to the Chinese temple at Lorong Halus on foot. Paul and Beatrice wheeled their suitcases behind them, their faces beetroot in the sun, sweat soaking their hair and their clothes.

“Nice idea having a stopover in Singapore!” Paul said to Beatrice.

“Oh, just shut up will you!” snapped Beatrice. “I didn’t know it was going to turn into the set of the living dead did I!”

Singaporean fighter jets roared overhead. HDB apartment blocks loomed over them, bone-white and silent in the sun. The streets were deserted, except for one man hurrying past them, a look of terror on his face.

“And what if we get attacked?” Paul yelled after Auntie. “And turn into those durian people?”

“Don’t worry,” said Auntie over her shoulder. “I’ll protect you.”

“She’ll protect us with bits of paper and old wives tales,” mumbled Paul.

After half an hour they reached the temple, a collection of gold-tiled buildings and shrines surrounded by a tall metal fence. The caretaker, an old man with a wrinkled face and missing teeth, greeted Auntie with a wide grin.

“You know what’s been happening ah?” said Auntie, bustling into the complex.

“Ya, I heard it on the radio,” said the caretaker. “Nasty business. I thought I will just stay here.”

“Very wise. It’s bad magic,” said Auntie.

“Ya, lor.”

“Can I use the Kuan Yin altar? We will need her protection for the counter-spell.”

“Of course! For you anything!”

The caretaker brought large glasses of iced sugar cane juice for Paul and Beatrice, who took seats in the shade while Auntie bustled about setting up the altar. Paul held the chilled glass to his head and let out a gigantic sigh. Beatrice tutted at him.

After a few minutes Auntie called to them. “We are ready,” she said. Beatrice, Paul and Adrian went to the shrine to observe.

Auntie had laid the paper amulets on the altar together with a horsetail whisk and ritual sword. A large clump of joss sticks burned, lines of smoke blossoming into clouds of incense, through which the milk white goddess of compassion and mercy smiled.

“You can watch, but you must not interrupt me!” said Auntie, pointing her bejewelled finger in Paul’s direction. “If you interrupt me you can ruin the whole spell, and then you’ll never get to your hotel and you’ll never get to try chicken rice and char kway teow. You’ll spend the rest of your life eating durian. OK?”

Paul nodded.

Auntie took out of her bag a polystyrene tray wrapped in cellophane. Beneath the cellophane lay golden pieces of fruit.

“What’s that?” asked Paul.

“It is durian,” said Auntie. “King of Kings variety, Wang Zhong Wang. Very nice.”

“Are you mad!” yelled Paul.

“Be quiet!” snapped Auntie. “To perform the spell, we have to use the fruit the spirits want, like a fisherman uses a hook and a worm to catch a fish.”

“And what if the durian attracts them to the temple!?”

Auntie turned to the caretaker. “Uncle, lock the gates,” she said.

“Are we all ready?” said Auntie. “Then I’ll begin.” She knelt in front of the altar and began praying to Kuan Yin, bowing to the statue, joss sticks between her hands. She then stood and began burning the paper amulets one by one, brandishing the horsetail whisk and mumbling a mantra in Cantonese under her breath. The wind quickened into gusts. It grew darker. Paul, Beatrice and Adrian gazed up into the sky. A bright star had appeared vertically above the temple, and black clouds formed and swirled around it. Thunder grumbled behind the clouds and then growled. The wind speed increased until it was roaring like a hurricane, whipping Auntie’s perm into a disordered frizz, tearing at her floral top. She didn’t flinch, but kept mumbling the mantra. She unpacked the durian, placed the fruit pieces on a silver dish, and elevated it three times high above her head. A clatter and a clamour could be heard above the roar of the wind and the growl of the thunder. Beatrice, Paul and Adrian turned to see a horde of Durian Eaters in the road outside the temple. They were pushing against the metal gate, their arms stretched through the railings towards the altar and the silver dish. They uttered a deep guttural sound, a yearning wail. Some brandished durians, clawing at the spiked shells, trying to get to the flesh within. The gate creaked. Some of the Durian Eaters began to hurl durians into the temple grounds. Paul, Beatrice and Adrian hid behind the altar to Kuan Yin to avoid the flying fruits. Under the weight of the Durian Eaters, the temple gate fell to the ground with a crash, and they spilled into the temple complex, clambering over one another to get to the altar.

With her right arm Auntie thrust the ritual sword high into the air and screamed the counter-spell:

游魂野鬼, 快D离开!
离开! 离开! 离开!
太上老君有命,
命令你地即刻离开!

As she finished the spell, a bolt of lightning came from the star above the temple and struck the tip of the sword. At the point where it struck, it divided into a thousand searing bolts which flew in all directions, some within the temple, some into the sky and to all the far reaches of Singapore. Each bolt hit a durian eater square between the eyes, making them slump to the floor, unconscious. The wind ceased, and the swirling sky cleared to bright blue. Auntie laid the sword on the altar, bowed once more to Kuan Yin, and then stumbled to a chair.

"I need a KopiC," she said to the caretaker, and a moment later he came back with a cup. She took a gulp and sighed loudly, "ah ya!"

The Durian Eaters slumped on the floor were beginning to revive. The madness was gone from their eyes, and they looked thoroughly perplexed.

"Quick do something! They're waking up," said Paul.

"They're cured, you stupid man!" snapped Auntie. "What do you think I've been doing for the last half an hour!"

"I don't believe it," he said.

"I don't care," she said, swiping his words away with her hand. "I don't care what you do or don't believe. You know your wife is right. Sometimes you just need to shut up."

For once Paul did as she suggested.

She looked at his confused face and grinned. "Oh, don't worry. You'll have a nice time in Singapore. They'll have it back to normal in no time. You can visit Gardens by the Bay and the Night Safari. You can eat bak kut teh and carrot cake, laksa and kaya toast. Then hopefully when you have food in your mouth you'll shut up and give your wife some peace."

The exorcised Durian Eaters were beginning to ask questions. The caretaker was doing his best to explain what had happened, and a few others who hadn't been affected by the spell were fetching antiseptic to bathe their wounds and stacks of paper towels to wrap around their hands.

An old woman with her arm in a sling hobbled forward. She was weeping uncontrollably.

"Ah ya" yelled Auntie, pointing at the woman. "I know who you are! I can smell it a kilometre away! You're the stupid woman who started the whole thing!"

Madame Cheong Lei Fa wailed.

"What spell were you doing? Ah?" snapped Auntie through her wailing.

"I wanted to bring my husband back," Madame Cheong sobbed.

Auntie raised her eyes and hands to heaven. "Necromancy! No wonder!"

"I was so stupid! I shouldn't have done it. I know I shouldn't. That's why I came to the temple. To beg forgiveness. And now that I'm here, I see that all my prayers have been answered. I tried a counter-spell, but it wouldn't work."

"No lah! It wouldn't have. You left the mess for Auntie to clear up."

As she looked at Madame Cheong, Auntie's scowl softened, and she guided her to a seat. "You will see your husband again one day," she said. "You just have to be patient lah! Look at all the trouble you caused! Lucky no one was killed, but there are going to be many people in Singapore with durian shaped scars now ah." She waved in the direction of the ex-Durian-Eaters bathing their wounds in antiseptic solution and dabbing them with paper towels.

"I've been so cruel to my daughter," said Madame Cheong.

"Then apologise to her lah," said Auntie. "And if you remember nothing else, remember this. Never treat the gods or spirits with disrespect again. Honour the gods, honour the spirits and be humble. If you show respect, everything will be OK."

"Do you think we could go to our hotel now?" Paul barked to no one in particular.

Adrian, who had been propped against a pillar smoking a cigarette, vaguely nodded.

“No lah!” said Auntie. She beckoned Paul and Beatrice over. “Before you go anywhere ah, first you have to taste durian!”

Beatrice and Paul politely declined, but Auntie wouldn’t take no for an answer. She sat them down and took out of her handbag another polystyrene tray packed with durians.

“Lucky for you, Auntie was durian shopping when the whole commotion started,” she said, taking the cellophane off the tray, exposing the fruits. “Golden Phoenix ah. Very, very nice variety.”

“What’s that ghastly smell?” said Paul.

“It’s the durians,” said Auntie.

“I assumed Singapore just had a big problem with its drainage system,” said Paul.

“Ang moh’s always hate durian,” guffawed Adrian, who had come over to watch the spectacle along with several others.

Paul glared at him and the others watching. “You’re having fun aren’t you!”

With no other choice, Paul and Beatrice both put pieces of the durian into their mouths, and despite lengthy descriptions and tortured hand gestures, neither could articulate exactly how disgusting they found the experience. However, as connoisseurs of stilton and long-hung pheasant will tell you, disgusting is just one MRT station away from delicious, and given some persistence, they were destined to fully appreciate the king of the fruits.

The author wishes to acknowledge Dr. Jock Wong (National University of Singapore) for his invaluable advice on the Singlish dialogues, and for translating the magical spells into Cantonese.

* * * * *

“A Tale of Reunion”

by Charles Lo Sin Yee

The crowds at the Sunday bazaar begin to thin away with the decline of the sun towards the upper end of the riverside town. Kassim has just finished eating the rice given by Mak Minah, a generous lady who runs an economy rice stall at the bazaar. Licking the leftover gravy off his lips, he sits on a curb beside the bus stand with an intent look at the slowed-down transactions between vendors and customers. The vendors begin to pack up their stalls while the customers are in haste to go home. He never comes to the bazaar when it is thick with people. He makes his usual appearance at the bazaar around 5.00pm. He always sits in the same spot, biding his time and waiting for an opportunity to collect unsold, wilted vegetables.

"Come here, Pak, I have some vegetables for you!" A Chinese vendor named Wong hollers, while beckoning him over with a wave of the hand. A grateful smile is etched on Kassim's sagging, wrinkled face. He props himself up on his walking stick from the cold concrete stone of the curb. He struggles for balance because the long sitting is giving him pins and needles in his legs. Taking a deep raspy breath, he adjusts the Songkok on his head and drags himself in Wong's direction with tottering steps. The crampy, tingling sensation gradually subsides with each step he takes. When Kassim has reached Wong's van, the tall, pot-bellied vendor asks him to open his dirty sling bag and shoves two rust-coloured cabbages into it. Kassim says a hoarse thank you and turns on his heel, walking deeper into the market against the homeward flow of people, his shadow trailing long behind him in the dimming, ochreous light.

Something has caught his eye and he bends down to pick up a few stray bananas from the rubbish-strewn ground. He puts them into his bag and resumes walking. He makes an obligatory stop at the rubbish dump of the bazaar.

There are a few skinny, mangy cats in the dump, gnawing at barbequed chicken bones with ravenous relish. They scurry off in a freak of timidity at the sight of Kassim. The old man smiles bitterly to himself. Don't they know that he is like them, too? He bends over and starts combing through the rubbish for empty tins and bottles. He earns a pittance by sending them to recycling centres. Kassim has grown inured to the overpowering stench. Half way through the search, he hears two people talking a few metres behind him.

"Mama, what is that old man doing in the rubbish dump?"

"He's looking for food."

"How dirty he is. I feel like puking."

"If you don't study hard, you may end up like him."

"I don't want, Mama!"

"You should study hard from now on. Read as many books as you can."

"Mama, reading books is so boring. I'd rather read comics."

"Boring? Laziness will make you become like that man of filth there!"

"I am not dirty, Mama!"

The exchange is obviously made between a mother and a son. Kassim can feel the weight of their stares on his back. He looks over his shoulder, and what comes into his sight are a fortyish woman and a boy who cannot be more than eight or nine years old. They are sizing him up with sneers on their faces. Their conversation comes to an abrupt stop when Kassim's eyes meet theirs. The woman looks away in uneasiness. She whispers something to her son and they hurry off in the direction of the car park without looking back. Kassim envies them a great deal. They have one another, but he has no one.

By the time Kassim calls his scavenging a day, the last vestiges of twilight have faded and the whole town looks like a picture blotted with ink. His bag is bulging with the addition of empty cans and bottles. With a sigh, he retraces his way back to the bus stand. He can hear his shuffling feet amidst the waxing and waning sounds of pushcart wheels. The buzz of voices around him is wearing off. Streetlight halos illuminate the dark streets. Vehicles roar past him, leaving gusts of wind in his face. He blinks away the dust, clears his throat and spits a gob of phlegm into the grass verge that borders along the road. When he has reached the bus stand, he feels as if his frame of bones is dismantling into a heap. He is dog-tired. He wants to lie down and sleep on the straw mat in his house. If possible, he

doesn't want to wake up. He is tired of his long life. Sometimes he cannot help wondering if God and His angels have lost track of his soul. He is wasting his life as one of the living dead on earth.

Suddenly, two tall shadowy figures are looming across the road, giving him a start. The same two men he has been used to seeing in the same spot for quite a number of times over the past four weeks. He has a strange feeling that they are looking at him. Who are they? What are they up to? Can others at the bus stand see them too? He can feel his skin crawling.

Kassim heaves a sigh of relief when a bus trundles into view on the shoulder of the road. It rumbles to a halt beside the bus stand and disgorges a stream of several passengers. Then, everyone at the bus stand piles into the bus, ignoring the poor old man who is too weak to join in the frenzied rush. It takes Kassim a great deal of effort to board the bus. His slowness is frowned upon by the driver, who almost barks profanities at him. He gets into a coughing fit after the exertion. Some cheeky youths sitting at the back parody the way he coughs, and burst out laughing without a shred of conscience. He shakes his head in utter disapproval of their action. His blood would have been boiling with anger had he been younger. Old age has softened his emotion. He scans his myopic eyes over the heads in the compartment and finds an unoccupied seat next to a young Malay girl. However, he dares not sit beside her. He knows how stinky and dirty he is. He grabs hold of the overhead rail with his fingers, trying to keep his footing in the shake and sway of the bus. The girl lets out a gasp and gets up from her seat, edging towards him. Without a word, she grabs his left arm with one hand and puts the other on his back, gently taking him to her seat. Despite reluctance, he yields to the young girl's will. He thanks her when he is seated.

"Are you feeling better now, Pakcik?" asks the girl.

"I...I'm alright," stammers Kassim, still half-dazed by the unexpected gesture.

"Where is your house, Pakcik?" asks the girl. She looks like Faridah, pretty and kind-hearted.

"I live in Simpang Tiga," replies the old man, his voice quavering in discomfiture. He is unused to the girl's outpouring of concern.

"Simpang Tiga is quite far from the bazaar!" frowns the girl, her voice tinged with

surprise. "Why don't you ask your family members to take you there?"

"I have no family," says Kassim, shaking his head. Faridah died of a miscarriage fifty years ago. He is dirt poor, living on the monthly subsistence allowance given by the welfare department.

"I'm sorry, Pakcik," says the girl, giving him a sympathetic look.

"It's okay, I am used to it." Kassim's voice falters. He is touched by the girl's truthfulness. She does not show any sick feelings towards him.

"Hari Raya is drawing near. Will you be celebrating it with your relatives?"

"No, I have no relatives," returns Kassim.

"Poor Pakcik," sighs the girl. "You must be very lonely."

Kassim opens his mouth to reply, but he chokes on his words. He turns his face away from her, trying to hide his teary eyes. But the girl grabs hold of his hands and says:

"Don't worry, Pakcik," says the girl. "Your loneliness will soon be over."

Kassim is startled. What does the girl mean?

The girl seems to know what he is thinking. She smiles and says, "We've found you and soon you will be with us."

Kassim is feeling confused. He does not know to whom the girl is referring. He wants to ask but the eyes of the girl have a strange effect in quelling his urge.

The girl looks out the window and says, "Pakcik, we're almost reaching your house. Let me press the bell for you."

With that, the girl rises and presses the bell. Kassim looks at her with disbelief. The girl's eyes gleam with all-knowingness but she vouchsafes no explanation. The bus is grinding to a halt. Kassim recognizes the surroundings of his neighbourhood, which exudes the same aura of loneliness. He thanks the girl in a muffled voice and alights from the bus, bringing a lot of doubts along with him.

Kassim's wooden house stands back twenty yards from the main road. It is half-buried in a copse of trees. Drones of cicadas are filling the air as he walks along the trail to his house. Moonlight filters through the overhead layers of branches and leaves, giving little animation to the dark surroundings.

When Kassim has reached the facade of his decrepit house, two dark shadows flit past before him. He looks around him but there is nothing but trees. Were his eyes playing tricks on him just now? He shrugs and walks up the steps. He produces his key from his trouser pocket and inserts it into the rusty lock of the front door. After some twisting, the door opens and he steps inside. As usual, he fumbles for the light switch in the dark. He switches it on when he locates it. The florescent tube on the ceiling blinks blue and orange before becoming steadily bright. Just as he is about to drop his bag on the floor, a bout of heart palpitations has caught him unawares. The rafters above him spin and his legs buckle under him. Holding his chest in agony, he sinks to his knees. A cold, stinging sensation is pulsating through his arms, making his breathing jagged. Through his ringing ears he seems to hear the creaking of loose floorboards coming his way. Before realising what is happening two warm hands circle around his shoulders and a gentle voice whispers into his ear: "Welcome home, Kassim."

Gasping in shock, Kassim finds himself kneeling face to face with Faridah. She looks surprisingly young, glowing in a youthful beauty. He can smell the sweet fragrance of plumeria from her. She seems real, very real. His heartbeat is gradually slowing down to a normal pace and at the same time, a torrent of energy is washing over him. He feels as if he were young again.

"Faridah!" Kassim cries, hugging Faridah tightly. "It's you! You've finally come back to me."

"I am always with you, Kassim" replies Faridah in a calm, soothing voice.

"I have wanted to see you very much," says Kassim. "God has finally granted my wish."

"God is always good to us," says Faridah, kissing Kassim's cheek. "He knows when it is the best time for us to reunite."

"Am I dreaming?" asks Kassim, looking at Faridah's shimmering face, seeking assurance from her.

"No, you're not," says Faridah. "We were predestined to meet each other today."

Kassim's eyes are brimming with tears. He has been in solitude for fifty years. He does not want to let go of Faridah this time. He loves her with the last fibre of his being.

Noiselessly, two hands rest on Kassim's shoulders.

Kassim looks up and sees the girl he met on the bus.

Faridah puts her hand on the girl's shoulder and says, "Kassim, she is our daughter, Hapsah. You met each other on the bus earlier."

"Hapsah? Our daughter?" murmurs Kassim, turning to look at Faridah with a questioning gaze.

"Yes, Kassim," nods Faridah.

Bending her body, Hapsah takes hold of Kassim's hands and brings them to her forehead.

"Father, we're back," smiles Hapsah. "Your lonely days are over."

Tears of gratefulness roll down Kassim's cheeks. He puts his hand on Hapsah's shoulders and puts the other on Faridah's. They are one family.

Two dark shadows glide into the house through the open door. They are becoming brighter and brighter as they inch towards the hugging trio. Soon, the room is blinding with the light they radiate. It engulfs Kassim, Faridah and Hapsah until they are seen no more.

The next day, a few social workers come to Kassim's house. Hari Raya is just around the corner, and they want to give him rice and some new clothes. They are shocked to find the door ajar and Kassim lying dead on the floor, wearing a contented smile on his face.

* * * * *

“Thursday Daughter”

by Katacha Díaz

Created out of love, you arrived on a Thursday morning late in the monsoon season. You were my first-born child, a healthy baby girl with big brown eyes, and silky black hair to twist around my finger to make soft little ringlets. At long last, I had my very own real live doll to play with, care for and learn from. Wanting to be your “perfect Mom,” I read books on parenting and sought advice from friends and family with child-raising experience.

As the days, weeks and months passed by, I watched you, my precious child, grow and change. Even though I was grateful to be a stay-at-home mom, the everyday chores of feeding and bathing you and taking fresh air outings together took time. At bath time, you played at being a cute little mermaid or a fish splashing water everywhere while shrieking in delight! Every night after I tucked you into bed with a kiss and cuddle, I’d read your favorite little gecko Balinese folktale. Then I sang favorite childhood lullabies to you, my captive audience, until you fell asleep.

Then, our special together time had to be shared with your brothers. The twins were sickly, screamed constantly and required special attention. Thankfully we got through that, and even though there was less one-on-one quality time for you and me, you were loved and nurtured. Everyone adored you and agreed with me, you were the sweetest little girl in the world.

Time has passed much too quickly. You have grown to be a beautiful, loving caring woman that I am so proud to call my Thursday daughter and friend.

I do love you very much, my first-born child, even more than when I first held you in my arms the day you were born.

* * * * *

“Fizzled-Out Redemption”

by Charles Lo Sin Yee

Mama liked Mei Ping the first time the girl moved into the house next to ours in the neighbourhood. Maybe the little girl reminded her of my late eldest sister, who, at the age of eight months, had died of an accident. Indeed, they had the same large animated eyes and rosy complexion. Mei Ping, whose mother was a divorcee, lived a separate life from her father and younger sister. Her mother, working as a salon girl in Brunei, employed a young housemaid to look after Mei Ping. She only came back to see Mei Ping once a month. The housemaid, from Mama’s observation, had a bad habit of going out with her friends and leaving Mei Ping alone at home. Taking pity on her, she frequently asked Mei Ping to come and join us for lunch and dinner.

I loathed Mei Ping’s presence in my house. The sight of her praising Mama’s cooking filled me with hatred. At first, my two siblings - my second sister, Ah Hui, and younger brother, Weng Weng - shared my antagonism towards Mei Ping. However, having mingled with her over a period of several weeks, they had found common ground with the girl, always going out for walks together and playing with the other kids in the neighbourhood.

Refusing to tag along with them, I often chose to stay in my bedroom, reading comic books and drawing cartoons. Experiencing puberty at this stage of my life, I developed a huge interest in the human body. My drawings were replete with muscle-bound superheroes and scantily clad women. I hid my drawings, particularly those of the semi-naked women, in my school bag.

One afternoon, I got home from school and had a shower, leaving my bag in the sitting room. There were only Mama, Mei Ping and I in the house. When I came out of the bathroom, Mei Ping was flipping through my drawings, disgust evident on her face.

“Who asked you to ransack my bag?” I shouted, stamping my foot in an access of extreme anger. “Give me my drawings!”

“It was half open and I was curious about what you had been doing at school,” said Mei Ping, cowering. “Why did you draw all these figures?”

“That’s none of your business!” I was unable to contain my anger and gave her a slap. Mei Ping yelled in pain and Mama rushed out of the kitchen.

“Stop it, Tai!” Mama demanded sternly. But I did not listen and continued hitting Mei Ping.

With all her might, Mama dragged me into the storeroom. She grabbed a cane and in a blind rage, whipped me with it. Each stroke bit into my flesh as I was trying to ward them off with my arms. Realising that she was losing her self-control, mama threw the cane aside and knelt down crying. Mei Ping, having witnessed everything through the ajar door, walked into the storeroom and hugged Mama from behind, whispering apologies. Mama returned her hug and kissed her on the forehead. She then turned to me and felt the welts on my arms, speechless with sobs. When we stopped crying, Mama went to cook dinner in the kitchen and Mei Ping helped her to rinse the rice. I went back to the sitting room, picked up the scattered drawings and threw them into the rubbish bin outside. All of us acted as if nothing had happened.

My perception of Mei Ping began to change during a power outage at night. Mei Ping, Ah Hui, Weng Weng and I were doing our schoolwork around a brightly lit candle. Our shadows loomed large on the walls and Weng Weng could not help making shadow animals with his fingers.

“Weng, stop playing around,” berated Mama. “Do your homework.”

Weng Weng immediately stopped playing and poked out his tongue.

“Mama,” said Ah Hui. “The kettle is hissing.”

“Okay, I’ll turn off the heat,” said Mama, rising. “Hui, come and make tea with me.”

Ah Hui got up and went into the kitchen with Mama, leaving Mei Ping, Weng Weng and I behind doing our homework.

“Weng, how lucky of you to be scolded by Auntie,” said Mei Ping, looking at the boy with a ponderous expression on her face.

“Why do you say that?” asked Weng Weng, baffled.

“You can see your mum every day but I can’t,” explained Mei Ping. “Mine sometimes looks like a total stranger, and I wish yours is mine.”

“But my mum nags a lot,” said Weng Weng, pouting.

“It shows that she cares about you,” said Mei Ping, wiping the corner of her eye. “How I wish to be nagged by a loving mum every day.”

I was touched by the sincerity in Mei Ping’s voice. I finally understood why Mei Ping liked coming to my house.

Mum’s almost mother-like attention to Mei Ping was justified in one argument. An elderly woman paid us a visit and she frowned upon seeing Mei Ping skipping ropes with Ah Hui in the backyard.

“Why are you letting that prostitute’s daughter spend so much time at your house?” she asked, her voice full of rebuke.

“Prostitute?” said mama. “You are too harsh on Mei Ping’s mother!”

“Everybody knows that she sells her flesh for a living,” retorted the woman. “How many salon girls really cut hair for a living?”

“We shouldn’t be prejudiced against Mei Ping because of her mother,” said Mama, placidly. “No child should bear the sins of his or her parents.”

Mother, oh Mother. She spoke up for Mei Ping many times.

Life took an unexpected turn the day papa told my siblings and me that we had to move and live temporarily at Uncle Ah Choi’s house. All of us were sad. Uncle Ah Choi, our uncle-in-law, was the husband of papa’s youngest sister, Auntie Sei Ko. They had moved to Johor several years before, and there was no one occupying their house. We were reluctant to leave our present house and Mei Ping. On the day of departure, Mei Ping waved goodbye with tears in her eyes.

We kept our promise and visited Mei Ping regularly. On each visit, we had a lot of tales to share with her and she would try to keep us at her house for as long as possible.

“What is your mother’s plan for you?” asked Mama, during one of our short visits.

“My maid will be dismissed in three days, and I will move to my mother’s friend’s house in the same neighbourhood.”

“Why didn’t your mother take you to Brunei?”

“She wanted to, but her husband is planning to move to Miri in a year. It is much trouble to enroll me in a new school in Brunei, so they think its best that I stay at Mr. Chong’s house for the time being.”

“It’s a good thing your mum will be back in Miri for good,” Mama said.

“No, I don’t like it,” said Mei Ping, her face flushing in anger. “I don’t want to call a stranger Papa.”

“Be patient, Mei Ping,” pacified Mama. “God must’ve planned this for a reason.”

“He once came to Miri, but mum reminded me to call her auntie,” Mei Ping said. “She denied me once, and the thought of living with him gives me a creep.”

“Pray to God, child,” Mama was trying to comfort her. “Any trouble would be kept at bay.”

“Auntie,” said Mei Ping. “Do you know that my mum has been pregnant for five months? Very soon she will give birth.”

“Extend my heartfelt congratulations to your mother,” said Mama. “Be thankful that you’re going to have a new sibling.”

“Maybe I ought to be thankful,” mumbled Mei Ping, looking into space. “I wonder if my mother will treat me the same as before.”

Some colour leached off mama’s face. She too had some problems. In fact, they were affecting the whole family.

Since moving into Uncle Ah Choi’s house, our presence had been frowned upon by Ah Sing, the younger brother of his, who came regularly to tend the orchid garden. Many a

time he threw us hints to move out. To complicate matters, Papa's business was turning slow, facing more competition from foochow vendors who had been on a continuous migratory flow from Sibu to our hometown Miri.

It was distressing to see mama sighing over the lack of money. Many nights Papa returned with only a few buns sold, his temper becoming erratic, and we all feared him. To ensure that there was enough food, Mama had to part with the valuables left by grandma. At the time, pawning could hardly fetch us a good price.

Left with no choice, Mama travelled to Brunei regularly, begging her siblings to lend her money, making her subject to their taunts. Since marrying Papa, they had been holding her in contempt, and the situation had become irreparable after the demise of my grandparents. She soon spiraled into depression, at times losing her faculty of reasoning, just like the period after the death of my eldest sister, through whom she had harboured hopes to win back my grandparents' affection.

Mei Ping did not live a happy life with Mr. Chong's family, too. Every now and then she complained to Mama over the phone that his kids liked calling her a prostitute's daughter. One day, the friction between them had become beyond remedy that Mei Ping came to our house in tears. Mr. Chong had accused her of stealing and threatened to call the police. As the girl recounted, I thought there was a passing shade of impatience on Mama's face, even verging on hostility, which appeared to me as not being directed to Mr. Chong, but Mei Ping. The emotional trauma she had been experiencing was unbeknownst to the girl. And I could feel a tempest brewing. As if trying to be obliging, Mama and Papa rushed to Mr. Chong's house with the girl, only to return home several hours later with anger on their faces.

"From now on I don't want to have anything to do with Mei Ping," Papa declared.

"I never expected Mei Ping to be such a dishonest child," said Mama.

"What happened, Mama?" I asked, incredulous.

"We argued with Mr. Chong for almost one hour and it turned out that his wife's earrings were in Mei Ping's pencil case," said mama.

"She must have been framed, Mama," I said.

“The evidence was very strong against Mei Ping and there was nothing we could do about it,” said Mama, with finality.

Papa bought into what he saw easily. What more to say that he was not particularly concerned about Mei Ping. But how about Mama? I was very shocked by her strong reaction towards Mei Ping’s alleged stealing of the earrings. She had been very sympathetic towards Mei Ping, and to me her change of attitude was abrupt and unfair. Was stress knocking her out of her mind? One thing for sure, Mei Ping’s clash with Mr. Chong had come at a bad time, stoking the bottled-up fire of anguish in Mama and hence the unsound judgment.

Before long Mei Ping came to our house. She greeted Mama several times, but Mama chose to ignore her.

“Auntie,” said Mei Ping. “Believe me, I really didn’t steal the earrings.”

“You didn’t steal them?” Mama erupted, unable to remain quiet any more. “I’ve treated you like my own child all this while, and this is the reward I get. I could not defend you because the earrings were in your pencil case!”

“Believe me, I didn’t...” Mei Ping was near to tears.

“Stop feigning innocence,” said Mama cruelly. “I already have a lot of problems, and I don’t intend to add yours to mine. Go back to where you belong. We are through.”

Mei Ping paled at Mama’s last remark. As she exited the door, I thought she was mumbling this, “Mama, why’re you doing this to me?” That was the last time we saw her.

We heard nothing from Mei Ping for many years. She was totally cut off from our circle. My siblings and I finished our secondary school education one after the other. We no longer lived in Uncle Ah Choi’s house. We had moved into a shop house in town. A few days before I flew to Kuching for a degree course, Papa returned home telling us he had bumped into Mei Ping’s aunt in town.

“How is Mei Ping?” Mama asked.

“Her auntie told me that she is now living with her boyfriend in West Malaysia,” said Papa.

“What! With her boyfriend? She’s only seventeen!” exclaimed Ah Hui.

“Apparently Mei Ping did not have a happy life with her mother,” Papa said. “She always quarreled with her stepfather, and her mother kept siding with him. She felt like a stranger in her house because her younger brother got all the attention. After Form Three, she stopped schooling and worked in a salon.”

“How did she get to know this boyfriend?” asked Mama.

“Her boyfriend was her customer, and she fell in love with him after they ate out together several times. To get away from her mother, she flew to West Malaysia with him, hoping to live a better life.”

“My goodness,” said Mama, sighing. “How bad she has become. She’s no longer the same girl we knew.”

Indeed, Mei Ping’s decision was worrying. It was against the way of society for an under-aged girl to cohabit with an almost stranger. We ceased to hear from her for several more years. By then, I had finished my studies and had returned to Miri as a teacher. Papa had stopped selling steamed buns, and now he spent much of his time doing voluntary church work. One day, after conducting a Bible knowledge class, Papa stumbled upon Mei Ping’s mother in an open-air-market. When Papa asked after Mei Ping, her face turned sad, and she covered it with her hands. In a shaky voice, she told Papa that Mei Ping had been caught prostituting in Malacca and that she was in jail.

“In a few days I will fly to Malacca and bail her out,” said Mei Ping’s mother.

“What made her become a prostitute?” asked Papa.

“Her boyfriend owed a lot of money and to pay off the debt, he asked her to sell herself,” said Mei Ping’s mother, her voice quavering.

“What a beast he is!” said Papa, emphatically.

“I regret quarrelling with her when she was around,” said Mei Ping’s mother, weeping. “I should have paid more attention to her.”

“Ask her to return to Miri and start her life anew,” said Papa. “Tell her that my wife and I both miss her.”

My siblings and I received the news with disbelief. We could not accept the fact that our childhood friend had gone astray. As a kid, she had been so precocious, mild-tempered and passionate about life.

Mei Ping killed herself two weeks after the bail. She plunged to her death from the top of a six-storey building. Mei Ping’s mother told us the sad news on the phone. We were all thunderstruck and couldn’t utter a word. Mama had been sullenly quiet for almost a whole day until her sobs woke papa up in the dead of the night. Mei Ping had wanted to live with us, but Mama had shut the door on her. A temporary loss of mind had changed the girl’s fate.

Many years had flown by and one night Mama had a strange dream. Mei Ping came into her bedroom in the same dress as she had worn the day we had last seen her. She still retained the same look, seemingly covered in a soft, fuzzy light. Forgetting that Mei Ping had been dead for a long time, Mum told her that she could live with us now, and that she was more than willing to treat her as her own daughter. Mei Ping did not say a word, but smiled. Unable to suppress the longing in her heart, Mama embraced Mei Ping, convincing the girl that she would no longer be lonely and oppressed by others. Mei Ping kissed mama’s forehead, the same way as Mama had in the storeroom, after caning me for slapping Mei Ping. Then, suddenly, she disintegrated, and the flying fragments turned into bubbles, drifting away in different directions. Even more terrifying, the floor under Mama’s feet gave way and gusts of winds picked up around her. Amidst popping sounds, the bubbles disappeared. Mama realised that she was sinking, falling from a tall building. She shouted till her lungs seemed to cave in and burst. At the same time, something was fleeing past her, a back-and-forth-loop of Mei Ping’s face alternated with that of my late eldest sister. On the brink of a fatal crush, the bubbles returned out of nowhere, lifting her up and putting her back to the top of the building. Two rays of gentle light were traveling around Mama’s body, gradually dispelling her shock and leaving her weeping till she woke up.

Was that a sign from Mei Ping, that she had forgiven Mama for betraying her? And why was my sister's face appearing too? It turned out that before she was dead, Papa had been in Hong Kong, his birthplace, attending to some family matters, while mama had been nursing her personal demon. When mama returned to the cot, my sister was found dead lying on her stomach.

It had taken mama several years to gather enough courage for a second pregnancy, which begot Ah Hui. It made me wonder if Mei Ping and my eldest sister were related to each other. Both had come to Mama's life, but because of too much wallowing in self-pity, they were all taken away from her. Could reincarnation have happened, that Mei Ping was my late eldest sister? If that was the case, redemption had been rendered, only to slip through Mama's fingers.

Since that dream, Mama has been tireless in helping the needy, donating in kind through charity organizations. She has even stopped mulling over her fall from grace. Sometimes, she takes it upon herself to cook for some poor pupils at my school. Her face beams as she watches them eat. We never mention Mei Ping, but I know Mama has never stopped trying to appease the guilt that eats away at the calm in her heart.

* * * * *

“Beautiful Rain”

by T.S. Kul

I don't like a rainy season. A drizzle or even light shower I can withstand, but the monsoon rain here is just unbearable. The downpour comes down like a curtain of water. Heavy rain ruins my hair, splashes my neatly pressed shirt and wets my shiny leather shoes (and makes them look dirty!). Raewat is the opposite! He loves rain.

The other day when we were about to go to Jatujak weekend market, I took note of the day forecast showing low pressure moving in with a fair chance of a rainstorm. I then packed my golf umbrella and wore simple jeans and a T-shirt. Living in Thailand for a few years, I learned that Thai people don't really pay much attention to the weather forecast, unlike the place where I'm from.

Raewat noticed my unusual low-key outfit and commented that I looked fitting as a Jatujak shopper. I told him it wasn't the JJ market I picked my clothes for, it's about a high chance of rain. Walking around a large open market like JJ is not that enjoyable under any rain, heavy or light. He laughed. His dark brown eyes were shining when he said;

"It is actually nice walking under the rain. Have you tried?"

"Me! No, Rae, never! Not gonna happen. Let's go. We don't want to get there too late," I said while thinking we would finish our walk before the rain started.

So many things to see at the weekend market. We were exhausted but had a great time. I got a silk handbag as a souvenir for my mother, found a beautiful handmade drape for a wall hanging, and bought a lot more things I didn't really need. Raewat enjoyed window

shopping at the antique vendors. He also bought a fake secondhanded Rolex for his collection. I forgot about the rain!

We, or I, for the most part, rushed to a taxi stand at the nearest exit just before a heavy downpour began. I must have looked like a maniac running away from a gang of mobsters! He said a few times that "it is just rain" to calm me down. Yes, just rain! I didn't mind it now, given that we had made it to a taxi heading to a big shopping mall on Pahonyothin road.

Our dinner at a food court at the mall was cheap and delicious. I mentioned how we were so lucky to get out of JJ before the storm started. Raewat was not saying much, other than joking that I won't melt because I am not made of sugar. I didn't find his joke funny.

* * *

A few days before I left Bangkok, Raewat came by to ask if I would like to go with him to a concert somewhere not far from my apartment building.

"When?" I asked.

"Starting pretty soon. It's free so there will be lots of people. We should go now."

"What kind of concert? Not that old rock band you like, I hope."

"No, no, Carabao won't play for a small venue like this." Rae laughed and explained:

"Some kids I know from the Faculty of Biology formed a group and they got permission to perform on stage near the Bio building. You know it is not far. Ten, maybe a fifteen-minute walk at most."

I wouldn't understand much of the singing anyway, but this could be fun. I figured Raewat knows many students from the lab where he works, so this would be even more fun for him.

The band was playing slow soap-bubble pop music, the kind of songs I hear from almost every radio station in Bangkok. They all sound soft and gentle with a feel of "*mai pen rai*" in all the singing. Not the kind of rock music that Raewat likes. We hung out at the Bio building, talking about anything and everything, more so than listening to the concert.

We were out at the concert for almost two hours when I noticed the heavy evening air. I looked up and saw a cloudy sky. Rain!! I told Raewat that we should leave.

We walked casually past the university stadium still chatting about the types of music young people listen to in Thailand and other countries. It turned out to be a very nice evening for us. Then we talked about my departure. I told him that I was almost finished packing. He asked who would pick me up at the airport when I arrived at my final destination, thousands of miles away. And that was when it started to rain! I was about to dash to the next building to find a cover, but he held me back.

"Easy Alex. Let's just walk together a little more. The rain is soft and cool, and it won't hurt you."

He sounded different. Not the usual open friendly tone I was used to hearing. I sensed a slight sadness and disappointment. I was unable to refuse.

I jokingly replied that none of my friends had ever seen me with soaking wet hair before, and now he was first to witness that. The joke put some smile on his face. He turned and looked at me.

"You look ahh... good!"

I smiled hearing his hesitation to end his comment about my look. Not cute, not ugly, just good!

We didn't talk much after that.

Walking along the edge of a football field, I saw young men laughing and yelling in a wet football game. On a street, motorcyclists were riding their vehicles with one hand and holding an umbrella up in another hand. On the sidewalk, a couple under an umbrella walked by, glancing at us and giggling. Raewat smiled back at them and said something in Thai. I looked around and was amazed by the rainy scenes I had never seen.

The rain was cool and soft, and that heavy air before the rain had lifted up. Raewat was all wet, but he looked so relaxed and seemed to enjoy the presence. I, too was wet like a dog, but, like he said, the rain didn't hurt. Then I realized I was truly enjoying the walk!

"Rae"

"Hah, what?"

"Thanks for taking me out to the concert...and the rain"

We left the university gate walking hand in hand under the beautiful rain.

* * * * *

“Till Death Do Us Part”

by Azlan Mahmud

Where am I? It's so dark! I can't see the floor! Am I floating?? Wait, what's that light I see?

Why am I moving towards it? Wait...

That's Ayah's voice!

Ayah! Ayah! Where are you.....?

He watched the myriad of tubes coming out of his son, helping him to breathe, giving him fluids, pumping him with drugs, all desperately trying to keep him alive. He would occasionally call his name, but the conversation he had with the intensive care doctors moments ago was still fresh in his mind.

They had ushered him into the room, where he sat down facing the three medical professionals. The Chief of Staff sat in the middle, a tall bearded man whose face showed the long standing stresses of his profession. The other two were younger, nevertheless experienced enough in their chosen field. They had asked if he would like to have someone with him during their discussion, and he had politely declined.

The Chief of Staff cleared his throat.

“Encik Malek.”

Malek said nothing. He just wanted them to say what he knew they were going to tell him.

The Chief of Staff shifted in his seat, and began to slowly give his medical opinion about his son's condition.

Malek listened, but at the same time he stared blankly at the polished white floor. They had done everything for his son, but his injuries were too severe. He was still holding on, but his heart would stop eventually despite the strongest of treatment now at its maximum.

Malek kept quiet as the doctors continued with their explanation.

Where's everyone? Where's Mak? Adik? Wasn't I driving them to see the movie?

Wait! Is this the movie? Are we inside a special theatre? Oh, then you should have taken leave and come with us ayah. This is one movie theatre I've never seen.

But...

But... (sob)

I don't remember parking the car

I don't remember paying for the tickets, or queueing up to buy Adik's favourite popcorn.

All I remember was avoiding the cat that ran across the road, and the loud honking of the bus behind us, and Mak and Adik screaming, and....

(Sob)

Ayah! Where are you!!!

Everyone wailed and cried as he told them the news. Some even fainted, while others fell crouching on the floor, their legs unable to hold under the weight of their grief. Malek remained strong. He had to, for no one else seemed capable of it. The loss was too much for all of them to bear. His wife and daughter was no longer with them, and soon his son would join them.

The doctors had suggested slowly turning off his son's life support, for they felt they were prolonging his death. Malek grappled with his decision for a moment, but the logical scientist in him realized the inevitable. With a heavy heart, he agreed. They doctors had asked if he would like to discuss this with members of his family, but he had declined to do so. It was his decision to make. It was for him to bear.

Mak and Adik didn't make it, did they?

It's all my fault. The cat just ran across the road. It was the same cat Adik would feed whenever it came calling. Mak liked the cat too. They always.....

(Sob) I don't want to leave you Ayah. I don't want you to be alone. I don't want to be alone I want to come back Ayah! Let me be with you Ayah! Let me take care of you! Ayah.....h!!!

He sat there next to him, watching the doctor put her stethoscope on his son's chest, her eyes watching the monitors. She finally stopped, and looked at Malek.

"We've switched off everything, but he seems to be holding on. Barely though. It is unusual for it to last this long."

She looked at his son, her face suddenly filling with sorrow.

"It's almost as if..."

She turned to Malek, and bent down closer.

"... as if he's waiting for something."

Malek turned to look at her. She nodded, and walked away.

He bent closer to his son, his forehead touching his cold cheeks. He could almost hear him, as if their souls were connected across the realms.

It's all my fault, Ayah!

It's my fault you're alone!

I don't want you to be alone

Let me come back!!

Malek closed his eyes. How he wanted his son to come back, to turn back time and make up for the things he didn't do for him. But he knew, with his son's injuries, that life would be worse than death.

He kissed his son's cheek, and whispered softly in his ears. Malek knew he would hear him. He just knew.

It's ok, my son.

I never blamed you for what happened. I know it wasn't your fault.

Promise me you will go. Go and be with Mak and Adik. Tell them I'll be ok.

Tell them that we will all leave this world eventually. You....and Mak....and Adik....all of you will see heaven before me.

Wait for me there. I will join you someday.

And we can be a happy family again in the most beautiful place ever.

Tell them I love them.

And I love you.

Malek hugged his son.

I understand Ayah. I can hear Mak and Adik calling me.

There! Within the light! I can see them! I can see them!

I'll go and tell them!!

We'll wait for you Ayah!

Mak! Adik! I'm coming!

The cardiac monitor emitted a monotonous sound, consistent with the flat line on its screen.

Malek hugged his son tightly, and for the first time that night, he cried.

* * * * *

“Radicals”

by A.J. Anwar

Why? I will keep
asking you why

in your quest to Him
you choose to hate

you are to us
brothers

but not us to you
outsiders

why so blinded
in your path

you plaster sins on us
you copy paste them

you loath us so much
for living

can't you see you
got it all twisted

why you smother

His image

and call your wrong

the truth

of what?

of God?

we worship Him not

less than you do

and you cast us out

keep hating why

can't you see Love

is Him is Mercy

that life is here

and the hereafter

that love is here

and thereafter

and still you won't see

why can't you

just let us be

“The Stand”

by A.J. Anwar

I found and followed footmark trails
of fellow countrymen
on the beautiful white sand
I felt the rush like Robinson Crusoe
but only for a moment
till all traces disappeared
at the tip of the tongue
of the ever shoring waves.

And so there
at the shoreline
I stop
and start building
a little castle with
a big, deep moat
some centimeters
against the sea
a good place
as any
to make
 my stand

“A Simple Poem”

by A.J. Anwar

This is just a verse of poetry
which I want to come out
in the easiest language
in ordinary words, that is
the simplest

It must not be complicated
that you won't understand
No need to weigh you down
to make you leave away

The best is like a brush stroke
of a master painter
bringing life to colors
Like a master chef
locking tastes in
exquisite dishes

It has to be subtle, seem ordinary
until you think it's all so easy

You'll get to the truth somehow, I believe
when the time arrives to bow down
when you wish to uncover the secret
of all that is perfect

Let me present to you a regular poem
which is not long, only in several lines
nicely arranged, a page with lots of empty spaces
no need to be pretentious, much less difficult
just some few lines
in an array of words
 the easiest
 the simplest

* * * * *

“Thirty Temples”

by Mary Shanley

Thirty temples surround Angkor Wat.
All sacred sites, these temples, born
from antiquity, await visitors and
visionaries. I stand in the presence
of this holy vibrational site, where
meditation and prayer live in the air.
I am deeply at home with the Cambodian
people. The easy familiarity might provide
a key to unlock one of my previous lives.
I may embody a slice of antiquity, but all
that came before. Now, only whispers
and visions.

* * * * *

“Indonesian Swamp”

by Christina Petrides

A fat dappled snake twists on a muddy riverbank.
Slime-stained slender paddles push
Into blackness beneath
Ancient moss-specked trees.
A rotten log or hungry crocodile bumps
The thin bottom of the canoe.
The tourist sits frozen, drifting silently
Until the monster sinks invisible behind her.
Moist air seethes with mosquitoes.
Startled turtles dive into green water,
And birds call in fear—
A flock bursts skyward in a cloud of frantic flapping wings.

“PC Room”

by Christina Petrides

Outside air steams
With the memories of centuries
Of rice farms overbuilt with glass and steel
Highrises and bright heat of traffic.

In a dark room no creature stirs but
Bandwidth vampires—
Glowing, awkward,
Hunched and typing furiously.

My skirt curls in a breeze
From the air conditioner
Like a cat winding around my ankles.

* * * * *

“Static”

by John C. Mannone

It doesn't ever snow
on an Indo-Pacific island
except for the cold crackle
of my shortwave radio—
the only surviving

piece of wreckage, a link
to my far away world;
insanity, my only company.

Storms don't always come
at night, but nightmares do
with all their *mayday mayday*
roars...and from the airplane
engines drinking water.

Yet the only thing I could see
through horizons of ocean,
through waves of yesterday

was you. The last time
I saw you, snow flurries tangled
in your hair, the Chicago tarmac

dusted with Christmas white—
 night sky, a snow globe,

and that old song echoed in
the moonlight from your car radio—
Same Auld Lang Syne.

For a moment, I was back
in school where I kissed you
...and that old familiar pain
 came back.

I only live for yesterday, today
isn't static, and tomorrow sets
faster than the Pacific sun slips

into the sea. Its quenching, a cry
of static, snow changing to rain.