

Anak Sastra

Issue 42

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Contributor Bios

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Mary Wong's short fiction has appeared in the *Quarterly Literary Review of Singapore*.

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As an introvert, **Vinothini Ananda Krishnan** expresses deep thoughts and personal experiences through her stories. Apart from having her head in the clouds, she is also a bathroom singer, an avid reader and an amazing keeper of worldly secrets.

Marielle Valmores (Twitter: [@marsvalmores](#)) is an aspiring director and screenwriter who dreams of showcasing Filipino stories globally. She's born and raised in the Philippines then moved to Vancouver to pursue her creative writing degree. Her written works dive into themes of individuality, female empowerment, innocence and horrors of nature, culture and family.

Kar Yern Chin is an aspiring writer based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He is interested in narratives of immigration, identities and movements, and postcolonial histories of food and nations.

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John Paul Egalin Abellera took up B.A. Communication and Media Studies at San Beda College-Alabang. He works as a creative producer at ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. and as a lecturer at San Beda College-Alabang. He is also a board member of Project Saysay. He was a recipient of the UNESCO Aschberg Bursaries Programme and a resident artist (for creative writing) at the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in California, USA. His short stories and screenplays have won awards from the Catholic Mass Media Awards, the Maria

Clara Awards and other award-giving bodies. His film projects include *Dubai*, *Sukob*, *Kasal-Kasali-Kasalo*, *RPG Metanoia*, *Corazón - Ang Unang Aswang*, *On the Job*, *Eerie*, and *Quezon's Game*.

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[Ryan K. Mason](#) is a poet and educator living in Phuket, Thailand. He writes in the confessional style and draws his inspiration from art, history, and other writers.

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[Alexa Jade De La Pena](#) has spent the last 22 years of her life going back and forth between the U.S. and the Philippines. She is currently a student at Kapiolani Community College in Hawaii.

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David Arroyo is a nerd and ex-catholic. His Dungeons & Dragons alignment is Neutral Good. He holds an M.A. in English from Florida State University and a M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Stonecoast. He's been published in *Stirring*, *Silver Blade*, and *Burning Word*.

[Ameerul Mukmin](#) is a 17 year old from Malaysia. He feels strongly about the political situation and the choices we are forced to make as a society that sometimes are made at the expense of our culture.

* * * * *

“A Night and a Street”

by Arif Shah

It was late at night and nature had not ceased its living opulence. By the side of a decrepit dirt road three young men sat on plastic chairs under a shoddy structure with no walls, exposed to the outside, a metallic awning with a single bright bulb attached to it that swayed with the passing of the wind declared the structure a shelter. The night was calm, sultry, the winds were gentle and vapid, when the light breached the darkness outside it did so politely, never disturbing the mysteries of nature; the surroundings, filled with corpses of trees and bushes, hid tens of thousands of creatures in its cover, an underbrush of red ixora flowers beneath marked an entry to the land of flora and fauna, from which the occasional mating call of crickets and an owl's hoot were the only whispers heard. Above the tallest of the trees the moon was showing half its face, the preeminence of its disappearance evidenced by the faltering of its grey light, it was selfish in its luminescence, only bathing the tips of the leaves that would eventually obscure it completely. As nature prepared to follow suit, mosquitoes fought against the tide by bombarding the men incessantly.

“These mosquitoes all go to hell, we're all going to get dengue!” one man, the youngest of them, said while slapping himself in an attempt to squish the elusive pests. The small plastic table between them quivered at his jerks, threatening to drop the warm cans of Guinness.

“Never mind them,” the oldest and darkest of the men, Mahathir, said, unmoved. His face was square and tight, sinews of muscles lined his face like a Greek anatomy figure and exposed every facial movement, and as he frowned the whole of his head joined in. “You can't even finish one can, that's why they're after you. Drink faster. Fill your blood with so

much alcohol the mosquitoes will drop dead after a taste.” he said in a smoky baritone. The youngest man took his words to heart and chugged his can in one go.

“Mat, uncles’ are supposed to give wisdom where the father fails.” Fitra, a man with an exceedingly average appearance and listless black eyes, lifelong friend of Mahathir, laughed as the youngest man’s face flushed red. Fitra himself was flushed purple from his second can, and a gaiety that rarely erupted from the man was coming out. A common butterfly gecko emerged from somewhere and sprinted across their feet; in response they stamped theirs in unison to no avail, only catching a glimpse of the striking orange and black stripes of the reptile as it routed from the structure and into the cover of the thicket.

“Today is different, Fitra. Come on, you remember how you made me down two shots of Jack Daniels on the day my match was made. So vile, burns like the sourest lime juice. My love’s family, her father, all thought it was manly. You remember yours? You couldn’t even down one on the night you were matched to my sister. Still, you drank six cans the night before the wedding... That was impressive.” Mahathir said to Fitra, gazing at the youngest man. “Not like nowadays where boys, on the night before their marriage, where the groom should be thinking only of the family he will start and that prize which men have not yet seen, cannot even finish two cans without stuttering. You hear me or not, weak Darell Tukong?” Darell did not hear him, his arms were sprawled beside his seat and a languor from his countenance filled the air along with the cigarette he was smoking.

“I don’t know how to say sorry... I don’t think I should...” he said to himself as he flung the cigarette onto the dirt, the effort made to entreat their advice. He continued as he rubbed his spiky hair, “but tomorrow is the occasion where everything before should be far away...” Darell got up and squatted in a third-word squat by a corner of the shelter, his head craned upwards to the trees, his arched back implacable and in view to the two others. Fitra finished another can, and hungrily took note of the last five unopened cans before turning to Darell.

“A fight about money, you are a man, Tukong. Women think, of course, but they’ve never earned a ringgit the way we have. If you know you’re right then this is what you should do,” Fitra said in a nasally tenor straining for clarity. “First tell her she’s right but also tell her your point of view, make sure to explain that properly and in a way that she can’t put up a fight without thinking first, and before she can reply stress that you think she’s absolutely right and you want everything to be okay again, that you’re doing this for her... But uh, don’t let her know that. The better you can hide your words the more she’ll have to accept what you said... Don’t feel bad; women do this too... Like when they hide their wrongs by using words of praise, they say they were doing what they thought was right and need to be told that they were, even if everything is wrong. Your job as a man, and these are words of wisdom from your uncle here to me long ago, is to reassure her but always remain on your own code.”

“A man must be like he is when dealing with heavier animals, unmoving and resolute. Only then will the animals feel safe and follow.” Mahathir added, jutting his figure on the chair towards Darell like an arrow. From that angle Mahathir saw the moon that was cut up into small bits by the leaves; he recited a silent prayer from his lips, and the angles of his face relaxed.

“But... I don’t know if I’m right. She’s smarter than me,” Darell said, his tone quavered from a lack of moisture. Fitra crushed the freshly drunk can with his forehead, leaving a circular red imprint on his purple-brown forehead, and was stopped from reaching a new one by Mahathir with a juttied arm above the unopened cans. Like a rhinoceros before a charge he exhaled loudly before throwing the crushed can in front of Darell to the dirt; a swarm of black ants hidden by the darkness soon engulfed the can ravenously.

“Your manhood is like that can, crushed and bitten away by tiny insects.” Fitra hissed at Darell. The jeer worked; Darell sat back on his chair and chugged half a can of beer, obstinately maintaining eye contact with Fitra as he did so — the act transforming the bitterness of the beer he detested into a piquant flavour.

“Now you have it back?” Mahathir asked, offering another a can each to himself and the other two. Fitra brusquely snatched up the offer and drank, while Darell lifted his and remarked it for a time.

By the night’s end the three were as sultry as nature had been; the youngest man had drunk the remaining two cans and was stammering out resolutions for his problem while his companions gave him all the assurance he needed. The men left on their motorcycles with deep red rings around their foreheads as the sky turned a tired blue; a mess of crushed cans lay above the one Fitra had discarded earlier. The common butterfly lizard peered its tiny black eyes from somewhere and crawled to the cans; it lapped up the ants and the remaining bitter liquid with its thin forked-tongue, watched by the waning of the dawn moon presently uncovered through the branches of the forest.

* * * * *

“The Census Taker”

by Mary Wong

On his first day at work, Rahid wore a freshly pressed baju melayu and broad-legged pants far too long for him. Boys as young as ten had begun working in the boiler rooms and in the docks carrying sacks. Rahid’s mother kept him at home until he was 13.

His work place was the raja’s mansion, which meant he would have to walk down the entire street and then climb the little hill at the end. The street was flanked by mobile food trucks and fruit stalls on both sides. The women shopkeepers greeted him politely, “Selamat pagi. What a well-mannered boy he is.” The boys his age spat on the floor. “Mommy’s boy!” they cried before their mothers shoed them indoors.

Rahid told himself that he was different from them. His father was the raja’s letter writer. He would never have to grovel under the weight of cargo or carry the piss of others in a chamber pot. He would get to work for the raja, his reward in exchange for giving up tag and chapteh with the other boys, along with all the hours he had spent under his instructor’s instructions to copy pages and pages of the Quran. Once, the raja had visited their house and seen his penmanship. Impressive, he said to Rahid’s father.

No, his father replied embarrassed. He’s a stupid, lazy boy.

The raja shook his head, waving two silver coins in front of Rahid. How about that, boy? Come write for me.

Rahid accepted the job on a whim. Anything to get away from his father.

The raja was indefatigably curious; he wanted a personal copy of every Malay text for himself. For research, he said. What a fine way to mask one's greed with intellectual curiosity, Rahid's mother said. His father had overheard her and refused to speak to her for days.

Inside the mansion, Rahid had to pass by the boiler room, where men older than him already had their faces red and bloated from the hot steam, their noses and mouth caked with ash dust.

"They will be there the whole day," the housekeeper said as though Rahid should be lucky that it was them that were there and not him.

Rahid was brought to a room lined with so much velvet, the whole world seemed to be shut away from this little room of velvet. The room instead was lit up by an electric fluorescent light bulb that reminded him of the ashen faces of the men in the boiler room. On both sides were glass cabinets replete with treasures from each overseas voyage—the bejeweled kris, the peacock feathers, the scorpion dunked in medicinal alcohol.

Rahid kept to the table the entire day, reproducing duplicates of pantun, hikayat and official documents. He curbed his 'e's and dotted the 'i's the way he knew the raja liked them. When seen from afar, those Malay texts didn't look any different from English ones.

The raja was deeply pleased with them. The boy writes just as well as you, he told Rahid's father. I wonder if he can translate.

This was the first time Rahid saw his father smile. This boy will do greater things than me.

Rahid never forgot his father's look as he set to setting all 600 pages of the English *Lectures on Comparative Anatomy, Physiology, Zoology* into Malay. The title itself was already a mouthful. What was 'anatomy' in Malay? Did such a concept even exist? He tried breaking it into 'the study of the human body' and then found such an approach would be too long for

every single ‘-ogy’ in the title. He wanted to settle for retaining the words in English, but he recalled his father’s words. This boy will do greater things than me.

He began reading:

“The islands of the Indian Sea, as well as those of the Pacific contain two races of men, differing in many aspects. One of these approaches and in some instances equal the blackness of the Negroes; the hair is curled and woolly, the body slender, the stature short, the disposition barbarous and cruel.”

It was just pages and pages of such verbose distant language, the writer saying things that felt very faraway from Rahid and that barely interested him. How did things like the ‘hair’, ‘body’ and ‘stature’ of other people concern him?

“They occupy the highest parts of the Moluccan, the Philippines, Formosa and Borneo; all New Guinea, New Britain, New Ireland and New Caledonia. The language of all the latter resembles the Malays--”

The book was beginning to get interesting. In fact, Rahid could barely believe that an English book would speak about the Malays and that the English were actually writing about them.

The subsequent paragraphs were all about them.

“MALAY variety. Brown colour from a tawny tint, to a deep brown approaching black. Hair black, more or less curled, and abundant. Head rather narrow, bones of face large and prominent; nose full and broad towards the apex; large mouth.”

The language was scientific and very precise. Rahid was suddenly very self-conscious of his large head, his large nose and mouth, his brown skin.

His mother wouldn’t call it brown. She had called it chestnut, after the sweet-smelling trees that filled the street they lived on.

“Why is mine like Papa’s? Why is it not like yours?” The young Rahid had whined about the darkness of his skin colour.

“Papa’s is a Javanese cocoa.” Rahid’s mother had answered, tweaking his skin playfully. “All shades and colours are beautiful. Allah made them all.”

* * *

When Rahid got home, his mother was drying chillies on the verandah, waiting for him.

“Your father is angry,” she said. It had been such a long time since his father had been angry with him that Rahid was unsure how to respond.

“It’s not you,” she smiled. “Your father just didn’t have a good trip with the raja to the neighbouring islands.”

The neighbouring islands were where the Orang Asli, the first people of the land, had fled to after the British landed on the mainland. Their skin was blacker, darker than all of ours.

“The Orang Asli said something to the raja, but your father couldn’t translate it.”

“Was the raja angry?”

“Maybe. He can never understand why your father never manages to learn their language.”

The language of all the men on those islands resembles Malay, and there can be no doubt that they arise from that race. That was a line from the book Rahid was translating. He was unsure of what to answer his mother, because even his mother did not understand what his father was doing.

The black people every where are barbarous and have language agreeing with each other. His father had spent his entire life, and then his son's entire life, trying all he could to not be seen as one of those black people. Rahid turned to walk out of the verandah. There was his father, standing just outside, overhearing their conversation. His eyes were gleaming as he looked at Rahid. This boy will do greater things than me.

* * *

Greater things meant that, years later, Rahid was the first in his family to get a red coat, the uniform of the officers officially appointed to the raja's service. At the marketplace, everyone made way for a red coat and at the docks, the man in the red coat had full power to let a man onshore or to have him thrown back into the sea.

Rahid sat at his table, eyeing the men walking up the boardwalk towards him. They were walking in a single file because their hands were tied with ropes, one tied to the other.

The dealer came ahead first. "55 of them," he said, shoving the first man onto the stool opposite Rahid.

"Name?" Rahid asked in English.

The man's face was one of incomprehension and emptiness. Rahid glanced at the dealer who sprang into action.

"Nama," he barked in Malay, flicking the man's forehead with his finger.

"Former place of residence?"

"Tempat kediaman dahulu?"

"Married?"

"Awak sudah kahwin?"

Question by question, Rahid took down the answers, his quill scratching out each English word in a perfected penmanship. The raja still praised his words. Rahid writes even prettier English than an Englishman.

He filled up the next question on occupation. Slave, he wrote. All the men had come here as slaves.

The last question on the form was race. Keturunan.

The man blinked at him. He muttered what sounded like a couple of names—perhaps his father’s or his grandfather’s—under his breath but his voice soon wafted off into a silence of emptiness, incomprehension, insipidity.

The dealer struck again. Keturunan. Nenek Moyang. Turunya. A string of Malay words barely grasping at the meaning of this English colonial concept, each word accompanied by a blow of the fist against the man’s back. His body shrunk into a self-defence foetal position, his face nearly brushing the gravel on the floor. The men behind him shook with fear.

Rahid looked away without acting, a sin he would later have to beg Allah for forgiveness for. Violence against anyone was abhorrent, but violence against someone that looked too similar to him was especially guilt-inducing; why should one man be treated that way and not the other?

Because he was different. His father was letter-writer to the raja.

Because he gave up tag and chapteh with the other boys to copy pages and pages of the Quran.

Because this boy will do greater things than me.

* * * * *

“Pao Lady”

by Lily Low

Petaling Street. The Chinatown of KL. An arch at the entrance leading to a long street filled with food stalls, cheap imitation goods, and loud voices. Haggling for prices, shouts of “leng zai” and “leng lui” used to try and draw in customers, along with the hustle and bustle of it all.

To Meng, Petaling Street was the road he had to walk along to get to school. Meng was adopted. He had no knowledge of the identity of his birth parents, other than an anklet that was left behind for him with a letter. Meng had read the letter multiple times, to the point that he had committed the details to memory. According to the letter, his birth mother regretfully had to give him up as she did not have sufficient funds to raise him. There was no mention of his birth father. His birth mother left behind her favourite anklet, hoping that it would give Meng strength and remind him that he was loved. The anklet was a simple gold chain, paired with little wings near the clasp. Meng always wore the anklet, even if it was hidden by his socks and white shoes.

A rainy Monday one month ago, was an exception.

Due to the pouring rain, Meng was wearing sandals rather than his regular white shoes and socks to school. The rain was getting heavier and heavier. Meng huffed, deciding to run for shelter at the nearest stall. He noticed the tiny stall was selling pao, which are Chinese steamed buns. An elderly woman had her back to him, and a tiny footstool was placed next to the rack of steamed buns. “Auntie, can I stay under the shade for a while?” Meng asked. The elderly lady turned around. An unreadable expression was in her eyes as she looked sharply at Meng from top to bottom. Meng fidgeted in the uncomfortable silence. “It’s okay

if I can't, I'll just leave now," he said hurriedly. This snapped the elderly woman out of her stupor, as she shook her head frantically. "No, no, stay! Have you eaten, boy?" she asked kindly. "It's okay Auntie, you don't have to do that," Meng tried to protest. The elderly woman laughed warmly. "A growing boy has to eat! What type of pao would you like?" she gestured towards the rack. Char siu pao, sang yuk pao, veggie pao, custard pao. *I love them all*, Meng thought wistfully. "My favourite is custard. Thank you, Auntie," he said shyly. She beamed in response, packing the yellow steamed bun into a Styrofoam container. "Better get going, the rain has stopped for a bit. Come by whenever you go to school, okay?" Meng's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh no, Auntie, I don't have the money to pay you," Meng frowned. "Who said anything about paying? I insist. No growing boy should be starving! Now, hurry along," she waved him off. Meng bowed in thanks before rushing off towards school.

Meng happily munched on his custard pao during recess. "That looks so good, Meng. Where did you get it from?" his friend Joe plopped down next to him. "A lady at the market gave it to me actually! She just offered it," Meng answered. "She gave it to you? You paid for it, right?" Joe asked, confused. "No, she just gave it to me. She said something about how growing boys shouldn't be starving," Meng parroted her words to his friend, albeit sheepishly. "That was really nice of her," Joe nodded. "Yeah, but I do feel a bit guilty for not paying though," Meng sighed. "Hmm. You could consider doing something, not necessarily monetary, but an action to pay it back? What about helping out at the stall?" Joe suggested. *Hmm, she didn't seem to be keen on accepting money. Maybe Joe is on to something here*, Meng pondered.

"Hi Auntie!" Pao Lady or Auntie, as Meng affectionately dubbed the elderly woman, smiled back at him. "Hello, boy. You're going to school early today," she said, seeing that it was barely 6 am. Meng nervously shifted from foot to foot before clearing his throat. "Auntie, I don't feel right if you are going to give me pao without receiving money for it." She placed the cover of the steamer down before looking at Meng. "Ah boy, I told you I don't want to receive money from you," she said firmly. "Which is why I am making a proposition," Meng interrupted, pulling up the footstool to sit on. "I could spend some time helping you to sell

pao before I go to school in the morning. To repay for the pao you are giving me,” Meng said. Meng was surprised that Auntie’s eyes were filling with tears. “Auntie? Was that inappropriate to suggest?” he inquired gently. “No, no. You just...surprised me, ah boy. You know, Auntie has been doing this all on her own for many years. I would love your company,” she smiled, quickly wiping at her watery eyes. “I’m sorry, Auntie. I know that feeling too. I was adopted, and I didn’t get to know my birth mother. In my mind, I was alone too for a while.” Meng noticed the same unreadable expression in her eyes from the first day they met, but it disappeared quickly. “I’m sorry to hear that. I’m sure she had her reasons for why she left. Are you taken care of now though?” Auntie’s voice shook as she mustered a feeble smile. “Yes. We don’t have much, but I am able to go to school. I don’t eat in the mornings usually, we get to eat twice a day for lunch and dinner,” Meng assured. “Come for your morning breakfast here, then you will have three meals. Okay?” Meng nodded to Auntie’s proposal, before sitting down on the footstool. “Red bean pao today?” she wiggled her eyebrows playfully. Meng giggled, murmuring his thanks.

Petaling Street became more than the road Meng had to walk along to get to school. Petaling Street became the place he met Auntie, or Pao Lady, in the mornings. They would share steaming buns and piping hot tea over conversations about school. Auntie became a constant in Meng’s life. He would tell her about his favourite subjects, what he and his best friend Joe were up to, and his dreams of becoming a counsellor.

“Why a counsellor, ah boy?” she asked. “Auntie, I think being a counsellor could have saved my birth mother. In the past, counselling initially began as career counselling. Since then, it has expanded to include marriage and finance counselling, too. Maybe if my birth mother had received the support, or help she needed, she could have had a better life, too.” There was a silence. Auntie chuckled, placing the buns gently into the steamer. “You are too good for this world, ah boy. I hope you know your Mother is proud of you.”

“We have red bean buns, custard buns, two types of meat buns, veggie buns. What would you like?” Meng chirped as a customer approached the tiny stall. “So cute! Auntie, your son is so adorable,” the customer squealed, looking towards her. Auntie seemed frozen, and

Meng frowned. "I'm sorry, I'm not her son. I'm just helping out here," Meng swooped in quickly, sensing the awkwardness. "I'm so sorry! You both look so alike. I just assumed. My mistake," the customer blushed furiously, bowing apologetically. "It's okay! So, which pao would you like?" Meng smiled, not noticing the sadness in Auntie's eyes.

"Hi Meng," Joe sat down next to him. "Hello," Meng grinned. Joe laughed, seeing Meng unwrap another pao. "You have been eating this every single day for the past month, Meng! Are you not tired of it?" Joe asked. Meng made a noise of pleasure as he bit into the lotus flavoured pao this time. "You can never get tired of pao! There are so many different flavours, and it's just comforting," Meng murmured with his mouth full. "You're working at the stall in the mornings, right? With the Auntie?" Joe playfully shoved Meng as his cheeks were bunched up with pao filling. Meng nodded. "She's really nice! I also get to learn how to sell things!" he said cheerfully.

"Good morning, Auntie!" Meng greeted the Pao Lady. "Morning, ah boy." He smiled as she gently ruffled his hair. "Auntie, you never tell me about you. I'm always telling you about school and friends. Tell me about yourself!" Meng said as he dragged his designated footstool to sit on. She gave a nervous chuckle in response. "Nothing interesting about me, ah boy. I didn't get to study, but my Mother taught me how to make pao. I met a man, who ended up leaving after finding out I was pregnant," she sighed, turning back to knead the dough. "Auntie, you have a son? I've never seen him around," Meng chirped, oblivious to her paling complexion. "Ah. I didn't have enough funds to raise him. Thankfully, I gave him away to a couple who was looking to adopt." She was surprised by Meng placing his hand on her arm. "Auntie, my Mom didn't have enough money too. It's okay. I'm sure your son will turn out alright," he said softly. Overwhelmed, she gently took Meng's hand in hers. "He did turn out alright. I believe that," she whispered, looking at Meng gently. Meng smiled, before looking at his watch. "Oh shoot, I'm going to be late if I don't leave now. Auntie, I'll see you tomorrow!" Meng waved cheerfully before grabbing his school bag and walking away. "I'll see you," she whispered, waving back.

“Mrs. Kim,” the lady says. “It’s Miss Kim. Thank you for taking the time to meet me,” Miss Kim bows, before sitting down at the dining table. “No worries at all. You wanted to know more about how your son is doing?” the lady sitting opposite her smiles gently. “I just want to know if he needs any help financially? I know he’s attending school, but I don’t know much about whether he is lacking financially or if he has any side passions that require funding,” Miss Kim asked hesitantly. The lady facing her raises her eyebrows. “Oh, you know that he is attending school?” she says, in surprise.

“Hey Mom!”

Miss Kim freezes, recognising the boy’s voice. “Hi Meng! I have a guest, we’re in the dining room!” Meng’s Mom, sitting opposite of Miss Kim, yells out. Meng pads into the room, walking with socks on his feet. “Meng, this is -,” his Mom starts to say. “Pao Lady – I mean, Auntie! What are you doing here?” Meng beams, quickly hugging Miss Kim. Meng’s Mom has a confused expression on her face as she looks towards Miss Kim. Her jaw drops, realising that they know each other. *Really, Miss Kim, what are you doing here?*

* * * * *

“Pati, What Have You Done?”

by Vinothini Ananda Krishnan

You are a no-good daughter who should've been drowned at birth!

And those were her last words before her last breath.

* * *

I surveyed the contents of the kitchen cabinet before deciding to make a hot cup of coffee.

Maybe I should make Amma one too. She's been working since morning without a break.

I took down two mugs and one sachet of instant coffee powder. I poured equal amount of powder into both mugs and carried them to the water dispenser. As the hot water was filling up one mug, I heard the shuffle of feet approaching the kitchen and cursed under my breath.

All I ever ask is one moment of peace and quiet.

I ignored the sounds and continued filling the other mug. The sound became louder until it was right behind me, probably a few inches away. I could feel the air around the cool kitchen become tense. I turned around and faced a wrinkly face with dark eyes staring into my tired soul.

“Excuse me, pati. I need to get the spoons.” I inched past her to the cutlery drawer and took out 2 teaspoons. I could feel her eyes boring a hole into my back, but I ignored it and inched past her again to reach the mugs.

“What you doing now?” My mother’s mother asked me in broken English, even though she could clearly see what I was doing.

“Making coffee for Amma and I.” I stirred the coffee in my mug and took a sip to taste it.

Ahh, the taste of coffee is bringing life to my soul and patience to my words.

“You are so useless,” she mocked me in Tamil. “Last time, we used to make coffee properly with the coffee powder, milk and sugar. Now you just use packet. So lazy.” She tutted.

Deep breaths, V. Just take deep breaths.

I drank my coffee again before replying to her.

“It’s not lazy, pati. It makes things easier.” I stirred my mom’s coffee, offering no further explanation because, as always, we are wrong and she is right.

“Nonsense. Now you listen to me, ah. SPM finish already. You better start applying for medical courses, ah. Manipal or AIMST. Don’t be an embarrassment like your mom. I’m warning you.” Her Tamil words were filled with hatred towards my mom and about an extra 50% hatred for me.

I continued stirring the coffee and remained unresponsive.

“I know you mixing with all those Chinese and Malay kids, ah, talking about stupid courses to take. Singing la, cooking la, make videos la. The Chinese got money and Malay got support, but we Indians got nothing. So you must make sure you do medicine. Become doctor and earn money.”

Every word she spewed out made me stir the coffee more.

“Eh, you listening not? You see, no respect for the elders. I’m talking here, and you are doing stupid things there. How to become successful? You should be kicked out of my house to live in the streets. Then you know.”

She hit my shoulders with her cane.

“Oww, pati! That hurts.” I massaged my shoulder, cursing her and her cane, and her loathsome remarks.

“Hey, what’s happening here?” Amma’s voice invaded my thoughts and our interaction in the kitchen.

“Your stupid, good for nothing daughter is as rude as you are.” Pati stared at Amma hard.

“Ma, don’t say that. Come let me help you back to your room. It’s time to take your medicine and nap.” My mom’s words in Tamil were as genuine as her heart, despite the reproach. She held the hunched shoulders of her mother to guide her out of the kitchen.

“You shut up and don’t tell me what to do. You are a rubbish person who disrespects me.” She shrugged off my mom’s hands and pushed her away. At 87 years old, this old lady still had her strength. This caused poor Amma to trip and fall to the floor. She groaned softly as her head knocked against the kitchen cabinet.

“Amma!” I rushed to her, pushing the old lady aside on purpose. I looked at my mom’s face and could see tears threatening to fall at the side of her eyes. I helped her up, ignoring whatever the old lady was saying as she pointed at us with her cane.

I turned my gaze towards her and stared at her.

I am going to kill her for this and every other abuse she has done towards Amma.

As if she heard my thoughts, pati suddenly went silent and grunted. She mumbled something and shuffled out of the kitchen.

* * *

I sat down on my bed, deep in thought about this afternoon’s event. It was nearly three in the morning, but I couldn’t sleep. This thought kept appearing in my head, and a small part of me was scared at how persistent it was.

I am going to kill her.

Almost like a chant.

Dinner was mercifully peaceful today. The old lady had hers in her room. I decided to take her food to her instead of Amma, knowing well that she would berate my poor mom again. She took the food silently from me and waved me out. I left her alone and went down to eat with my mom. We had a good conversation about my future.

I told her that I wasn't interested in medicine and would like to pursue English Studies at UPM. As usual my mom was always encouraging and told me to do whatever makes me happy.

I'll be happy, but you will be tortured right, Amma? The old lady will mock, scold, and abuse you until the day either one of you dies.

I will kill her.

After dinner, Amma went to her mother's room to check on her. It was a quick and silent affair. Amma said she was already asleep. After washing dishes, we sat to watch a Tamil movie together and laughed a whole lot. By 11pm, Amma retreated to her room to sleep, and I went to mine to keep insomnia company.

I spent about 2 hours researching the course at UPM and figuring out the logistics to get there from Bukit Jalil. The easiest way would be to drive, since it takes only 20 minutes, but we only had one car.

Unless I stay over at Appa's place, which happens to be in Serdang. But she wouldn't like it now, would she?

In case I forgot to mention, pati hates my father, and she deliberately separated my parents. Now the reason why she hates him so much, I do not know but from what I have gathered, that old cow thinks my mother is better off with someone else and should divorce Appa!

Crazy, right?

So at this point, my parents are living separately, although they are still legally married. Appa lives in his own house, alone, while Amma is forced to stay with her mother in her house because she is old and needs to be taken care of.

But I know her real evil intentions are to break my family apart.

I am going to kill her.

I got up from my bed and walked.

* * *

I stared down at her old face full of wrinkles, not as a result of smiling but from constantly frowning. This old face should have been the voice of wisdom and advice, instead of childish behaviour and evil thoughts. It should have been the face of a grandmother's love and guidance for her children. Instead, it is the face that detested any form of love, happiness, or peace.

No wonder athai and mama refused to take care of you. Your own son rejecting any sort of connection to his own mother. I wouldn't blame him.

She looked almost peaceful as if she was dead, but the small rise and fall of her chest crushed my hope.

I am going to kill her.

I took a deep breath and walked away.

"You are a no-good daughter who should've been drowned at birth!" her raspy voice called out after me.

I whipped my head back and saw her black, beady eyes glaring at me, a veil of malevolent aura surrounding her.

I walked towards her slowly, holding her glare with my own eyes. I leaned down to her face and whispered in Tamil, "You should've died at childbirth."

* * *

I woke up suddenly with a splitting headache and something missing. I squinted my eyes and looked at the clock. It was 9am.

And silence.

I got up from my bed and walked warily to the bedroom door. I opened it and peeked outside. The entire house was eerily quiet. No sounds of pots clanking in the kitchen, no whirring sound of the washing machine, no TV noises, and most importantly, no nagging in an old, raspy voice.

I walked out of my room and headed to Amma's. I knocked and there was no response. I knocked again, but still nothing and I felt a weird sinking feeling in my stomach. I opened the door softly only to see her bed empty and messy. She had not folded her blankets or arranged the pillows. Instantly, I ran to pati's room.

The door was open, and Amma was sitting on the floor. She held her mother's crinkled hand and was stroking it. Her head was lying on the bed next to pati's waist. I went in cautiously.

"Amma?" I called out softly to her.

Almost like a soft doll, my mom slowly lifted her head to look at me. Her eyes seemed forlorn, and her lips started to tremble.

"She's gone." Her voice came out as a whisper, breaking off at the end.

No! It can't be. She was well and alive when I left the room. Did she die because of what I said? Not a chance! She has a strong heart.

"Oh, Ma." I kneeled and hugged my mother. She hugged me back with one hand while the other was still holding onto pati's hand. Her body felt like jelly, but yet she was not crying. I found that quite odd considering how much she appreciated and tolerated pati all this time.

“We need to call the police and ambulance, Amma. Be strong okay?” I got up, intending to get my phone from my room.

Amma gripped my hand.

“We can’t,” she whispered again.

This is not good.

“But we have to. They’ll have to come and do a report, then post-mortem and such.” I explained patiently to her, although I felt like puking all of a sudden.

“But...then...they’ll know.” She nibbled on her bottom lips like a small child.

“Know what?” I asked her exasperatedly.

“That...she was...murdered.” Her voice trailed off, and her eyes glazed over.

“Amma...how do you know that? She probably died in her sleep. A peaceful death that she doesn’t deserve, but whatever.” I tried to rebuke her nonchalantly despite my blood running cold with fear.

Suddenly, Amma looked up at me, her trembling lips turning into a small, trembling smile.

And then I knew what had happened.

* * * * *

“Out of Her Cage”

by Marielle Valmores

Cream-colored ribbons and trumpet-shaped lilies were bound together on the pews leading to the altar. Embroidered fans continued to flutter with the warm breeze and the sweet-scented sampaguitas. Several ladies with rehearsed smiles lined up beside the arches, while little girls with flower crowns arranged on their heads groaned to each other. As the organ built the first note, everyone stood up and turned their gazes toward the church door. They murmured that it was her fate to wear the lace gown, to walk down the carpeted aisle with tears of joy, and to repeat the two words that would change her life. These were the things that Nadya remembered as she twisted the golden band that embraced her finger. She stared at the letters that were carved around it —1953 Forevermore. Then she started to hear the rapid footsteps against the floorboards. She turned her lamp off, pushed a leather attaché case under the bed, and fixed the ruffled skirts. She clutched the blanket to her chest and laid on the sheets. She closed her eyes as Rodrigo, her husband, climbed onto their bed. Silence filled the room as she breathed in some traces of rum.

Garlicky longganisa, salted eggs, and warm rice were placed on the mahogany table. Nadya told Rosa, her young maid, to slice the ripe papayas in the kitchen while she poured brewed coffee and a teaspoon of sugar into Rodrigo’s cup. Nadya set down a folded *Manila Chronicle* beside his plate. Rodrigo, a clean-shaven man in a dim gray suit, marched down the staircase holding his briefcase. He took his seat at the head of the table, and Nadya sat on his left side.

“I have a business trip tomorrow, so I’ll be back in two days. I also invited the Salcedos tonight.” Rodrigo picked up the newspaper without looking at Nadya.

Nadya put rice and two pieces of longganisa onto his plate. “Is there something specific you’d like me to make?” She watched him straighten his tie, so she ate in silence.

Gatherings at their household were a time to bring out the fine porcelain from the cabinets, to change the everyday curtains into the silk ones, and to show Rodrigo's collections of Cadillacs. Around 7pm, Rodrigo's valued friends rang the doorbell. Nadya smiled at Lino, a stocky man with a goatee, who was gripping his wife's waist. Then she turned to Sandra, who wore a burgundy, polka-dot dress with a small bow attached to her curls. As Nadya laid a gentle kiss on Sandra's cheek, she caught a whiff of her vanilla-scented perfume. They all proceeded to the dining room. However, most of the time, the women just nodded to each of their husbands' stories.

"Pare, how's that shoe store of yours?" Rodrigo asked Lino.

"All good here in Marikina but forget about that. They told me you fixed Congressman Araneta's case," Lino said.

"An easy one. I just needed to pay the girl's family, keep them quiet. Besides, they'd just lose the assault case against him."

When their dinner was done, the wives left their husbands to enjoy their cigars while they sat in the living room and listened to kundiman songs from the vinyl. Rosa served them polvoron and tea. Then she glanced at Nadya before walking back to the kitchen. Sandra took a sip of tea and grinned at the crystal chandelier shining from the ceiling, the terracotta floor vases, and the landscape paintings of Amorsolo that adorned the walls.

"Oh, I heard Rodrigo is up for another promotion. Well, it must be exciting to be a lawyer's wife," Sandra said. "I'm happy about Lino's business, but it's still a risk. You're lucky." She laid her eyes on the double-strand pearl necklace that was wrapped around Nadya's neck.

"I know." Nadya looked away and tugged her long sleeves down to her wrists. Suddenly, she felt a heavy hand stroking her shoulder, which caused a shudder to run down her back.

"Ladies, are you talking about me?" Rodrigo stood behind Nadya.

"Not really. I was just about to ask your wife, if she ever planned to open a restaurant here. Her recipes were just amazing," Sandra answered.

Nadya noticed Rodrigo's hand pressing down on her shoulder. "Thank you, Sandra. But I don't think I can handle it. I prefer cooking just for my Rodrigo." She folded her hands in her lap as he kissed the top of her head.

After their guests left, Nadya faltered up to their bedroom and settled down in front of her three-mirror vanity. She removed the clasp of her necklace and placed it in an ornate jewelry box. She stared vacantly at the gleaming stones that almost filled the box. Then she stripped off her dress and gazed at her fragile body that was littered with scratches and dark purple to greenish marks. For every bruise, Rodrigo would give her a piece of jewelry as a peace offering. Opening the drawer, she took out a wrinkled photograph of her late parents who were smiling in front of their bungalow home. She traced the creases in the picture as she remembered Antonio, her brother, who demanded that she accept Rodrigo's proposal in exchange for money to start his own hacienda. Rodrigo wasn't violent with her in the early years of their marriage, but she learned that a glass of alcohol mixed with frustration could turn him into a beast. There were moments when she chose to understand him and to hold on to hope that he could change. But as time went by, Nadya grew more fearful about the life she would continue to have.

As soon as daylight hit Nadya's eyes, she got out of bed and made breakfast with Rosa's help. After Rodrigo kissed her goodbye and drove off, she hurriedly asked Rosa to go to the marketplace. Then Nadya decided to wait in their garden and to finish her cross-stitch of a dove. Through every stitch, she began to focus on the vines of the pink bugambilias that enveloped the brick walls. For four years, she had tried reaching out for help, but most of them refused to believe her and told her to simply be a dutiful wife. Nadya stared down at her lap as she felt a twinge from her finger as a drop of crimson fell onto the linen. Then she heard the gate creak open and saw Rosa running toward her.

"Senyorita, I got your bus ticket. It leaves in two hours. You won't have to suffer anymore." Rosa reached into her apron pocket and gave the ticket to Nadya.

"I'll never forget this, Rosa. Salamat." Nadya hugged Rosa as tears streamed down her face.

They rushed into the bedroom. Nadya pulled out the leather attaché case while Rosa packed Nadya's clothes in a duffle bag. Nadya gazed at the framed wedding picture on the shelf and then looked back at the ticket in her hands. Once they had finished packing, they

hastened downstairs. Nadya opened the front door, but staggered back as she met Rodrigo's confused stare.

"What are you doing with those bags?" Rodrigo asked. "Where are you going? Tell me!"

"Rodrigo, please... L-let me go." Nadya's fingers quivered as she grasped the leather case.

Rodrigo clenched his fists as he stomped into the house and grabbed Nadya's arm. Rosa tried to pull him away, but he shoved her to the floor. Before Nadya could help Rosa, Rodrigo dragged her back to their bedroom. He slammed the door shut as he released Nadya's arm. Nadya dropped the leather case as she held her breath. Then Rodrigo moved toward her and slapped her. She fell on the satin sheets as she tasted the bitter blood on her mouth.

"If you try to leave again, I'll kill that maid of yours, and I'll do everything to find you." Rodrigo stepped out of the room then locked the door.

Nadya rose from the bed and wiped her lips. She winced but not a single tear fell from her eyes anymore. Rodrigo kept her inside for five days and only opened it to let Rosa bring some food to her. Sometimes Nadya would look through the window to watch the mayas that were leaping on the tree branches and gliding toward the clouds. That afternoon, she was staring at the empty corners of the room when Rodrigo entered and sat beside her on the bed.

"I love you. It's just...you have to listen to me. I'm letting you out of this room. I promise we'll be fine." Rodrigo took her hand and kissed it.

Nadya nodded as he gathered her into his arms. After Rodrigo left to go to his office, she went to the kitchen to prepare dinner. She mustered a small smile as Rosa patted her on the shoulder. Nadya asked her to wash the potatoes and repolyos, while she stirred the beef broth into a pot of boiling water. When Nadya opened the bottom drawer to get a dishcloth, she saw the packet of powdered rat poison. She picked it up and stared at the powder that looked like black pepper. A tablespoon into the broth could be enough. But she shook her head as she placed it back inside the drawer. She gripped the marble countertop.

It's not who you are, Nadya.

Bursts of rain started to knock on the windows. A few hours later, Rodrigo came home and threw his briefcase on the couch. He ripped off his necktie as he slumped onto the armchair and stretched his neck. Nadya walked toward him and smelled the stench of brandy over him. She knelt down to remove his shoes and to place the slippers by his side. As she stood up, she bit her lip and held his gaze.

“We will never be happy. I-I tried, but I can’t. Not anymore,” Nadya said. “If you do love me, let me go.”

Rodrigo sneered at her as he got up from his seat. Before he took another step, Nadya stepped back and hurried upstairs. He tightened his jaw while he grabbed his briefcase. Then, he swayed toward every step of the staircase as he reached into it. He brought out a pistol and tossed his briefcase aside, while Nadya begged him to stop. Rosa ran into the room and gasped, but Rodrigo told her not to move. He trudged toward Nadya and seized her arm. But Nadya clawed him across his face and pushed him to the banister.

“I’m not letting you hurt me again.” Nadya raised her chin.

“Fine, you want to go? We’ll do it together,” Rodrigo said. “Till death do us part, right?”

As Rodrigo tried to aim the gun at Nadya, he stumbled backwards. Then in an instant, his foot slipped on the edge. Nadya heard Rosa’s shrieks as she watched Rodrigo fall down. A puddle of blood began to flow out of his head while he lay still at the bottom of the stairs. Nadya lifted her hands over her mouth. Teardrops began to roll down her cheeks as she looked down at his body.

Soft wind blew Nadya’s hair as she raised her face toward the deep blue sky. A flock of mayas flew above her while she strolled along the grassy path. Family and friends were leaving flowers and lighting rows of candles beside the graves. Nadya stopped and shut her eyes for a while. Then she removed her wedding ring and placed it on Rodrigo’s tombstone. She glanced at it and took a deep breath as she walked away.

* * * * *

“Ghost Month”

by Kar Yern Chin

Ling sat dangling her legs on the bench right by the school’s bicycle shed. She dug into the bench’s paint with her untrimmed fingernails, peeling away the aquamarine paint cracks, continuing the work of her peers in erasing the colour to reveal the dull brown-grey metal underneath. The aquamarine was beautiful, and had an appeal to the kids, but peeling off the rubbery layer of paint had become a past-time for many a student here. She lifted her fingers to her nose to smell the dried flecks tucked underneath her fingernails. The heat had begun to subside, as the sun gave way to the evening and a breeze swept through the school compound.

A little agitated, she bit her nails as she waited for her friend Andy, who was supposed to meet her here. This demeanor was the best front she could put up to mask her excitement about what they were going to do tonight.

“Don’t get caught by the security guard or Cikgu Azwa! If they find out where we’re going, they’ll tell our parents and then tai wok lo!” Ling had exclaimed to Andy about this, stretching her arms in magnitude of the phrase her parents had always used when something bad happened or was about to. Something bad was perhaps an understatement, for it was when Ling’s uncle had declared bankruptcy on his business; when Aunty Angie’s car got into a grisly accident, although she herself miraculously survived without a scratch; or when Aunty Mimi’s son joined a local neighbourhood gang. Ling would come to understand the gravity of these events, and the weight of the phrase itself that matched its garish, and often ludicrous, tone. But, for now, she was just seven, and saying it out loud made her sound important.

Just as her dangling legs oscillated quicker and quicker, betraying the bottled-up excitement she had about their plan and growing frustration of Andy’s tardiness, Andy

arrived, carrying his blue backpack with rubbery shapes of Pikachu and Charmander rip-offs glued on its back.

“There you are!” Ling exclaimed, jumping off the bench and landing onto the cement ground of the bicycle shed. “I wait for you so long edi. The sky’s darker now.”

“Sorry,” Andy replied, panting a little. “I needed to sweep the classroom. Puan Puziah asked me to do it now or my class will be in trouble,” said Andy. That was enough to diffuse Ling’s annoyance, and her lips, which were pouting initially, parted into a cheeky grin. She then gesticulated backwards, gesturing him to follow her out. They said goodbye to Encik Azhan, the security guard watching over the school’s entrance. He mustered a smile in response to them and the cooling weather as they darted out of the school gates. Ling was sprightly and quick on her feet, while Andy was trailing behind, panting, although he managed to keep pace with her.

They were heading to a park five or six blocks away from the school and their homes. This was well thought out as, that way, Ling had mused to herself in front of Andy before, neither parents nor teachers could spot them, chase after them, tug at them by the ears, and keep them out of the fun. Ling, smirking as she remembered it, also conceived of a winding path that skirted her neighbourhood and avoided the daily walks of the different adults she knew. They would be out on an adventure unsupervised. Apa was away at work; Ama would miss them; and Pak Pandir and Mak Aini, who ran the nasi lemak and rendang store right opposite her house, would not catch sight of them. And the aunties and uncles who’d later put up their offerings by the street that they were about to pass would not know them enough to be concerned, even though it was that month.

Ling ran across a murder of crows on their path, causing them to hop a little to the sides to make space for her. She relished the power to command the crows to part for her. The crows were, however, growing accustomed to people; they were beginning to be less afraid of them and, although Ling could forever match the crows in obstinacy, they observed Andy with an alien astuteness, unafraid. That made Andy quiver a little and watch over his exposed belly as he tiptoed his way in between the birds, which looked even more menacing to him with their matte black feathers and sharp beaks. Closing enough ground,

he sped up to be nearer to Ling and further away from the black birds that continued to eye him up and down. Upon a wary glance back, he noticed that the crows had started pacing a little towards him and, in renewed trepidation, ran even faster. Within no time, he outpaced Ling, who took it as a challenge of speed and chased after him.

As they got nearer to the park, they broke their run into walks, to Andy's panting relief, and noticed several Chinese uncles and aunties outside of their terrace houses, setting up their offering plates, placing pink and steamed paos on red plastic plates with floral grooves along the edge, lighting joss sticks and candles and sticking them to the ground. Andy noticed that one aunty even plopped a plate of siew yuk, its oily sheen dancing by the warping candle light. Andy eyed the pork belly and licked his lips, for he was peckish; he hadn't had food since recess and was about to skip dinner for this excursion. The adults looked up and stared at them for a moderately long time, probably thinking that these kids should not be out here at a time and day like this. Andy's eyes darted away from the adults' chastising gaze, and he now looked straight ahead to avoid attracting more attention. Look unassuming and make them assume that we were walking home from school. Ling, ignoring the adults around them, got more excited by the surreal quality of the lights and the shades of red by the street-side. Usually, upon encountering potentially troublesome adults, she would turn unseemly and demure, by changing her gait to tread more lightly and taking smaller steps. She would hold her hands together and look down awkwardly a little; these were moves she had picked up and perfected from watching other girls and some shows, just to appease older people around her and convince them that she wasn't up to no good; today she wasn't even going to try. Let these adults care and worry, we'll be gone soon enough, she thought as she trampled away to the park. Just then, the sky had dimmed into evening blue, the air cooled to the point that the sweat on both their skins began to evaporate, leaving a sensation akin to opening the fridge door and basking in front of the cool air. It was as if they had entered another world.

"Why did they choose to be at this park?" Andy asked Ling. So that there was no one else. No one to question what they were doing. No adults thinking that they knew more, fearing that them being outside at this time, this night, was dangerous. It was a different realm they were treading into, and it was exciting. Ling half-believed that her parents kept

kids from going out during this time because they really knew nothing about the other side, what it brought, and were thus afraid of finding out. She was also convinced that they wouldn't want her to have too much fun out there and then stay there and not see them again. She was, of course, braver than them and decided that one day she was going to see this other realm, or what came out of it. And opportunely, Andy wanted to find his uncle there, to see if he was doing well. This was how and why they decided to come here, to explore this new place and, if possible, find Andy's uncle. Ling prided herself in that, for once, her often mischievous adventures could—aside from the undisputed benefit in providing more knowledge to herself, for she was a hands-on learner after all—do good deeds like reuniting Andy with family. In her head, this justified her actions.

They passed the last pair of houses at the end of the row and proceeded to cross an intersection. They now stood right by a wire fence, worn and warped a little, which made up one side of the park. Tracing the fence, canopied by young trees that just hovered a little over, they found the entrance after turning around in the corner. The park was expansive, much bigger than the one in their neighbourhood. There was a basketball and badminton court, both paved with concrete. There was a playground with two slides and monkey bars, their bright and lurid colours dulled in the dark. There were walking trails that wound around golden shower trees (this was the first time Ling saw them, and they were beautiful), their yellow flowers covered in shadows formed a loop for joggers and walkers. The grass, aside from a few areas, was mostly trimmed, and that alone made it look more refined than their own school field, where children would play football slicked in mud and grass. The few lamp posts on the park were unlit, leaving the night to swaddle the park. In the dark there were pockets of bright, some food offerings with candles and joss sticks on the cement pavements and jogging trails, where people had placed them carefully near the grass so as not to start a fire. The park was still, aside from cricket chirps, the croak of a frog, and the occasional breezes that swept the area, toying the candle fires.

Ling was about to step into the park when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Andy's worried face.

"Should we go in there?" he asked.

“We’re here now. Might as well do it. Don’t be scared! Look at me!” she beamed a confident smile, one that Andy had known for quite some time. There was no stopping her now. But Ling, despite her outward appearance, had started to develop an instinctual fear too, one that she’d not had before and thus could not identify first-hand. Her jovial gait turned more cautious.

To quell his fears, Andy held onto her bag slung on her back as they walked into the park, so that, whatever happened, they wouldn’t be separated. This also calmed down her own concerns, and her confidence returned. Her slow, heavy treads became brisker and were only held back by Andy’s tugging onto her bag. They stepped across a soggy lawn and soaked their white Bata shoes in blades of grass and wet dirt, and on one occasion Andy nearly slipped on the mud, receiving a light pat on his chest as a rebuke from Ling. They managed to eventually reach one end of the basketball court and decided that they would finally sit after half an hour of travelling.

As Ling was darting around, back and forth, to see into the darkness around her, to find glimpses of strangeness, Andy, tired, was staring at the pictures on his bag, relieved that they were done with walking after all. The leaves were rustling as the wind blew harder. Petals of golden shower floated near them, and Andy grabbed hold of a sprig of the flowers. Up close, it lay limp, as if it was washed up by the shore and left to dry. How it ended up on the court when the nearest tree was metres away eluded him. His mind was occupied with its wilting beauty.

A long time had passed, such that Andy dozed off, head perched on his bag, and Ling, despite being determined to be independent of any adult supervision, started to wonder if her parents were worried now. Ling had been swatting mosquitoes droning right by her ears and scratching the beveled bite spots on her arms. She was envious of Andy’s capacity to sleep without care for the world, even with these many mosquitoes around. Maybe they should go back, she thought. An owl could be heard hooting from afar, and, afraid that she was the only one awake, that she was alone in what might possibly turn into a dreadful night, she slapped Andy’s face. Andy startled himself and was visibly annoyed. To his frustration, he realized that they were still at the park. He was tired and was half dazed when he noticed that Ling was still, looking ahead.

“Andy!” Ling whispered, though try as she might, she was still loud. Andy glanced onward with her as she looked into the night. A shadow could be seen, a figure cloaked in darkness. The shadow grew larger, more distinct, until it became clear that a figure was gradually approaching them. Muffled echoes could be heard of footsteps, like hard rubber coming into contact and leaving the surface. Andy, frightened, prodded Ling, suggesting that they leave now. Ling stared back in annoyance.

“Eh, I thought you wanted to find your uncle?” she asked rhetorically. “Isn’t this what you came here for?” At that point, Andy just stopped and hid behind her, trembling a little. She could feel a little sweat from her back as Andy was leaning on to her, but before she could react, the figure was close. She held his hand, an assurance that it would be okay and beckoning him to be still. They looked on at the figure.

“Have you seen my daughter?” the figure approached, revealing himself to be an old man in a white T-shirt and shorts, wearing slippers. His white hair strands were combed to the side, and shades of gloom appeared on his wrinkled face. He wore a solemnity that weighed down his skin. However, upon noticing the kids in front of him, his face parted into a smile.

“What are you two doing here?” he asked. Ling elbowed Andy, prodding him to answer, as she felt that he had a more compelling reason for them to be here. Her excuse, while probably exciting to her peers, she thought to herself, would only be a cause for concern to him.

“I’m looking for my uncle,” he replied. Both started to stand up, not wanting to be rude to the elderly man in front of them, despite all their previous fears that manifested with his shadowy arrival. Andy’s head stooped down, partly in deference to the old man, partly because he was shy, perhaps embarrassed. Ling wondered if he’d told anyone else that before. Did he ask his parents about his uncle?

“Ah, you’re looking for someone too,” said the man, who felt reassured, as if comforted by the fact that he wasn’t being ludicrous for being out here tonight. Despite the heavy face, Ling could discern glints of movement on it, which indicated understanding,

vibrancy, a life. This man was real. After a moment's pause, the old man asked, "What does he look like?"

At that point, Andy fumbled for words. Ling, impatient, questioned now if Andy actually had an uncle he wanted to find. After all, she was the one who suggested for them to go out tonight, whispering to him in the school canteen, while aware of the presence of their peers who could see but not hear them. She wanted to let everyone know that they were cooler than the rest of the kids, that they were perfectly capable of finding activities that were fulfilling and thrilling, rather than follow the boring and made-up activities adults usually made them do. And he didn't even respond to her until he came up with a reason to join her a few days later at the same bicycle shed, when no one else was there. Maybe he didn't want to just follow her. Maybe he wanted to have his own compelling reason to be out here tonight, to prove to Ling that he himself was as daring and purposeful as she was.

Just then, Andy finally relayed what he remembered: he had a moustache and stubbles around his chin, deep-set eyes with baggy eyelids, as he didn't usually catch sleep, twirled, curly hair, and stained yellow teeth, as he smoked a lot. The old man listened and took it in like those words had aged and worn out inside Andy for a long time; it was as if Andy was waiting for someone to ask him this question, so that he could say these words, describe his uncle, before it was too late, before those words had muddied themselves in the back of Andy's mind and, as he grew up, become forgotten. It was like the old man could sense Andy's urgency. Ling felt the noticeable pause. The old man then left a little sigh.

"When did you last see him?" he asked. Ling was satisfied with the question, as a lingering part of her wanted Andy to finally admit whether he knew what he was saying or was lying. She kept mum, eager for an answer. Andy grew quiet for a bit, then moroseness clouded over his face. Ling looked at him quizzically. He was looking down, crestfallen. No, it was that thing he usually did when he was about to tear up, for he easily cried about the smallest things. She remembered when he cried because Anita claimed his seat and would not leave as she wanted to talk to Rati; the time when Zheng Peng took his eraser without his permission and he sniffled uncontrollably; the time when Encik Aizam called him out for talking in class. That boy had endless tears to spare, she once joked with her mother. But unlike the other times, he hadn't sniffled yet. He was just facing the ground.

The old man's gloom returned. "Have you seen my daughter?" he asked them. He became a little more frantic than usual and started looking around him. "Where am I?" His ease when meeting them and talking to Andy dissipated, leaving a tired man behind. Ling was frazzled, the toll of the whole journey and staying here was catching up to her, along with the sudden realization that they had been in the middle of the darkened park for quite some time. Though Ling wasn't about to answer that question, as she was still freaked out about the old man, she realized she hadn't identified where this park was. Before, she had merely been looking for a space, a site of their adventure. She had just walked across blocks in search of the place that was to be their escape from their homes and school. She tried to look around for signposts, anything that could give away the name of the park or the area. They really were in the middle of nowhere. There was no landmark or discernable feature that she could position herself in her mental map of her neighbourhood. In response, for lack of a better reaction, she just shrugged.

"What does your daughter look like?" Andy asked, seemingly recovered. Ling heard no snuffles and was curious. His glazed eyes could be discerned against the moon. But he held it in.

"She was around my height. She had long, curly hair and really big almond eyes. Her skin was tan as she played a lot of sports, like volleyball. I was following her just now, and I walked into this place and then she was gone. I don't know where she went." He paused for a second. His face was still, as if in contemplation. Then his eyes widened.

"I shouldn't...I shouldn't have. I hope that she's not mad at me. I didn't mean to leave her and my wife like that. I just...I was worried that...what others would think. Oh, I wish I took back everything I said to her." At that point, he sobbed in low mournful whimpers. His face scrunched up, and in that expression, Ling saw the time when Apa hit his head against the dinner table when he slipped on the wet floor at home. That same wincing face, although with a swollen and bleeding head. She remembered her mother's shock and hurry to call the ambulance; she remembered her own feelings of paralysis as she turned back to look at the commotion from the couch.

As the old man stood there weeping, covering his face, Andy reached into his backpack for a packet of tissues. He touched the man's arm to get his attention before handing it to him. His open palm received the packet and he crumpled it.

"What happened to her? What did you say?" asked Ling.

The man wiped off tears with the tissues.

"I don't know. I can't remember. It was something like...I was afraid that she was ruining our family...our name. What with her and who she liked...I blamed her and I blamed my wife for letting this happen. I regret it now...I just want them back." His words went beyond Ling's head, but she felt like this was the hurt that one felt when one's family fell apart. The thought of what would happen if Ama and Apa were no longer here appeared suddenly in her head. What could be a tear formed and was subdued as she pressed herself to not give that thought any attention and focused on Andy.

This time, Ling noticed Andy's tears as they trailed down his puffy cheeks. She felt confounded and anxious. It was as if Andy, after looking at the old man, took on some of his sorrow and was influenced by it. Just then, the question of Andy's uncle returned to her mind. Ling didn't really think about what it meant when Andy said he wanted to find his uncle. She was mostly looking for an excuse to go on this excursion with someone, to hopefully see floating lights and apparitions; ghosts, she wanted to see ghosts. She guessed that his uncle was just living somewhere here, and that for some reason he wanted to find him and that his parents, who didn't want their son to see him, did not let him know the address, and that they were about to spend time looking around houses to find him. She never really bothered to ask about him.

It then occurred to her that this reminded her of the time when Ama became withdrawn for an entire day. She noticed it when she received no reproach for leaving her dishes unwashed and on the dinner table, when she did not hear the ambient din of the Hong Kong drama that her mother watched every Wednesday night. When, in the middle of that night, she noticed that the living room was pitch black—her mother was usually adamant with leaving the living room lights on at night. She inched her way to her mom's

bedroom, and noticed her lights on, her door closed. Later she found out from Apa that something terrible happened to her dear friend.

“Just give her some time okay? And smile for Mummy when you see her. She wouldn’t want you to be sad.”

Her hair was being blown past her face from the back. The winds billowed. Branches danced as the leaves stirred, and sprigs of golden shower detached and swam aloft in the air. Candles were blown out, one by one, and the wispy smoke that trailed off from the joss ticks unravelled into the air and nothingness. At this point, the old man got down on his knees, yelling.

“Cheng! If you can hear me, please forgive me! I’m sorry! I should have been a better father!” He swallowed tears and saliva and put his head onto the floor. A veiled shadow enveloped him as clouds drifted over the moon, giving him a menacing appearance, a shadowed contour that contorted itself, moaning, weeping. A flash of lights as a car sped up nearby, caused Ling to catch a glimpse of the man’s hollow, sunken eyes. She screamed and darted back a little. Andy, seized by something, also yelled at the air around him, screaming “Yijiong! Where are you?” a few times, bracing against the buffeting winds, trying to be louder than them, before his voice turned into a gargle of tears. Andy startled Ling, for she never heard him so loud before. The voluminous winds grew fiercer. Ling rushed to hold on to both their bags, toppled by the winds onto the court. By now, Ling just wanted to go home.

Lightning. Thunder. A roaring shower.

* * *

Ling sat on the couch, hair still wet, though she had changed into her pajamas now. The living room was lit and through the window opposite her, next to the TV, she could see the storm roaring outside, rain pattering on the window, flashes of light and sonic booms. She was afraid to turn on the TV, so she kept still and just sat there. She closed her eyes against the lightening, afraid that it would strike her.

Next to her was Ama, who brought a cup of hot Milo for her. Ling was eager to grab it, but realized that she mustn’t let her guard down. She had a lot to explain to Ama. She

glanced sideways at her, testing the waters. Ama's face was not tight, her eyes were not flaring. Sensing that she wasn't going to be in trouble, she gave off an internal sigh. Yet, she noticed that Ama was too quiet to not be angry.

"Liling. Why did you go out at night today? You do know what this month is, right?" she muttered. Her voice, though a little reproachful, was also oddly reassuring.

"Yes."

"Why then, did you go out tonight?"

To see ghosts. Ling shrugged.

"Why didn't you let me know? Do you want me to lose you, Ai Liling?" Ama's voice was quivering, shaking a little. The timber of the tone pierced into Ling, and she softened.

"No, Ama." Ling's arms gradually wrapped around Ama as she buried her face in her stomach. She started sniffing, her weeps muffled under Ama's shirt. She felt Ama's arms encircling her, embracing her. Ama's quivering movement betrayed her own silent weeps.

"Next time please don't do it again, okay?" Ama asked. Ling nodded into Ama's stomach.

"Okay, finish your Milo and then go to sleep. You have school tomorrow." Ama untangled her arms, caressed and kissed Ling's forehead. She prepared to get off the couch when she realized that she had to say something. The image of Andy and his mother embracing, Andy crying, his mother looking grave, attempting not to cry. That must have left a mark on Ling.

"Liling, you know what happened to Andy's uncle right?" To her surprise, Ling nodded slowly. She wondered who told a child about this, wondered if it was Andy himself. But didn't prod on.

"Andy loves his uncle very much. He raised him since he was a baby. He was a caring person and helped him and his mother a lot." Ling didn't know what to say. She just nodded, and looked down at her toes, afraid to let Ama look into her eyes and realize how she really felt. The rain lightened to a drizzle, the lightning no longer seen, the thunder no longer heard.

“Can I go to sleep?” Ling asked. Ama nodded. Ling got off the couch and walked into her room. The door was shut lightly. Ama was alone. She felt that she should bring Ling to visit Master Fan sometime during the weekend. Who knows what thing might have followed her home. Yet Ama also worried over whether the incident affected Ling in any way. She had not gone to funerals; she had not been around deaths. Maybe that was why she was so fascinated with ghosts.

The image of Andy and his mother hugging, in tears, was unbearable for Ama. She could only look for so long before she couldn't hold it in anymore. As soon as they had reunited, she excused herself and Ling, not wanting to intrude on their moment.

The old man that they had encountered was handed over to the police. She remembered seeing a 'missing' ad for him on the newspaper. When she had seen him, he had sunken eyes, and was soaked all the way through, his clothes just hanging down his body like dripping flaps. Despite that, she could see that his forlorn look had not been due to just bad weather. That look had made her reach her hand to the nape of her neck, and press it a little, and hold onto Ling's hand, who'd been with her at the station, a little tighter, just so that she could feel and sense a touch, to remind her that she was there and that she wasn't without company.

* * *

Ling lay snuggled under her striped blanket in the dark. Her body ached from walking the entire night. Yet, lingering in her head was the image of Andy holding onto his mother, the color drained from his face, weeping. The face of his mother, solemn and sorrowful, whispering to him that things would be alright again. As she drifted off to sleep, the only thought that accompanied her to her dreams was that she needed to apologize to Andy. To find words to reach out to him, to absolve her compunction that she now had because she had doubted him. By the time she fell asleep, she had come up with nothing that she felt was appropriate enough.

* * * * *

“The End of the Lifeline”

by Thao To

Grandma tells me that there’s a charming gentleman waiting for her at the gate. He wears a handsome fedora and polished leather shoes—*can you not see him?* I peek through a sliver of her curtains and the rain-stained window, even though I know there’s no man out there. It’s impossible for Grandma to even see the gate from her bed. They say that even the wisest become children in their last moments.

“Grandma, you should rest,” I say as I look back at her paper-thin frame.

“He’s calling me, dear. ‘Miss Thi,’ he says.” Grandma laughs. She’s looking at me, but the cataract in her eyes make it seem like she’s watching something far away. “No one’s called me ‘Miss’ in years.”

Eighty-seven years ago, Grandma was born into the sumptuous two-story house of a landlord, in the days when one could still lord over land. She was only a daughter of his third wife, so she still had to till land and harvest grains, but people respectfully addressed her as ‘Miss.’ That is, until the workmen decided they’d had enough. Enough of landlords, and enough of French colonialists wringing their labor dry. Enough of not enough food, and shelter, and peace.

So, they banded together. A ragtag squad of nationalists who grew from the creeks and mountains of what would become Vietnam. They searched not for a new ideal but a breathable way of life. No thunder could quieten their battle cries. No guns and bombs could stifle the fires in the pits of their growling, empty stomachs.

Grandma was too young to help set up this earthy force, but she was ripe for harvest when they needed a new lifeline. She was seventeen—skin and bone, but bursting with life—and she was recruited by the volunteer army to carry food to the military base up North. They were bracing for an end-all battle. They needed grain, grain, and grain. She carried sacks of rice double her weight on two baskets that hung from the ends of a pole

resting on her shoulders. She trekked up the mountains for months, and she came back down only to take on a new burden.

“He stood at the foot of the mountain waiting for me, all three times I made the trip,” Grandma says to me, her brown eyes blue. Her voice fades like a wistful whisper from the walls of her room. “After the third journey, I got malaria. My bones shivered and my ears buzzed, and I had to stay home. But then he was sent away.”

Grandpa was sent to construction school that year. To sustain the showers from bombs, they needed sprouting roofs; they needed men who could pitch up the new nation. Grandma was hardly aware of this operation—by then she was in fits of fever.

“He said he’d wait for me,” Grandma recalls and smiles, lifting her crinkled lips. I wish I can smile for her, so she can reserve what little energy she has left to stay with me. “He’d become a nation builder while waiting for me to become better.”

It took her two years to get back on her feet, by which time he’d returned. Grandma’s landlord father had been arrested, the land he owned was stripped away, and his daughter of a third wife married off. Grandpa and Grandma moved to the city, although no city was a city for years to come. Every house was a room for decades. All old clothes were new for ages. But they lived happily with their children.

By her last baby, Grandma fell ill again—years of bearing the weight of an army’s survival were finally catching up to her. She was made to stay in a hospital—she couldn’t even see her infant daughter—while Grandpa was mobilized to a factory down South.

“He told me he’d wait for me,” Grandma says softly, and I wonder if I’ve lost her. “He said, ‘The day I finish strengthening the nation will be the day you come home.’”

And so, they met each other again in their modest one-story house a year later, just like he’d promised. They lived humbly and watched the city grow. Bicycles were replaced with mopeds, and oil lamps replaced with light bulbs. Children were replaced by the new movers and shakers of the country.

When their first granddaughter was born, Grandpa was diagnosed with cancer. Grandma didn’t cry. She did what she knew she’d succeeded at before—she became a lifeline. She was by his side and told him tales and held his calloused hands.

“He told me he’d wait for me,” Grandma repeats. Her once-fluffy silver hair hangs loosely around her weathered face. I used to think of her hair as clouds; now there’s just

the rain and the waterworks. “He told me to take my time. Enjoy my garden, and my bed, and my peace.”

He hoped she’d relish it, watching their grandchildren in her neat little yard, picking fruits and feeding her chickens joyously, not knowing a day of hard labor in their sunrise years. Relish their safety and satiety – drink it in like the freshest water from a wild stream. He hoped that when she was replenished and ready, she would remember that he’d still be there, waiting for her, as always.

“He’s so patient,” Grandma says, and I take her veined hand in mine. It’s fragile and cold, like broken ice, but her grip tightens around my finger. She gives my hand the slightest but firmest squeeze, and I realize that she’s not slipping away. “Even now he’s waiting.” She’s going home.

* * * * *

“Notes from Travels into the Heart-land”

by John Paul Egalin Abellera

For Albert Vincent Barretto

DUPAX DEL SUR, NUEVA VIZCAYA, PHILIPPINES

APRIL 19, 2019 / 2:14 P.M.

"You never did this before."

"What do you mean?"

"Going down riverbanks to look under old bridges."

He was right. In the six years he knew you, you always enjoyed walking on bridges instead of walking under them. Back then, you saw bridges as extensions of roads that allowed you to walk on raging rivers or deep ravines. You never romanticized bridges as they only served one function – provide you the ability to enjoy the view from above. Thus, convincing him to go down the Abanatan Creek with you to look under the two-centuries-old Dampol Bridge was something the two of you would not have done before.

"Someone must have inspired you to do this."

He was right once again. Someone did inspire you to do this. Someone else, not him.

TAYABAS, QUEZON PROVINCE, PHILIPPINES

APRIL 29, 2018 / 4:12 P.M.

In a summer that felt like a lifetime ago, you found yourself walking on the longest bridge constructed during the Spanish colonial period. As you looked down at the Dumaca River flowing through the Malagonlong Bridge with the afternoon sun transforming it into golden honey, it was the perfect ending to a perfect day. You spent the entire day going from one heritage town to another, visiting ancestral houses, praying in old churches and chapels, savoring flavors that were new to your tongue. But you also knew that the day's perfection stemmed from somewhere else – the fact that you were spending it with someone you just recently met but whose significance for you deepened with each minute of that summer.

When he saw that you were finished taking photographs, he grabbed your hand and brought you down to the side of the river. He took off his shoes and socks and waded into the water.

"Wait! I have weak ankles and knees. I know that I would slip on those rocks and hurt myself."

"Trust me, the view under the bridge is worth a few cuts and bruises."

You trusted his words, you trusted him. Into the water you went. True enough, you slipped on the rocks and cut yourself several times, but he would always pick you up and encourage you to go on, determined to make you reach the underside of the bridge. When you reached the bridge, he enthusiastically showed you the markings underneath the arches. You watched him as he threw around his ideas about the true meaning of those symbols with so much joy and passion. You listened to his dreams about promoting and protecting the heritage of his town and his province. As his eyes gleamed with the light of the afternoon sun, you were blinded with emotions you tried hard to ignore. You turned away from him to look up at the symbols. You tried to make sense of them, but you knew in your heart that you were trying to decipher something else.

He was right after all. The view under the bridge was breathtaking. The soaring piers capped with beautiful arches were like gateways to a wonderful world you knew existed but refused to enter. One step forward, and you would fall into that world. That summer afternoon, you found yourself falling. This time, it was your own decision to take the jump.

GUMACA, QUEZON PROVINCE, PHILIPPINES
APRIL 30, 2018 / 7:39 P.M.

It was already late afternoon when the two of you decided to leave the river that runs through the longest bridge constructed in this country during the Spanish colonial period. After a quick stop at a noodle house, you were soon on a bus going to his hometown. Looking out of the bus window, you saw the full moon in the sky. "One thing I never got to see was the full moon shining on water," you told him.

He chuckled and promised, "I will show you."

Half an hour later, the bus was going through the highway that was separated from the sea by a low wall. He roused you from your sleep and pointed out the full moon shining on the sea. You thanked him for it, but he knew you better.

"It is not what you imagined."

You smiled as you shook your head. "The waves are so strong. They distort the light of the moon." Then you placed your hand on top of his and softly said, "But thank you. It is still a beautiful sight." It could have ended there.

The next day was spent visiting old watchtowers, bridges, houses, churches and cemeteries. The two of you reveled in the beauty and the warmth of the sun as you visited one town after another. You wanted to stop the sun from setting to extend the hours spent with him, but you could not stop the darkness from falling.

It was already nighttime when you returned to his hometown. As you were preparing yourself to accept the end of the day, he took your hand and brought you across the road, around the San Diego de Alcalá Cathedral and behind the Kutang San Diego watchtower. He led you to the end of the Muralla and showed you a part of the sea that was placid, where no huge waves rolled. And there on top of the small ripples was the light of the moon, shining like a bridge towards a place that you knew held the fulfillment of your dreams.

"This is what you imagined," he whispered.

You placed your hand on top of his, but no words could be formed by your tongue. It was an ineffable joy that could only be expressed by a smile and a lone tear streaming down your face.

You would hold on to this memory in days of anguish, to that precise moment when wishes were fulfilled, not by magic, but by the action of someone who truly listened to what your heart longed for.

CAGBALETE ISLAND, QUEZON PROVINCE, PHILIPPINES
JULY 7, 2018 / 8:19 P.M.

The sky was dotted with twinkling stars as the two of you sat on the bamboo raft floating on the waves. In the distance, the lights from Mauban were twinkling as well. He rushed to the shore to trace your names on the sand. Moments later, the seawater rushed

to erase each and every letter. You tried to make the night last longer by sharing pains and dreams, but the coming of light could not be stopped.

Moments like these are ephemeral pleasures. When morning came, you found them transformed into beautiful memories.

CUBAO, QUEZON CITY, PHILIPPINES

JULY 8, 2018 / 6:02 P.M.

This is not the star dollar that he gave you. No, that one was an almost perfect circle with an almost perfect inner circle enclosing the star in the center. You still remember the moment that he gave it to you. The two of you were spending your last few minutes on Cagbalete Island. You walked beside him, amused with his idea that he would find a megalodon's tooth on the island's sandbar. You watched him pick up shell after shell, coral after coral, stone after stone, exclaiming, "I found it!" You would always dash his hopes by explaining why that shell, coral or stone could not have been a megalodon's tooth, but he would just laugh and throw away whatever he found and start his search anew.

And you? What did you find on that lonely stretch of sand? A man who finally got you completely, someone who would not find you weird as you poke your way around old cemeteries, who would go down with you along riverbanks to look underneath old bridges, who would whisper in your ear the untold stories of old houses, who would rekindle your passion in collecting old coins and stamps, who would drag you with enthusiasm from one museum to another in search of everything old and valuable. That kind of man, who would not cling to you for your money, your influence, your libido, was a more precious find than an ancient shark's tooth. And that was why your tears nearly fell when he took your hand and placed on your palm a star dollar that was an almost perfect circle with an almost perfect inner circle enclosing the star in the center.

"Something for you as you wait to get your own Isabel II Un Peso," he said, chuckling.

What he did not know was that you valued that star dollar more than that Spanish-Filipino gold coin.

But where is that sand dollar now? You lost it. Yes, you accidentally broke it when it fell from your hand as you were going down that bus in Cubao. It was only when you stared

at the fragments of the star dollar on the pavement that you realized how fragile it was. More painful was the realization that you could not put it back together again. Just like your friendship with him, which you had to end days later. It was beautiful but not strong enough to stand the challenges that came your way. Now all you have left are fragments of memories that you could not put together to complete a narrative.

That is why you keep coming back to this island, combing the beach in search not of a megalodon's tooth but of a star dollar that was an almost perfect circle with an almost perfect inner circle enclosing the star in the center. You would never find it, but each star dollar that comes closest to it you would put in your pocket and bring home. You would give it the same importance as the one that you lost. And in your heart, you would wish for the moment when the replacement would become more significant than the original, but you also knew that you were simply fooling yourself.

* * * * *

“Memories”

by Liswindio Apendicaesar

Memories, I attach to you
Because time won't repeat itself
As life goes on, people move on
Nothing will remain the same
All things we have fade away
Because we change and won't remain the same

So that,
Memories, for you to keep
As a reminder of what you used to be
As a reminder of what you used to have
Because time won't repeat itself
Because things change as time flies away
Because we change as time goes by

But there, we have memories
That to a faraway land you will carry
Lest you forget you're not alone
And if the journey exhausts your heart
You can look back and smile

And every once in a while
I will allow nostalgia
Sneak into my dream

Just so that we can meet again there
Reconnected by the memories.

* * * * *

“Saigon”

by Ryan K. Mason

Saigon was
manic magic, honking horns, watching the traffic pirouette below us
from the terrace of the oubliette we'd dropped ourselves in
to forget them and hope they forget us. You were sitting alone, listening to my friend and I
talk.

I said you're either here too long or not long enough and you said not long enough then
took a drag of your cigarette. I had been there four days. You, five months.

People here are all running from something, you said. Responsibilities,
money owed, money lost,
bitter co-workers, awful friends, prying eyes, broken government
the push, the push, the endless push.

Home? Family? Boyfriend? None, (or so you said).

We drank like the desperate all night, all drawn in. Your accent rare, your history
harmless and strange.

My friend couldn't pronounce your name. He called you

Almond Joy, Almaty, Alemania,

then he fucked a drunken German girl and passed out. We stayed up drinking in my room,
the thing (you know the one) sitting gift wrapped on a table, but ultimately, untouched.

Even so,

I was happy

4 AM was easy,

time, sensitive.

The pull, the pull, the endless pull

We spent the days jumping over tripwires, dodging motorbikes,
the sun warming your freckles like coals, glowing.
The water bottles said La Vie. La Vie! You laughed. Life, life. Oui
it was back there somewhere, waiting for me like Charlie in the jungle.
There were things we never discussed, like
the ambush pulled back tight, aiming
the nailbomb of inevitability at you and me
and most importantly, what exactly you were running from.

I was happy
up until the moment came to climb to the roof where everyone could see me
and let the bastards shove me in the chopper home.
I thought we'd see each other again, somehow, and said so. But
the number you gave me went dead. You went missing, and I mourned—
a pointy Purple Heart driven into my flesh. It was over, no parade.

You're the softest thing that ever hurt me.
I nursed the wound for two months before I ran back into the jungle to find you.
I wanted to piece the bomb back together, light it and hope.
But you'd kept running, freer than me.
There's no one that can catch you.
Still—
I carry your shrapnel in my chest. I feel it jab me when I breathe too deep
and I hear your raspy laugh,
that glorious and short-lived sleep.
C'est la vie. La vie—
Before I steel my hand and set this metal free,
please tell me,
finally—
What was chasing you, mon cheri?
What were you running from?

* * * * *

“in my bedroom with God”

by Hana Ghani

with the lights dimmed,
under my covers,
palms spread wide and willing,
i whisper secrets to my God,
Al-Sami' Al-'Alim,
grant me this, at least,
bury me in soil that would accept me.

* * * * *

“The ‘F’ Word”

by Alexa Jade De La Pena

Yes, I was born there
Yes, I speak my language
Yes, I know my culture
Yes, I love my roots!

Yeah, I speak English too
Yeah, I grew up here too
Yeah, I am American too
Yeah, I am NOT FOB TOO!

Okay, I won't talk too fob
Okay, I won't walk too fob
Okay, I won't act too fob
Okay, I won't be too FOB. So shame!

I don't speak my language
I don't know my culture
I don't love my roots
I don't wanna be FOB. So shame!

Mom, that's not how you say it
Mom, so funny your accent
Mom, you don't know anything
Mom, you're so FOB. So shame!

Ew, I don't eat that

Ew, I don't sound like that

Ew, I don't look like that

Ew, FOBS. So shame!

I am not like them I speak English

I am not like them I eat burgers

I am not like them I wear designer

I am not like them

I am

ashamed.

* * * * *

“Hijabs and Poetry”

by Josie Rozell

My fingers wrap around the cool steel.

How many people have stood here,
knuckled-white against this bar, swaying
as the train passes, windows whooshing with
tropical greens and hungry mosquitoes.
There’s a call to prayer somewhere in this world.
Our sandwiched bodies are oddly comforting
and in the post-rain of the afternoon
we’re not as pungent as on other, hotter days.

A woman next to me is so close
a wisp of hair, unclasped from her scalp
shares secrets with the fuzz of my sticky arms.
Her fingers, crinkled and cracked in five places,
envelope the steel like mine.

She chews softly on her lower lip
and her brow is furrowed.
I wonder if we wonder the same sorts
of wonders. I gaze at the cracks on her hands,
like a map to some far land,
like the cracks and maps on my own hands.
Hers are the color of caramel roasting
in the low evening sun, while mine are like adding

three spoonfuls of cream to a glass of espresso.

Our shoulders brush as the train sways
and I feel the cool silk of her maroon hijab;
I think she might be an adventurer too
the way she holds her chin so. These days
I'm sensitive to the dreams which fall
like sweat off the brow.
She longs for freedom which looks like
a beautiful silk hijab
& for me
poetry and the breeze.

She could be my sister
if it were based on our skin.
And it always seems to be based on skin
which is why she could never be.

* * * * *

“The Buddha in Nana District”

by David Arroyo

I'm standing in front of the Trendy Building
a tower of un-babel, the lower floors
littered with visa assistance
agencies for various countries while the upper
floors crown the tower with
language schools — a trove of that rarest
treasure, highly motivated students.

In the lobby
it's common to hear English, Korean, Arabic,
Vietnamese, Hindi,
smell Thai cafes and Dunkin Donuts.

Both a poor man and a homesick American
can find solace here.

Outside, to the right of the large glass front door
stands a shrine to the Buddha
Believers lay offerings at his feet,
a field of inverted flowers, red Fanta being the blossom
Plastic straws representing the stems.

I do not think the Thai know the truth
of Fanta, do you? It is the Nazi soft drink, a scheme
by Coke-a-Cola to make money without
the pesky moral objections.

Can a divine liver filter fascism like a minor toxin?

Democracy is on life support here. The military autocracy
promises elec— Monsoon! Out of nowhere. I stride inside
the Trendy Building in three giant steps.
I dry, but raindrops are sticky like sugar water. I smell strawberry soda, and
realize the odor comes from me. The Tower is quiet. Power
Out. Many mouths
no movements. No one practices
their second tongue.
Trendy Tower stands stable, but worry rises with the water
pressing against the doors like a horrible rumor
that has achieved critical mass. Outside
the statute and its offerings are still, unmolested. This is not
a miracle. This is a warning. Long ago, I put away
religion, tucked in a basement corner
like a childish thing, but on this day, I remember
an appreciation of power that has crawled
out of the shadows with a face covered in cobwebs,
On this day, I fear the Buddha.

* * * * *

“They Have Everything in Nana”

by David Arroyo

We are walking in Nana Plaza
going up as Dante went
down, as Socrates
and Odysseus went down. Some
are repulsed by the neon lights
and the meat markets
recognize this as a prison for ladyboys
and sex trafficking
and good ole fashion corruption.
But when I reach the top floor, I see a girl
in her early 20s, she is fit and smiling
and wearing a bikini. I do not
make eye contact. Alexis is walking up the stairs.
How much money do I have? I do not
believe the caricature that every girl
is an unwilling victim of sex trafficking but —
“Are you ready to go?”
“yeah...This place is 50% ladyboys”
But this girl is 100% Drop. Dead. G.
We leave. Three days later I’m still thinking
of this Thai girl. I am making pornos
with her in my head.
An ugly truth is confirmed: I cannot go
back to Nana Plaza ever.
If I climb up those three flights

to find her, then I might
as well climb the top turnbuckle of a wrestling ring
and moonsault head first onto the empty canvas.
I would ply her with lady drinks,
pay the bar fine, and strike a deal for boom boom in a short time hotel.
An ugly truth, but not as vexing as a second truth.
Afterwards I would wallow in guilt,
spend 3 days wondering if I engaged in consensual sex or merely
exploited my privilege to get laid.

As we walk to the BTS children beg for education,
a middle-aged man sells black cocks and DVDs,
I make a note to try one of the fifteen Indian restaurants,
Street vendors sell everything, street walkers sell
everything else, and the music
venue on a side street full of happy endings does poetry
readings every second and fourth
Thursday of the month.

* * * * *

“Under Attack”

by Ameerul Mukmin

We are under attack,
From enemies within and without;
Destroying us where we stand,
Together, we fall.

We are under attack,
Irrational fears plague our minds,
Of the people that are different;
We doubt their intentions,
Even when they advance our ascension.

Who is attacking us?
Why are they named progress and
Righteousness?
When they force us to leave behind,
The mores of our ancestors.

Who is attacking us?
Are they also one of us?
They proclaim our salvation,
But leave us in frustration.
Famous thieves and liars,
Everything to quench their desires.

We must defend ourselves,
From these enemies that surround us,
From the substance that poisons us,
From the words that corrupt us.
And perhaps, one day,
The battle will end,
But not today.