

Anak Sastra

Issue 35

Issue 35 Contents

short fiction

"First Marriage"

by Hardy Jones

"The Devil's Bible"

by Jonel Abellanosa

"Father McGuire"

by Daniel T. Emlyn-Jones

nonfiction

"The Yonder Bank"

by Lo Sin Yee

poems

"Traffic Lights"

by Benita J. Rosalind

"Her Mountain Town in the Philippines"

by Hilary Isabelle

"Grass" and "The One"

by Ronald Maliao

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Contributor Bios

Hardy Jones (Twitter: [@HardyJonesWrite](#)) is an educator and author in New Orleans. He is a two-time Pushcart nominee and the author of the novel [Every Bitter Thing](#) and the memoir [People of the Good God](#). His creative nonfiction has won two grants. His short stories were anthologized in the *Dogzplot Flash Fiction Anthology 2009*, *The Best of Clapboard House Literary Journal*, *Southern Gothic: New Tales of the South*, and *Summer Shorts II*. He is the cofounder and executive editor of the online journal [Cybersoleil](#). Hardy splits his time between New Orleans, Louisiana and Si Sa Ket Province, Thailand.

A previous contributor of *Anak Sastra*, **Jonel Abellanosa** resides in Cebu City, the Philippines. His poetry has appeared in numerous journals, including *Rattle*, *Poetry Kanto*, *McNeese Review*, *Mojave River Review*, and *Star*Line*. His poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and Dwarf Stars award. His fourth poetry collection, [Songs from My Mind's Tree](#), has been published in early 2018 by Clare Songbirds Publishing House, which will also publish his collection, *Multiverse*. His poetry collection, *Sounds in Grasses Parting*, is forthcoming from Moran Press. His first speculative poetry collection, *Pan's Saxophone*, is forthcoming from Weasel Press.

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*.

Lo Sin Yee is an English teacher in Miri, Malaysia. He took up creative writing several years ago. He likes to write about his childhood and the lives of the underdogs in society.

Benita J. Rosalind is an occasional poetess and fulltime creative based in New York. Born and raised in the bustling capital city Jakarta, Indonesia, she is trained to deal with terrible traffic. She currently studies neuroscience and economics at Vassar College and makes time to create content for various brands she partners with. Her broad range of creative work—film, writing, marketing—can be seen at her [website](#) and her writings are shared to her small, but dear-to-heart audience on [Instagram](#).

Hilary Isabelle is a half-Filipino, half-American writer based in Boston, Massachusetts, where she works at Harvard University. She has previously been published in *Rushlight Literary Magazine*.

[Ronald Maliao](#) is no poet. He just writes some of his random musings from his home in Aklan, Philippines. He is a marine biologist by profession.

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"First Marriage"

by Hardy Jones

That night, after pretending to fall asleep on her fiancé Luke's shoulder, Nat thought about the wedding ceremony she had had three years earlier in her village with Henri, a Swiss man. He was older and claimed to have a successful business in Switzerland. Nat met Henri when he came to the travel agency where she worked. He had booked a ticket back home as well as a return ticket to Thailand for the following week. As he ordered his ticket from the *khotey* who worked the front desk, Henri smiled at Nat, who sat at her desk in the back of the office, organizing receipts and keeping the books balanced. Once his tickets were ordered, Henri said hello in Thai to Nat and asked if he could speak to her. Nat didn't know why this blonde, blue-eyed *farang* wanted to speak to her. Since she was considered too dark and ugly by Thai men's standards, she didn't consider the possibility of romance with a *farang*, especially with one who due to his age—older men had financial security—skin, hair and eye color could easily have his choice of Thai women.

She walked to the front desk and he made small talk in Thai. She was impressed at his fluency, and was glad that she did not have to speak English with him. He asked her if she'd like to have dinner that night, and Nat didn't know what to answer. She was flattered that a *farang* asked her out, but she wasn't really attracted to this man. She thought he was old—after he left the office she checked his paperwork and discovered that he was sixty—but the fact that a *farang* asked her out made her feel special.

"I have to have dinner with my sister tonight," Nat said.

"Then what about a drink after work?"

"I don't drink alcohol."

"We don't have to drink alcohol. We can get coffee or tea."

Nat's co-workers had stopped pretending to be occupied with work and listened intently. Other *farang*, handsome ones that they talked about for days later, had come in

before, but no *farang* had asked one of them out. Nat knew her co-workers wanted her to say 'Yes', but she knew her family's customs: she would have to have Pee Rum as a chaperone.

The *khotey* slid a piece of paper in front of Nat and written in Thai it read: "Say yes!!!"

Nat folded the paper and glanced at the *khotey*, who slinked to the back of the office.

"A little drink after work won't hurt you," Henri said.

At that moment, Nat recalled her tenth birthday when she told her father: I will marry a *farang*. Her father had smiled, but the others in the village had laughed at the child's bold proclamation. Now thirteen years later, her father deceased, and she in Bangkok, Nat began to believe, for an instant, that her fate was coming true.

After work, Henri met her on the sidewalk in front of the travel agency. The sky was pink and orange, and shadows were beginning to lengthen as they walked to a Western-style coffee shop near her office. Everyday Nat walked by this coffee shop, but she had never entered; the prices were too high for her salary, and since it specialized in Western drinks, its fare was unknown to her.

Henri ordered himself a cappuccino and asked Nat what she wanted.

"You order, please."

He got her a cup of green tea.

Quietly they waited on their drinks. Should she speak? If she remained quiet, would he think she dumb? Boring? Or did he like her silence? Did it make her appealing—the obedient Asian woman?

The server was a young Thai man who smiled at Henri, but scowled at Nat as he set their drinks in front of them. Nat lowered her eyes.

"Do not allow him to make you feel bad," Henri said.

"He sees me with you and thinks I'm a bargirl."

"Do not worry about him. Or any other Thai. We know the truth."

Nat raised her eyes and smiled. Henri raised his cup, motioned for Nat to do the same, and he made a toast to new friends.

Nat felt more at ease and listened attentively as Henri spoke about his shop in Switzerland that sold Asian goods and European antiques. Due to her father having been a

merchant, Nat understood this talk and Henri's pride in his business. Her father had had the largest shop in the village; Nat worked in it as a child and her father hired many workers for his rice fields. After her mother's death, he took to drink and little by little the shop went down until he finally sold it. But he never sold the farm land, and Nat's family continued to be one of the largest landholders in the village.

Before Henri and Nat parted ways that night, he asked if he could take her photo.

"I shy," Nat replied.

Really Nat feared that he would place her photo on the internet, and while the photo itself was innocent, she was not sure how he may alter it or in what context it would be placed.

"There is no reason for you to be shy. You are a beautiful young lady."

"Thank you." Nat *waied* to him. "We take photo together."

Henri didn't answer immediately and Nat feared that she had angered him, but after one last sip of his cappuccino, he agreed. They leaned in closely and the golden stubble on his face pricked Nat's cheek. She didn't mind the scratchy feeling; she'd never felt whiskers; her father had never shaved and her one Thai boyfriend in college, to his disdain, was never able to grow thick whiskers.

The first photograph was taken with his phone and the second with hers.

When they walked out of the coffee shop, Henri hailed a cab and asked her to join him.

"I live the other way."

"Then come to my hotel."

Nat's worst fear: Henri thought, like many *farang* men did, that every Thai woman could be had for sex.

"No."

"Oh, I am sorry. I did not mean for you to join me in that way."

"What way did you mean?"

"For us to talk more and get to know each other."

"Talk is not for a hotel."

"Yes. Yes. I suppose you are correct. Then give me your number and I'll call you tomorrow."

After Nat gave her her number, he rode off in the cab, and she called Pee Rum, who told her to come over immediately. They must talk about Henri the *farang*.

Nat showed Pee Rum their photo. The sisters sat on a mat eating mango slices, and Pee Rum said, "He looks kind and honest. When will you see him again?"

"Tomorrow."

"Good. I should come with you."

Nat knew that was custom, but a chaperone seemed old fashioned and very Thai. Henri was not Thai, so why must she perform a Thai custom with him?

"I think it's better if I see him alone."

"It is not proper," Pee Rum said, slicing another mango. "Our family's reputation will be damaged."

"We're in Bangkok. No one knows our family here."

"You don't want this *farang* to think you're like the bargirls."

"That's why I didn't go with him to his hotel room tonight."

Pee Rum cut her finger and a drop of blood stained a mango slice. She wrapped the end of her sarong around the cut. Nat stood to get the alcohol, but Pee Rum motioned for her to sit, saying the cut was not deep.

"He asked you to stay with him at his hotel?"

"I don't know if he wanted me to stay the night, but he asked me to go there with him."

"Maybe you should have gone."

"But what about our family's reputation? What about my reputation?"

"As you said, this is Bangkok. And he's a *farang*. He doesn't know our traditional ways." Pee Rum discarded the bloodied mango slice. "Since he's a *farang*, maybe he thinks Thai women are supposed to go with him. Maybe he won't see you again."

"If he doesn't call, then it's not my fate to be with him."

"Don't joke about fate. This may be your only chance to marry a *farang*."

"Why are you talking about me marrying Henri? I just met him today."

"*Farang* men, especially ones with money, do not come around often."

"How do you know he has money?"

"He can afford to come to Thailand. And you said he has a business in his country."

“But many *farang* come to Thailand because they are in trouble in their country.”

“If he were in trouble in his country, why would he buy a ticket to return there?”

“If he weren’t in trouble, why would he buy a ticket to return to Thailand a week later?”

“But if he were in trouble, he would not return to his country at all. Think, Nat. Think.”

“I am, but it sounds as if you are thinking of my life without thinking about me.”

“Father is gone. You’re the youngest child. A good size dowry could help the family.”

“Dowry sounds as if you’re selling me, the same way the women in bars sell themselves.”

“A dowry is part of our culture. Has been for centuries.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“The family must get something.”

“Why? You’re not Father. If Father was alive, I would agree to a dowry. Why should you profit from my life?”

“Pee O paid a dowry when he married me. Why should you be any different?”

“Because your dowry went to Father.”

Nat watched Pee Rum wash the sticky mango remnants and blood from her hands in a small bucket of water. Nat knew she had angered her sister, but she would stand up for herself. She would not allow her older siblings—an older brother Pee Thurd—to profit from her marriage. Her marriage...all this talk with Pee Rum now had her thinking as if marriage to Henri was a possibility.

Pee Rum pulled her feet under her and softly cleared her throat. “I am sorry. I should not speak of marriage concerning a man you just met.”

“Would you have spoken of marriage so quickly if Henri was Thai?”

“While you may not marry Henri, you must marry. And soon.”

“Why? So you can have my dowry?”

“No. Because you are getting too old to still be single.”

“Afraid I’ll become a burden?”

“No, an embarrassment.”

Nat's phone rang. She pulled it out of her purse and though she didn't recognize the number, her anger at Pee Rum made her answer. It was Henri; he apologized for calling so soon, but he couldn't stop thinking about her. Not wanting Pee Rum to be able to eavesdrop, Nat asked in English the name and address of his hotel. His voice lifted as he gave her the information. When Nat hung up the phone, Pee Rum asked if that was Henri, but Nat only answered: "I have to go."

As Nat rode in the cab, she did not know that Pee Rum remained on the mat smiling.

After paying the fare, Nat only had fifty Baht left. The hotel was on Sukhumvit in the ex-patriot part of Bangkok. She was impressed at the hotel's height, the sign out front read twenty-floors; the white exterior gleamed under the night lights. A man in a white military-like uniform stood in front of the hotel's door. Nat knew he was supposed to open the door for her, but he only stood there, arms at his side and a disapproving look on his face. She reached for the door, and the man asked, "What is your business here?"

"I'm meeting..." She thought for the most appropriate word: friend, boyfriend...but those words could make the doorman think less of her. In this neighborhood of go-gos and brothels, many Thai women had *farang* "friends" and "boyfriends."

"I'm meeting my husband."

The doorman looked quizzical, and Nat realized that her lie was unoriginal. But after a few seconds he opened the door. Nat had forgotten to ask Henri his room number, so she approached the front desk. A Thai woman, perhaps in her late twenties, wearing a white sports coat and matching skirt, greeted her, and when Nat asked for Henri's room number, the lady countered with: "What is his last name?"

She did not recall his last name immediately, and then Nat felt anger toward this woman, who asked the question intending to make her look like a cheap fool. The woman smiled, revealing teeth in a pseudo-friendly gesture, but Nat had the final laugh when she recalled Henri's paperwork and last name: Gauche.

"Would you like for me to spell it for you?" Nat asked.

The woman called Henri, and in English worse than Nat's asked him if he was expecting a visitor, and if so, was it ok to send her up? The woman hung up the phone and brusquely told Nat the room number. Nat smiled and in a voice softer and sweeter than cotton candy thanked the woman for her assistance.

Henri stood in his room's doorway and waved to Nat as she stepped off the elevator and on to the twelfth floor. Henri looked different. He had not changed clothes and he had not bathed, but Nat noticed a different air about him. Perhaps the difference was not Henri's but hers.

When he reached out his arms to hug her, Nat did not, as she would have before, stop him from enveloping her petite body.

"Are you hungry?" Henri asked.

This is the first question Thai friends ask each other in polite greetings, so his inquiry made Nat comfortable. With his hand in the small of her back, Henri guided her into his hotel room. Nat had never seen the inside of a *farang* hotel, and she was shocked that his room had a sitting area, a sleeping area, and a bathroom. Nat's apartment, like her sister's, was simply one room. Henri asked if she would like to have room service or go out.

"Which would you like?" Nat said.

"I recently discovered a lovely French restaurant around the corner."

As they walked out, Nat smiled at the receptionist and thanked the doorman.

All through dinner Nat weighed the idea of whether she would spend the night with Henri. She had lost her virginity when she was a junior in university to her one and only boyfriend, a Thai boy she had met in an Accounting class. Nat was surprised when he spoke to her because he was considered handsome: well-built, a small-frame with light skin, the perfect Thai male specimen. Boys like him had never paid attention to Nat before, and at first she told herself that he simply wanted help with the class's final project; by that time in the semester the other students knew that Nat had the only "A" in the class. When the class was over, Nat did not return to her hometown to stay in her father's house and work in the family's rice fields as she had done previously. Instead she and the boy (she could not bring herself to say his name again) hung out and one night, after a day at the beach, they returned to her apartment. Nat thought she might be in love and she knew for certain that she wanted to have sex.

Her virginity at that time weighed on her, made her feel like a child. She went against Thai customs and her father's warnings and had sex before marriage. The pain was severe, but not surprising. What surprised her was how her feelings for the boy did not change. She had thought that once they had sex, she would definitely be in love, an intense,

romantic love as she had seen in movies and read in novels. When her emotions did not intensify, she refused to have sex again; she and the boy, who bragged about his conquest to their peers at the university, drifted apart. Upon graduation, Nat found a job and remained in Bangkok, where no one knew that she was no longer a virgin.

Since that first sexual encounter, Nat had been chaste. She had not dated anyone, but working in the travel agency, she had day-dreamed about some of the *farang* customers. Would sex with a *farang* be different? She looked across the table and studied Henri: yellow hair encircled his balding head, and while many women would have focused on the hair, Nat was intrigued by the bald spot: its whiteness and the light that reflected off it; she had seen Thai men with bald spots, but their scalps were dark, and Nat was tired of seeing darkness. Henri's head beaded sweat and Nat raised her napkin. Henri tried to stop her, but she said: "Your head is cute like a baby," and he allowed her to dab away the sweat.

Back in the hotel room, Nat lost some of the desire she had had in the restaurant. She worried she could not please him. She figured that Henri had been married before and was therefore accustomed to the touch of a wife, a loving wife who knew how to satisfy him. And even if he had not been married, Nat was certain that Henri had been to the go-gos and had been with experienced women. What could she, only one carnal encounter removed from being a virgin, offer him?

Henri asked her to have a seat while he went to the bathroom. Nat looked around the hotel suite: a sofa against the far wall, a chair in each corner, and a chair at the desk. Nat was raised without sofas and chairs, and she didn't have any in her apartment, so she did as she would have normally and tucked her legs under her and sat on the floor near the foot of the bed.

"My dear," Henri said returning in his bathrobe, "please, sit on the furniture."

Nat was embarrassed by her mistake, and afraid she had angered him.

Henri sat on the bed and patted the space next to him. Nat joined him and he placed his arm around her. He turned on the television to an English language news program, which they silently watched for several minutes. Nat listened intently to the program, but she could not focus. Her mind was on Henri and what was to come. He had not said anything about making love, but Nat was not so naive as to think that they would simply watch television all night.

Henri yawned often and each time his body moved, Nat braced herself. But the actions that she assumed would follow never did. Perhaps, she thought, he will awaken during the night and make love to me. After a few more yawns, Henri told her that he was going to sleep and that she was welcome to stay. Nat thanked him and went to the bathroom where she stripped to her undergarments. Once she was in bed, Henri turned off the lights, kissed her on the forehead, and held her in his arms.

Nat closed her eyes and waited a few minutes, but he did nothing more. Meekly in the dark, she said, "Don't you want to make love to me?"

"Yes, my dear. I most certainly do. But not tonight. We will have many more opportunities."

He kissed her lips and squeezed her tightly. Nat snuggled closer to him.

She awoke in the morning disoriented. The curtains were pulled shut with the morning sun encroaching around their edges, giving the room a dusky light, and before she saw it, she felt Henri's arm weighing on her stomach. She looked at him; his bald spot was in her face, and she saw wispy fine hairs arranged on the top of his head; the night before she had thought the bald spot was hairless flesh. She looked at her watch, saw she had an hour before work, and gently moved Henri's arm as she slid from underneath. She quietly dressed in the bathroom, and once she returned to the bed, she nudged his shoulder. Henri grumbled in French, Nat nudged a little harder, and he slapped her hand.

For a moment she considered leaving without saying good-bye, but that would not provide the correct impression. Nat again nudged his shoulder and Henri said in Thai, "Stop, Phet."

Hearing another Thai woman's name, Nat pushed more forcefully on his shoulder. Henri rolled to the other side of the bed and raised his head off the pillow; his face wore a sleepy scowl.

"Who is Phet?" Nat said; Henri looked confused. "Answer me."

"Phet is my ex-wife."

"How long have you been divorced?"

"Almost two years."

"She is in Thailand or your country?"

"Thailand."

“Bangkok?”

Henri stood. “Yes. Why all these questions?”

“You called me Phet.”

“I was asleep, my dear. I didn’t know what I was saying.”

“You dream of her while you sleep with me?”

“No, no. You’re the first woman I’ve had in my bed since we divorced. I must have said her name out of habit. Please don’t hold my sleeping mind against me.”

“I am going to work.”

“I’ll pick you up for lunch.”

Nat did not answer as she left the room. An ex-wife, especially a Thai ex-wife, was not a possibility Nat had thought about. She took the sky-train to her apartment, showered, changed clothes, and headed to work. The whole morning in her office she considered calling Pee Rum, but while she wanted to tell her about this ex-wife, Nat still was not ready to talk to her sister. She remembered that Henri said he would see her for lunch, so Nat left the office early.

As she walked down the street, her phone rang and Nat, figuring it was Henri, didn’t take it from her purse. A minute later the phone rang again; Nat still didn’t look at it, but when she heard the voicemail chime, she took out the phone and listened to the message. Pee Rum had called, said she was sorry for yesterday, and could they meet for lunch. Nat called her sister and they arranged to meet at an outdoor noodle shop halfway between their jobs.

After they took their seats and ordered, Pee Rum apologized again. Nat forgave her and told her about Phet.

“An ex-wife is not a problem. If he was still married, that would be a problem,” Pee Rum said.

“But his ex-wife is Thai. If she were *farang*, it would be different.”

“How?”

“Since his ex-wife is Thai, it makes me feel like the second choice.”

“But even if his ex-wife was *farang*, you would still be his second wife.”

“No. If his ex-wife was *farang*, then I would be his first Thai wife.”

“But *farang* or Thai, a woman is a woman and a wife is a wife.” Pee Rum set down her chopsticks and leaned closer to Nat. “He is divorced. You are not his second choice, you are his new choice.”

When Nat returned to work the *khotey* told her that Henri had come by asking for her. “You have *farang* boyfriend now?”

Nat ignored the question and went to the small copy room where she could call Henri with some privacy. He asked her where she had been during lunch and Nat explained that she had met her sister. Henri said that he was returning to Switzerland tomorrow and that he would like to see her tonight. Nat thought about his ex-wife, thought about what Pee Rum said: his new choice. This young lady who Thai men looked over was chosen by a *farang*.

Nat told him she would come to his hotel after work.

She did not worry about the doorman or the lady at the front desk as she entered the building and took the elevator straight to Henri’s floor. She did, however, worry that night as she lay in his bed. Would Henri be upset that she was not a virgin? Would he know that she was not a virgin? If he asked (if virginity meant as much to *farang* men as it did to Thai men she assumed he might) what would she tell him? The truth? But Henri might want a pure woman. Perhaps she would lie...

To her relief Henri did not ask. And his lovemaking was slow. Nat was shocked by his tenderness. Her other experience had been quick and rough. She found Henri’s pale body intriguing: his whiteness shone in the dimly lit room. Nat thought he appeared magical. She kissed him all over, wanting to consume his hue. That night as they lay in each others’ arms Henri asked her if she would wait for him to return next week.

“When I return, I want us to be together. Is that nice?”

“Yes. It is very nice.”

While Henri was gone, Nat and he emailed daily. At first, they talked about their days, what she did in the office and what he was doing in Switzerland, but as the days passed they made plans for his return. He wanted to rent an apartment; his business would keep him mainly in Thailand, and he wanted to set up a permanent residence. Would she move in with him? Nat wrote that the idea sounded good, but she could not move in with

him unless they were married. Nat figured his answer would let her know if he was serious about being with her. To her surprise, Henri said yes, they would marry as soon as he returned.

Nat knew this was quick. But she saw Henri as her fate, her destiny, her *farang*. In the back of her mind was also Pee Rum's warning: You are getting too old to be single. Nat knew her father would be proud that she would marry, and even more so if he knew she was marrying a *farang*. Once her father took to drink, in his more inebriated moments he would tell Nat how he was sorry that he would not see her wedding, would not see her husband, and would not see her children.

"Please don't say that, Father. You will live to be old and play with my children," Nat always responded. She could not imagine a world without her father. Nat decided that she would use all of the knowledge he had taught her about cooking, cleaning, and making a husband happy; by doing so, she would keep her father's presence alive.

Nat wanted to meet Henri at the airport, but his flight arrived in the middle of the day, and he said he would call her from the hotel after he was settled in. Nat took off work the next day and they went to a gold shop in Chinatown. He bought her a gold band and a necklace with a charm containing the portrait of King Rama V, the protector of women. After jewelry shopping, they looked at apartments in the ex-patriot section around Sukhumvit Road. They found one that allowed them to move in the following week.

Thus far Nat had kept their upcoming marriage a secret from her co-workers and family, but after Henri signed the lease on the apartment, she visited her sister.

"You must have the ceremony in our village," Pee Rum said.

"I was thinking we'd have the ceremony in his Bangkok apartment."

"No. You must marry in front of the family."

"I don't know if Henri will want to go to our village."

"If he wants you to be his wife, he will go."

Nat returned to the apartment and asked Henri if they could have the wedding ceremony in her village. At first he was quiet and rubbed his hand across his face. Nat knew this was a sign of aggravation; she had seen him do it when they apartment hunted. She braced herself.

"Why must we marry in your village?"

“So my family sees us. It is tradition.”

“Is this so they can ‘see’ the dowry?”

“You don’t have to pay dowry.”

Henri’s body language lightened. “But isn’t that part of the tradition?”

“Yes. But I don’t care.”

“What about your family?”

“You are not marrying them, you are marrying me.”

Henri smiled and hugged Nat.

The next day Nat called her sister and told her that they would have the wedding in their village. Pee Rum did not take the news about the dowry so well, but she agreed to attend and help plan the wedding for the following month.

Word spread throughout Nat’s village that she would be marrying a *farang*, an older *farang* from “Swiss land” the villagers said. And he was a wealthy *farang*. The villagers, like many Thais, mistakenly thought all *farang* were wealthy, but since Henri was a businessman, they believed he was even wealthier. Along with the wedding buzz, there were the naysayers. Nat, the silly tomboy who had grown up to be a dark skinned woman, could not have a *farang* fiancé. This was a lie, a rumor her family, or perhaps the girl, had started. They would wait and would not believe until they saw Henri.

A large portion of the villagers were proven wrong when the rented van with Nat, Henri, and Pee Rum, arrived from Bangkok. The wedding was held in Nat’s family’s house, and all of her family and friends as well as curious onlookers attended the wedding and party afterwards. Most of the villagers had never seen a *farang*, and even those that had seen them on television or in photos could not believe how large he was and how the hair on his head and arms was the color of gold. There were whispers and giggles about his bald spot.

At the wedding, they did not sign a marriage certificate. Henri had convinced Nat to wait and complete that final step back in Bangkok. After the wedding there was no honeymoon. The couple returned to Bangkok, Nat gave up her apartment, and moved her things into the new place. Henri informed her that she no longer had to work at the travel agency. He wanted his wife to stay home. At first not having a job was a shock; Nat had worked in her father’s store since she was a small child and after he lost his store, she

worked in the rice fields. Nat could not recall a time when she did not have a job, but she liked that Henri took care of her, and she made their new home as comfortable as she could.

Nat loved the new apartment. It was Western style, two beds and two baths—Nat liked having the extra rooms but she wasn't sure why they needed them—and a large living room with a balcony overlooking a motorcycle-taxi stand on the corner of the street. Most of all Nat loved the large kitchen and its appliances: a microwave (although she wasn't sure what she would cook with it), a refrigerator taller than Henri, and a large stove top with four burners. In her old apartment, Nat used a propane burner, and could only cook one dish at a time, but when she saw the four burners, she imagined four course meals.

While Henri was fluent in Thai, he did not like much Thai food, especially the spicy dishes. Like most *farang*, he loved phad Thai, and Nat cooked it daily for him. She enjoyed phad Thai as well, but after a month her body craved the sting and burn of chilies and curries. One morning after she cleaned the apartment, she went in the kitchen and pounded green curry in her mortar and pestle.

"Please take that horrible noise out to the balcony," Henri said from the sofa where he lay reading a newspaper from his country.

His request surprised Nat, but she didn't want to upset her husband. Once she finished pounding the curry on the balcony, she returned to the kitchen and prepared to add it to the pot of simmering coconut milk.

"What are you doing?" Henri had walked into the kitchen and towered over her.

"I am cooking green curry and chicken with Thai eggplants. I think you will like it."

"You know I don't eat spicy food."

"Green curry is not too spicy."

"Spicy or not, it stinks to high heaven."

"Stinks?"

"*Min*," Henri said in Thai.

Nat knew that some Thai foods smelled too strong for *farangs*, but she had never heard anyone complain about the smell of curry.

"If you insist on cooking this smelly meal, you must do it on the balcony."

"Why?"

“Because I will not have you making the apartment malodorous.”

Nat could not understand Henri’s dislike of her curry. *Farang* from all over the world came to Thailand for the cuisine. But here was a *farang*, and more importantly her husband, telling her she could not cook inside their apartment.

“While I cook and after I cook, I will burn incense.”

“Incense will not remove the smell from the furniture. If you want to cook your food, go on the balcony.”

“This is not fair. We are husband and wife. We are supposed to share with each other.”

“I paid for this apartment. And I will not have you making it smell like a street vendor’s food stall.”

The mortar shook in her hand and the coconut milk simmered and steamed and Nat thought of throwing the hot milk in Henri’s face. Her father’s voice sounded in her head: A wife must obey her husband just as you obey me. Even when his reasons are not clear, you must obey. Nat stepped around Henri and took the mortar to the trash can, dumping the curry, and then she returned to the stove top, where she lifted the pot of coconut milk and poured it in the sink.

As she washed the mortar and the pot in the sink, Henri stepped close behind her and kissed her head.

The next morning Henri left without eating breakfast and when Nat asked where he was going, all he said was “Out.” Nat noticed how large and quiet the apartment was. All of the neighbors were *farangs*, mainly single men, with whom Nat had no contact. The only other Thai women she saw in the building were maids, older women who looked askance at Nat, thinking she was a *farang’s* lover. She wanted to yell at these women: I am not a bargirl, I am a wife.

Nat cleaned the apartment during Henri’s absence, but since she cleaned daily, there was not much housework to do, and in under a half hour she found herself sitting on the sofa, her feet under her, clutching a small yellow pillow. I follow Father’s lessons, but they don’t seem to make Henri happy. Is this my destiny?

Later that day, Henri returned carrying a bouquet of red roses and a small gift bag. Nat did not like red roses; pink roses were fine: they were the flower of King Rama V, the

protector of women. Why could Henri have not bought pink roses? She could have set them on her small altar on the bedside table. But red roses...

“My dear, women the world over love red roses.”

“I am not like women of the world.”

“Certainly.” He strode to the kitchen’s garbage can, lifted the bouquet above his head and looked over his shoulder at Nat; his eyes beseeching her: Do I trash them?

“They will die in a few days anyway.”

Henri slammed the roses into the trash can.

“Orchids can live a long time,” Nat said, “and they are the pride of Thailand.”

“Since you do not like red roses, perhaps you will like your gift.” He removed a small velvet box from a small shopping bag, and opened the box, revealing diamond stud earrings. “You do like diamonds?”

“I prefer gold.”

“But people, not just women, the world over love diamonds. Blood is daily spilled for them.”

“Diamonds shine, but they lose their value. Gold can always be sold at one of the Bangkok shops.”

“You would sell a gift from your husband?”

“My husband did not buy me a gift that could be sold.”

Henri had returned to the apartment, to Nat’s life, but their intimacy was strained. The one part of married life that her father had not prepared her for was the marital bed. It is always difficult for a single father to teach a daughter about sex, and Mr. Khot-asa could not have guessed at Henri’s perverse proclivities. At the end of their second month as a married couple, they were in bed and Henri, to Nat’s surprise and approval, had initiated intimacy. During intercourse Henri stopped and said, “Piss on me.”

“What?”

“Piss on me so I can finish.”

“What does ‘piss’ mean?”

“Pee-pee on me.”

Nat pushed him off her and jumped out of bed. “That is not natural.”

“Sex is very natural.”

“That not sex. That bathroom work.”

“Shall we go to the bathroom then?”

“No. Sex is for the bedroom and pee-pee is for the bathroom.”

“But I want you to pee on me.”

“I not do.”

“A good wife would.”

“Then I not a good wife.”

Henri stood, grabbed her arm, and yanked her onto the bed. Nat slapped his face and her fingernails sliced his skin. She was momentarily shocked at how crimson the blood was against his pale skin. He pushed her onto the floor, felt the side of his face, and when he saw the blood on his fingers, he reached for her face. His eyes were bright and full of what Nat knew her father would call an evil spirit. He smeared the blood on her face. Nat tried to stand, but her legs were pins and needles; and when he felt her move, Henri snatched her down by her hair. Nat knew that she screamed, but there was no sound. He squatted over her, continuing to smear his blood on her face.

Nat wanted to close her eyes but she couldn't. Something inside of her told her to keep them open, to keep looking at him, to see what her husband was doing to her, and to never let him do it again. Henri's legs buckled and he collapsed onto her chest. Breathing became difficult for Nat, and she thought he was trying to suffocate her, but then her face felt even warmer than it had with his blood. She realized he'd had an orgasm.

She lay on the floor and heard Henri slam the bathroom door. Water ran in the shower and he sang a song his language; Nat was in disbelief. He sounded so carefree. Had it been his plan to marry her and then reduce her to nothing? Nat wished she had known her mother; perhaps she could have prepared her daughter for such a brutal act. But the more she thought about it, Nat knew her mother would not have been able to prepare her for what had just happened because her mother would not have had a frame of reference, for her father would not have treated his wife in such a beastly manner.

When the water stopped in the shower, Nat held her breath, afraid of what would come next. Would he abuse her more? Would he rape her? The bathroom door opened and she heard him rummage in the closet on the other side of the bed. Next she heard his

footsteps thunder past her. The lock on the front door clicked and the next sound she heard was the door slamming. Tears moistened the crusty blood and semen.

Nat lay on the floor and in her mental and physical exhaustion momentarily dozed off. When she awoke she hoped she'd had a nightmare, but the evidence was tangible. She walked lightly to the bathroom and scrubbed her face until it felt raw and remained in the shower until the running water turned cold. Shaking, she dried off, put on clean clothes, and sat on the bathroom floor in silent thought. Should I leave? Should I leave him? Should I tell the police? But what would the police do? What could they do? Nat felt hopeless. Was this her life? What karma had she earned to deserve such treatment? Was it the lack of a dowry for her family? Were her ancestors' spirits punishing her?

These questions went unanswered and engendered more tears. Nat called Pee Rum, and before she could speak, she cried into the phone. Pee Rum cajoled and cried in response to Nat's tears, and told her younger sister that she was coming over. When Nat opened the apartment's door, Pee Rum rushed in, took her sister in her arms, and asked what happened.

Nat didn't know if she could say what Henri did; thinking about it made her cry harder, and trying to verbalize the incident turned her stomach. She broke free of Pee Rum and ran to the bathroom, just making it before she vomited a clear and burning spew into the toilet. Pee Rum rubbed her back and pulled back her hair; Nat wretched until she had dry heaves.

Seeing her sister vomit, Pee Rum's first thought was that her sister was pregnant.

"Where is Henri?"

"I don't know." Nat wiped her face and hid it in a towel.

Pee Rum pulled the towel away from her. "Why don't you know?"

"He left earlier tonight."

"He didn't say where he was going?"

"He didn't say anything." Nat snatched back the towel and buried her face in it.

"Why did he leave?"

"He's angry at me."

Nat's stomach churned, but she didn't think she'd vomit. Pee Rum slowly pulled down the towel and mouthed the word "Why."

“I didn’t make him happy in bed.”

Pee Rum stepped away from her sister, and said: “Do you think he went to his ex-wife?”

Nat had not considered this as a possibility. But he had said that his ex-wife lived in Bangkok. Before Pee Rum’s question, Nat thought he was probably out drinking; and then she thought about him picking up a woman at a bar. The go-gos were shut down at this time of the morning, but many regular bars stay opened and women went to these places to pick up customers. Would Henri find someone to piss on him?

“Why is your first thought that he ran to his ex-wife?”

“Maybe she does something in bed that you do not.”

“If she does, then she is more animal than human.”

Earlier Nat had thought she could never vocalize what Henri had demanded of her, but now she wanted to tell, wanted Pee Rum to know that she had not failed as a wife.

“Henri wanted me to pee-pee on him.”

Pee Rum’s face slacked. After a few moments she regained her composure and asked Nat to repeat herself.

Pee Rum said, “You must have misunderstood him.”

“Why don’t you believe me?”

“That request is not normal,” Pee Rum said. “Why would he ask you to do such a thing?”

“He said if I do not pee-pee on him, he could not finish. I never heard of such a thing.”

Pee Rum nodded her agreement.

Nat took her sister’s hand and said, “Let’s return to your apartment.”

“No. You must stay here.”

“Why?”

“You are his wife, and you should be here when he returns.”

“What if he doesn’t return?”

“He will.”

“And what do I do when he does?”

“You listen and obey him.”

“But he is not a man. He is a monster.”

“He is your husband. You must be with him and obey him.”

“Why won’t you help, Pee Rum? You are my sister. The only family I have in Bangkok.”

“I am helping you. If he returns and you are gone, he can say that you left him and demand back the ring and necklace he bought you.”

“Forget the jewelry. What about me?”

“You and the jewelry are inseparable.”

“Why are you taking his side? Don’t you care that he hurt me?”

Pee Rum spoke through tears: “Yes, of course I care. But you are married, and sometimes a wife has to endure hardships.”

Henri returned three days later. During that time Nat did not leave the apartment or call anyone. He returned at lunch time; Nat was in the kitchen cooking a pot of *khotum*—rice soup—when she heard his key in the door. From the kitchen she saw the front door open, his bald spot popped in, and Nat noticed that he wore different clothes. She wanted him to apologize and therefore she did not speak when he stood in the center of the living room looking at her. She poured the soup into a bowl, which she took to the kitchen table. She sat with her back to him. His footsteps thudded on the wooden floor, and at first she thought they were coming toward her, but he never entered the kitchen or reached the table. When the footsteps stopped, she heard the bedroom door shut.

Nat heard the water in the shower and she imagined his body in there slippery with water and soap. Was he washing away his shame as she had in that same shower? Did he think he had wronged her? Was his time away to make her miss him?

Nat entered the bathroom, full of steam emanating from the shower.

“You have come to join me?” Henri asked.

“I come to ask where you been.”

“I needed time to think.”

“Think about what?”

“I believe I may have been too harsh with you.” Henri stepped from under the shower head; his golden hair lay flat around the sides of his head and water beaded on his bald spot. “I am sorry if I scared or hurt you.”

“You did both.”

“Please allow me to make it up to you. After I shower we will go out to eat. Run and put on a nice dress.”

Nat changed into a yellow silk dress that he’d had made for her upon their return to Bangkok after the wedding. She had matching heels and a purse too. She helped Henri on with his black sports coat and tied the tiny laces to his leather shoes. They stood together and Henri leaned down and kissed her forehead. Her heart and disposition lightened.

She thought they were going to the Chinese restaurant a few blocks away that Henri liked, but they went to an Italian restaurant. Nat became nervous. She’d never eaten Italian food; she’d seen Pizza Hut in the mall, but never tried it. Pizza consisted of so much bread and cheese and her tastes for these items were not developed. She prayed that the restaurant would have other dishes.

The wait staff was Thai women dressed in men’s black shirts and slacks. The chef, their server said, was from Italy. Henri smiled and helped Nat with her chair. If the chef were Thai, Nat wondered, would Henri have demanded they leave? The server never looked at Nat; instead she always addressed Henri, who, without asking Nat, ordered for her.

“What did you order for me?”

“Parmesan chicken. I know you’ll like it.”

“I do not like chicken much. Menu has seafood.” She held up the menu as the server tried to take it away. Nat snatched it and held it front of Henri’s face. “See?” She slid her pointer finger under the English words ‘seafood medley: shrimp, mussels, and clams in alfredo sauce over angel hair pasta.’ I want this dish.”

“I have already ordered.”

“She can erase my order. She is standing there. Tell her.”

“Please, Nat. Try the parmesan chicken.”

Nat turned to the server and forcefully said: “*Mai ow kai* parmesan. *Khun ow* seafood medley *kha*.”

Other diners turned in the direction of Nat's voice and the server's eyes grew large; their whites sparkled with tension as she stood frozen beside their table.

"Why are you waiting? Write down my new order." Nat addressed the server in a lower voice, but still in Thai.

"What would, sir, like me to do?" the server asked.

"Bring her the seafood medley, and bring me a bottle of red wine." After the server walked away, Henri slid his hand across the table, took Nat's hand, and asked: "Why are you being difficult?"

"I like seafood."

"Would it have killed you to try the parmesan chicken?"

"It kill you to order what your wife want?"

"It kills me that you are being so obstinate."

"What means obstinate?"

"Hard headed like a water buffalo."

"You think I am like a water buffalo? That means you married a water buffalo. What does that say about you?"

"We can all make mistakes."

"Marry me a mistake? Maybe marry you a mistake."

"Why are we arguing? Because of chicken and seafood? Is that worthy of us fighting?"

"Not chicken and seafood. You not think about my likes and dislikes."

"I am sorry, honey. I was only trying to help."

He slid his hand across the table and placed it on top of hers. The server set the wine bottle in the center of their table and wine glasses in front of them. After she opened the bottle and filled their glasses, Henri raised his and toasted Nat. "To my beautiful wife."

Nat had never been involved in a make-up situation with her Thai boyfriend, so she found Henri's gesture and toast most romantic. She decided not to ask him where he had been for the last three days. Instead, she enjoyed her seafood medley, a taste of wine (it made her face flush and her chest burn), and did not suspect Henri's after dinner plan. They walked holding hands down the sidewalk, and at first they were in the upscale ex-patriot area, but as they continued walking, they began passing more and more bars. Initially the

bars were just small affairs, but Nat noticed that Thai women in various types of dress—some like schoolgirls, some like nurses, and some in bikinis—stood in the doorways. Nat did not have ill feelings toward these women—they had to make a living too—but she didn't know why Henri was bringing her to this area.

Perhaps they had to walk through this section of bars to arrive at their destination. That thought soothed Nat's mind for a few minutes, until the bars became larger and louder and *farang* men, several of them drunk, milled around the sidewalks. The women now stood in front of the bars and Nat had never seen women in such scanty outfits.

"Why are we here?"

"I want to take you someplace special."

"How is the place special?"

"You'll see, my dear."

Nat wanted to run away, but after so many twisting streets and alleys she wasn't sure if she could find her way back to the main thoroughfare Sukhumvit. She was afraid that every Thai woman's greatest fear of a *farang* man had come true: he was going to sell her to a bar.

Henri led her by the arm to a bar with a blinking neon sign that read: Cowboys. The women in front wore cheap cowboy hats that Nat had seen for sale in the flea market and they had button up shirts that were tied in front of their chests revealing smooth stomachs. The women smiled and stepped toward Henri, but when they saw Nat, the women, still smiling, stepped back. Black beads hung in the doorway and Henri parted them with his free hand; Nat saw two stages, each with three golden poles. On the stages were Thai women in bikinis, and on their bottoms were a round pin with a number.

"I do not want to go in," Nat said.

"This is not about what you want." Henri's grip tightened and he pulled her behind him as he went to a corner table.

"You were here for the last three days?" Nat asked.

"I came where they know how to treat a man."

"Women here pee-pee on you?"

Henri cast angry eyes at Nat, but he did not answer. A woman in a bikini, number 46—Nat wondered if that was her age—approached their table. Nat thought the lady was

going to take their drink orders, however all she did was hug Henri and speak sweetly to him in Thai. Nat waited to see if Henri would introduce her to this bargirl; Henri ordered a draft beer and a Coke for Nat.

“Why did you bring me here? I do not want be here.”

“Relax and enjoy yourself.”

The lady brought their drinks. Nat feared that she might sit with them, so she was relieved when the lady walked off. The stages cleared of the dancing girls in bikinis and were replaced by women completely naked. Nat noticed that their server was one of the naked women. An unseen announcer said that the night’s show would now begin. The first lady placed a Coke bottle on the stage, squatted over it, and with her genitalia removed the cap. Nat pushed her Coke bottle to the center of the table. On stage the lady held a straw above her head and pranced around like a magician’s assistant showing that this was indeed a regular straw. To ease the nausea that Nat felt, she studied the woman’s body. She had a round belly that protruded at the bottom and on her back were some fat rolls dangling from her shoulder blades. Nat could not understand how this woman made money: What man would pay to have sex with her? This must be why she now performed a show.

The lady placed the straw inside the Coke bottle and again squatted above it. The amber liquid flowed up the clear straw and into the lady; sour vomit, the putrid flavor of shrimp and clams, spewed from Nat. She leaned away from the table and splattered her dinner on the floor. Henri let out a curse in his native language; Nat didn’t know it was a curse, but by his tone, she knew the words were not conciliatory.

“If you can, please take yourself to the restroom and clean up.”

As Nat walked to the restroom, she saw the lady stand up, hold the straw against her leg over the bottle, and the soda refilled the bottle. Nat puked more in the restroom. The restroom didn’t have Western toilets. Instead, small troughs were set into the floor, and Nat wished there were walls separating the troughs. A few of the women in bikinis were in the restroom, but once they saw Nat vomiting, they hurriedly left. Once Nat composed herself, she was glad that she was alone. She rinsed her face at the sink and stared into the mirror. How did I get here? Father, is this punishment? Is this a sign that Henri is not the correct man to be my husband? Please, Father, tell me if this is a punishment or a sign.

When Nat returned to the table, the Coke-lady was again in her bikini and sitting next to Henri, who had his arm around her. He pulled her close and they kissed.

“Why do you kiss her?” Nat asked and slammed her hand in the center of the table, spilling the drinks.

“This is Phet.”

“You want her to be your wife again?”

“I first wife,” the lady said. “Always be Henri wife.”

“She worked in bar when you married her?” Nat asked.

“She did.”

“You want me work bar too?”

“It is a means for you to make a good salary.”

“No. I will not work in bar. I have Accounting degree.”

“You not better than me because you have degree,” the lady said. “You have degree, but I know how make man happy.”

“I see your show,” Nat said, “I know how you make Henri happy.” She removed the necklace and gold band from her finger and threw them in his face.

Nat never saw Henri again. Nat knew that what she saw in the bar was not a punishment. It was her father’s answer to her prayer. And, her fiancé Luke was part of the answer.

* * * * *

“The Devil’s Bible”

by Jonel Abellanosa

(From Chapter 23 of an unnamed novel in progress)

Three days earlier, when he arrived in the house (rented for him), in the town of San Remigio in the northern province of Cebu, the things he needed were on the round dining table: 8 pounds of rainwater, 2 pounds of gallnuts from Aleppo in Syria, 3 clay jars usually used for cooking, bottles of acacia gum and vitriol, 3 bottles of red wine, quills made of goose and swan feathers, empty ink bottles, the instructions on how to create the inks over fire, and the thing that exploded little shivers all over his body as he laid eyes upon it - the leather-bound writing notebook. Its pages used to be the 12 sheets removed from the gigantic *Codex Gigas*, popularly known as “The Devil’s Bible.” That night when he laid himself down to sleep, looking at the stars through the window, the angel he’d been dreaming of since he was a boy hundreds of years ago, appeared in a dark corner.

“Do not fear,” said the Angel. “I am Raphael. I heal people, and I will be your guide. I minister before God’s throne, and I alone stand between the human race and Michael, who is poised to strike mankind.”

Luis quickly realized something. He stood up, saying, “You cannot blame all of us humans for the greed and lust for power of a very few.”

“Greed and lust for power aren’t the only things killing you. Mankind has become more depraved and bestial than the human race before the flood. There might come a time when I can no longer stop Michael.”

The angel revealed to Luis the 12 missing sheets of The Devil’s Bible, which have been cut into 144 much smaller sheets of vellum made of donkey skin, bound in leather, entrusted to

his care. Through centuries there have been numerous speculations as to the texts of the 12 missing sheets. Some have been saying the removed sheets contained incantations to summon the Devil, invocations and magic spells, as if the *Codex Gigas* were some sort of a grimoire. Others have been saying they contain the Devil's prayer. The 144 sheets entrusted to Luis in the form of a leather-bound notebook looked like palimpsests, as though the texts had been erased, leaving ghostly traces that looked like ink smudges.

The Archangel Raphael confirmed the medieval book was written by a Benedictine monk, Herman the Recluse, in a monastery of Podlažice, in 13th century Bohemia. He'd been condemned to be walled up alive, his immurement a consequence of breaking his monastic vows. (Luis was reminded of the Edgar Allan Poe short story, *The Cask of Amontillado*, as the Archangel continued speaking.) Raphael appeared to him in his walled cell, instructing him to bargain for his freedom, by writing in a single night the book that would contain all human knowledge. Raphael confirmed it was completed in a single night, which explained the absence of mistakes, penmanship consistency and uniformity from the beginning to the end. Analysts and experts have concluded it takes at least five years of nonstop writing to complete the texts alone, and with the illustrations and drawings it takes around twenty-five to thirty years to complete the entire manuscript. Raphael smiled, saying that textual and illustrative qualitative uniformity alone should show the book's divine origin, that it was completed in a single night by one monk, not a group of scribes.

Raphael lamented the false and destructive legends surrounding the manuscript he had helped produce. Raphael said he, not the Devil, assisted Herman the Recluse in completing the book overnight. Herman the Recluse never gave his soul for the Devil's assistance in completing the book in a single night. The most inaccurate legends started swirling, inspired by the huge image of the Devil in ermine loincloth, found in folio 290 recto. Because of that one terrifying image of the Devil, the book came to be known as "The Devil's Bible." Because of one image of the Devil the entire book suffers incredible prejudice.

“It is a prime example of how the irrational draws mankind’s propensities for extreme prejudice,” said Raphael. “What you don’t understand brings you together more than the things you understand.”

All sorts of demonic stories and legends arose and passed on through centuries. Books have been written about its diabolic powers, inspiring widespread horror. Raphael explained the huge image of Satan merely serves to juxtapose good and evil, because the “Heavenly City” depicted in folio 289 verso is the visual representation of “good.” For centuries the *Codex Gigas* has been attracting dread and fear, and if it draws fascination it always comes from one image’s ability to inspire speculation and more fear.

Raphael has given Luis the task of writing 284 poems; each poem must be contained on a single page. The completed manuscript will be called *The Book of Healing*. The poems “will have the power to help shape reality, like the momentary cooling of the planet.” The poems “will have the power to heal, they will synchronize with the music of the heavenly spheres.” The poems “will redeem the book of Herman the Recluse from infamy and slander.” The poems “will warn what might be the last three generations to mend their ways, and the warnings could become the very lives the last peoples live.” The poems “will help reconnect the human race to nature, showing the ways to reconciliation with the Earth, whom you call Mother.” There’s no timeframe within which Luis must complete the manuscript.

“Because you are an immortal again, Luis.”

Luis was shocked, but before he could react verbally the angel continued, “You will be an immortal for as long as there are poems to write. After you write the 284th poem you will become a mortal man again.”

Luis has spent three days mixing the ingredients precisely over fire to create the ink. As the Archangel Raphael instructed, he lights three candles in his room and arranges them in a triangle on the floor. Sea breeze seems to have stilled as soon as the candles hoisted their flames like little flags. The strong smell of jasmine adorns the night’s ninth hour with peace

and tranquility. The moon is full, rolling past the window slowly, like the only visible wheel of an angel's carriage. Stars glow with a congregation's reverence, the dark sky like a church dome.

Luis sits on his bed, and puts the leather-bound notebook in a patch of moonlight. He turns to the first page. He surmises that the Archangel Raphael meant without saying it that he should leave the first and last sheets untouched, as the angel mentioned he write only 284 poems. He turns the first sheet to the left. He slowly runs his fingers on the sheet's grainy polish, feeling the pulse of centuries, humbled that what lay before him is sacred as ages past.

Moonlight illuminates. Centuries of exposure have been deepening the yellowish sheets into the faintest brown shades. He remembers Raphael mentioning that the *Codex Gigas* weighs 165 pounds, and it takes at least two persons to lift the book up.

“That is the weight of guilt, Luis,” said the Angel in a sad tone of voice. “165 pounds is how heavy men and women carry their guilt.”

Luis lifts the leather-bound notebook with both hands, wondering how much it weighs.

He gently puts it back on the bed, in the patch of moonlight. He has prepared two quills made from goose feather, which Raphael told him to use for small texts, and two quills from swan feather for larger texts. He turns the lid of the ink bottle slowly, as if ceremoniously.

The ink's sharp and bitter smell wafts, quickly vanishing.

He dips a swan quill in the black mixture.

The first poem he writes is about the dog under his care.

The day after, as he nears the veterinary clinic for his daytime voluntary work, the same dog in the poem he has written runs towards him, barking and wagging its tail. Luis is surprised at the dog's energy, brimming with life.

The vet tells Luis he's puzzled, as the dog seems to have completely healed, as if the hit-and-run incident that almost claimed its life never happened.

* * * * *

“Father McGuire”

by Daniel T. Emlyn-Jones

Sunday August 26th 2018

I've got to get a grip. I have got to get a grip. That's why I'm starting this diary. It's supposed to be therapeutic isn't it, writing a diary?

I've been going out with Wanrong for a month now and she's perfect. More than perfect. I could go on about her eyes, her smile, her kindness, but I'm not much of a writer and it'd sound like shit from one of those rubbish romance stories ... it feels good when I'm with her. It feels like the whole world is singing - until the thing happens.

Monday August 27th 2018

We had chicken rice this evening in a hawker centre opposite the Golden Mile. I used to go there when I was a kid, before my parents sent me to the UK. Wanrong gave me the latest instalment from the never-ending Taiwanese drama that is her workplace. Person A likes person B, but person B doesn't like person A. Person C likes person A, but person A doesn't like person C. Could person D be gay? It's like some mathematical puzzle with no solution. I couldn't stop laughing.

I always walk Wanrong home, and as we ambled from Serangoon MRT station to her condo, I had my arm through her arm. It feels comfortable like that. I feel like I'm the man, supporting her, protecting her. We reached her condo block and as we parted, she turned and slipped her arm around my waist and drew close to me, her lips moving towards mine.

In that moment I froze. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. She backed off. There was a look of shock on her face and, after the shock there was hurt and there was embarrassment. I wanted to tell her. I wanted to tell her it was me and not her, but I couldn't say anything. I just stood, frozen like a statue. She whispered 'goodnight' and

walked into the lobby, the glass doors swinging shut behind her so that all I could see was my own reflection.

When I got home, all I wanted to do was go to my room, but I had to face my mother first. I'm twenty-five, but she still thinks I'm twelve. Where had I been? What had I done? Who was I with? I try to avoid arguments, so I just calmed her down with a promise that I'd be at the special family dinner on Wednesday. Some sons resent their tiger mums, but I don't. She and dad have done everything for me. They gave up their life savings so that I could get my education at a boarding school in England.

I've just had a few beers. I've got to be strong and get a grip.

Tuesday August 28th 2018

Wanrong messaged me this morning, wanting to know if she'd done anything to upset me the night before. I made some excuse about feeling tired from work and told her how much I love her.

How can I tell her the truth? The thing is, it's OK when I touch her, when I'm the one in control. It's when she touches me that it happens. It feels like the thirteen years between then and now disappear, and I'm there again. I'm really there. It's not just Wanrong. There's a man in the office, a touchy-feely kind of guy, who likes to come up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. He doesn't mean any harm, he's just being friendly, but that one moment stresses me for the rest of the day.

Sometimes a smell can set it off. Not many people smoke pipes in Singapore, but when I'm near someone who does, that smell makes me remember everything. I can hear his voice. I can feel the pain.

I've got to be strong and get a grip. It's in the past. It has happened, and I can't make it not happen. I just have to be a man, put it behind me and move on.

Wednesday August 29th 2018

Wanrong didn't message me this morning. I messaged her, but she didn't reply. I spent the day feeling like shit, but still had to sit through a family dinner and make conversation. Some aunts were there, and they kept asking me about my work (I'm a lawyer, which is the jackpot of careers in Singapore). Fortunately, my mother did most of the talking. I just sat

there with a fixed smile until dessert was finished and I could make some excuse about having a heavy workload and go to my room.

I'm drunk now, and I feel really lousy. Why did I think I could be man enough for Wanrong? I'm just a weird mentally disturbed freak. As I type, I can't stop thinking about the balcony. It's out there, a few metres away. We're on the twentieth floor, so the fall would be enough. I'm not serious, I'm not going to do it, but it doesn't hurt to think about it, does it? It makes me feel better for some reason.

You see, I went to a "big shot" Roman Catholic boarding school in the UK, which gives children a 'compass for life'. For unlucky ones like me, the compass pointed to hell, but they didn't mention that in the brochure my parents got. It's been all over the news lately. Brave ex-pupils have spoken out. How could they not die of shame?

Thursday August 30th 2018

I got a reply from Wanrong this morning. She'd been busy with her cousin's birthday and didn't have time to message me yesterday. We met after work for dinner. I love being with her, but, more and more, I feel like I'm putting on an act for her. When I laugh with her, it's almost like it's not me doing it, but someone else. I feel like I'm disappearing, turning into a ghost. I walked her home and we said goodnight. She didn't touch me. She's learned not to do that.

I don't think I can go on.

Friday August 31th 2018

Wanrong knows now. We had dinner tonight at a restaurant near Orchard Road and she asked me what the problem was. She said she knew I didn't like it when she touched me, and she wanted to know why. Her eyes were wide with anger and fear. She looked as if she were going to cry or shout, or do both. It was a side of her I hadn't seen before. She wouldn't accept my excuses and said that, if there was a problem with our relationship, she wanted to know what it was, and she wouldn't continue with it unless I told her.

I was on the edge of a precipice, with no choice but to jump. I couldn't speak. I looked into Wanrong's eyes. The anger had turned to pity. "Tell me," she said, her voice soft.

I felt as if the person sitting at the table was no longer me. I was standing in the corner next to the potted orchid, watching myself. When the words came out they sounded empty and mechanical. "When I was at boarding school in the UK I was raped by my Latin teacher, Father McGuire."

For a moment, Wanrong stared blankly at me. Then she blinked, as if waking from sleep. She stood up, circled the table, and embraced me.

I started sobbing. I couldn't stop myself. A waiter rushed over, but Wanrong waved him away.

"I don't deserve you," I cried.

She shushed and rocked me like a mother quietening a child.

Saturday September 1st 2018

Today I feel like I'm drowning in shame. All I want to do is crawl into a hole somewhere and hide. At least when Wanrong didn't know, I had some dignity. I could try and sort it out by myself, I could be a man. Now it feels like I'm some sick child and she's my nanny. What kind of man am I to her now?

She's arranged for me to start counselling tomorrow. I'll give it a go.

We had another family dinner tonight. I kept wondering what my parents' reaction would be if I told them what had happened at their perfect British boarding school. Disbelief probably. I'll never tell them. It would destroy them. That's something I can do.

Sunday September 2nd 2018

Wanrong and the counsellor keep telling me that the abuse wasn't my fault and I shouldn't feel ashamed, but I still do. The counsellor was kind though and let me talk about what I wanted to talk about. He didn't try to extract anything from me.

I had dinner with Wanrong. I thought she'd want to slowly break it off with me now that she knows she has a mentally disturbed person on her hands, but I don't think she does. Weirdly, it feels like I'm getting closer to her. As we parted in Serangoon, she told me she loves me. She's never said that before.

Tuesday September 11th 2018

I've had quite a few counselling sessions now. The counsellor keeps telling me that I'm not weak for needing help, but very, very strong. Wanrong keeps saying the same thing. She even called me 'my hero' the other day. God, I don't deserve her.

Tomorrow I'll make a statement to the British police about Father McGuire. Several victims have already come forward.

Friday September 14th 2018

Today, on my way from work to dinner with Wanrong, I had a look at some diamonds. I'm not planning to propose yet, but when I do, that woman is getting one big stone. I'll be paying it off for a while, but I don't care.

The counselling continues. I'm now telling him in detail about what happened. I've been crying like a baby. I even vomited once. Saying the things out loud helps though. It's as if every time I say them, they lose a little bit of power.

I've taken up boxing. The counsellor suggested it and Wanrong loves the idea. I beat the living crap out of a punching bag and pretend it's the priest. It feels good and I'll get fit doing it too, which can't be bad.

Sunday December 16th 2018

I'm not planning on keeping this diary for much longer, but I had to write in it today. This evening I went for dinner with Wanrong at Changi Village and asked her to marry me. It was perfect, like some slushy romance film, except when you're inside it, when you're living it, it isn't slushy at all. We sat at a table overlooking the sea. Otters were playing in the water; the sky was bright with the sunset; and airplanes taking off from Changi Airport roared above us into the sky. I knew what her answer would be the instant she saw that ring case!

Whether I like it or not, the person I am today has been shaped by the abuse I suffered at the hands of Father McGuire. Even the worst things in life can lead to good things. Would I have poured my heart out to Wanrong if I hadn't been forced to for the sake of my sanity? Would she have given me her heart in return?

Would I now be the happiest man alive, despite everything?

* * * * *

“The Yonder Bank”

by Lo Sin Yee

It rained last night. Water submerges much of the road, reminding me of typhoon nights in Kowloon, as sand sticks to the tyres of vehicles crawling along.

Papa is driving our newly bought car, an Austin Mini. At a less affected part of Sungai Tujoh Road, it starts shuddering and chugging, as if smarting from previous traumas of having changed hands several times.

Then disaster strikes. The rear tyres get sucked in a rut. Papa keeps flooring the gas pedal, only to have them sink deeper. Nobody pulls over and offers help, including those who know Papa. A friend in a truck waves, but when Papa motions for him to pull over, the truck roars and lumbers away, spraying mud in its wake. Papa goes red in the face and smiles at Mama wryly. But her cold stare mocks him for believing in reciprocating kindness. Help is elusive until an Englishman takes it upon himself to tow our car with a rope. His Iban employees, young and wiry, push the car, not minding mud splattered over them. One of them tells Mama that they will clean themselves in a nearby drain.

I have not the slightest idea why we are moving to Miri. The town rings no bells with me. The nearer we approach the Belait River—a murky waterway marking the end of Kuala Belait—the heavier my heart sinks. But a part of me fills with relief for leaving that dratted school, where other children picked on me. But the thought of not returning to the flat that became our home for nearly five years brings tears to my eyes. Never again would I see my aunties every day, ditto the Churchill statue across the street from our regular hangout, and the opposing streams of traffic along the road from the vantage point of the balcony. Most importantly, I could no longer seek revenge on Nanak, a cousin who liked to tease me.

The bumpiness of the road makes me carsick. My siblings—Ah Hui and Weng Weng, thrilled by the experience—are not perturbed. One minute, they are a flurry of noise, and the next, sleep reduces their eyes to slits of white.

Slumped into her seat next to Papa, Mama is as silent as a statue. For days she has not been her usual self, often staring into space. Perhaps she is like me, too attached to Brunei, where she was born and raised. The eldest granddaughter of a kapitan, she was pampered as a child until she married Papa. My grandparents have since disowned her. Even when everything turned against us at one stage, they refused to help.

A regular attendee of a makeup and perming class, Mama never failed to look her best in Brunei. She made sure her blouse matched the colour of her skirt, and the foundation on her face was not a bleached mask. It set her apart from other housewives when her hair, a cascade of silk, draped over her shoulders with a natural waviness that seemed to ripple. But now the wind whips her hair, turning it into a riot of grass. She has not bothered to roll up the window, lost in her own thoughts.

Hours since driving out of Bandar, Papa breathes hardly a word. His eyes are glued to the road ahead, which peters out towards the customs office. The vehicles ahead slow down and form a long queue. The sun beats down, and the pine trees lining the sandy shore sway but do little to lessen the heat. Mama hands Ah Hui a large bottle, and we take turns sipping from it. By now the pangs of hunger are setting in, and Mama passes us some sandwiches. I love the thin slice of salted pork in between, not letting dripping grease go to waste. Papa decks two sandwiches together. Seeing him chomp on them, you would never imagine the gentleness in him. He treats everyone with care and patience when in a good mood.

During the late fifties, Papa was considered highly educated for graduating with a Senior Cambridge Certificate. He could have easily landed a good job, especially as a Chinese language teacher, but office politics and curry-favouring revolted him. Hence, he

chose to be his own boss and operated a shop along Jalan Permaisuri in Miri. A lack of business-mindedness, unfortunately, became his stumbling block. He sold the only house inherited from my grandparents and took us to Hong Kong. His attention to detail secured him a job as supervisor at a textile shop. In few years, his hard work bore fruit. We had an apartment, and life seemed to get more stable—until the authorities found out that we had no licensed permit to support our stay.

The ensuing deportation broke Papa's spirit. We returned to Miri, then decided to move back to Brunei. But not long after that, he left us behind with Mama and spent several years working in Singapore. There, in his free time, he attended cooking lessons and became adept at making dim sum, particularly steamed buns. One day, Papa returned home and unsettled Mama by deciding to move the family back to Miri. The idea did not sit well with her, but she sucked it all up.

"Mum, how long are we going to wait here? My legs hurt!" I lament.

Mama's eyes skim over the crowds in the customs office, her face wooden. The repeated stamping of passports chips away at my patience. Only a few officers are working, but they are not to be messed with. Anyone ticking them off might risk being denied entry into Malaysia. When one part is over and done with, another stage beckons. Under their stern eyes, we unzip our suitcases, pour out the contents, and lift them up to show that they are legitimate bags. Some blasé-looking officers go through the motions, glancing over the motley luggage bags, occasionally ruffling up the insides before declaring them safe.

"That's life," Mama whispers as if to herself. "We're here to suffer. If you're able to swallow all the bitterness of life without batting an eye, you are a man among men."

I blink, unable to get what she is saying. What could the agony of waiting have to do with a better life? I try to call her bluff, but her face breaks my heart. Whenever Mama experiences some trouble, a certain part of me boils with a strong urge to carry her pain.

However, in response to my curiosity, she tends to smile and say I am too young for the complexities of life.

Exiting through the gate, we enter Kuala Baram—the southern tip of Miri—en route to another customs office. The larger structure has more booths to streamline the checking and regulating of traffic. It makes a world of difference when in no time we are back on the road, passing trees almost desiccated and gutted by fires—a desolate picture of death. I ask Mama what happened to them, but she is preoccupied again. Ah Hui repeats my question, but Papa answers, telling us that nearly fifty years ago an epidemic wrecked havoc on Miri, causing many deaths, so a shaman suggested that the particular stretch of forest be cleared to drive away evil spirits.

“Why should they destroy the trees?” Ah Hui pouts. “Not fair to blame everything on them.”

Ah Hui, my eldest sibling, is inquisitive beyond her age in certain situations. My aunties described her as a little madam. When our parents were not around, she ordered Weng Weng and me about to run errands for her. A week before moving to Miri, Mama cut her hair very short, and she did not like it, insisting that when in Miri, she would keep her hair as long as she pleased, just like Bridgette Lin. She flips through the only magazine in the car, and a dress catches her eye. She tells me that being a fashion designer is her dream.

“When I grow up,” Weng Weng exclaims, “I want to be a garbage collector.”

This wakes Mama from her stupor. She scolds Weng Weng for having such low ambition and demands he change it. Weng Weng pulls a face and mumbles, “Lemme think first.”

Upon arrival at the ferry point, a strange thing happens.

A little stretch of the South China Sea lies side by side with the Baram River, not blending into each other. While crossing the river, my siblings and I gaze out over the murkiness, taking in sampans and speedboats moored along both sides of the river. When the number of vehicles reaches the maximum, the ferry folds back the giant ramp on its rear, and makes its way towards the opposite bank—from where Miri Town starts extending and sprawling for many miles.

The roar of engines travels through my veins, jarring every nerve. Papa is hugging Mama from behind. His palms clasp over hers, but Mama does not respond. The air smells of diesel, so that I crinkle my nose and feel sick in the gut again.

Some Iban children are walking around barefoot, laughing at the top of their voices. Their mothers are looking on, occasionally scolding them. The women carry on their backs handwoven cylindrical baskets with motif designs, *belanyat*, stuffed full. Around them lay gunny sacks of various sizes. Their faces are slick with sweat, and their mouths busy chewing betel nuts that stain their teeth red. The men—skin rough and lined from the sun—are puffing away on rolled cigarettes. Some young ones are cracking jokes and nudging one another. Dark, spiraling, wavy lines emblazon their muscular arms and chests—a telltale sign of what they could have been in the bygone warrior days. A young woman whose face is caked with makeup is reading what appears to be a letter in her hands, over and over.

Approaching the shore yonder, all eyes gaze towards the front. Papa's are full of hope. Mama's and mine are half-shut, blinking and watery against the sunlight.

However, Ah Hui only has eyes for her shoulder-length hair. She was fiddling with it, when suddenly Weng Weng's eyes widen and he points, shouting, "See, over there, a crocodile!" The giant reptile is bobbing like a log near the bank, its wide-open mouth a V-shaped chalice against the sky. It is playing with a little swarm of flies.

For the past several days, I saw a dimness in Mama's eyes. But now they brighten with a spark of light. She straightens her back, lifts her chin, and watches the front plate of the ferry recline, groaning, ready to release the cars.

Here we come, Miri.

* * * * *

“Traffic Lights”

by Benita J. Rosalind

packed car lanes and honks blur into focus
as my eyes blink to the rhythm of our turn signal.
the traffic light turns green beckoning us to move forward
 like rice paddies that beckoned my ancestors to leave plain lands of China.
in China green means envy,
but the Spice Islands are filled with red and yellow –
colors of fortune that made them believe it’s gold.

green is the jade bracelet on my grandma’s wrist.
she told me that jade stones pick their owners
 that they were once pale
 that they suck the blood of their chosen ones to revitalize their color by trapping
 a part of their owner’s soul— a bond for life.
 loyal.
as her skin turns to dust and bones, i wonder if the jade glows happily six feet
underground.

in english class, we learned about the green light in Gatsby’s life.
how the moral of the story is to not hope on such mystical dreams that you lose yourself.

i wonder if the rice paddies are jade stones are green light
because green may mean go,
but to others it may mean death.
 stuck in a pool of blaring headlights too bright for our eyes,
 yellow like the sun,

 like the color of 福,
a golden imprint against red envelopes.
inside,
my 5-year-old self finds golden coins that turn into chocolate once i unravel them. a
metaphor
they say, “yellow girl,” but all i remember is the
 yellow of my highlighter,
trying to memorize words my ancestors have known since childhood and write their
meaning in English, a neocolonial alphabet.
 yellow

the red light follows.
i don't look back.

* * * * *

“Her Mountain Town in the Philippines”

by Hilary Isabelle

It's hard to see it without
seeing what's no longer there.
Now it's just air where my mother once stood,
and I'm in her home town, walking her old routes.
These are my roots, and hers is my face.
My grandfather's fading memory squints,
confusing me for his middle daughter.

My mother's cousins had her
in their childhoods, and I had her in mine.
My mother's cousins knew her
before she knew me, but I knew her more recently.
To them, she's a singing teenager on a bike.
To me, she's *bilo-bilo* on cold days.

Sharing stories over rice, we re-learn her together—
there's so much distance between you
and the memories you're not part of.
When she died, I thought healing was a one-stop event.
I'd write about it and be cured forever.

But mourning is more like a hiking expedition:
always another summit, then the traveling back down,
and the mountain's always shaped like a mother.

* * * * *

“Grass”

by Ronald Maliaio

What is it with lowly grass?
Embrace the earth's womb, covered with dust
Trampled with hooves, savaged with wind
Yet it still stands after the storm

Trees stand haughtily with the passing gale
Timber cracked like grinded bones
Conceit cringed with the passing despair
Does it matter to stand and fall?

After the tempest the horizon bemoans
Gorged with raped trees, pride subdued
While crickets sang the night lullaby
Dreams fade away, hopes benumbed

But the meek grass during the storm
Cede its pride to survive
Bend with the wind, cried with the rain
Stand tall after the passing storm.

“The One”

by Ronald Maliao

Sun glows incessantly
Day and night in the valley of dreams
Sun never sets
And darkness never reigns

Flowers bloom every day
In a rainbow of colors swaying
Birds fly twirling
A melodious song of rhymes

This valley with all dreams contented
Is nourished by a jewel bath in glow
She shimmers like a golden sun
With a hue of unblemished gold

Her beauty is shielded with innocence
Like a fiery wall of fire she hides
Should I reach out my hand and taint her?
Or just dream dreams and let life flow?