

# *Anak Sastra*

## Issue 37

### Issue 37 Contents

#### *short fiction*

"The Wailing"

by Kerry Yang

"A Game of Ash and Bones"

by Nyse Contereal

"Secret Instinct"

by Catherine Quesada

"Fiend"

by Harrith Hasmadi

"Banquet for the Hungry Ghost"

by Keith Raymond

"Ride Hail"

by Farid Hamka

#### *poems*

"Never from Nowhere"

by Salman Akhtar

"Moon Orchid"

by Julia Cai

"Not a Want but a Need"

by Riya Sarna

"The Fisherman's Son"

by Jessrel Escaran Gilbuena

"To Leave"

by Kat Yap

"A Winter Day in Hanoi, January 2019"  
by Farid Hamka

\* \* \* \* \*

## Contributor Bios

[Kerry Yang](#) is a Hmong-American writer who graduated from UW Madison with an English degree and currently resides in Wisconsin. She is an avid reader and writer and keeps a blog about current events, motherhood, and her thoughts.

**Nyse Contereal** is a short story writer and fulltime student majoring in French and Russian in the UK. She is of Timorese-Chinese descendancey.

**Catherine Quesada** is a creative writing graduate from the University of the Philippines Diliman. She's only starting out as an established writer, but has found steady ground on writing for and about women and the environment.

[Harrith Hasmadi](#) is a Malaysian reader who dreams of writing.

Dr. **Keith Raymond** is a family and emergency physician who practiced in eight countries and in four languages. He currently lives in Austria with his wife. When not volunteering his practice skills, he writes or gives lectures. He has multiple medical citations, along with publications in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *The Grief Diaries*, *The Examined Life Journal*, *The Satirist*, *Chicago Literati*, *Blood Moon Rising*, *Frontier Tales Magazine*, and in the sci-fi anthology *Sanctuary* among others.

[Farid Hamka](#) has a predilection for the unaccustomed earth and is an avid believer of the redeeming power of literature. He graduated with a B.Sc. in Government and Economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science and worked as a management consultant. He believes in how things can be improved by taking an interdisciplinary lens.

**Salman Akhtar** lives in Kuala Lumpur, where he masquerades as a teacher in the day and various other beings at other times.

**Julia Cai** is an American student of half-Indonesian descent whose work has previously been recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards.

**Riya Sarna** is a 22-year-old law student whose first love is writing. Writing has always been an outlet for the things that she doesn't have the courage to say out loud. It is and always will be her safe haven.

**[Jessrel Escaran Gilbuena](#)** hails from Santa Fe, Bantayan Island, Cebu. He is a teacher in a public senior high school in Bantayan Island. Some of his works have appeared in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *BANWA* of the University of Philippines-Mindanao, *Sunstar Weekend*, and other local publications in the Philippines. In 2017, his first book of poems, *Lugas sa Balas*, was published by BATHALAD Sugbo Inc. He was a fellow of the Iligan National Writing Workshop in MSU-Iligan (wherein he was awarded the Jimmy Y. Balacuit Literary Award for Poetry), Ateneo Writers Workshop in Ateneo de Manila University-Manila, and the IYAS National Writers Workshop by the University of St. La Salle in Bacolod. He is one of the awardees of the 2019 Indonesian Arts and Culture scholarship. He travels, and places with beaches are his favorite.

**Kat Yap** (Twitter: [@bonesNPotatoes](#)) is a poetry enthusiast from the little town of Kuching, Sarawak. She has self-published a poetry chapbook, *You Don't Have To Call It Home*, to raise funds for Mental Health Association (MHA) Sarawak.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "The Wailing"

by Kerry Yang

Mai See awoke to the muffled cries of a baby emanating from within the icy darkness of her bedroom. She peered around her cramped room littered with insignificant objects she had collected throughout the years. The high-pitched squeals retreated into the night, yet she could still hear them distinctly in her head. Her heart beat as if it would burst from her small chest while she clutched at the thin blanket enveloping her. The baby ghost had returned even after the best shaman in the state tried to coax the spirit into the realm of the dead. She did not place so much faith in the man of the underworld as he covered his eyes with a black cloth, but had hoped that the ancestors that came before her would eventually help her out of her predicament. She remembered the accusing eyes boring holes into her at the ceremony, where her dead husband's family congregated in hopes of expunging the stain from their family name. Mai See knew that they wanted to be rid of her, for she had stained their name. Ghosts who momentarily appeared could be tolerated, but living beings with no value were not.

She presumed her husband dead while fighting during the war, widowing her, but not relieving her of her duty as a wife to the family. The family bought her for life, and she could not leave them unless they willed it. *Ruam*, crazy, is what they soon called her once they arrived in the states so that no male relative of her husband's wanted to marry her—not even out of pity. As such, they could not separate themselves from a crazy, unmarriageable woman with no blood tie. Mai See could not return to her family anyway, since she never learned of their fate after the war. And, since she did not have a family, she did not have a champion, so she lost her voice and say in what would happen to her. She thought herself cursed and accepted it as her punishment. Being crazy had its advantages, though, such as, others left her well alone. Thus, it freed her from performing a wife's chores, but not from being a wife. Her husband's aging parents treated her with

indifference since they did not want to be responsible for her care, but also felt obligated, for she had married their first-born son. The multitude of brothers and sisters and their spouses avoided her and sometimes acted as if she did not exist. She wished she did not exist, but then remembered her burden to bear the curse.

Mai See pulled a battered, tan suitcase from the cluttered closet and placed it on her bed. She opened it slowly and let the aroma fill her nostrils, her mouth, her lungs, and her heart. She picked up the intricately made wrap dress her mother sewed for her in her childhood in anticipation of her wedding day. Even though her family lived a poor life of begging from relatives for scraps and farming off other's land, her mother made sure her wedding dress looked its best. Mai See brought it to her face and inhaled deeply while her hands caressed the worn pink and black dress with its ridges and beaded decorations. She possessed few items left of her mother and the old life, so she cherished the dress even more. She wrapped herself in the skirt and tied it tightly in the back. It still fit her. Mai See grew up the third oldest daughter in a family unlucky with only girls, and as her mother's favorite, she was kept out of the sun as much as possible and close to home. Her father lamented a son to secure their future in old age and the family name; and although others ridiculed him for not being able to produce a male heir, he showered praise among his daughters.

From far and wide, word traveled of the girls' beauty and sense of honor in the family. Poverty hindered them from school, but their mother trained them in the arts of weaving straw baskets, mending clothes for others, singing songs about heart-wrenching women in terrible dilemmas and humble humility. The girls helped their parents in the fields and tended their small home as best they could, rarely conversing with boys. Mai See's mother delighted in her favorite daughter's smooth, light complexion and soft hands, so she never let her stray too far out of her sight unless to deliver food. Suitors traveled great distances to spy the faces of the young girls in hopes of making them their wives. The eldest daughter married the son of a wealthy farmer, who gave the family two cows that they quickly sold to pay their mounting debt. Many also sought the second eldest daughter's hand in marriage, but she refused on the grounds that no one would look after her parents.

The day they took Mai See caused her mother to faint, and in doing so, a part of her spirit died. She never recovered after that and stopped making beautiful dresses for her younger daughters. Mai See's husband-to-be, Kong, traveled from the neighboring village that day in search of a bride, and his party headed to her parent's house to inquire of her older sister, Paj. Her mother had sent Mai See to deliver food to her father in the fields when Kong spotted her in the distance. Her long hair cascading down her back and her innocent, wide eyes stopped him in his steps. At that moment, Mai See needed to relieve herself, so she walked into the woods to find a secluded spot amongst the bushes. There, Kong's party forcibly grabbed her and covered her mouth. She tried to bite at the rough hand pressing on her lips, but it only strengthened its hold. She succeeded only in peeing all over herself and her captor. It took three men to secure her as they dragged her away from her family and everything she ever knew. After they tracked some distance and the scenery became more and more vague to her, they finally let her go and told her she needed to walk on her own with no other choice.

Mai See struggled futilely at the threshold of her intended's house, not wanting to go in. She entered the thatched hut with its dirt floors and speckles of light streaming through the roof soiled and teary-eyed. She knew that taken girls could never return with their honor intact, and that no one would want to marry her afterwards even if nothing happened. A frenzy of women buzzed around her with wedding advice and cold comfort of similar stories, but she continued to cry not knowing who she would wed. They offered her rice and water, but she could not eat. She cried as old women with head shawls jeered at her and little children peered at her with half-interest. Kong came and took her to the side and told her that he could not resist taking her because of her beauty. She had just entered her 14<sup>th</sup> year, and he was 27; but he had never married, even though his younger brothers had already fathered two or three children. She pleaded with him to return her, but he merely smiled and said she would sleep alone for the night. Mai See cried herself to sleep nestled between the slumbering bodies of Kong's sisters.

She awoke to the rooster crowing and joined the women in preparing food for the trip back to her house. The women put hot rice in bamboo steamers, roasted pig in large containers, and secured the rest of the food as best they could. The main wedding party, consisting of Mai See, Kong, the *pjlaj*, the *nam thais ntsuab*, and Kong's older, male relatives

traveled out first with two mules, while everyone else made the trip at a slower pace. The *nam thais ntsuab* was an unmarried sister of Kong's, who took no interest in her, and so she feared how she would find a place in this new family. Already, she could feel the eyes of the next oldest brother, Tou, on her. He did not speak one word to her but looked knowingly at her whenever she turned around. She knew she would need to avoid him and his wife when she could. The rest of the family members paid no heed to yet another wife entering the family, and she knew they would only respect her because she would be Kong's wife.

Her mother greeted her outside with howls of grief, and she longed to run into her arms and relinquish her husband, but merely let him guide her to her mother instead. Inside, her sisters looked dreadful from crying. She lost herself within their folds and left the men inside the one-room house to negotiate the terms of her marriage. Her own relatives started to stream in with gifts of blankets, packets of money, cookware, bags of rice, and lectures on being a good wife. Her younger sister, Suab, wiped away her tears and whispered in her ears, "Be happy, for we may never see you again." Mai See wanted to cry, but bit her lip instead.

Paj cast a stern look at her. "Little sister, I should be married before you. Listen to your new husband and mind his parents. Don't start any trouble and always be the first to rise, or they will call you lazy. You are not their daughter, born of their flesh, but you are bought, so remember that."

\* \* \*

A knock sounded at her door, and she opened it onto her favorite niece, Ka Zoua. The little girl did not fear her like the other children that ran around the house. She recently turned eleven, and Mai See could see a young woman budding from within. She recalled hard, manual labor at that age, which children born in the new country would never imagine doing. When they first landed from the enormous, white plane near the shores of California, everything she saw bewildered her. Like everyone else, she had heard stories of America and the Meeka; of how beautiful their houses looked and how they threw out good food simply because they could not eat it all, but nothing prepared her for what she saw. Immaculately clean, soaring buildings lined the streets of paved roads which rolled forever in all directions. It seemed that America could reach as far into the skies as mountaintops and swell across great distances like the sea.



An elderly, white couple sponsored some of the family and helped them set up in a crowded, two-bedroom apartment that eight people shared. Indoor plumbing, running water, and electricity frightened them at first since they could not comprehend how it worked, but it soon became commonplace. The Meeka woman, Eileen, would always speak very slowly to her in a friendly tone, but she could only nod and smile back, not understanding what she said. She heard their last name being anglicized so it could fit in American mouths. It sounded so funny coming from them, but she tried not to laugh out of respect. They gave each family member new clothes from the Salvation Army that smelled like the sleeping dead and American names so it would be easier to call them by. They called her Nancy, which Mai See barely responded to, so that the sponsor lady thought her deaf and dumb.

She preferred it that way. Everywhere she traveled, the white people gawked at her openly with mouths agape, and some laughed at the way she spoke or dressed. Little children would point or make faces, while the older ones boldly stood in her path. "Try to be American," they told her, but why would she want to be like these people who couldn't even keep their children from disrespecting others? No, she was Hmong, and she would die Hmong. "Let the younger children become these people we are not, but I am too old," she thought, "Everything will end with me as it should." She had no family of her own, nor did she intend to start a new one, so she only had the baby ghost. She ignored him at first, unsure of how he followed her to this new land. She made sure she sealed all of her pockets and left nothing open, but still, she heard the crying.

The more she ignored him, the shriller he cried until she acknowledged his presence. His cry would pierce the air and freeze her as still as a bamboo stick, unflinching. She tried to appease the baby ghost by burning paper money and offerings, but he did not care for such things. He was a child, and children always wanted attention. He enjoyed appearing at night, just before she fell asleep, so that he caught her between the worlds of consciousness and dreaming. She could feel his loneliness and sorrow, so she began to sing to him the old courting songs her mother taught her in her youth. Eventually, she stopped singing because the others in the house grew uneasy at hearing the songs at such ungodly hours of the night. Now, she started to leave him round balls of sticky rice in case he hungered for them. He did not eat them, so she stored them under her bed.

Her niece with the same eyes of her husband pointed out the window. "Auntie, Auntie, I saw the baby ghost outside."

Mai See covered her tiny hand and brought it down. "Do not point at the moon or your ears will bleed. Do you want that?"

She shook her long, black hair that reached to the middle of her back. "No. Why is that?"

"Speak Hmong." Mai See chided her, "Pretty soon, you won't know any Hmong at all. Then, who will you be?"

Ka Zoua laughed. "Me, but the baby ghost..."

"Ah," she cut her off, "now, you know your mother doesn't want you talking about that, and she'll be mad at me. If you do see the baby ghost, don't tell him your name."

"Why?"

"Because he will know who you are, and if he wants you, he'll try to get you. When my mother gave birth to me, she named me Bao, and I became so sick with fever that I almost died. My mother changed my name to trick the demons into thinking I was someone else."

"Why did they want you, Auntie?"

She shrugged. "They are dead, and we are alive."

"Then why do we try to talk to them? Won't they try to get us?"

"Only some of them do. Don't think ghosts are all bad. They are our past, and they know things we'll never know, so that's why we fear them."

"But my teacher says there are no such things as ghosts."

Mai See narrowed her eyes at the girl. "Did you see the baby ghost or not?"

She paused and stammered. "I'm not sure if it was a ghost or a cloud, but I felt cold."

Mai See took her into her lap and started to braid her niece's hair. "Oh, what do these white people know? We are different from them, so to them, everything we say is wrong. You have to be smarter than that." The girl laid her head in Mai See's lap, and she could almost feel her husband's head resting there also.

\* \* \*

She loved him, but did not know how to express it beyond laughing eyes and playful struggles. She loved the way he woke her in the morning with a gentle caress, how he left

her gifts of wildflowers and sweet candy, and how he gazed at her when he thought she wasn't looking. They moved into their own house, and her fear of his family began to lessen. She swept the dirt floors everyday and made sure everything appeared clean and neat in case a certain someone should drop in for a surprise inspection of her son's well-being. Kong forbade her from working in the fields, so she would finish all her work, help her husband's parents with theirs, and then tend to the various children that ran around half-naked and dirty from playing near the muddy banks. In the middle of the day, she trekked to the fields with meat wrapped in banana leaves, steamers of rice, water, and always some pepper for the men.

When she could, she stole Kong away to the top of the mountains, where the cool breeze seemed to call their names and entwine them, and the tall trees swayed to the whistling wind. Kong would pluck a leaf, fold it in half, and blow a melody on it for her.

She asked him once, "What would I do without you?"

He smiled and replied, "You would go on. You must live for those who can't."

"What would you do without me?" she asked him next.

He turned to face the vast expanse of blue before him that stretched into the horizon. "Marry another wife."

He stumped her for a second, and then she started pounding feebly on his back. They fell to the ground laughing. He pulled her to him and whispered their future together in her ears. It was on the mountaintop where they conceived him.

Mai See knelt to wash the clothes in the river without dirtying herself in the process. Two of the brother's wives had invited her to wash clothes with them, and she obliged with the few articles they owned. The heat seemed to suffocate everything in its path that day so that few things could be done in the field. Instead, most of the men traveled to a neighboring village to attend a wedding ceremony. That morning Mai See awoke in the dusky morning as dawn began to shimmer in the sky and ran as far as she could from their house. She did not want Kong to hear her retching. She had felt incredibly nauseous and light-headed for days before, but thought nothing of it until then. The blood had also stopped coming last month, so as she had watched her mother become pregnant numerous times, Mai See knew that she too carried a child within her. She did not want to tell Kong just yet; for at that moment, the baby belonged to her, and her alone.

The remnants of her past meal still clung to her favorite shirt with its soft feel, so she felt it a good time to join the women at the trickling stream. Lee was the wife of the second-eldest brother, Tou, who still tried to catch Mai See's eye. She looked very pretty once as a young girl, but three children and long days in the sweltering sun dulled her into a plump woman with constant worry etched into her sun-darkened face. Mai Der married one of the middle sons quite young and never lost her shy, girlish ways. She always covered her mouth while laughing and spoke to every man with lowered eyes.

Lee wrung a long dress over the embankment while two of her children played nearby. "I hear there is trouble in the cities."

Mai Der looked up with her wide, innocent eyes. "I'm sure the trouble will stay in the cities."

Lee snorted. "That's what you think. Haven't you seen the soldiers at night?"

"But there are always soldiers," she refuted.

"Yes," Lee said, "but something's not right. I overheard the men talking about going into the woods."

Mai Der gathered her clothes into a woven basket and beckoned to the children. "So? What does it have to do with us? We are farmers. The men would tell us if anything should happen."

Lee unfurled the dress in one swift movement, making a snapping sound. "Oh yeah? Then why did they all go to the wedding?"

Mai See remained silent, trying to think back as to whether Kong told her anything, but she could not remember. Kong explicitly told her not to visit the fortune teller in the village for he thought her a witch, but she saw the old lady anyways. She thought back to how the woman's withered hands glided over the chicken bones spread on the ground, and how she looked up with bewilderment. The elderly fortune teller with her few teeth couldn't believe that the bones could prove so deadly. The future boded ominously for her, and Mai See decided then and there never to visit her again. The women walked back to their parents' home and started to retrieve tools and ingredients to grind rice. Mai See helped out where she could and then made her way back to tend to their chickens.

She only walked a short distance out of sight from Kong's parents' house when she heard someone calling her name. It sounded like Kong calling from within the woods. She

swiftly found her way into the sparsely populated woods only to hear her own voice calling for his name. Suddenly, an arm encircled her waist and held her against the trunk of a limbless tree. As she began to open her mouth, a dirt-caked hand covered it. Kong's brother, Tou, stared back at her with a menacing grin. He pressed his sweaty body against hers, and she started to cry.

"You look beautiful with your eyes wet," his hot breath trailed down her ears to her neck. She struggled against his hold, but he only tightened it until she could barely breathe. Just as quickly as he grabbed her, he released her, shaking and inhaling quickly. She turned around and saw Kong's mother walking furiously towards them.

"Are you two trying to kill me? You must have no shame to do this out in the open where anyone can see. Think of Kong and your father. Tou, go home to your wife," she said to him, and he left with his head hanging. Mai See could still smell the sweat from him and feel his weight pressing down on her. Kong's mother roughly jerked her by her elbow and walked her in the opposite direction. "Who do you think you are trying to get both my sons? I told him not to marry poor filth like you, and here you are trying to ruin our family name. Try to test me and I will make you suffer. Now, go home and never speak of this again."

\* \* \*

Early in the morning, various members of the Yang clan congregated in the house downstairs, filling it with smoke and children thumping down the stairs. They left Toyotas & Hondas strewn in the streets and driveway, bearing tinfoil covered food. The men shook hands with each other and settled down with their shoes off, while the women rolled up their sleeves in the kitchen, boisterous with laughter. The chill of the air kept their light jackets on, but the sunlight almost blinded them, so they closed the drapes. The family and relatives stirred early that September morning for the wedding of Tou & Lee's youngest daughter, Cee. The women buzzed around four rice cookers, the oven, and large, metal pots of stewed meat and eggs in a brown sauce. Outside, two laughing women plucked thin, lifeless chickens while sitting on wooden foot stools.

The women killed them yesterday in the basement, and Mai See could hear their squawking all the way to her room on the second floor. Even as a young girl, she dreaded killing chickens and hid whenever her mother called for her. Her sisters would separate a

few of the tame chickens into another coop marked for killing, and then they would retrieve knives, blocks of wood used to cut up the chicken, and water. She still remembered the smell of excrement as they died and how they struggled feebly before someone slit their throats. The worst part was listening to them squawking and knowing they would soon meet their end. She shuddered as she looked out the unwashed windowpane at the women below. The trees looked red with fire as leaves sashayed down to the earth in their last dance.

When she first arrived in the open spaces of the sprawling Midwest, bare trees with gnarled limbs greeted her, and she thought this new land ugly and uninhabitable. She knew nothing of blistering winters and freezing, white snow. Everything amazed her from supermarkets to flushing toilets. She wondered where all the food came from and where all the toilet water went. No doubt magic existed in this new land, but it held few novelties for her. The one thing she did enjoy was the television set. She could see into different worlds and places, even if she couldn't understand what they said. Last year, they bought her a 13-inch, color television set with long ears and a hazy reception. She watched it all day long and enjoyed its company immensely, and so did the baby ghost. At night, foreign voices startled her awake. Her eyes fluttered open to see the soft glow of the screen pulsating across the wall, while miniature shadows flitted within the hazy light, so she knew the baby ghost had arrived. The others complained that the noise bothered them, so she unplugged it at night. Then, the wailing began. She tried to pacify him with balls of rice and shiny trinkets at first, but it continued.

She looked haggard in the morning with dead eyes and an unblinking stare. The smaller children feared her even more and none chose the dare to knock on their Aunt's door anymore. The cries grew so persistent that Mai See gave in. She turned the t.v. on at night but taped the volume knob so it wouldn't awaken the others. That quieted the baby ghost most nights, but he did not cease crying entirely.

The smell of fried egg rolls and barbecued pork wafted up to her and her stomach responded with a rumble. She slipped down unseen to steal a cup of sweet *naiva*, some freshly made egg rolls, and a chunk of rice. Sometimes, they forgot about her when a huge gathering took place, so she needed to fend for her own food before it all disappeared. The hot egg rolls burned the insides of her mouth, so she let them rest while she drank the

creamy *naiva* with its green and pink tapioca swimming like tadpoles amongst unborn, white eggs. As she took a long sip, the door creaked open, and in stepped Cee dressed in traditional clothes that young women considered suffocating nowadays. She closed the door behind her and expelled one long breath. "May I stay here for a while? They won't look for me here. I've got to catch my breath, Auntie."

Mai See nodded cautiously and the girl of 17 sat down on the small bed fanning herself. Mai See set down her cup of *naiva*. "Where is your husband?"

Cee laughed in a high-pitched tone as she arched her back. "I don't care." Her round cheeks looked flushed and rosy, while she painted a muted, red lipstick onto her lips. "I don't care," she repeated, "He's the one that wants to marry me. Do you know that the only reason we're getting married is because he brought me home late? I've only known him for two months! Oh well, at least I will finally escape my parents."

"Is it so bad?"

Cee leaned on the bed with her legs dangling off the side. "They keep me locked up, and I can't go anywhere. At least now, I can do what I want."

"Oh," Mai See uttered, then a long silence ensued, and she asked, "Were you in the refugee camps? No, that was your sister. Once we made it to Thailand, they put us in refugee camps. I lived there a month or two before someone sponsored us. We were lucky."

"How was it there?" Cee asked absentmindedly, but not really interested.

"Well," Mai See squinted and answered, "I don't remember much. I was sick almost the entire time. They almost didn't let me come, but your grandmother pleaded for me."

"Why were you sick?"

She furrowed her thick eyebrows over wide, brown eyes. "I can't remember."

An image of a tin roof flashed through her mind. She could see herself immobilized with vacant eyes cast at the ceiling. Her body would then shake in convulsions until someone tied her down, but she continued to shake until the ropes bore welts into her skin. Her long, black hair became unkempt and wild, and she looked emaciated since she took in so little food. Her family stated that nothing was wrong with her physically, and others began to gossip that a demon took possession of her body. On a calm night, when the full moon shone silver across the rooftops, Mai See awoke drenched in sweat with eyes red and full of fury. She started spitting out names of the dead, gods, and demons. Half the camp

awoke to the commotion as they called out for a shaman to cast out the demon, yet remained quiet enough not to raise suspicion from wandering guards. The camp people swarmed around their little hut as the shaman traveled to the other world on a wooden horse and came back with the answer that the water of the Mekong poisoned her, so they must cleanse her in another river.

The men wrapped her in white linen and tied a strip over her mouth so she would not alarm the guards. They carried her to the murky river some ways from the camp. No one else dared to follow, so they retreated to the safety of their own homes. The men carted away a wild, fierce beast, but brought back a figure so still, it looked dead. They never spoke publicly of the incident again, so stories arose of what may have occurred at the shallow river. Some say she wasn't a woman at all, but an animal they traded for the life of another. Others said she died out there, and the men brought back only the shell of her. However, most agreed that when the men loosened her into the rushing water, she tried to claw at them to reach the shore, so the shaman said she must be covered in water. Thus, they submerged her underneath the flowing stream, but no one knew how long she stayed under.

"Auntie," Cee asked with a quizzical look on her plump face, "why were you sick?"

Mai See's eyes rested on Cee again and she almost didn't recognize her, but her vision cleared as did her head. "I don't know. I don't remember much except what they told me. Are you pregnant?"

Cee burst out laughing. "No."

"Be careful when you are, because the demons especially want newborns since they are so pure. Sometimes, the demon will take the mother with the child if he is still in her. You must be careful to guard yourself and the baby. Always wear a hat and eat only plain food like boiled chicken."

Cee rolled her eyes as she fixed her drooping, silver-colored neck ornament. It cut into the back of her neck and weighed heavily on her while the pink sashes tied around her waist restricted her breathing. She could not wait to be rid of the outfit and the day but relished in the attention she garnered in the meantime. Cee observed her image closely in the mirror hanging over the wall with the fake money twinkling on her dress. Everyone could hear her enter the room before they saw her. She felt ambivalent towards her



marriage, and although countless female relatives dictated the importance of being a *nayb* to her, she paid little heed to their advice. At times, she felt as if the swarm of elderly women knew nothing of her and her life. Cee peered out over the window overlooking the backyard and saw someone presenting her husband-to-be with yet another cup of beer, and she laughed. "I have to go now, Auntie, but won't you see me when I leave?"

Mai See nodded. After Cee left, Mai See retraced her footsteps to the window and looked out at the gathering of people. It reminded her of the last day she saw her husband alive.

When she awoke that day, the baby kicked her hard on the left side of her stomach, already missing its father. She readied herself in the early hours and gathered food to feed the chickens. With her large stomach, she waddled some distance to carry back a jug of water for the day. As she walked back along the dusty road with the sun barely rising above the cliffs, a black bird dropped out of the clear sky and landed dead at her feet. Mai See fell back, aghast at the unmoving bird while rivulets of water pooled around her. The child within kicked ferociously, and she cried out in pain and fear. It was a bad omen, and she knew it. She wanted to run to Kong and tell him not to go fight for the white people, to chop off his legs so he could not go, to rip out his heart so she could feel it beat within her grasp, but she knew he would leave her all the same. He said the Meeka promised them help if they fought for them, and it would be worth it. He said he could not live a persecuted man his entire life and must fight for the freedom of the Hmong and his children. "Don't worry," he said, "the Meeka will help us."

Lately, many soldiers roamed the countryside where few came before, and she knew death trailed close behind. She heard of soldiers kidnapping and raping women, whole villages burning with the scent of human flesh, and men disappearing into the dark of night. Until now, they remained stories, but Kong's departure gave color and credence to them until they became so vivid that she shut her eyes to the world. Fear had come to roost in the hearts of the villagers, and distrust spread like a disease. Each man fended for themselves and kept secrets in the face of total annihilation. Many kept up the semblance of normalcy on the surface but whispered secret plans behind closed doors. The vacant eyes of the bird peered back at her, so she kicked him out of sight. Mai See gathered herself and what remained of the water and made it the rest of the way home.

She folded a steaming pyramid of rice into a large banana leaf and placed the scrawny chicken she'd boiled into a metal container for Kong's departure. All morning, she felt uneasy about his leaving, but did not want to express her fears to him. She kept that hidden like so many other things, including his brother's advances. She did not want to burden him with such thoughts, for he was a carefree man who questioned little and loved enormously. She felt thankful every day that he never even joked about a second wife, nor raised a hand to her. As they laid down to sleep, he confided his doubts and fears to her and awoke refreshed and freed from them, but she carried them within her, knowing he entrusted her with them. Deep in her chest, she felt as if a hand clutched at her heart and squeezed it tightly. The morning sun glimmered in the sky, and the din of the animals and villagers filled the air with the noise of something to come.

Kong entered the hut smiling after a quick jaunt to his uncle's house. He grabbed her from behind and pulled her into him, smelling her freshly washed hair. As she let escape a surprised yelp, he turned her around and knelt on the dirt floor. He kissed her protruding belly and caressed it. "Take care of my son."

Mai See laughed. "How do you know it's a boy?"

His eyes glazed over, and he lifted his head with a solemn gaze. "Because I know my son is coming."

"And what will you name him?"

He shrugged. "I will decide that when I return. I want it to be a perfect name as he will be when he grows up to be a man. Promise me that you will take care of him and let no harm come to him, for if you don't, my words will follow you wherever you go."

Mai See laughed nervously. "With my life, I promise you."

He stood and regained his pleasant demeanor. "Good, for I promise to always take care of you."

He kissed her on the head and gathered his belongings for the long journey. He did not know how long he would stay away or what he would encounter but took few provisions in hopes that he would return shortly. Behind his smiling face, he felt the pull of death clawing at him, but this, he chose not to confide in his young wife. She needed every last ounce of strength to take care of their unborn child. They ate a quiet meal that morning of rice and roasted pig from the night before. Many of the families in the village had

slaughtered pigs and chickens for a feast and an offering to protect their men when away. Mai See found few words to say to her husband of a year. She had grown accustomed to him and his ways and enjoyed his laughter and kindness. However, whenever he left her alone, she felt alien amongst his family and neighbors. She cleared away the remaining food and watched her husband walk out the door. He turned back and waved at her, smiling his old smile. She smiled back while her chest constricted even more. She watched him until he disappeared out of sight and never saw him again.

She did not want to leave the house that she and Kong had shared. She knew he had died deep in her heart, but she hoped that he would return to her in another form. She missed him and his comfort terribly. When she gave birth to their son, Kong's female relatives attended to her out of respect, but treated her coldly. Kong's mother stayed with her for a week to ensure the health of the baby, but rarely spoke to her. The baby reminded her of Kong with his sparkling, brown eyes and matted black hair. Kong's mother adored the child of her favorite son, so she moved the pair in with the family since Mai See remained sickly after the birth. The child, on the other hand, grew healthy and suckled voraciously at his mother's breast. At times, she wished she could trade the child for Kong, but knew nothing could bring her husband back. By then, a few villagers left for Thailand because of the fighting. Soldiers roamed the countryside freely, and stories of their atrocities became widespread. When the soldiers raided their village, Mai See clung to Kong's mother, still weak after three months

When the fighting erupted, the entire village scattered in all directions. Mai See traveled with Kong's parents, Tou and his family, a sister, and two other families in search of safety. They lost track of the other family members in their flight for higher ground. They fled to the caves of the mountains with few belongings, foraging for food when possible, and traveled under the cover of night. Mai See could scarcely carry anything else with her unnamed baby boy nestled in her arms. She saw countless numbers of people moving in the pitch-black night, desperately trying to escape death. Along the way, gunfire and rotting bodies littered the ground. In the caves, they met another group who could lead them to the Mekong River. Word spread that salvation lay on the other side of it, but the road there was treacherous and laden with unseen danger. They decided that they needed to make a break for the border that night.

They lived in the recesses of the caverns for what seemed an eternity. Many families congregated in the dank, cool holes of the mountain with children and the elderly. Some were left behind simply because they could not make the trip. Contained, wood-burning fires sprung up around the cave, and the cave-dwellers created a system of watchmen, hunters, foragers, and such. Many times, a whistle demanded absolute silence, and nothing could be heard throughout the cave. A father with a motherless child begged for Mai See's milk, but she denied him after her milk started to run thin between his child and hers. Others started to hoard food and left without telling anyone. Mai See watched her son grow bigger everyday as he came to resemble Kong more and more. He grew into a lively child who laughed at nothing and cried every time she left him with someone else. Kong would not return now, but she could not find the strength to name him by herself. He was their child, born of their flesh, and that was enough.

Mai See ate nothing for days as they made their way west towards the Thai border. She tried to feed her child, but the stream of live-giving milk slowly diminished. During the night, two of the families that traveled with them left without word to the others. They hid in the massive jungle at night, moving silently amongst the foliage in hopes of surviving another day. When they slept for spurts of time, Mai See made sure to sleep right against Tou's wife so he could not do anything to her. Still, his eyes roved over her thin body in tattered clothes. She overheard some of the men talking about leaving behind the children, but the husbands and fathers protested, thus the men who knew the way to the Mekong deserted the group as well. The rest of the group would try to find their own way there, blindly following the stars westward.

They decided to move over a large expanse of land at dusk, hoping to cover as much ground as possible. The light of the day lingered in the air as the translucent moon loomed above. A few men made their way first across the area, and then signaled for the others to follow. Mai See could feel her child burning hot in her arms and squirming about. She crossed the space to the thick trees that lined the jungle floor close to Kong's mother. The child continued to thrash in her arms and made a yelping noise. At that moment, Kong's mother pushed her down towards the ground. "Soldiers," she said urgently in Mai See's ear. She scrambled to hide behind a tree trunk, but the child flailed on and cried out. She covered his mouth as her heartbeat quickened. An older woman placed something in her

hand. "Opium. To quiet him." She nodded and placed the substance in her child's mouth. He screamed at first but quieted down. He began to struggle less and lay still in her arms. Mai See noticed none of this as she kept a hand over his tiny mouth to suppress his cries. She cringed as she could see soldiers holding long rifles marching through the clearing. She shut her eyes and drew the infant closer into her body.

They waited until they could no longer hear the soldiers, then the rest of the scattered group reassembled. As Mai See shifted her baby boy over her shoulder, she felt him limp in her arms. Her heart caught in her chest while she tried to rouse him. "No, no," she muttered, "this can't happen." She shook him as his lifeless body remained still. His little head dropped back, and his mouth opened with no air escaping. "Wake up," she called to him, but he did not. The men watched from afar as some of the women flocked to her side. They tried to gently take the child out of her arms with doleful eyes, but Mai See tightened her hold on him. She could still feel the warmth of his little body pressed into hers. Kong's mother touched her arm and she jerked away. She would not let that woman touch her child. "What happened to him? Why is he gone?"

The older woman from before gestured at her. "You must've given him too much opium."

Kong's mother peered off in the distance. "It's better this way. He was too sick to make the journey."

"We have to keep moving. This is a dangerous place for us to be," one of the men said.

Mai See sank to the ground holding her last link to Kong. She wished his life for Kong's, and now she lost both of them. "He wasn't sick," she said.

Kong's mother knelt beside her. "He was sick, but you didn't notice. Now, you must leave him, or they will leave you behind." She glanced over her shoulder at the antsy men itching to move on for fear of detection. Even the women started to peel off from the circle around her with their own children in tow. She took the lifeless body out of Mai See's arms slowly. "We'll bury him." Mai See watched stone-faced as the older woman and Kong's mother dug a shallow grave with sticks and their hands. Kong's mother took down her head shawl and wrapped the body in its magenta cloth. She placed the body in the earth and poured dirt on it. The rest of the party did not watch but moved deeper into the jungle as

long shadows covered the land in darkness. Mai See could barely see the women near the hastily made grave anymore. She heard the rustles of their skirts as they rose and walked to the group ahead, leaving her behind.

Mai See's arms shook as they were the very arms that the child had died in. She rooted herself to the earth in disbelief that her first-born son laid in the dirt at that moment. Her body rocked back and forth while she stared intently at the grave in front of her. The old fortune teller's withered hands over the chicken bones flashed through her mind, and she pressed her hands against her temples to relieve it of its immense pounding. She thought of Kong, how he wanted his son to grow up to be a man, and her promise to him. It was the only thing she had left of him, and even then, her memories of him grew hazy and distorted. She could scarcely remember the smell of his clothes or the touch of his hands on her belly. Everything seemed to slip away from her until she had nothing left.

Her head continued to pulse as her chest constricted, until she could only breathe in long, sucking gusts. She lost track of the others in her grief but cared little if they left her behind anymore. Just then, she thought she heard a faint cry. It jostled her out of her shock and back into the thick, green jungle. Again, it sounded in the distance, and she took a few steps towards it, but the sound faded away before she could reach it. Her hands felt clammy as adrenaline pumped throughout her bony figure. She swirled around as she realized the sound emanated from the freshly dug grave. "I'm coming" she shouted and ran towards it. She fell upon it and started digging through the cool dirt with her bare hands. "I promised I would take care of you," she crooned into the ground.

Suddenly, she felt hands clawing at her from behind. She ignored them at first, intent on retrieving her child, but they became rougher and more insistent. "Leave me alone!" She screamed, hoping to scare them off, but they continued to grab at every inch of her skin. "My baby! My baby! Leave me here. I don't care!" They managed to take a hold of each of her limbs and lift her into the air while she fought furiously against them.

Kong's mother appeared in front of her and slapped her in the face. "Stop before the neighbors call the police. You should be ashamed of yourself." This only enraged her more as she thrashed violently against her captors, causing a few other men to take a hold of her also. "Get her inside!" She heard Kong' mother yell.

Although the groom's wedding party had left with Cee, many of the Yang relatives remained behind to help clean up around the house. The wintry night bit at them as they watched the scene unfold under the clear, moon-lit sky. The men carried her into the house, up the stairs, and into her cramped bedroom while the women and children watched on in astonishment and disgust. They managed to bring her into her room without dropping her as she cried out the entire way. Kong's mother made sure to close the door behind them in case any nosy neighbors watched through their windows. They dropped her onto the bed, exhausted and red-faced as they tried to catch their breaths. Children peered through the doorway, fearful of what lay inside.

As she lay in bed, she heard the baby's whimpering cries pierce the air, and guilt and regret flooded her. She covered her ears in an attempt to drown out the noise that became shriller and shriller each moment. "I'm coming for you! Don't you remember? I made a promise!" She tried to rise to soothe his aches as the crying became more belligerent, but calloused hands quickly pinned her down again. She could not stand it anymore as the crying seemed to rail right against her ears so that she could hear nothing else. "I promised, didn't I?" The crying only intensified until Mai See let out an earth-shattering scream that silenced and stunned all those who heard her in the house. Momentarily after they recovered their senses, the same hands that took her before covered her mouth and pushed her against the bed until she could not move an inch. They could no longer hear her after that, but beneath their many hands, she continued to scream.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“A Game of Ash and Bones”**

by Nyse Contereal

Gods, he hated the sewers.

Not because of the stench or the pile of shit laid on the side. It was actually a convenient way to get around unseen by human eyes.

He would have liked it, if it wasn't such a hard place to find a rotting corpse.

Ryo sniffed at the air, clamping down the bile rising in his throat. He took a step forward, careful not to step on any vermin, or rat poison or whatever else lay hidden inside the gutters.

'Right,' he swallowed hard, holding onto his knife. He paused, taking off his gloves, unleashing his iron claws.

She was watching him.

He could feel her presence lurking in the darkness. Black wind whipped at his feet. Little pools of water slithered its way towards him, snaking itself around his ankles.

His stomach coiled. Gods no, it couldn't be happening.

But he knew it would be minutes. Minutes until the water came at him, roaring and snapping and unyielding, squeezing every life out of him.



He had to hurry. He took a few steps forward, shutting down the tightness rising in his chest. Ryo held his breath. Gods, it was her.

She was a fool for leaving her back exposed like that. Black blood slid down from her face onto her ankles. He lowered himself, baring his canine teeth.

Water swished at his ankles, making small gurgling noises. He closed his eyes.  
\*Shit\*.

She turned, cocking her head to one side. A low hollow laugh escaped her scarred lips.

She lunged, iron teeth snapping.

He didn't even have time to pull out his blade. Moon white nails dug into his neck, twisting back and forth. If he was human, he would have been another victim within seconds. Only his blood, as a deity of fire, kept him from being sent to the underworld.

The water was reaching his waist. Pure, unadulterated pain seared down his back. He kicked at her waist, sending her flying towards the edge of the sewers.

Ryo's eyes lit up. The fool hadn't preserved any of her energy. He snapped his teeth together, taking one glorious moment to celebrate his victory.

He grit his teeth, pulling the blade out, and lunged.

\* \* \*

'Are you telling me you've never killed a human soul?'

Yuki looked at him, from between sips of her bubble tea. Her face was slender, grave, if not pretty. She couldn't have been older than twenty.

She shook her head, resorting back to drinking her bubble tea. Her eyes lay fixed on the wooden table.

'And you only attacked me out of self-defense?'

She gave a slow nod. Her midnight eyes didn't meet his own this time though.

His muscles tensed. Out of all the things he'd faced in the past 300 years, he hadn't expected drinking bubble tea in Bali with a zombie to be his newest one.

They had had thirty seconds, \*thirty seconds\* to swim out of that hell hole before the festering water smothered the fire in his veins. Switching into his human form had nearly taken the very life out of him. And trying to convince the receptionist at the sauna that they didn't smell of rotting corpses had been nearly impossible.

And the girl. What would he do with the girl? She looked up at him as if reading his thoughts. A lazy smile left her lips before she took the last few remaining sips.

He couldn't destroy her. She hadn't killed a human for that. But he couldn't keep her here on Earth either. That would attract too much attention.

'I'm going back to the Mystical Realm in a week' he said, leaning back enough to show the tanned chest underneath his white shirt. It was a shame really. Bali was beautiful.

'Okay?'

Ryo clicked his tongue. Her voice was so slow.

'Would you like to come with me? There will be a place for you somewhere there.'

Gods, she was reeking already. He pulled out a small bottle of perfume, spraying her neck. A few locals turned their heads, wondering what on earth was happening.

'Surprise?' he smiled, letting out a small laugh 'It's for you, darling.'

'Me?'

'Yeah,' he smiled, waving the bottle. His jaws clenched. The last thing he needed was unwanted attention from prying human eyes.

'Thanks.'

He grit his teeth. Gods, she was insufferable.

'Is it a yes or a no then?'

She let out a soft yawn. 'For what?'

'Do you want to go the Mystical Realm with me or not?' a low guttural growl was rising from deep inside his chest.

'Yeah okay,' she said. She shook the bottle of bubble tea. He wasn't sure if she had even heard him. Still, it was good enough of an answer. 'Can we order something else?'

'Sure,' he said, 'sure.'

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Secret Instinct”**

by Catherine Quesada

I loved how this one area in the whole department store felt like its own unique world. Amongst the shelves of various household items ranging from Teflon pans to vases the size of a three-year-old, there’s an area that just exploded with splashes of bright colors. When I crossed the barriers marked by the changes in the floor tiles, it always felt like I was stepping into a rainbow. A rainbow. It’s kind of fitting, actually, considering that I only went here after feeling like I was pushed down by the harsh winds and splashes of a hellish storm.

Today’s been difficult. I failed the exam I had spent a whole week studying for. Then, as I was in the midst of trying to recover from that, my professor in another class humiliated me, because I couldn’t respond well to the graded recitation. After the day I’ve had, a little pick-me-up was just what I needed. I started looking around the shelves of various toys and trinkets radiating with joy. I stopped by a shelf of baby pink blankets. The soft cotton calmed my nerves with just a touch of my fingertips, reminiscent of the way some people felt when they touched fresh grass. I continued stroking the blanket, while being careful not to jostle its neatly folded pile on the shelf.

Yes, looking at these things calmed me, but I couldn’t deny that it also reminded me of what I probably wouldn’t be able to have. Sometimes, I would think that this was my own body telling me that this wasn’t meant for me—this life of tiny baby shoes and brightly colored bottles. I tried not to dwell on that idea, but it’s not like I could control what stayed in my mind and what triggered the familiar waves of anxiety.

I didn’t notice the looming presence until I heard, “Anything I can help you with, Miss?”

Looking up, I saw a female salesperson smiling brightly at me. But I could feel the hint of judgment in her gaze. Of course. In my school uniform, I was clearly a student

looking around at the baby section. She's obviously thinking that I should've been looking at books or clothes or anything else that twenty-year-olds should concern themselves with. I shook my head as my hand dropped to my side. "No, I'm good," I told her and briskly walked off.

On my way home, I always passed through an overpass near our subdivision. I got so used to passing by that I was familiar with every homeless person there. But as I walked up the stairs, I saw somebody new. A mother with a baby in her arms—who's maybe a few months old. Their arms and legs were marred by black and gray streaks of dirt. I watched them just sit there on the floor, until the mother started struggling to breastfeed her baby without exposing herself too much. The image stuck to my mind as I walked and rode the tricycle inside the subdivision—a mother struggling so hard just to feed her baby. But the images flew away when I finally entered our front door and saw my preteen twin brothers watching TV.

Brian and Teddy halfheartedly greeted me, their attention fixated on the sitcom. I noticed that they were watching something suited for older teenagers.

"Maybe you shouldn't—" I started to say, but was cut off when both of them turned to me with that very familiar look on their faces. I got what they were saying. It's the "we've been over this already—we're old enough to watch this show" look. I sighed and retreated to my room upstairs. Yeah, they were right—we have been over this.

As I prepared our dinner that night, my brothers settled in at the kitchen table and started on their homework. As I sautéed some corned beef, I peered over their heads and saw on their textbook that their homework was about the digestive system. Smiling, I told them, "So, stomach, huh? I could help you with that. What's the assignment?"

Brian looked up briefly and shook his head gently. "No, we're good. This is just a continuation of the activity from class today."

Teddy added, "It's very easy."

I deflated a little, but still tried. "Are you sure? I am a biology major, you know. I know some stuff."

Then Teddy replied, "No, this is really easy. We actually did very well at the activity a while ago. Our teacher even said so."

“Alright, then,” I said, masking my disappointment by turning back to the corned beef.

Then the sound of the front door opening and closing echoed through to the kitchen. Soon, our parents stood by the doorway looking tired and a bit sweaty.

“Hello, children,” my dad greeted us in a mock British accent, obviously thinking that it made him sound fancy. He went to the refrigerator for some water.

“It’s like you think you’re the queen or something,” Teddy remarked while Brian snickered beside him.

“Hi, Nina.” My mom walked up to me to peer at what I was cooking on the stove. She was obviously tired after a whole day at the office, but she still smiled at me. She always tried to smile at us. “Breakfast for dinner—did they request that, again?” she asked, jerking her head towards the twins.

“You know that they’re addicted to corned beef,” I mumbled. “Plus, it’s cheap.” I know that sometimes she felt guilty for leaving such chores to me, but I honestly didn’t mind at all. To distract her from the guilt settling in, I asked her, “How was your trip home?”

She sighed. “So hard. Every day, there are more commuters and less jeeps.”

I smiled sympathetically and said, “Don’t worry, dinner is almost ready.”

The next day at school, I was having lunch with Sam. We sat on the steps of our building, surrounded by the chatter and bustle of other students. I noticed that as I wolfed down my food, she barely touched hers. “You okay, Sam?” I asked.

She stabbed her food with her plastic spoon, almost as if she was frustrated by the harmless thing. “Yeah. Just hungover.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Today’s Tuesday.”

“Yes, so?”

I laughed a little. “So, you were wasted on a Monday night? Girl. You never do this. What’s up?”

Sam rolled her eyes at me. “What are you, my mother?” Her snappy tone made me raise my eyebrows, again. She sighed. “Sorry, Nina.”

I shook my head to show that I didn't mind. "So, what's bothering you?" I pressed again.

"Nothing," she answered too quickly and masked it with a bright tone now. Then she changed the subject. "Did you finish that assignment for biochem?"

"Yes, you know that I'm never behind on my schoolwork," I answered briskly. "Now don't change the subject."

Sam hesitated, and then said, "Can we go off campus for a bit? I need a cigarette. Really bad. Like, right now."

Knowing that she's only just an occasional smoker and was almost never this desperate for one, I began to genuinely worry. "Sam...?"

She sighed and leaned in closer. She whispered, "I think I might be pregnant."

For a beat, I didn't say anything out of pure shock. Suddenly, my packed lunch wasn't settling well in my stomach. The leftover corned beef from dinner last night wasn't even that good to begin with, but now, it's like I couldn't even keep it down. After a moment, I was finally able to vocally react, although my voice was a little shaky. "Jesus, are you serious?"

Then she explained, "I've been suspecting for days. Since I've always had irregular period, I could never keep track. I don't know, man." She laughed a little, dark and hollow. "My breasts feel really sore, cramps have been killing me..." Her hands started to shake as she set her take-out box on the step beside her.

I took a deep breath and told her in the most reassuring voice I could muster, "Maybe you're just about to get your period. And besides, you and Ryan broke up months ago."

Sam averted her eyes and I knew immediately what went down.

I sighed exasperatedly. "Oh, Samantha. Him, again?"

"I know, Nina, I know. I don't get it either. He's just..." she trailed off, shook her head and ran her hand through her long hair.

Nodding determinedly, I told her, "Okay, then we'll find out if you're," I dropped down my voice, "really pregnant, okay? We'll go buy a test after school."

"Nah, I'm busy."

I fixed her with a stare. “Sam.” Again, she didn’t respond and was now looking away from me again. I knew that she was just really scared, and a test could only confirm what she was truly scared of. But she had to know. I asked, “Have you told Ryan about this?”

Sam shook her head again. “I need more time to process this before I tell anyone else.”

I decided to drop it for now, and let her take her time to get ready to take the test. I nodded and took her hand. “Okay, fine. But no more drinking and smoking, okay?” I said the last part more firmly.

She barely nodded and let out a deep breath. She said, “You’re lucky you have that PCOS thing. You wouldn’t have to worry like me.”

I couldn’t form a response, so I just looked down at my food. Yeah, sure, it’s fun to have a sickness where my body refused to menstruate, and slimmed my chances of ever having a baby in the future. Sure.

\* \* \*

It was about two years ago when something similar happened. It was late at night, and my little brothers had long been fast asleep in their shared bedroom. That had given me the peace and quiet that I needed in order to study. A little after midnight, I was getting hungry, so I had stepped out of my room and made my way down to the kitchen. But as I went down the stairs, a distinct murmuring stopped me in my tracks. It was my parents, sitting at the kitchen table—which I had a full view of from my spot on the stairs. Mom and Dad still hadn’t noticed me since they were facing away from me. They both sounded so serious that I had started to go back up the stairs, but something stopped me.

Mom had said, “I think I’m pregnant.”

For a split second, I had the urge to run up to my room and pretend that I didn’t just hear that. But my curiosity was suddenly at an all-time high. So, I sat quietly on the stairs and listened.

“Really?” Dad asked. His voice was low, but kind of cracked, undoubtedly filled with worry.



Mom sighed, "I haven't taken a test yet, but I'm very worried." She paused, clearly hesitating over what she wanted to say next. But still she tried. "Money is already so tight. We can't afford to have another kid."

It took Dad a while to respond. Then he said, "It'll be alright." When Mom didn't say anything back, he continued with a more determined voice. "Hey. We'll figure it out. Tomorrow, I'll get you a pregnancy test and we'll see where we really are."

"Okay," Mom said, shaking her head gently. "I mean, I would love to have another baby. We have three great kids--why wouldn't I want another one? But it's just a really bad time." She had sighed deeply. "I don't know what to do."

Dad covered her hand with his on the table.

Mom continued, "You know that Nina went to an obstetrician a few weeks ago, right?"

"Yes, for her period, right?"

My eyes closed at the mention of me. I didn't want to think about it--this thing that had been happening to my ovaries. I didn't understand what I did to cause it, but the doctor had made sure that I understood the effects.

Then Mom explained, "Lack of it, yeah. She just found out that the reason why she's not having her period is that she has PCOS—this syndrome and one of the effects is that she'll have a hard time getting pregnant when the time comes."

Dad didn't say anything, but I could see that his hand tightened around my mom's.

"I just kept thinking about that, you know? That my own daughter may not have the experience I had--or will be having again, if I really am pregnant now."

Clearly, Dad didn't know what to say any more, so he just pulled her in for a hug, kissing her temple.

Suddenly, the private moment became even more private.

I quietly ran back to my room, food forgotten. Once alone, in my brightly lit bedroom, I sat on my bed, disturbing the piles of open books and notebooks lying on it. I couldn't believe it. A baby sibling. That would be so great. I could be helpful with taking care of the baby, just like when the twins were born. Maybe my parents wouldn't be so scared if they just thought of the sheer joy that a baby could bring into the house. It could make all the money problems in the world worth it.

\* \* \*

It was almost dinnertime when I emerged from the library. As I walked quickly across the campus oval, I called Teddy.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Teddy, I'm running late, so when you and Brian get hungry, just eat a snack first--I think we still have some of that tasty bread," I told him.

After a moment of murmuring between him and Brian, his clear voice came back, saying, "We'll just buy some pancit canton at the tindahan. We can cook that for dinner."

"What? Why?" I demanded. "No, just wait for me. I can cook you dinner."

"No, Ate, it's fine," Teddy answered. "We can feed ourselves, you know."

I stopped walking. Were they really insisting that they cook dinner on their own? I knew that they were getting older, but I was the Ate and it's my job to take care of them, even if it's just for dinner.

"Really, Ate, it's fine," Teddy said again, and I could just picture Brian nodding beside him.

And so I gave in. "Yeah, okay. I mean, canton is not really a good dinner, but go ahead."

"Okay!" Teddy answered and then the line cut off.

I started walking again, but slower this time. Moments later, my phone rang again. It was probably one of the twins, maybe changing their minds about their dinner. But when I looked at my phone, it was Sam. Eyebrows furrowing, I answered it.

"Nina?" she asked.

"Sam?" It'd been a few days since she told me that she might be pregnant. I had been trying my best to get her to stop drinking for a while, at least until we were sure that she wasn't pregnant. But it's not like I could watch her 24/7. Who was I kidding? I still didn't know what to feel about her possible pregnancy. I wanted to help her so much with anything that she needed, but I was finding it hard to cope with the fact that this was happening right now.

“Nina, Nina, Nina,” Sam said, her voice cracking a little. “You’re my best friend, right?”

I rolled my eyes. “If you’re just asking that after more than ten years of friendship, then we have bigger problems.”

She replied, “Okay, um, well, now, I need you to do what a best friend would do for her best friend.”

Her silliness made me pause. But after a beat, it dawned on me. “You’re drunk.”

Sam took a while to answer, clearly embarrassed to admit it. “Can you please...? I don’t wanna—I’m at my usual place--”

I sighed. “Yeah, okay. Just stay put. I’ll pick you up.”

After I picked Sam up from the bar just a few streets away from our school, I walked her to where she lived, which was, thankfully, nearby. When we entered her dark and empty condo, I asked her, “Where’s your roommate?”

“Province,” she answered as she walked deeper into the small studio unit and crashed face-first onto one of the two single beds pushed up against the wall.

Fully knowing where things were, as we’d had sleepovers here during our years in college, I rummaged through her closet for some comfier clothes, tossed them at her, and made my way to the kitchenette for some water. I also found some packs of grocery mamon in the fridge and took out two. Going back to the sleeping area, I saw that Sam was sitting up with her back against the wall, and had successfully changed out of her dingy school uniform and into the clothes I had given her.

“I assume you haven’t eaten yet, so,” I told her as I handed her a glass of water and one of the mamon packs. I sat down on the other bed across the small space and started eating mine.

Sam chugged the water halfway through and then set it on the bedside table she and her roommate shared between them. She hadn’t touched the pastry yet.

“Eat, Sam. It’ll help absorb all the alcohol in your system.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “That’s just some silly myth.”

I did know that, but it had earned a response from her. And when she opened her pack, I considered it a win anyhow. “Why were you out drinking, when you know that you might be pregnant?”

She shrugged and swallowed before answering. “I was just with some people I met at PE.”

I suddenly got a picture of my mom sitting at that kitchen table, her voice wavering in worry as she told my dad that she might be pregnant. Maybe this was what Sam was feeling--that she was just really worried about getting pregnant at the wrong time, but deep down, she actually wanted it. Maybe Sam was in the same situation as Mom was two years ago. Only this time, I could actually help. I told her, “Sam, we should talk about it. You’re clearly not okay. I mean, you weren’t even supposed to be drinking.”

“I’m just really scared,” she said, her voice low. “I don’t want to have a baby.” She stopped and took a deep breath. I waited for her to continue. “But, if I am pregnant, I don’t know what I’m gonna do.” She laughed darkly. “What? Get an illegal, unsafe, abortion in, where, Recto?”

“Sam,” I started, and then paused in hesitation. Maybe it wasn’t my place to say this, but someone should say it, at least once. “Having a kid, at your age and still studying, it’s doable. Lots of people do it.”

“I don’t care, I don’t want it, okay?” she snapped.

“A baby shouldn’t be the end of the world, right?” I asked.

She scoffed. “Oh, yeah, sure it’s literally the start of a new life. But then I start thinking of actually being pregnant...what would my family say, what about school, money, a house—all of those things. And, add to that, the fact that I am not ready at all to be a mother. Hell, I’m not even sure if I want to be one at all, okay?”

“Sam, at least consider the possibility of you being able to do this. It’ll be hard to be a mom, of course, but people will help you. I’ll help take care of the baby.”

“It’s still different. It will still be my responsibility. I can’t just rely on people for that.”

“Think of the joy it’ll bring to your life,” I argued. “You may not see it at first, but it’ll be there. You’ll be happy about it.”

“I don’t care! Shut up!” she exclaimed. “Stop saying these things to me, okay? They’re fucked up.”

I kept my voice low as I continued. “I just can’t help but think that it’s so unfair that you might be pregnant and hate it so much, when there are some people who want it so bad but can’t.”

Sam shook her head, obviously trying to contain her anger. I knew I had stepped too far. But, I couldn’t stop myself. I just couldn’t hear such things from my own best friend--thinking that this new life would be the fall of hers.

Her voice lowered as well. “It’s the PCOS thing, isn’t? I know that it scares you, and it is unfair that you have it. But, you can’t just transfer your frustrations onto me. Okay? So, stop. I’m not ready, so don’t force it.” She set her half-eaten mamon on the bedside table and laid down. She rolled over to face the wall, and said, “It’s late. You can stay over, but go home first thing in the morning.”

I texted my parents, telling them that I’d be staying over at Sam’s tonight. The small space was rife with tension, but neither of us spoke. The guilt just burrowed a hole in my gut, settling there, telling me that I went too far tonight.

\* \* \*

The day after I overheard my parents quietly talking about the possibility of a pregnancy and having another kid, I found myself walking around the baby section in the department store of a nearby mall. I couldn’t explain it. I just woke up that morning and had an underlying urge to buy something. The urge stayed with me throughout the day. Sam had even gotten a little annoyed at me during lunch because she was trying to tell me a story about this guy she had just met named Ryan. I couldn’t follow what she was saying—which apparently was front and center of her life concerns at that moment.

To be honest, the reason why I couldn’t focus on her as well was because, well, I couldn’t care less. I was about to have a baby sibling. The weight of that responsibility and the sheer excitement I felt, trumped everything else. And so, at the end of the day, I had made my way to the mall to buy something for the baby. I knew that my parents were worried about it being legit, but I could feel it. I could feel the huge possibility of it.

Looking at the various items in the area, I found that there really were a lot of things that I didn't know about babies. However, just looking at the tiny baby bottle with bright polka dots against a purple backdrop, or the white wooden crib with a solar system baby mobile—I felt the realness of it—of a baby I could help take care of.

I thought that maybe I could get something for Mom, to show her that it was all going to be okay. Maybe it would help her to stop being so scared about having a baby. I walked through the aisles of baby clothes and ran my fingers through the hanging clothes, feeling the soft cotton fabrics. And then, one item in particular caught my eye. A onesie, with its front facing me, instead of hanging sideways.

The yellow fabric reminded me of scrambled eggs. Instantly, I was taken back to the Sunday breakfasts where Mom wasn't in a hurry to go to work, or too tired from a long night of overtime. In the middle of the onesie was an embroidered sunflower. Taking up most of the torso area, the embroidery looked so detailed. This particular detail reminded of Plants vs. Zombies, a game that I was once addicted to as a kid. I decided that the detail was perfect, because in the game the sunflower produced suns, which gave life and kept the game going. This shirt felt like it gave off life. And, anything that could fit happily into that tiny onesie couldn't be something you heavily dreaded.

So, I had taken it to the cashier and bought it, not even caring that I had just spent a chunk of my allowance for that week.

\* \* \*

I woke up early in Sam's place. Thankfully, her roommate had spent the night elsewhere, so I was able to sleep on the vacant bed. Sam was still fast asleep, and knowing that she hadn't been sleeping well lately, I tried to be as quiet as I could while I made my way out of the condo. I went to a 24-hour drugstore near Sam's apartment building. The 6 AM sun barely shone in the horizon, casting a dull yellow glow. I didn't know, but I thought of it as the sun getting tired every day, just like most of us.

I walked into the store and the fluorescent lights were so bright, they almost gave me a headache. After a quick look around, I approached the pharmacist behind the counter.

She was leaning both of her elbows on the counter, looking bored and tired. I asked her, "Excuse me, where can I find a pregnancy test?"

She cast an odd look my way, which instantly reminded me of the female salesperson from the department store a few days ago. That's when I remembered that like that time, I was wearing my school uniform. Since I had slept over at Sam's, I didn't get a chance to change my clothes from the day before.

The pharmacist replied, "Right here, Ma'am," and jerked her head to her right, where a bunch of tests were neatly piled on the counter, right beside the condoms.

I gave her a small, albeit tight, smile and took a look at the pregnancy tests. I got overwhelmed by the different brands and just grabbed two random boxes, and bought them. Thankfully, they weren't that expensive. When I got back to Sam's, she was still fast asleep. So, I left the tests inside her bag, so that her roommate wouldn't accidentally see them. I took my stuff and went home.

As I commuted home, I passed by the same mother and baby on the overpass. Since it was still a bit early, they were still asleep. They looked the same, both marked by streaks of dirt on their skin. The mother struggled to fit onto the single-sized blanket on the ground, with the baby wrapped up in her thin arms. I paused at the sight. Here was another different case of motherhood--the everyday struggle to keep your baby alive. I knew that Sam wouldn't end up like this, if she was indeed pregnant. It wouldn't be the same level of struggle, but it would still be hard.

Suddenly, a car horn echoed from below the overpass, startling the mother awake. When her eyes landed on me--a total stranger looking down on her and her baby--I quickly ran away. But, the sight of the mother and baby stayed in my mind, even after I got home.

\* \* \*

On the night that I bought the sunflower onesie, I had planned to sneak up on my parents, again. I knew that they were going to confirm the pregnancy that night, because I had felt the heavy tension between them when they got home from work. After my brothers had fallen asleep, I found my parents once again sitting at the kitchen table.

"So," Mom said, "three minutes is up."

“Okay, let’s see what the test says,” Dad replied.

Since I was hiding on the stairs, I could only see their backs and not their facial expressions. I couldn’t even see the pregnancy test placed between them on the table, but I could feel the air rife with tension.

Mom let out a deep breath and then said, “Negative.”

Silence filled the room. I could hear their heavy breathing. And maybe even the drop of my heart, I didn’t know.

After another moment, Dad finally spoke, “Really?”

“That’s what the stick says,” Mom replied.

Another moment of silence fell between them.

I realized that the silence meant tears were falling down my mom’s face. Dad pulled her into his arms. As quietly as I could, I walked back up the stairs to my room. And, that was that--there was no baby. My heart ached for the loss that we never even had in the first place.

I ended up in the same department store the next day, determined to return the onesie I apparently no longer needed. As I stood there in the middle of the baby section, in the middle of a place that somehow reminded me of a rainbow, I was suddenly unsure of what to do.

One moment, I was standing still. And, the next, I was walking out with the paper bag containing the onesie. I didn’t have to second-guess anymore, because all of a sudden, I felt lighter—like it was some kind of high, having that tiny, seemingly innocuous thing with me.

\* \* \*

I didn’t see Sam in our classes all day. I didn’t even text her and ask why she hadn’t come to school. I knew that she was probably pondering over the pregnancy test, and right now, that trumped everything else going on in her life.

As I left my last class for the day, Sam called me.

“You have to come over,” she said. “I can’t look at the test result alone.”



“Okay,” I told her and headed straight to her place.

A little while later, we were both sitting on the floor by her bed. Given how tiny her studio apartment was, it didn’t have a couch. Their two-seater dining table, also served as a desk and a shelf. When we studied or hung out here, our only options for sitting were the bed or the floor. It was kind of nice that we had chosen the floor this time. It reminded me of when we were much younger, sitting on the floor in front of the TV. The pregnancy stick was on the floor between us with Sam’s phone beside it, its timer counting down the minutes until the result would show.

I watched Sam’s anxious face stare at the test. She looked so young and vulnerable. My problem was that I had built up this image of motherhood in my head, and thought that everyone should want it the way I wanted it. Some people can be a mom at my age and find that it’s what they’re meant to be. But, I had to accept the fact that not everyone was the same. Not Sam, and not even me.

Sam let out a shaky breath. “Longest three minutes of my life.”

I could feel the nervousness radiating from her. I tried to lighten things up. I told her, “Really? ‘Cause mine was that time with Mike from Sociology...”

She laughed. “Yeah, he really did freeze time with that one, huh?” she replied, shaking her head a little. Then she sighed again. “Hey, thank you for being here.”

I said, “Of course. Whatever happens—if you wanna be a mom or not—I’ll support you.” I looked at her and saw that she was scared out of her mind and felt like she’d been backed into a corner with no way of getting out. She really was just a kid. We were both still just kids. I continued, “I’m so sorry for the way I treated you. I was being selfish.”

Sam nodded. I could see her eyes getting glassy, so close to tears. She did not say a word, but just took my hand. I knew that she was trying to hold back her tears and talking would just open the floodgates. So, I just squeezed her hand to tell her that I understood what she wanted to say.

Her phone chimed—it’d been three minutes.

She gave me a terrified look. I gave her an encouraging nod.

We both looked at the test at the same time.

Negative.

We were both so shocked that we couldn’t speak.

And, then.

Laughter.

I don't know who started it, but we just ended up laughing together and it actually felt right. There's something cathartic about letting out a hearty laugh. My chest contracted, my stomach tightened, and my cheeks feel like they were being stretched out beyond their limits. I couldn't see straight. I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe. And yet, it was the best feeling in the world.

After a moment or two, the laughter died down, but we were both still wearing goofy smiles.

Sam, still trying to catch her breath, said, "I should take another test to make sure."

We started laughing again as I passed her a large bottle of water.

A few days later, when I passed by the overpass, the mother and baby were still there, sitting on the dingy floor. With determined steps this time, I walked over to them and smiled. The mother looked warily at me and clutched the fussy baby on her lap tighter.

"It's okay," I told her as I knelt down across from them. "I mean no harm. I just wanted to give you something that I don't really need, but your baby might."

The mother still didn't respond as I reached into my bag and pulled out a worn plastic package. Through the old plastic, I could see the familiar warm yellow color and the sunflower embroidery. It was old, but definitely unused. It didn't deserve to be hiding away in my cabinet, waiting for something that I wasn't ready for after all.

I offered it to the mother, who reluctantly took it. With the baby in her arms, she struggled to open the package. When she finally succeeded, she took out the yellow onesie and held it up. She looked at me with a warm glow in her eyes.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," I replied. I stood up, nodded at her and continued on my way home. The sight when I entered the front door was all too familiar: the twins sitting in front of the TV. The smell of pancit canton wafted through the air.

Brian and Teddy looked up at me and smiled in greeting. Teddy was holding a big bowl of the instant noodles and offered it to me. He asked, "Wanna eat? I know you're hungry."

Brian nodded, "Yup, you always are. That's why we cooked."

A laugh suddenly burst out of me. Well, I couldn't deny that. I set my bag down on the floor and settled onto the couch between the twins. Since I was in the middle, the bowl sat on my lap. There were two forks and Brian took a huge bite with one them. Then he handed me the fork. I took some of the noodles and shoved them into my mouth. I realized that this was the first time they cooked food for me. It was nice.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Fiend”**

by Harrith Hasmadi

He stood up straight, stepped back and admired the whole bloody scene. He tried to control his breathing when he caught himself bellowing like an ox. His heart was beating fast, his ears ringing from the excitement and frenzy. Slowly as the adrenaline rush ebbed, he felt fatigue creeping into his body, like he had just run a marathon. He was tired, but he felt good. Slowly, he walked towards the bathroom and went straight to the sink. He held on tightly to the sink and slowly looked up into the mirror. What he saw shocked him at first. It was like staring into the eyes of a deranged stranger.

All this while he had had no problem cutting open Samantha; not a single feeling of guilt sawing through Rachael’s limbs; nor any remorse when Hayley stared back at him with her cold dead eyes. So why is it that he actually felt badly looking at Susan’s mangled body? Could this be the turning point for David? In the silence he heard the ticking of the clock, and he knew he had no time to spare. He could wash away his sins later, he had more important things to take care of at the moment.

While dragging Susan’s bloody body, David couldn’t help but remember the small moments he had shared with her. He remembered one time when she woke him up and told him she wanted ice cream. He had groaned, turned to his side and hid his face under the pillow. She had pried the pillow away and whispered in her raspy voice, begging him to drive her to McDonalds. He sat up and looked at the time on his iPhone. It was 3:37 a.m. He was a bit irritated, but he liked how free spirited and random she could be at times. So, they had ended up eating McFlurries by the beach. The sound of the cascading waves occasionally broken by whispers and laughter of the young lovebirds.

After carefully stripping Susan, David tossed her clothes into the basement furnace. He also removed all of her accessories; her dove necklace and heirloom bracelet. He would keep them for later. Without any hesitation, he took his favourite cleaver and with a

practiced precision, he mutilated Susan's body to small pieces. The rhythmic chopping brought comfort to David, almost giving him some sort of orgasm. He found solace as his cleaver cut through her meat and bones. When Susan was no longer distinguishable from a pile of meat at the market, David threw her body's pieces into the basement furnace. He also splashed some petroleum inside the furnace to make sure that the fire wouldn't leave anything behind.

As the fire engulfed Susan's remains, David set to work on cleaning the house of any evidence. He wiped every nook and cranny clean, not leaving one spot unbleached. He was sure to make it look like Susan had simply vanished into thin air, so that he would look innocent and as baffled as anyone would about her disappearance. After burning all of the evidence, he fished for her dove necklace in his pocket. He toyed with the dainty pendant and thought of what he could do with it. He placed it back in his pocket and headed out for something to eat. He was always famished after a killing.

The next morning, David knew what he had to do, say, and how to act in order to win sympathy points from people. He drove to the nearest police station and lodged a report that his wife was been missing from their home. It was very peculiar that she would run away, but David showed the police a few things that indicated Susan may have ran away with another man. The police jotted down everything that David said, checked the house, and the evidence he claimed showed that Susan had been planning to run away for a long time.

In the end, the police came to the conclusion that Susan had run away. David was off the hook. He later sold the house and moved to another town. People said that David did so, as he didn't have the heart to live in a house that would remind him of his runaway wife. The whole town sympathized for David's loss. Little did they know of the shocking truth. Every now and then, David would fiddle the round pendant on his neck. The pendant that was made from melting Susan's dove necklace.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Banquet for the Hungry Ghost”**

by Keith Raymond

“The path between realities is a difficult one. If that is not enough to scare you off, oh intrepid one, the disappearance of others should be. ‘Master mindfulness’ says the guru, but if you are still not deterred, you must practice ‘out of mindfulness.’ If you succeed and transit, my compliments. Yet there are dangers that defy understanding. Prepare to be eaten!”

“Beware friend: What you leave behind is more precious than family, belongings, or even your body. Everything that you once were will be taken. When you return you will never be the same. Have you considered this? Consider once again, perhaps you might choose a different path!”

Nick dropped the brochure, but like flash paper, it flamed out before it hit the ground. Leonora grabbed his hand, white knuckling his fist. They looked around in awe at the golden temples. Then their eyes circled back to the fakir, smiling with a rod through both his cheeks.

“Take this incense. Go to the nearest spirit house and light it,” he mumbled around the bolt. “You must give the ancestors a high wai, and pray for acknowledgment.”

Nick thanked the man by giving him a large durian, which he was happy to stop carrying. They exchanged gifts with opposing hands. Then the man descended in half lotus from shoulder height on his ‘magic carpet.’ Furling his purple satin elephant pants, he dismissed them with a nod.

Leonora smirked at the three sticks of unlit incense. Now she knew what it was like to be Jack’s wife, just before he threw the three beans into the garden. Another scam in Thailand.

Nick, on the other hand, was completely enchanted. It was this kind of experience he sought while on holiday. Fake or not, he was having fun. “What could we lose by trying.

Besides, they wouldn't let us in the hotel with a durian anyway. Cut it open and it fills the corridors with sewer gas."

"But the taste...scrumptious! Oh, what the hell," she shrugged, "Let's go."

"You did read the brochure, didn't you?" Nick cautioned, as they strolled off the temple grounds to search for a spirit house. "Seems risky."

"Yeah right," she was willing to indulge him. His concerned frown was adorable.

\* \* \*

Nick Stamper was not actually on holiday. He was on a mission. One assigned by his girlfriend after they lost their son at four months of age. The boy was found in his pram by a nosey walker while they strolled Hyde park. Sudden infant death syndrome the coroner pronounced. No matter how hard he tried, Nick could not grieve.

Hence, his mission. It was not that he did not have feelings for his kid. He simply could not find them. He had no sense of loss. Perhaps it was his insensitivity, groomed by slinging slices in Soho. As a purveyor of pizza, he had learned to insulate himself from the freak show that paraded past his counter.

The ginger haired Brit never found a place in his soul to mourn. While Eva cried and tore her hair out, he was reserved. She found it worse than odd. Eva found it disturbing. So she sent him away. Perhaps more for herself than him. While Nick felt for her, he had never had an inkling of remorse for a boy whose name he barely remembered. He was told not to return until he felt the loss. Thailand might not have been the best choice in that case.

Leonora Bancroft, on the other hand, was on holiday, but she had been abandoned. All her mates had canceled on her. They told her only after it was too late to get a refund. Her choice was to toss the quid and stay home or go. Being penny wise, she chose the latter.

This is how she found herself sitting beside Nick on the jet. They both had shied away from each other. Leonora was ten years younger than the man sitting beside her. She was still struggling to resolve being stood up. He, on the other hand, was concentrating on finding his grief.

Both failed. Which led to a tentative probing and finally a chat out of boredom. They both had little interest in each other, despite their mutual attraction. Leonora tried not to like older men, and Nick always found swarthy women beguiling, but out of reach.

Ultimately, they settled on neutral conversation. What with five hours still to go and bloody boring flight entertainment, they felt inclined to talk.

“Sounds like we both drew the short stick,” said Nick after a while.

A bit of amusement flashed in the gold flecks of Leonora’s hazel eyes. She smiled for the first time, then returned his reticence. “You know I’m not into having...”

“Oh, thank God,” he gushed, flushing. Their defenses and magnetism dropped an octave. They both relaxed knowing a shag was not to be had or avoided.

“Where are you staying?”

“Dunno.”

“Phuket,” she answered her own question.

He reflected and pronounced it with a ‘Fuc’ as she had, which made them laugh. “Okay, mind if I join you. We can protect each other from predators.”

She was apprehensive for a moment, but his look was pure innocence and well meaning. So she settled on, why not. “Fine, so long as you don’t get any ideas.”

“Furthest from my mind love,” and Nick meant it.

\* \* \*

They found a spirit house beautifully decorated at a police station. It was as unexpected as it was odd. Yet it perfectly suited, as they needn’t bother to enter anyone’s yard, or disturb a local family. Still, they looked around self-consciously.

A short distance away was the beach, the shore, and the sand. Fishermen sewed their nets and smoked roll-ups by long-tail boats. Tall pine trees separated the beach from the road. Minah birds nosed around in the shade, and a cool breeze came on shore. The station seemed unoccupied. It was painted white as was the surrounding low wall, dazzling in the tropical sun.

“Good a place as any,” Nick offered.

She nodded as he placed the three sticks of incense into the usual receptacle removing the old used sticks. He patted his pockets looking for matches. She sighed and reached into her clutch pulling out a lighter. Flicking it a couple of times, while shading it from the breeze, she lit the incense in sequence.

The smell was intoxicating as the smoke curled up. The whorls were blocked by their bodies from the sea wind. They stood close, almost huddled, and watched expectantly.



The sky grew dark, as if an eclipse was taking place. They barely noticed until the blackness became claustrophobic. First Nick looked up, then Leonora, as she sensed his gaze from the corner of her eye.

A field of stars.

Primordial stars with undefined constellations soared above them. Several comets shot by with magnificent rainbow colored tails. Leonora gasped, and a new voice intruded on their awe. "Ayahuasca transits..."

Nick thought she coughed, "Say again."

"It was not me," she answered.

"It was me, down here."

They both looked down at the tiny figure standing on the steps of the spirit house.

"That's right," the miniature saffron robed monk said, "they're Ayahuasca transits. Souls traveling to her realm. If you look carefully there are other shooting stars, darker and colder. Those are the dead. One way ticket..."

The incense sputtered, and daylight intruded on their meditation. Leonora and Nick squinted in the sudden beach sun. There was a sizzle as the sticks burned down to a new section, and the smoke curled up again, bringing back the cool night.

"Lost you there for a minute," noted the monk, "I bet you bought that incense from that cheapskate fakir."

They shrugged numbly, still in shock over the tiny talking man.

The monk nodded his bald brown head as if bobbing in prayer. He slapped his big round belly beneath his robes and lifted his begging bowl to them. Then he winked and grinned at the couple. Continuing, he asked, "What were you expecting, an old Thai cop? Maybe a hunched over grandma?"

"Well, we uh..."

"I appear in this form to put you at ease. Don't expect me to be your guide though, but I can point you in the right direction. Up to you where you go, and maybe how you get back."

"You said Ayahuasca whats?" Leonora found her voice.

"Yup, one way to get to her realm. Short acting hallucinogen. Bloody tourists!"

“Her world? Where is that?” Nick asked, screwing up his courage, still not believing they were talking to an ornament.

“Best way to know is to go,” the monk answered. “But be aware of the time. You only have as long as the incense burns. Beyond that, you’re trapped.”

Nick snuffed out the sticks with two wet fingers. The daylight intruded and the couple looked at each other full of questions but no answers.

“What do you think?” Leonora asked.

“I must be dehydrated. Did you see what I saw?”

“You mean a tiny monk on those stairs?” She pointed at the entrance to the small spirit house.

“They told us to stay hydrated.”

“I’m not sure beer is what they had in mind, Nick.”

“Best we eat first, I am a bit peckish. Can’t go on a long trip on an empty stomach.” She looked at the three sticks, three quarters of the incense remained.

Nick grabbed the sticks in one hand, and led her with the other to a beach bar where they were grilling seafood. They sat down on cheap plastic molded seats and wiggled their toes in the warm sand. Looking into each other eyes, they still had a hard time believing what had just happened at the spirit house.

The cook walked up to them with a bucket of fish, and Nick pointed at two red snapper flopping among the other sea creatures. The man nodded and said, “Twenty minutes. You come back.”

\* \* \*

Nick used a fish bone to pick his teeth when they were done. Leonora took a swig of beer from an over-sized bottle.

“Ready?” she asked.

They hadn’t really talked more about it. Throughout the meal, they had looked at each other cautiously, denying the supernatural events at the spirit house that morning. Chalking it all up to a spicy breakfast, jet lag, or both. Rather than facing the impossible, Nick answered, “Yup. Time to check out the Big Buddha.”

They climbed into their rental car and drove an hour south, then up Nakkerd hill to the parking area. From there, they climbed to the top where the shrine sat. On the way, they

passed the trappings of tourism. Zip line centers, ATV rides, elephant treks, and cobra parks all designed to take baht and leave the visitor breathless. Parking was tight in the afternoon but they found a spot. Leonora took the three partially burned sticks of incense from the dashboard, hoping to use them, putting the morning memory behind them.

Above, at the top of the hill towered the forty-five meter white marble Buddha. One was required to pass stalls selling incense, flowers, and gold leaf to adorn the statues and altars that sat beneath the dome on which the Buddha resided. From there, an immense staircase of white marble allowed visitors to climb from a terrace that overlooked the Andaman sea and southern Phuket up to the base of the Buddha. Twin temple dragons guarded the stairs.

Just before entering the dome beneath the Buddha stood the statues of the great leaders of Siam, Prince Naruswan, the one who initially united the nation, and General Taksin who succeeded in reuniting Thailand a second time. Both became kings. Their stories are legendary.

After entering the dome, one could see a monk sitting on an elevated dais. Devotees would crawl on a red carpet toward him to share their prayers and hopes so they could receive blessings. Nick and Leonora passed them all without stopping. They were drawn to the section beneath the Buddha itself.

They entered a vast area, beyond where the crowds gathered to rotate prayer wheels and read displays. In the silence, a multitude of pillars stood supporting the immense weight of the Buddha above. At the base of each pillar was either a statue, an altar, or both. Each pillar display was unique. The area itself still reeked of unsettled marble dust and old incense.

They paused around each altar seeming to look for something specific. Attracted by the art or maybe a feeling that emanated from the collection of flowers and hand written prayers left behind. Leonora found what she was looking for in a bas relief. Charging horses and sea creatures seemed to leap from the marble, hovering over an altar with a scattering of gold leaf stuck on by devotees.

Nick stood behind her. He placed his hands on her shoulders, uncharacteristically. She normally would have shrugged them off, but there was a sense of reverence rather than

seduction in the act. She placed the incense between her palms and did a deep wai, as she had seen other Thai do it in the same way. Then she placed the incense in a brass censer.

Nick reached around her and lit each stick with her lighter, then they stood upright and watched. His hands remained on her shoulders. As the smoke curled up, they inhaled deeply. To the backpackers walking by a feat of magic seemed to occur. At first the couple at the altar became wood, then cracks emerged in the statues that encased their forms. Slowly but visibly they petrified, shedding the dark wood, changing into white marble, like the pillars all around them.

The young backpackers shook their heads. Burdened by day packs in front, and over-sized backpacks behind, they sweated profusely, wondering if the mirage they had seen was nothing but their imagination and the humidity. The guy looked at his girlfriend who shrugged, only to walk on.

\* \* \*

Unaware of the changes their bodies underwent beneath the dome, Nick and Leonora stood on the steps of the spirit house they had seen up north. Two marble temple dragons pointed their claws toward a scintillating star hovering in space a short distance away. Brilliant light was spinning around, forming a ring, spilling sparks. The ring was at first horizontal, then it rotated to the vertical, growing in diameter from the star into an opening. Through the opening, another world beckoned.

They immediately sensed it was her realm. Above and around them, cold spirits passed through the portal. Moments later, in their subjective sense of time, they saw the rainbow colored tails of Ayahuasca transits. Comets of luminous beings joining the colder ones and passing through the portal. It all seemed normal as before.

What captured their minds was the torrent of sound coming out through the ring. A thousand voices, some Gregorian chant, some chanting Buddhists, some harmonic Salah, each voice blending into a base rumble of Zion's trumpet summoning the worthy. The music was seductive, the entreaty of sirens. Nick and Leonora sensed her presence beyond.

They agreed silently, and rose into the air. Flying seemed absolutely reasonable here, and they headed toward the portal, collecting brief impressions of the space around them before passing through. Then it all changed.

Vessels of consciousness became fluid rather than fixed, and their bodies transmogrified into radiant pyramids. Each face of the pyramid rippled with images from their individual memories. To stay close, they linked, Nick and Leonora allowed their pyramidal bases to come together and fuse into a radiant diamond shape, like some of the other geometric awareness's around them.

The variable shapes of different beings shared moments from their past on each of their facets as they moved forward. They flowed through a channel, more a crevasse, surrounded by steep cliffs that boasted vast planes above and on either side. Moving as a group, they flew faster until they emerged into a valley, spreading out in a huge bowl comprised of shiny metallic surfaces. In the center, she hovered, the hungry ghost.

To each geometric being, she appeared different, and yet to all she was resplendently gorgeous. Her evanescent form floated enchantingly, seducing with her beauty beneath a lavender sky. To Nick, she was a voluptuous brunette with features that were part Eva and part Leonora. To Leonora, she was a tall willowy blond, reminiscent of Thalia. A girl she had had a crush on when she was a teen.

At the periphery, they watched the others approach and enter her, drawn by her irresistible smile. A disturbing contrast grated on their nerves. A sense of bones crunching. Mastication from the tearing of flesh, as the hungry ghost's teeth gnashed and lips smacked. Around her other silvery ring portals formed, like the one they had past through into her realm. These portals served as paths where the remnant beings of her meals passed into other realities.

The mixed vision of horror and seduction unnerved the fused couple, still floating as a diamond before the banquet. The eaten Ayahuasca transits rather than passing through the other portals like the dead, returned from where they came. Now soulless, they re-inhabited their intoxicated bodies. Those bodies they had left behind during their hallucinatory experience.

Nick resisted the hungry ghost only by the force of his fidelity to Eva. Still, his resistance ebbed as the majestic being poured on the charm, coating him with her pheromones as she sensed his reluctance. There was a ripping sensation of the diamond as Leonora tore away from him (as a lone pyramid) to embrace her destiny with the ghost.

It was Nick's concern for Leonora that made him shake off her love potion and woke him from the spiral of seduction. Aggrieved by Leonora's absence, his pyramidal being raced after her. Not allowing her to be abandoned to a soulless fate. His pyramid spun around hers until they fused once more, then their combined strength fought the gravity of the hungry ghost's enchantment.

In answer, she directed a torrent of anger toward them. Intermittent flashes of lightning shunted between boiling nimbus clouds condensing behind her hovering form. Rather than following the others, the conjoined couple averted their sight, and moved further away from the intoxicating lust, now blended with fury. They fixated on the worlds beyond the still spinning portals outside the valley. A distraction that saved them as they once more flew diamond-form.

The worlds beyond the portals were mythic fairy tale lands. Other than those, there were also realities not much different than their own. Mega-cities of the future, or open farmlands and villages of the past. They seemed to welcome the lost and eaten soulless dead in a wellspring of new opportunity. Provide them a place of succor after being devoured.

Repulsed, Nick and Leonora's diamond returned along the channel back toward where they came. New portals formed with vistas attracting them to realities beyond their imagination. Zones of joy where friends welcomed them. Yet their vestigial hackles rose and kept them away, suspicious of further subterfuge thrown up by the hungry ghost to intrigue and enchant.

Nick and Leonora might have been lost had it not been for the smoke that allowed their travel. The incense sputtered out, a few last curls of vapor, then the cherry red coal went dark. A strong yank on their umbilicus drew them back through the closing ring, up the steps of the spirit house, and back into their bodies. They stood shuddering under the dome once more.

\* \* \*

The stone flaked back into wood, the cracks sealed, and arboreal grain returned to veins. Veins filled with blood, pumped from hearts that grew warm and radiant as life entered their flesh. Breath followed, great sighs of returning consciousness, startling those that strolled the great gallery beneath the dome.

Nick and Leonora turned toward each other shaking, although still stiff from the transition. They panted, restoring life into the corners of their beings. They looked around, realizing that strangers were staring. Feeling self conscious, they moved on, looking back only once at the fakir's burned out stubs of incense.

Digesting all that had transpired, they walked out of the dome, along a solitary path back to the parking lot. They felt as if they were watched obsequiously by those they passed. Finding the car, Nick opened the driver's side and climbed in, and she slid in beside him from the passenger's side.

He jumped in his skin looking over at her, seeing for a moment the hungry ghost superimposed on her features. Then he relaxed when she spoke for the first time since they emerged.

"I don't know about you, but I'm famished."

"Phuket town is not far from the bottom of Nakkerd hill. I'm sure we can find a place to eat."

Traffic was brutal that afternoon. Soon the heat and humidity slipped back into their bones inside the stalled car. At first it was comforting, then stifling. Parking took a frustrating few minutes as they circled the streets. After, they wandered into old town looking for a restaurant.

Red pagodas and gold Chinese script adorned a store front. They walked into the hot restaurant, the waiter bringing fans over to the table and turning them on. They sat sweating, waiting for the cool, as tourists from many nations walked by speaking in a variety of languages.

Cold drinks arrived, iced tea and cold juice, orders were taken, and a variety of dim sum soon filled the table. A brief rain shower cooled the air, followed by the sound of horns and music as an impromptu parade moved down the street. The couple picked at their food. Nick stood and walked to the door to take a closer look at the conflagration.

A well dressed man rode on the top of an elephant. A man of power and position that people wai-ed to as he passed. Nick met the man's eyes and their stares locked. He felt Leonora by his side. The man seemed familiar. Soulless, like the other victims of the hungry ghost, his vacuous stare met Nick's with a strange mirth. An understanding that went beyond this world.

Nick turned to Leonora, "Until now, I never understood people's attraction to power and position. Now I do. It seems the soulless seek to fill an emptiness in themselves left behind by the remains of her meal. As much as they try, as high as they climb, they cannot fill that void."

"Of course, not all of them have had their souls taken," noted Leonora.

"No, you're right. Not all, but many of them are bereft."

"How did they find their way to her, I wonder?"

"Some are drawn by memories of their loved ones lost, I suppose. Others carry unresolved grief that corrodes their hearts. Still others are simply lonely for a past they never had. Family they never knew, or refused to open themselves up to while they were around. And of course, there are many fakirs, all in different guises."

Leonora hugged him in answer. "Thank you for this. It's been more than a holiday."

"No, thank you. You've taken me on an unexpected adventure."

"Hey you two! You pay now. We close," called the waiter behind them in the restaurant, clearing away their dishes.

They looked once more at the street, normal traffic had returned, or perhaps there never was a parade at all. Nick threw his arm around Leonora and walked back. The sweat of his arm pit wetting her shoulder. A sudden overwhelming grief struck him, tears flooded his eyes. The pain came out of nowhere, which filled with the memory of his son. A son whose name he had forgotten.

Leonora felt him tremble, and fell back into his arms to comfort him. Tears appeared in her own eyes. Tears of her own from when she was abandoned. For all the times in her life when she had been left behind. Not just on this trip, but every other occasion. Then she remembered him chasing after her as a pyramid.

The waiter grew impatient with this scene of unexpected emotion. Displays of raw feeling beyond the Thai smile was unnerving in public. It embarrassed him. The kitchen staff moaned. The waiter's wife pointed at him then at the couple, and waved at him to get them out.

"Hey, you pay now!" he reiterated.

Nick sniffled and wiped his eyes. "Sorry."



Leonora grabbed money out of the pocket of her vest, shoving baht into the waiter's outstretched hand. "C'mon Nick, let's go."

"Wait, wait, you change..." but the couple was already gone.

\* \* \*

Nick sat alone in the hotel room looking into the jungle beyond the window. Leonora had already left for her flight. He would remain a few more days before his own departure. In the end, she offered her hand, and they shook as if they had just completed a business deal. Perhaps they had. That was it.

With the few days remaining, rather than exploring, he decided to relax. He took a towel and walked to the beach. Rented an umbrella from a fisherman's wife and sat beneath it as the sun beat down.

When the strolling hecklers, offering trinkets and back rubs, became too much, he'd swim out to sea to cool off. Lying on his back floating, he watched the stratus clouds like fingers scraping the blue sky. He had performed this ritual several times as the day wore on.

Floating outside the incoming waves, he felt a presence beside him.

"You know you are sinking, right?" said the monk from the spirit house, now full size. His fat belly like a life preserver holding him high in the water.

Nick realized his heels were sinking, moving him into a vertical position from lying perfectly still, so he kicked a little to return to the horizontal. The monk drifted away. His long saffron robe floated on the tide. Seeing this, he used his short stubby legs like a paddle wheel to motor back to Nick. At first, the monk overshot, so he had to reverse his legs to slip back. To Nick, it was mildly amusing.

"You're not really here, are you?"

"Of course I am. Even mythic beings need a holiday."

Nick let the argument go, and enjoyed the contrast of heat on his chest and cool on his back.

"I'm glad to see you returned with your soul intact, few do," the monk commented after a while.

"She sure is something..."

"Irresistible to mortals, especially the newly dead."

“What does the fakir get out of the transaction?” Nick asked, considering angles.

“The hungry ghost once fed, takes his pain away. She has hundreds of agents like him walking the Earth earning favors.”

“It is an odd arrangement to be sure.” Nick kicked a little more to maintain his float.  
“What were you doing at the spirit house?”

“You just happened to catch me while I was passing.”

“Where to?”

“A story for another day,” the old monk answered, taking a deep breath and wrapping the water around him like a comforter.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Ride Hail”**

by Farid Hamka

The sun is shining way too brightly and inside the car is an oven. Damp, sticky, and highly uncomfortable, I ask the driver to pump up the AC. Swoosh, the wind blows and the coolness settles.

‘It’s insane yah, pak, with all this smog and still the sun is so hot,’ I force myself to be chatty. The ride to Andy’s place is forty minutes away and I detest uncomfortable silences. I left my headphones at home.

‘Yeah, it’s right, dek. It has been like this all month. The rainy season should be here soon though,’ he adjusts the fold up mirror to cover himself from the sunrays.

‘Climate change, pak, it is sadly happening everywhere. We cannot say when seasons start anymore,’ I sigh.

‘When I was younger, we always knew that there would be flash floods in February and it would be burning in May.’ I glimpse the nostalgic contentment on his face from the small mirror.

‘Did bapak also grow up here in Jakarta then?’

‘I moved here when I was almost twenty, dek. Now it has been more than twenty years. I am from Solo originally.’ His Javanese accent is very slight, clearly this city has influenced him.

‘Wah, I have not been to Solo pak, but I was in Jogjakarta last month and I really liked it. The people are nice, the streets are lively at night, and the food is superb. I think the soto there is amazing! I had two bowls for breakfast.’

‘You should come to Solo then, in addition to soto, we are famous for our nasi liwet, they are now popular everywhere but the original place is always the best!’ He tilts his head to the back seat, his thumbs up and his smile wide, showing faith in his recommendation. Just then, a motorcycle approaches fast from the left of the intersection

'Watch out, pak!' I shriek.

He swerves the car abruptly, almost drifting, evading the ojek driver in his green outfit. The ojek driver swears and smacks his hand on the taxi's bonnet. My driver drives on, the angry figure dissipates from a distance.

'Sorry dek, I did not pay attention. It is just that I have not gone back to Solo for a while now.'

'No worries, pak. I only almost had a heart attack.' His smirk shows that he gets my sarcasm.

I grab my deep blue water bottle, unscrew the metal cap and start sipping. The cold ice water flows down my throat. It is soothing and my racing heart slowly equilibrates. I glance at the window; the clouds are starting to cover the sun and we are driving around the greener part of this metropolis. Explosive magenta bougainvillea adorn the fences and from time to time, I see heliconia hearts in their crimson splendor. The houses around Pondok Indah feels like a secret garden, lush and inviting. 'Did you not go back for Idul Fitri last month pak?'

'No dek, my parents passed away and most of my family have moved elsewhere. Sometimes there are friends, but I see no point going back too often.'

'Ah, I see'. I peek at the taxi's license. Pak Somad was born in August 1974, making him around my father's age. The photo was taken in his younger years, when he had not yet sported the white hairs that cover his head now. His expression on it is formal, deadpan. In reality, he looks quite animated, vacillating between annoyance and sly grins.

'Are you working, or still studying dek?'

I laugh, 'I don't think I look that young pak. I have been working for 6 years already in a bank.'

'Who knows dek, nowadays people like to study, study, study until they are old.'

'Maybe in a few years I will do a masters.'

'Yes, that's great. I always tell my two boys to keep studying, so they become successful. If they do not study, they will never be somebody.'

'That is good pak, with their parent's encouragement, they should be motivated. My parents did not motivate me, so I had to motivate myself in university. It was tiring. Sometimes I felt like I was so alone.'

The driver opens his window to exchange his ID card with a pass to the residential complex. He closes the window and looks at me.

'Honestly dek, I am so surprised that you are such a good passenger!'

'This is nothing pak. I like talking to drivers, I find it interesting. Sometimes we forget that drivers are also people. For me, it is an opportunity to understand other people's lives.'

'That is true dek. Usually people with a rating of three stars like you are very rude. I was worried when I accepted the order, but here you are, a kind young man!' he smiles widely.

'Wah, I did not know that my rating is that bad. That is weird. Why is that? I thought I have always been a good passenger.'

'Sometimes it is like that, dek. Maybe the drivers that rated you just pressed randomly. An error. Me, of course, I will give you five stars.'

'You have to promise pak, I will rate you five stars too,' I laugh awkwardly.

'Of course, dek, it is rare to have such a talk with a passenger. Nowadays everyone is just rushing and rushing, or playing with their smartphones.'

My mind is still fixated on my bad rating. What could have been the cause? I do not remember bringing stinky food, nor do I ride home drunk and loud. I try to always talk with the drivers and I always tip them for good service. There may be some very unfriendly and obnoxious drivers, but they are rare. Most drivers smile after dropping me off. What was on their minds?

'Do you rate those people badly then, pak?' I ask him.

'No lah dek, I am very generous with rating. I don't often rate people less than four stars, not even when they are a bit angry because of detours. Roads in Jakarta can be unpredictable. Closed here, closed there. I would be angry if I were a passenger too.'

'That is really nice of you, pak.'

'Oh, but I remember giving a one-star rating last week! So, I was carrying a passenger from Kuningan to BenHil, two men. Young professionals, slick and cool in their smart shirts. They talked a bit with me at first, but after a while they stopped. The traffic was crazy in Sudirman, so we were stuck for a long time. After it cleared a bit, I wanted to reconfirm the address. When I turned my head, imagine what I saw, dek. The men had their hands on one another's thighs. They were shocked and quickly moved their hands. I was furious at that moment, dek. They were sinning in my car. I wanted them out quickly. Five minutes later when we arrived, I quickly dropped them off and left. It was really disgusting.'

I freeze at this revelation. I try opening my mouth to say something, but it feels like there's a stone in my throat. Only a weak 'ah' comes out. I start thinking about the late-night rides I take with Andy. One time, after our third date, we were going to a cinema on the South of Jakarta. We held hands even as our stiff bodies were on opposite ends of the back seat. The moon was bright. We were staring at different parts of the streets. Our palms betrayed the display of coolness. It felt so right to grab his palm then. The other time I was so tired after going out, so I dozed off on his shoulder. It felt as if time and space melted away in a hazy dance. I could only recall the passing streetlights from behind my eyelids. My head was firm on his shoulder, no longer were there the stiffness of the first dates. A lot of times we refer to one another as sayang, out of habit.

My cheeks start feeling a bit numb. Inhaling feels heavy. I cannot reconcile that such tender memories possibly caused my abysmal rating. That even the simple matter of traveling with a loved one somehow makes me less worthy. That somehow being a decent person is not enough when you are socially deviant. That even in such a digitized world, bigoted thinking still wins. A weird rage builds up inside me.

The car stops just a few houses before Andy's. I can see his frangipani tree over the brown fence that encircled his house.

'Is it here, dek?'

'Yes pak,' I gather my phone, flask, and backpack and rush out.

'Don't forget the five stars yeah, dek!' he reminds me just before I shut the door.

I taste iron on my tongue, and that is when I realize I have been biting my tongue way too hard. The smell of blood makes me a bit lightheaded. I turn towards Pak Somad's

car. The sun is reflected on the sky-blue sedan. The reflection is a dazzling white. Above it, on the glass window, I see that he is checking his smartphone, perhaps to accept another order from the application.

The next few seconds pass like a trance. My blue flask feels cold. Droplets condense near its lid. It is still half full. The sun glares, it is so hot. I feel my arm bending backwards. The bottle has that weight reminiscent of a light dumbbell. I think of the Olympic Games. Suddenly, I hurl my flask towards the car, which only then begins to move. It slips so easily out of my grip. Bang. Homerun. It smacks the boot before ricocheting towards the window. It smashes the glass. The sonorous crack is like an amplified cracking of a crème brulee. The spidery line extends its web all over the back window, its centre hollow, almost perfectly round. I have never seen a more beautiful fracture. It starts shattering like hail. Soon enough only the sides of the back window sustain tiny shards of glass.

My adrenaline races. I ready myself for a confrontation. How do I explain? Fight or flight. I mentally list a thousand excuses. My ratings, my ratings. It will plunge more than it already has. Is this a crime? Maybe I will just say that it slipped. How many stars will I be left with after this? No more ride hailing service anytime soon. Maybe. Oh well, maybe I should start using the MRT. Should I learn to drive? I hear the front door of the car opening. A breeze passes and rustles the leaves of the trees around. The wind caresses my cheeks. I smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Never from Nowhere”**

by Salman Akhtar

Listen carefully -  
under the belly  
of my neutral manicured  
even enunciated english  
lies the dark bellow  
of my disappeared  
great-grandfather's  
plosive punjabi

You can hear it  
under the schwas  
in *mother* and *turban*  
trying to rise  
above the ambivalence  
the servile -  
my self-suppression  
suffocates it

On the street  
in DFW/KUL/PAK  
I'm variously  
Iranian, Turkish,  
Mexican, Kuwaiti -  
at once from



everywhere;  
never from nowhere

The parch of my  
childhood's desert  
crinkles now  
the tropical soil  
that whispers  
the word  
*Home* in a  
minglish drawl.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Moon Orchid”**

by Julia Cai

Strung up on a fine gold chain,  
bezeled on a heavy gilded ring,  
are the iron and steel waters of Jakarta,  
reflecting blue and bottle-green and rainy gray.  
If irises hold images burnt on by desire,  
then the green eyes of my grandpa have been lost at sea,  
swimming around the Pacific and Atlantic in half-blind constellations,  
where the stars are flipped upside down and inside out in a white night sky.

On a fine gold chain and a little clay Buddha  
is all that remains of a thousand islands I do not know,  
whose blood runs blue in me like the sea;  
on my ring finger, I gaze into the sea.

Here, where it never rains, the food is water-logged, bleached to the bone;  
There, streets pour and shiver, and spices steep in boldness and in floods.  
Soaked earth coaxes out foggy, feathery hazes,  
where golden sun is softened by blur,  
and sepia tones diffuse drunk on silvery sheens,  
from fish and from moons and from people on cobblestone streets.

I look into my grandpa’s face for the hard lines of a country long forgotten,  
for green eyes lost in translation, lost in generations,  
for green eyes of his mother, of my mother, of me,  
for green eyes of a country never returned to, never seen again.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Not a Want but a Need”**

by Riya Sarna

It was 4am  
on a Saturday morning.  
We stumbled out of the club,  
downed 3 shots all at once,  
tripping and falling all over each other,  
laughing at nothing,  
in love  
and drowning in the dawn.

It was 5am  
on a Saturday morning  
when we fell in bed,  
tangled in each others' limbs,  
not knowing what we were doing  
but figuring it out together.  
The drinks had worn,  
we weren't sober,  
just stupidly in lust.

When we awoke  
at 3pm on a Saturday afternoon,  
it was forced conversation  
and awkward interactions.  
We were sober,  
and regretful.

You didn't know my first name  
and I didn't know your last.  
The dawn had disappeared,  
disappeared,  
now replaced with too much light.  
Neither one of us  
wanted to state the obvious.  
So we didn't.

We stayed in bed for hours,  
quiet,  
silent,  
unmoving,  
awkwardness and tension filling the air,  
taking up the space in the bed between us.

Batteries were depleted,  
Actions were doubted  
and hearts were emptied once again.

It was back to  
discarded lovers  
and stained bedsheets.  
Back to  
drowning out the pain  
and blocking out the noise,  
or trying to, at least.

Once that door shut,  
I was back to being alone  
without anyone to call my own.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“The Fisherman’s Son”**

by Jessrel Escaran Gilbuena

He has learned the numbers  
through the weighing scale.

Three is more than one.

Five comes after four.

He has also learned names,  
names of fishes that come  
with good value. It brings him  
great joy as much as his father

to see these fishes lie showing one  
of their paired eyes in the stomach  
of the boat. Every load of fish in the  
scale is a coveted chance to buy

his favorite snack. His mother  
gives him extra if the number  
reaches more than six.

At lunch, his father reviews

the numbers to his mother.

His parents create a quiet  
calculation of the kilos  
and what can they become.

He tries to satisfy himself  
with a soup from a tinuwa made  
from fishes that rarely go to  
the market while his father

takes pleasure to mention  
and describe the size, color,  
and freshness of katambak,  
lagaw, lipot, lipti.

He continues to devour  
the food on the table at the  
same time wonders how those  
great fishes he has come to hear

all the time

taste.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“To Leave”**

by Kat Yap

You've made a home in my head, and I'd like to be left alone.  
You've come in through slamming doors and unlocked cupboards.  
Through shattered glass and roaring car engines that prepare to leave.  
The only time you yearn for me is when I leave,  
And I'm learning now that that's not a reason for me to stay.  
Do not bind me to your stagnancy,  
Do not impregnate me with your lies.  
Do not mistake my composure for ease.  
We have empty chambers in our hearts where love cannot be born out of isolation.  
The quicker we accept this,  
the faster we shift away from rose-coloured glass.  
And the quicker I can learn that  
I can exist without your consent.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“A Winter Day in Hanoi, January 2019”**

by Farid Hamka

Even when our bones are breaking in the morning  
Whether it is caused by the dance, the cold, or the wandering  
We dress up. Walking and queuing at a pho stall  
Steaming broth over delicate beef and noodles amid the squall

When the warmth has seeped in, we hunt for a calm corner  
Impermanence encased in sunflower seeds. Coffee restoring order  
As our conversations meandered, the hours fly away  
Only time limits the things we are able to say

We return to the room to undress us from our weariness  
Not caring as the sun sets outside. Time passing is not a fuss  
My heart palpitates for the tenderness of friendship  
Is a union this pure really not worth the worship?

When the night arrives, we roam the streets  
All suited up for the evening's surprise treats  
Orderly chaos of Hanoi, what have you got in store?  
Glasses of cocktails? Dinner? Nothing will be a bore

We lose ourselves among the balloons and the liquor  
We find ourselves as the epiphany hits our core  
Through the dark, empty alleys we saunter  
The light of minimarkets beckons us to enter



Hanoi, I was brought here by the threads of fate  
I am glad to have known you before it is too late  
I let myself ensnared by your deep embrace  
And I know that these days will be my saving grace.