Anak Sastra
Issue 43

Issue 43 Contents

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Contributor Bios

Kelly Kaur's poems and works have been published in *Sanskrit*, *West Coast*, *Singa*, *CBC*, *Mothering Anthology*, *New Asian Short Stories 2015*, *Short Story Dispenser* (Central Library), online *YYC Portraits of People*, *Time of the Poet Republic*, *Canada*, *Word City Monthly*, *Anak Sastra* (issue 41), *SAG Reader Lethbridge*, *The Rucksack Project*, *The Tatamagouche Centre*, *Decolonizing – An Alphabet*, *Blindman Winter Stories*, *CKUA*, *The Contemporary Canadian Poets Program in Namaashoum*, *Understorey Magazine*, *Best Asian Stories 2020*, and *A Thousand Cranes Anthology* (Singapore). Her first novel, *Letters to Singapore*, will be published by Stonehouse Publishing.

Ikera Olandesca is a senior at Little Me Academy and the Stanford University Online High School. She enjoys writing, performing, and teaching flash fiction and poetry. In 2019 she self-published a book of poems entitled *Homesick*, which explores the feeling of losing and finding "home." She has performed at several esteemed venues, including Stanford University, the 40th Manila International Book Fair, and the 2019 Global Authors' Summit.

Ismim Putera (Twitter: @ismimputera) [he/him] is a poet and writer from Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. His words have appeared in *Fahmidan Journal*, *The Remnant Archive*, *Ghost Heart Literary*, *Prismatica* magazine, and elsewhere.

Michael Howard's essays and short stories have appeared in a wide variety of print and digital publications.

Bea Pauline Salcedo is a 20-something student of the humanities in Manila. She is pursuant of the creative call to live multiple lives through the written word.

Julia Hlaing (Twitter: @mohingacrackers; @jugaaraa) just wanted an opportunity to share a piece about how the current coup in her home country of Myanmar is affecting her and her sister.

Pauline Mari Hernando is an associate professor at the Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature, College of Arts and Letters, University of the Philippines Diliman. She is the author of *Lorena: Isang Tulambuhay* (University of the Philippines Press, 2018). Her creative works and research have been published by *Diliman Gender Review*, *Philippine*

Humanities Review, *Humanities Diliman: A Philippine Journal of Humanities*, *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia*, *Luntian Online Journal*, *Malay Research Journal*, and *Likhaan 9: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*. She has been a recipient of several grants and awards in the Philippines.

Nashrah Hassan is a 24-year-old trying to enter the world of poetry.

David M. Som is a 20-year-old writer drifting somewhere between Minnesota and New York City. David has previously written for *Book Riot* and holds a bachelor's degree in English writing.

Michael Mintrom is an Australian poet and a frequent visitor to countries in Southeast Asia. He has published his work in many literary journals, including *Anak Sastra* (issue 38), *Cordite Poetry*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Meniscus*, *Rabbit Poetry*, *Quadrant*, and *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*.

Janii Yazon (Twitter: @ochibijan) [they/them] is a Filipino-American poet.

SK Musairah has been in the workforce for 28 years. She has experience working in the Educational Leadership Department at the School of Education at the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota. She has also worked as a volunteer at Groveland Park Elementary School in St. Paul, Minnesota. In addition, she has also volunteered at Carlisle Primary School in Western Australia. Now that she has come home to Malaysia and is almost at the end of her career, she is trying to pursue the long-forgotten passion for creative writing.

Lorelei Bacht (Twitter: @bachtlorelei) [she/them] is a European poet living in Southeast Asia. When she is not carrying little children around or encouraging them to discover the paintings of Edvard Munch, she can be found collecting bones and failing scientific experiments. She has also been known to befriend orb weavers and millipedes. Her recent work can be found and/or is forthcoming in *Visitant*, *Quail Bell*, *The Wondrous Real*, *Odd*, *Abridged*, *Postscript*, *Backslash Lit*, *The Inflectionist Review*, and others.

Nayli Nasran was born in Ampang, Malaysia to Malay parents. She began writing poetry as a child and has contributed a number of poems to her institutions' literary journals. She has written for the national paper, *The Star*, and the student-run media *IGNITE*, based in the University of Nottingham Malaysia. She also has a collection of privately self-published poems on her blog. The blog was published in late 2018 and had a poem ("Gone") featured on the katzenworld.co.uk website.

Agas Ramirez (Twitter: @agasramirez; @herstoryseapod) is the creator and host of *HERstory Southeast Asia*, a podcast about female historical and mythical figures, matriarchal societies, and contemporary feminist icons. She also writes fiction, and was most recently published in Binghamton University's biannual literary magazine, *Harpur Palate*. She lives in Manila, Philippines.

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“The Bell”

by Kelly Kaur

Hari could hear the shrill voice of the restless roosters crow their death song—crammed in cages carefully balanced atop one another. Not even the undignified quarters could pen them in as their unwelcome, glorious crows punctuated the Singapore sky from the market in front of his one-bedroom flat on Jalan Tenteram. Reluctantly, he stirred and lazily opened his eyes. He knew that it was five o'clock. Years of practice had certainly fine-tuned his internal clock. He turned and nudged his wife. She turned to look at him and smiled; how handsome he looked, even with sleep in his eyes. Lazily, she got out of bed and ambled to the bathroom in the kitchen to take her bath and to prepare his breakfast and lunch. Hari went over to his daughter's little bed tucked in the corner of their bedroom. The four-year-old was sleeping with a peaceful grin. He felt a surge a love for her; he loved children and felt it was certainly time to have a son: yes, a son, next, to carry on the family name. With such a happy thought on his mind, he whistled all the way to have his bath.

Invigorated, Hari stepped out of the bathroom and briskly towelled himself dry. He could smell the buttery delicious aroma of potato pronthas his wife was expertly making for his lunch. He sat down at the dining table in the uncomfortable vinyl chair to have his morning cup of tea and toast and orange marmalade. He could see outside the kitchen window—the hustle and bustle of the morning Singapore life. Little children stood near the parking lots with their overladen satchels, waiting for their school buses as their parents anxiously hovered close by. People were getting into their cars and onto their motorcycles and scooters to get to work. The “vroom, vroom” and sputtering engines filled the Singapore morning. Hari spotted his shiny blue Vespa sitting in the parking lot. That was his pride and joy. He had certainly worked very hard and saved every cent to buy his Vespa. Now he could take his wife and daughter to the Esplanade for walks or to Rex cinema to watch Hindi movies: no need to wait for buses. He smiled and he thought about how

grateful he was for his new job that brought a roof over their heads and food in their bellies. A store clerk for the British Officers' Depot—he was lucky to have a job in Singapore. Yes indeed, the British would take Singapore on an economic boom; they would be in Singapore forever; they would treat Singaporeans like their own—all promises made by the British themselves. Well, how could he argue: he had a good job, a steady income, a beautiful family, his one bedroomed flat in Jalan Tenteram, his Vespa...the list was astounding.

The British Officers' Depot was astir with activity at 7:30 in the morning. The British officers looked uncomfortable in their starched uniforms; the locals looked more at ease in their white shirts and brown shorts. It was a beautiful sunny day in Singapore; the humidity hung like a thick blanket over the horizon. But, not even the glorious day could stop the butterflies from fluttering in Hari's stomach. Hari felt a sense of apprehension that morning. He knew that a new commanding officer from London was beginning his first day of work. This man—Smith—would be his new boss. He had been rather sad to see Hill, his boss of 3 years, go back to Sussex—he had been a wonderful, kind, and patient man—a good man. One of them. Hill often shared Hari's chapattis with him under the giant raintree in the yard behind his office. Hill would tell of stories from the motherland—jolly old England. There was the Queen and her royal family and her palace in London. It all sounded so exotic to Hari, and he would listen with his eyes wide in wonder at this magical kingdom so far away from Singapore. Every evening, the British officers and the Singaporeans would change into their shorts and T-shirts and play a robust game of hockey in the twilight hours, where the stern cloying sun would soften and even bring in a welcome breeze—the overcast clouds threatening to rain but holding off until the game was over. Such a respite from the heat. Often, Hari would tease Hill that the Singaporeans would show Hill how to play real hockey. Hill often guffawed in good humour and threatened to give Hari more work the next morning if the British team lost. Yes, Hari certainly missed his friend, his old boss, Hill.

Hari went to his little cubicle and immediately began checking his ledger. He was a dedicated worker; he believed in giving his best. He checked every item on the list. Busy, already. He heard stirrings in the inner office and realized that Smith must have had an even earlier start than him. Hari grinned and wondered if he would have trouble

understanding Smith's accent at first—"you know the British," he thought. "They call a bus a bush!"

Suddenly, Hari's reverie was broken by a jarring British twang. "Singh!" A loud, commanding voice boomed from the inner office. "Come here now!" Hari practically jumped out of his skin—the voice echoed in the room and penetrated his nostalgic memories. Hari jumped to his feet and marched into the inner office. He saluted the surly looking officer who was sweating profusely in the early morning heat: he looked terribly uncomfortable and annoyed. Fat, short and bald. Red, red skin. Funny, protruding ears. Hari grinned inwardly; he knew that the Singapore heat and humidity could be unkind to first timers in Singapore. Instead of a cordial introduction, the surly Brit looked menacingly at Hari and barked.

"I am the new commanding officer. I have seen your file. Harry, right." Without looking at Hari for an answer, he continued. "See this bell here?" To Hari's amazement, Smith held up a palm-sized bell; it was of pure silver, and its reflection bounced off the walls of the office as it caught the piercing rays of the sun. "What on earth would Smith want with a bell," Hari wondered uncomfortably. The hairs on the nape of his neck rose in consternation. Smith was certainly a rude, British pig. Yes, he would certainly miss Hill. Hari's thoughts were broken by Smith's growls.

"When I ring this bell twice," thundered Smith, "it means that I am summoning you. Drop everything you are doing and come in here at once. Do you understand?" Smith enunciated each word and syllable with such force that Hari was taken aback. He was dumbfounded, convinced that Smith must be crazy or else his brains had certainly melted in the scorching heat. Too shocked to respond, uncertain what to do, Hari merely nodded, turned and walked out of the office. Hari had barely sunk into his chair in disbelief when he heard the infernal clanging—once, twice.

Hari got up—everything felt like it was in slow motion. The beads of perspiration rolled down Hari's forehead, and his eyes were beginning to flash in angry control. "Sir?" Hari clipped in barely concealed anger. Smith looked at Hari with a half-smirk on his now amused face and said,

"Just wanted to make sure you understand!" Hari could feel his blood pressure shoot up to his temples. This was his Singapore—first. He was a Singaporean who had worked

hard to build his country. Who was this foreigner who was ringing his bell in some perverse enjoyment of his authority? Authority over what? Over whom? Hari forced his concentration on his sweaty little face—his job... his flat... his pay check...

"Sir—my name is Singh. If you need me at any time, you will call me by my name, and I'll be in your office. I will NOT come when you ring your bell, Sir."

Hari heard these words come out of his mouth even before he had time to check them. He looked at Smith whose jaw had dropped in disbelief. Smith was turning bright crimson, and Hari could see a menacing blood vessel throbbing furiously on Smith's temples. Smith's eyes flashed in anger, and Smith thought, "These bloody pariahs. Who the hell do they think they are? Why did they send me to this god-forsaken island? Thanks a lot, Stamford Raffles—you should have left this island alone with its imbeciles."

The ten seconds felt like an eternity. Hari did not wait to find out the consequences of his disobedience. He turned and walked out. He had work to do. He had no time to play foolish games with his new, British commanding officer. Hari thought, "I am a Singaporean." He was dedicated to the rising of his shining island that held so much promise. Why should some Ang Moh dictate his Singaporean heart? He had barely reached his desk when he heard the angry, sharp clangs—once…twice.

Hari sat down in his chair, slowly and deliberately took out his ledger, and began making the entries for the day. The temperature was steadily rising. The air was stifling and the weakly whirring fan could barely bring any relief whatsoever. The fan started clunking in defiance. The pen scratched entries in disobedience. But nothing could stop the infernal sound of the bell—commanding, summoning, subordinating. The sound of the bell continued for what seemed like an eternity. Suddenly, without any warning, the sound stopped. The silence was deafening. Out of the caverns of the tiny office, a huge voice boomed in hysteria. "Singh! Come here at once!"

Hari jumped to his feet and marched to the deafening, quick beats of his heart into the room. Smith was standing behind his desk; his red, bulbous face was twitching uncontrollably, and the rings of perspiration marked his brand new uniform in half crescents under his arms. Smith hopped from his left foot to his right. His arms began flapping, making him look like a dancing clown.

"WHEN -I -RING -THIS -BELL -TWICE -SINGH -YOU -WILL COME -INTO -MY -OFFICE -AT -ONCE!" Smith punctuated each word with a resounding clang of the bell. The silence was now deafening.

Smith's voice was hoarse with his screams of anger at the unacceptable, offensive insolence of a low-class coolie on his first day as commanding officer. This was not how the natives behaved at his last posting—always subservient, always humble, always unquestioning. It was the pride of the British Empire at question here. Satisfied at the horror on Hari's face, Smith pounded the silver bell to its resting place on the desk.

The room was spinning uncontrollably for Hari. Without thinking, he took one step forward, reached out his hand and picked up the bell from under the shocked gaze of Smith. He felt the smooth feel of the cool metal, and he was surprised at how heavy the well-worn bell felt in his hand. A small insignificant item relegated to such a pompous role. Slowly and deliberately, Hari turned and walked to the large open window facing the giant Raintree tree 18 feet away. A proud, sturdy tree with strong, long, branches and deep green leaves providing a giant umbrella covering. The tree towered high up over the puny building, comfortable in its anchoring in the ground. Looking directly at the tree, and with all his might, Hari hurled the bell out of the window. He felt the liberation from the weight of the bell and its futile desire to imprison him. The bell rotated and catapulted with the speed of fury that Hari had summoned in his throw. When the bell reached the end of its trajectory, it faltered and collapsed. It clanged weakly. Unexpectedly, the bell gave up and sought a final resting place under the raintree, the same spot that Hari and Hill had often shared their collective stories.

Hari turned to look at Smith—Smith was gaping like a fish caught on a fishing line; his eyes were almost bulging out of their sockets. Smith's face was turning such a deep shade of red that Hari was certain he was going to explode!

"Sir. My name is Singh. Hari Singh. I will come to your office immediately if you call my name, sir. My name is Singh, sir. You call a dog with a bell, not a human being. Treat me with respect. ..... Sir ..... and I will treat YOU with respect. This may be the British Depot, but it stands on Singapore land. My home."

Hari turned and left the room, uncertain where his footsteps and his fate would take him. In the deafening silence, Smith turned his face to the window, and for the first time

noticed the giant raintree. His eyes fell to the dishevelled bell at the base of the tree. With an inward gasp, he saw that the bell had been permanently silenced by the rich, moist, dark brown Singapore soil.

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“Aunt Aida’s Evening Delivery”

by Ikera Olandesca

Trigger warning: Extreme physical violence

“You’re having your baby tonight,” Aida whispered.

My first. A tear ran down Juliana’s cheek and onto her nightgown. “No one has looked forward to this moment more than me,” she murmured, then caught herself and chuckled. “Well, no one, but you, Tita Aida.” She grasped her aunt’s calloused fingers. “Thank you for being here for me.”

“Of course,” Aida said, placing Juliana’s hand on her bulging belly. “Get some rest, *anak.* The doctor is on his way.”

Juliana woke up to a hammering pain in her lower back. *It’s time*, she thought. But before she could say anything, she tasted the bitter mold of an old rag. It stretched across her open mouth and was tied around her head.

Cold sweat soaked her hair, her forehead, and the bags under her widening eyes. She jolted her hands, wanting to tear off the rag, but zip ties secured her wrists to the bed rails. She shook her feet - her ankles and knees were tied together, too.

Iron-hot pain seared deeper into her back. She wailed, her spine arching above the bed, her nails scratching at the rails’ rusting metal. *What will happen to my boy?* She panicked. *Who did this? Did they take Tita Aida?*

Her baby started to push his way out, despite her legs being shut closed. Dull knives pierced through her pelvis. Black spots danced across her eyes. She was about to pass out, until she felt a familiar, roughened palm on her shoulder.

“My dear *pamangkin,”* Aida hummed, walking to the foot of the bed. Instead of undoing the ties, she plucked the hem of Juliana’s nightgown with her thumb and

forefinger, took a shaky breath - as if controlling her excitement - and then lifted the dress to reveal the mottled, pulsing belly. Juliana sobbed. Aida's eyes glittered.

With the smell and the sound of a hundred rotten, cracking eggs, Aida's torso bent ninety degrees backward, like there was a joint at her waist - except there wasn't. Juliana froze. The pain disappeared. Paralyzed, she watched Aida wrap her arms around her own shoulders and yank downwards, thrashing. In moments, Aida completely pulled her two halves apart. Blood and tissue spilled from the exposed ends like a garden fountain. The marble statue of her spine stood upright, before Aida's lifeless knees dragged it, crumbling, to the floor.

Though much too late, Juliana knew what her aunt was. The stories were true. She pulled at her restraints. The ties sunk into her raw skin. It was useless. As Aida's upper half hovered horizontally, midair, her frail fingers grew into claws, each one at least an arm's length, thin black skin forming between them. Then Aida flew above her niece's naked belly, intestines dripping from her severed stomach. A forked tongue made an endless exit from her mouth.

"God bless the food," Aida muttered. Her tongue slithered into Juliana's nostril and dug down to her womb. Aida feasted, and all the while, Juliana wished she were dead.

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“Panggang-Panggang”

by Ismim Putera

It was nine in the morning on the thirteenth day of the holy month in the small town of Pendam. The *gerai*, an open-air food court, was closed for a month. At normal days, six main food vendors served a tapestry of fast food and drinks. Meals were ordered at one of the vendors and carried to the common dining area.

On Ramadan eve, portable chairs and tables were put away, creating an enormous empty space in the *gerai*. The next day, villagers would come to set up their hawker booths. The *gerai* could fit up to forty booths, at most, ranging from a simple study table to something as complicated as a makeshift kitchenette.

Bagot pushed an old hamburger stall out from the porch of his house. He had the gumption to be the first person to arrive at the *gerai.* The stall was of no practical use for a year, hence it creaked shyly as it crossed the road on its four tyres. The overhead canvas roof had a rip at the centre, exposing a hole big enough for a cat to slip through. One of the umbrella stretchers had its spring snapped, thus making the affected part lopsided like a dangling limb flapping against the wind. The two-tier glass shelf on the stall was very oily. He parked his stall on a raised, cemented walkway near the entrance. It was his favourite spot.

He was known in the town for his *panggang-panggang*. He had learnt the techniques from his father when he was barely sixteen. His barbecue barrels were oil drums sliced in half lengthwise. The barrels were fixed at both sides of his stall and further accessorised by two wooden legs with small wheels. The pieces formed a rectangular enclosure, enough to accommodate three adults. If viewed from the front, it looked like a tank for combat during war.

He struck the matchstick, and a tiny spark latched on the edge of a briquette. He fanned it gently with a piece of cardboard. Strands of greyish smoke curled upwards lazily.

Half an hour later, the entire mountain of charcoal was sizzling hot, like a volcano spewing out molten rock. Bagot was overwhelmed by the heat from both barrels, warming up his flanks. Sweat flowed down along the trimmed sideburns, leaving a glistening, watery trail.

He brushed a thin layer of coconut oil over the metal grill using a bundle of trimmed lemongrass. The sprayed end of the lemongrass bulbs smeared the oil in equal streaks, preventing the meat from sticking onto it badly. He arranged chicken wings, drumsticks and breasts in a row, leaving some spaces in between for the smoke to pass through. The chicken had been marinated overnight with homemade *kuah sambal*, a condiment of blended spices, shrimps, chillies, anchovies, and corn flour.

"*Psss*! *Psss*!" A sharp hissing sound can be heard as the watery sauce dripped from the *panggang-panggang* to feed the starving charcoal underneath. His *panggang-panggang* was almost ready. The squishy nature of the delicacy would sate and slake any hungry tongues in town. The evolving fragrance stirred the quiescent air in the *gerai*.

"*Yo*! Bro! *Nang antap*!" Samin sidled up into Bagot's working area, spending a few minutes looking around the place as if he was a health inspector. "You're always the first to come here. I wish I can be as hardworking as you."

"Of course! No one will give you money. I need to earn as much as possible this month."

"*Waa*…I think your *panggang* is ready! They look delicious. I'm hungry now!" Samin salivated at the *panggang-panggang*, while holding a spoon pressing the wings and breasts to test their texture.

"Are these ready yet?" Samin flipped the chicken wings with a fork after the *kuah sambal* coatings had encrusted like golden flakes.

"*Uii*! You not *posa* ka? *Haha*!" Bagot extended his hand and poked Samin's shoulder with a pair of serving tongs.

"*Hiihii*, how about you? I see a few cups of *air nyiur* in the drawer." Samin sneered with a wide grin. He squatted and slinked into the storage compartment. He took a few sips from one of the drinks.

"*Woi*, *woi*, stop drinking! Someone's coming. Get up!"

Agitated, Samin pushed the paper cup back into the drawer. He stood up after

wiping his lips dry with a ruffled sleeve of his shirt, pretending to tend the chicken only to realise there was nobody around.

"*Oi*! You lied to me! *Ceh*!"

"*Hahaha*! You want the wings or the breasts? I'll pack them up for you."

"Only the wings please. I'll pay you later. I need to have my lunch. I can't work if I'm hungry. I woke up late today, I didn't *sahur*," begged Samin.

"Sure, coconut boss! You only *posa* for the first few days, then you quit for no reason! You should be as pious as me. At least I *posa* half-day yesterday," chuckled Bagot with a grin grazed over his face.

"Wow! Someone is preaching now."

"*Eh*, at least I practise what I preach!" Their combined laughter resonated in the empty *gerai*.

Bagot picked up his *panggang-panggang* and put them on the *talam* to display on the glass shelf. Each *talam* was tagged with a piece of cardboard with the price written on it. The chicken wings cost three ringgit each.

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It was two in the afternoon. Long past *zuhur* time, the mosque was barren. The main trunk of road from Pendam was choked with people, bicycles, cars, motorcycles, and hawker stalls.

Everyone was busy setting up their booths to start their business. There were thirty small booths operating that afternoon, and each one of them was brilliantly decorated. Two rows of booths were made to face each other; with an aisle in between them, wide enough for customers to waddle through.

Both sides of the booths displayed a resplendent array of traditional cuisines, ranging from fried rice to braised noodles to coconut milk-based *kuih*. *Bakul*, *tongkol*, *celorot*, *lenggang*, *kosoi, seri muka, apam balik,* and the multi-coloured *kuih lapis* were simply irresistible. A transparent plastic sheet was used to cover the cuisines. The womenfolk were as busy as bees. Each of them held a stick with a crumbled plastic bag tied at one end. They swung the stick left and right to whip the flies away.

"*Kuih kuih*, *kuih kuih*...*tiga seringgit, tiga seringgit*!"

In a flash, silence and peace no longer existed. The hawkers enjoyed roaring business. They shouted with hoarse voices, trying to entice their customers. There were two walking trains of people strolling slowly past the booth while some stood clustered around engaging in lengthy conversation. The noisy chatter from the crowd had escalated exponentially to a deafening level.

"*Air tebu, air tebu, air tebu*… *Dua ringgit satu, dua ringgit satu*…" A group of enthusiastic *air tebu* sellers chanted their marketing phrases loudly. Under their canopy, people swarmed the stalls like an army of black ants.

"*Kriss*! *Kriss*! *Klak*! *Klak*!" The sugarcanes were being forcefully squashed in between two rotating metal cylinders, expressing the much-awaited greenish watery puree. The bagasse was then discarded into a plastic bag, and later used to fodder cattle and livestock. Standing next to the grinding machine while waiting for your drinks can be oddly satisfying. *Air tebu* and *air nyiur* were the two legendary thirst quenchers in any hot month.

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"*Panggang-panggang*! *Panggang-panggang*! *Ayam panggang*, *ayam panggang*! *Cepat datang*, *cepat datang*!"

Yes, it was Bagot's high-pitched voice. He shouted from time to time. Needless to say, people had been queuing up near his stall for the past two hours, enjoying their *panggang-panggang* to be grilled in a traditional way. They were commenting on the delicacies and elaborating on their plans for the forthcoming Hari Raya.

As time went by, the greyish smoke from the barrel grew darker. The ambrosial aroma was instantly gassed by a fetid odour that emanated from the remnants of burnt flesh. The wind blew the smoke into the *gerai* and wrapped the scene in a thin, piquant haze.

"*Hmm*! It's him again!" snapped Mak Jah, pinching her nose. She was sitting in the same row but some table-booths away from Bagot. She coughed as the smoke pricked her nasal cavity.

"What's that?" asked Mak Pek.

"He's supposed to bring his stall outside the *gerai*, like the others. His *panggang-panggang* is not suitable in here. The smoke is killing us!" argued Mak Jah. She turned her face to Mak Pek, a lady selling *soya cincau* next to her.

"I told him last week. He refused to set his booth elsewhere. He's blocking the walkway too. He said he came there first," squeaked Mak Pek while eyeing Bagot.

"It has been two weeks since we suffered from the bad smoke. My cough sounds worse than a lung cancer patient! Now my eyes are watery!" Mak Jah rubbed her eyes with her fingers.

"*Yalah*! Me, too! He's useless! The smoke is making it difficult to do our business."

"I want to tell you something. He did not *posa* for the past few days!" Mak Jah dragged her chair closer to Mak Pek, as usual, ready to exchange stories.

"Really?" Mak Pek stared at her in disbelief. "He's the son of Pak Mot—"

"Of course, I know that! His father, Pak Mot, is a religious teacher. That old man is the wisest in this kampong. A pious father will never guarantee a pious child!" Mak Jah reassured her.

"It's so hard to believe."

"A few days ago, I went to buy his *panggang-panggang*. While I was waiting for the small change, I saw some plastic bags of *kuih* and drinks in the drawer. When people were not around, he'd sneak into the drawer and enjoy the meals to the fullest!" Mak Jah kept her voice down.

Mak Pek sank deep into her chair. "I believe you, Jah. He's the worst among his siblings. He only works during Ramadan, using his father's old hamburger stall. After earning the money, he'll go to Kuching, leaving the old man behind."

Mak Jah then actively turned her head around, scanning everyone in the *gerai*. "All the boys and girls here never *posa*, did you know that? Have a look at Samin over there, do you think he *posa*? I saw he smoked a pack of cigarettes while preparing those coconut juices. See that girl with red *tudung* over there? She always wears tight jeans and T-shirts! Those clothes are very revealing! This is the holy month. How can she dress like that?"

Mak Pek leered at the lady in disgust. "You're right!"

"To be honest, I think only the two of us here are fasting according to the Prophet's teaching. The rest are just pretending and taking advantage to make money in this holy

month!" Mak Jah concluded their gossip with a continuous bout of chesty cough. Occasionally, she tapped her chest with her fist. When she wasn't coughing, she continued to tell more stories.

"Jah, your cough is getting worse. You should go to the clinic," suggested Mak Pek while massaging Mak Jah's sweaty nape.

"I'm fine. My asthma has been under control for years," replied Mak Jah, despite her being severely gagged by the smoke. She leaned forward to ease herself and breathed through her mouth.

"This is taking forever!" complained Bagot in vexation after stoking the embers half an hour ago. The old briquettes were reduced to a pile of incombustible ash. The flames were behaving badly. Tired of fanning the flame, he kicked open the drawer and snatched a bottle. He pulled the stopper cork out and poured its content over the feeble flame.

"*Passssssss*!" A large spark flared in the barrel and the *panggang-panggang* was instantly engulfed in bright flames.

"*Pooos*!" Huge ball of sooty smoke erupted like an old volcano from both barrels. It enveloped everybody in the *gerai* in a black cloak. The people who were queuing near the stall withdrew themselves to a safer distance. Some escaped to get fresher air.

"Yes, yes, burn, burn like hell!" thought Bagot. He fanned the fire even harder.

"*Oi*! *Oi*! *Asap! Asap*!" Customers coughed and covered their nose with displeasure. Some rubbed their eyes and stared at Bagot with an unhappy gaze.

"You're making too much smoke, Bagot!" griped one man, while walking towards him. "What have you done?"

Another woman scolded him. "*Aoklah*! Bagot! Your smoke is scaring all the customers away. You should control the smoke! There're old people here, and small children, too."

"Sorry! Sorry! The wind was strong just now! Not my fault! Not my fault!" explained Bagot glibly. He fanned the flame as slowly as he could, trying his best to redirect the smoke elsewhere.

"Serves him right!" murmured Mak Jah. She was partly satisfied when she saw Bagot being lectured by a few senior citizens.

"That will teach him a lesson!" said Mak Pek.

"*Kooh, kooh, kooh*!" Mak Jah tried to clear her throat. Earlier on, she had inhaled a lot of smoke. The smoke tasted worse than swallowing a handful of needles. She posed like a wooden statue, unable to feel herself. Her chest felt heavy as if a big rock was pressing on it.

"*Koook*! *Koooook*! *Koooooh*!"

"Are you okay?" Mak Pek was shocked by the phlegmy coughs from Mak Jah. It sounded like a choked rooster trying to crow.

Mak Jah leaned her body forward trying to listen to her own breath sounds. *There were none.* Her brisk effort failed to draw air into her chest. There was not enough clean air inside. Her cheeks ballooned up and turned purplish.

"*Koook*! *Koook*! Help! I cannot breathe!"

Panicked, Mak Pek stood up and cried for help. "Help! Help!"

The lady in the red *tudung* rushed from the opposite booth to help them. "Mak Jah, are you okay?"

Mak Jah shook her head and clutched her chest to signify the site of the terrible pain. She was too weak to open her mouth. Her knees were shaken badly by her trembling body. She breathed rapidly and laboriously through her mouth. Her lips were dry and her tongue was coated with greyish-white plaque. Her eyeballs rolled left and right, left and right. Thousands of faces were floating around her. Nobody knew how to help her. A few seconds later, she swayed sideways and almost fell off from the chair.

"Hurry, bring her to the clinic!" Ordered a young man who happened to pass by.

A group of ladies volunteered to escort Mak Jah to the nearby clinic. In the emergency room, she was laid on the examination couch, gasping like a fish out of water. The doctor auscultated the wheezy lungs and ordered the nurse to give an urgent nebulisation. A dose of anti-inflammatory steroids was given intravenously.

A heaven-sent wind dissipated the smoke. A few remaining strands of cotton-like mist lingered beneath the ceiling like an apparition.

"Bagot! You should have helped them carry Mak Jah to the clinic. See what have you done?" said an old lady who was queuing nearby.

An elderly man approached Bagot. "Your smoke has brought trouble to us. *Kesian* Mak Jah. You are an adult. Please be a responsible man. Tomorrow you must park your stall outside like the sugarcane stalls."

Red-faced, Bagot hung his head low. His earlobes were warming up. He took out his handkerchief and wiped off the sweat beads nesting on his face. Thanks to that sudden outrage, he had forgotten to monitor his *panggang-panggang*. All the meats were partly charred.

"*Coi*!" Bagot kicked the body of the stall. He scrapped the *panggang-panggang* off the grill and discarded them into a container.

"Bagot!" Samin walked into the enclosure. "What happened just now?"

"The flame was too strong and the smoke flew into the *gerai.* Mak Jah had an asthma attack. They brought her to the clinic. People were angry at me because of that. Now look at what she has done to me! Because of her, my *panggang-panggang* are black and smelly. Nobody will come and buy them. These chicken parts are damn expensive."

"If she knows that she has asthma, why risk her own life to come here?" Samin peeped into the barrel. "This is not a place for old people."

"You're right. She's too old to work in here. This is a bazaar. She should stay in the mosque and pray all day long!"

* * *

Sunkey was scheduled at 6.45 p.m. The sellers packed their booth and were ready to go back home. They offered each other whatever food and drinks that were not sold. The *gerai* was gradually deserted.

Bagot was the last one to close his stall. He put the remaining *panggang-panggang* into a container. With a heavy heart, he decided to leave his stall in the *gerai* overnight. He had no strength to push it back home.

Samin came to him, carrying a pail of water from the nearby river.

"*Jom*! *Sungkey* at my house! Bring all your *panggang-panggang*, we'll finish them tonight. You must eat the black ones, or you can give those to my cats!" joked Samin while pouring the water into the barrel. Blackish water flowed out through the tiny holes of the barrels, staining the ground with its ashy sediments.

"Just leave your stall here tonight, it won't fly away. Don't worry. Mak Jah is fine. I heard that she had been discharged from the clinic. She won't be here again tomorrow. I

mean, nobody buys her *kuih* anyway." Samin wrinkled his face.

"Why?"

"You don't know? They are rubbish. She recycles her *kuih* from the day before. That's why they smell strange, like rotten eggs. She even has the guts to bring them to the mosque every night. Everyone knows about it. Mak Pek told me that she'll move to a new place tomorrow. She said she can't stand the smell."

"*Ugh*, really?"

"Forget about her. Let's play video games tonight!"

"Sure."

* * *

At dusk, Pendam turned into a ghost town. The *gerai* was deserted. Navy blue light shrouded the town and it was gloomy as far as the eye could see. The recitation of the *azan* coming from the mosque arrived on the dot, signalling the time to break the fast.

Mak Jah walked out from the clinic holding an inhaler in her hands and a plastic bag with packets of antihistamines, a bottle of mucolytics, and cough syrup. The nurse advised her to stay indoors for the next few days.

"*Isssh*! I don't need this pump to survive!" She angled her head skyward, thanking God for resolving her ailment. There, she saw a pale gibbous moon at a far corner of the sky. The moon was as hoary as her face.

She went back to the *gerai*. To her dismay, three trayfuls of *kuih* were still on the table, unattended. A cloud of flies was feasting on them.

"Why nobody helps me to clean my booth? At least they can put them back into the container. Mak Pek is useless!" She grabbed the trays and splashed the *kuih* randomly around. Flies peppered the floor, buzzing on the free meals. Impulsively, three wild dogs from the nearby dumping ground rushed into the *gerai*. They stick their tongues out licking on the sticky paps.

"I hope they'll have a good time cleaning this place tomorrow," muttered Mak Jah after packing her stuff. Out of the corner of her eyes, she spotted Bagot's stall. The indistinct whiffs from the barrels made her chest ache again.

“He almost killed me!” Her face twitched with heat. In a rage, she kicked the wheels and dislodged the stall from its resting place. She tugged it across the road as if she was dragging a reluctant child to school. At the edge of the river, she pushed it down, and ran away.

The stall slid down from the muddy cliff and hit the river with a mighty splash. The stall sank. Water rushed into the barrels and the ashes turned cold.

* * * * *

“Day, Night, and Day”

by Michael Howard

Fifteen minutes before class started, Mr. Long asked Cole if he would please join him in his office for a chat. “Sure,” Cole said, standing and following Mr. Long’s short, wiry frame out of the breakroom. The office was small and cramped and smelled of antiseptic. It was also as cold as a morgue on account of the air conditioning unit that Mr. Long kept running round-the-clock. There were framed photos on the desk and framed certificates on the wall.

Cole shivered as he sat down. It was a quarter to ten, and he was hungover and tired. His head ached. He figured the chat, as Mr. Long called it, would be about his having neglected to wear a tie again. Maybe about his shabby appearance in general. But Mr. Long looked at him across the desk with a grim expression on his square face and said in his rigid staccato English:

“I have received several complaints from parents.”

“Really? What sort of complaints?”

“Well,” Mr. Long said, turning up the air conditioner, “they say you teach the students about sawing babies in half. They are upset and ask me why we allow such a lesson.”

“I didn’t teach them about sawing babies in half.”

“That is what they say. They threaten to remove their children from the course. I told them it is not allowed, and I will talk with you.”

“They misunderstood. I was teaching them a short story.”

“What story.”

“‘Popular Mechanics’ by Raymond Carver. See, they were learning symbolism and metaphor last week …” Rubbing his hands together to warm them, Cole summarized the story and argued its relevance to the lesson. “Afterwards I wanted to make sure they understood the story’s use of symbolism, so I drew a severed baby on the board. As a symbol of the, erm, broken family. It didn’t even really look like a baby. But they appeared to see what I was getting at …”

Mr. Long nodded thoughtfully. “His name is Carver. That is why he writes about sawing babies.”

Cole did his best to explain that the story did not feature any sawing and, giving up the symbolism angle, said any harm to the baby was done by accident. Mr. Long leaned forward in his chair and told him with an indulgent smile not to teach any more violent stories to his students; of course, it was no business of his if Cole liked violence and read about it on his own time, but there was no place for it in English class.

“Remember,” he added, “students look up to foreign teacher, so you must set good example. They are very, how you say … impressionable. It is not good if they know you like violence.”

Cole protested that he didn’t like violence, that he in fact strongly disliked it, but Mr. Long only nodded his head and smiled indulgently. Before Cole left the office, he told him to please remember to wear a tie to work.

They were rowdy and uncooperative today, the students were, but Cole was too tired to care very much. He phoned it in. It was a slow and painful three hour stretch. About halfway through the lesson he began to feel queasy. Excusing himself he went to the restroom and splashed cold water over his face. The queasiness passed. He dried his face

with a paper towel and looked at his reflection. Dark gray circles bulged under both eyes, like he'd been in a prizefight. No more drinking during the week.

When he returned to class some of the boys were throwing things and swearing at each other in Vietnamese. Cole banged on the whiteboard with his palm—it made a nice resonant boom—and asked the class whether he was a teacher or a zookeeper. "Zookeeper!" they shouted at him, laughing like hyenas. He gave them a writing assignment and sat down at his desk to massage his temples. He was almost dozing off when the bell rang.

After class, while Cole was putting his things into his bag, Tam came and poked him gently in the ribs. Tam was a guileless and easygoing twenty-four-year-old with big dark eyes and a lot of quaint ideas implanted by her home city of Hanoi. She was also prettier than she seemed to realize. For some reason she had set her sights on Cole, who'd taken her to his apartment once. Then twice. Then three times, and so on until he'd lost count. It wouldn't happen again—that's what he told himself. After all, it wasn't something that could ever work. She wanted a husband out of the deal. He just wanted the usual.

"Hi there," Cole said. "You look nice today." She was beaming up at him with that glowing round face and the ink black hair that threw her white teeth into sharp relief. Her liveliness made Cole feel dull and washed up.

"What about other days?"

"You look nice every day."

"But especially today?"

Cole nodded.

"Why?"

“Because … I don’t know. Your dress.”

“No more classes today?”

“Nope, all done.”

She clucked her tongue. “Lucky.”

“How many more for you?”

“Just one.”

“That’s not so bad.”

“No, but they don’t behave well …” She paused for a moment. Then it came: “Are you doing anything later?”

Cole zipped up his bag and slung it over his shoulder. He said he wasn’t sure if he was going out. He was trying to lay off the drink, he said. They didn’t have to drink—she didn’t care much for drinking anyway. Okay, well, yeah, he’d have to see. Would he let her know? For sure. There was this new Italian restaurant in District 1 she wanted to try … “I’ll be in touch,” he said curtly, smiling and waving goodbye to her and some of the other teachers on his way out.

* * *

From work Cole went straight to the health clinic. Dr. Pedro told him the biopsy on that lump on the floor of his mouth had come back negative. Another false alarm. But Cole’s blood pressure was still too high. Cole sighed. His headache was gone, but he was tired as

hell. He wanted to go home and take a nap. Dr. Pedro asked him whether he'd cut back on his alcohol consumption, as they'd previously discussed.

"Yes. Sort of."

"Drink now and pay for it later," Dr. Pedro said plainly. "You'll start to feel the consequences when you're fifty—if you're still alive."

Cole started to laugh but cut it off when he saw that Dr. Pedro was quite serious. He told Cole to unbutton his shirt and hop onto the examining table. When he did Dr. Pedro indicated his paunch and said:

"Try getting some exercise every day. Even if it's only fifteen minutes."

"Okay." Cole asked if he was officially overweight. Dr. Pedro didn't answer—he moved the cold stethoscope around Cole's chest like he was playing checkers. Then he took the tubes from his ears and said again to watch the alcohol. "Sodium too; and don't smoke." Did Cole have any other questions or concerns? Well, since he asked, there had been a few instances of priapism. How long did they last? Oh, maybe twenty minutes. That's not uncommon. Any pain? Not really. Did he have a healthy sex life? As far as it went.

"Let's try increasing your blood pressure medication," Dr. Pedro said.

"Okay."

"And I'll see you again in six months."

They shook hands on it. Cole filled his prescription at the pharmacy adjacent to the clinic. The girl behind the counter who spoke good English smiled at him, and he smiled back. Then he took the elevator down to the parking garage and found his bike and put on his

mask and helmet and kicked the engine on and drove up the ramp into the steamy, smoggy furnace of downtown Saigon.

The heat was overbearing in spite of the cloud cover. He could feel little pearls of sweat running down his back as he drove past Notre Dame Cathedral, where bunches of tourists stood around taking pictures with their phones. He stopped at a cafe, drank a strong black coffee, smoked a cigarillo. He thought maybe he'd get a haircut before going home and crashing, but when he walked outside it was raining spears. Vietnamese were pulling to the sides of the road to put on their raincoats. Cole didn't have his with him. To hell with it. He jumped on his bike and drove into the hazy, sodden grayness. By the time he got to his place, his shirt was soaked through, and his shoes were full of water.

* * *

His nap lasted all of twenty minutes. Then his phone started buzzing. It was his mother. Cole answered against his better judgment.

"You're up early. Isn't it like four in the morning there?"

"I don't sleep much anymore," his mother told him. "You'll see when you get to be my age."

After some pleasantries she came to the point. Was he coming home for his younger brother's wedding or not?

"I have to look at the flights."

"You said that last time we spoke."

"Sorry. I've been busy."

"I told you I would help you pay for the airfare."

“And I told you I don’t need your help.”

“Okay, Cole. You know, it’s not every day that your brother gets married …”

Cole didn’t say anything.

“He would really appreciate it,” she said, “if you could make it back here for his wedding.”

Cole didn’t say anything.

“Don’t you think?”

“If you say so.”

“Cole,” she began, “I’m sorry, really I am, but it’s been four …” He pulled the phone away from his ear; a few seconds later he brought it back in. “… know it was difficult for you, but you can’t hold a grudge against them forever. You have to get over it. They’re family, whether you like it or not.”

“Dad was family. That didn’t stop you from divorcing him.”

“That’s different.”

“I don’t know, seems pretty similar to me.”

“I’m not getting into this with you again,” she said, losing her composure. “Your brother is getting married in three months, and I think the very least you can do is make an …” He held the phone out again until she was finished.

“I have some work to do,” he said. “I’m afraid I’ll have to call you back.”

“Cole, I don’t know how to get through to you anymore.”

“Then stop trying.”

* * *

That evening Cole met Jackson for beers at a *quán nhậu* along the canal. Cole got there first and took a table next to the curb. The air was thick with smells of stale beer and cooked flesh and assorted herbs. An attractive young waitress dressed in a camisole and jeans came out and handed him a menu. Cole had seen her here before. He might even have gotten her number one night. It was hard to remember.

He ordered a Tiger and, lighting a cigarillo, leaned back in his chair. It was just after seven o’clock. The sun was gone without a trace—a wavering shaft of silvery moonlight cut diagonally across the black water of the canal. Motorbikes zipped past every few seconds. Behind Cole a large party of Vietnamese sat around two tables eating hotpot and drinking beer and reveling. A great heap of empty cans littered the ground at their feet, glinting a bit as they caught the lights from the restaurant.

The waitress came back with Cole’s beer plus a small bag of peanuts and a little dish to put them in. She asked if he wanted any food. In his shoddy Vietnamese he told her he was waiting for his friend. He asked her how she was doing. She giggled and said she was fine and walked away. From the party behind him came the familiar chorus: “*Một, hai, ba, dô!*” They were getting drunk.

Cole was on his third Tiger when Jackson turned up wearing a Panama hat that Cole thought made him look ridiculous. He sat down opposite Cole and apologized for being late. “Sorry dude, had to finish somethin’ up for work. Took longer than I anticipated.”

“No worries,” Cole said. He’d given up trying to understand what sort of business Jackson ran or how he turned a profit from it. It was something to do with men’s underwear. At any rate Jackson appeared to be making good.

“Been here long?”

“Not so long. Thirty, forty minutes.”

“Where’s your bike parked?”

“Got a mototaxi.”

Jackson ordered a beer. He asked if Cole was working tomorrow. Cole said he was off. “Planning on goin’ deep tonight?” Jackson asked him, slugging his beer and showing his yellowish teeth in a grin.

“I don’t know how deep I’m prepared to go. Had kind of a long day. But we’ll see. Why, you lookin’ to get cockeyed?”

“As you say, we’ll see. *Em ơi*,” he called to the waitress. “*Hai chai*.”

She brought out two more beers and more blocks of ice for their glasses. After she walked away Jackson said she wasn’t too hard on the eyes, eh? He asked if she was the same girl Cole was chatting up that time a few months back. Cole said he wasn’t sure. In back of them the Vietnamese were still living it up—every few minutes there was another “*Một, hai, ba, dô!*” Jackson looked in their direction and raised his glass: “*Dô!*” They saluted him and drank more beer and then one of them came over and invited Cole and Jackson to join their party.

The food was all picked over so the Vietnamese insisted on ordering more—grilled pork and spiced beef and seafood fried rice and fried tofu with lemongrass and lots and lots of

soy sauce. The beer kept coming. Cole drank more than he could keep track of. They clanked glasses and bellowed "*Dô!*" over and over again. It was all very heady. A couple of the men spoke English. They had a lot to say about America and England and foreign affairs in general. Cole, they said, was lucky to have Donald Trump for his president. What Vietnam needed was a great man like Trump. Then the world would show them proper respect and China would stop pushing them around. Cole let them go on, politely nodding. "Look," one of the men said, and grinning he pulled a pack of Trump-branded cigarettes from his pocket. Cole tried to smoke one but it tasted like burning rubber. At length the party started to thin out and by ten o'clock Cole and Jackson were back drinking at their original table.

"Hey," Jackson said when Cole returned from the bathroom, "I saw what's her name the other night. Phuong."

"Is that right." Cole didn't want to hear it.

"Yeah. Over on Hai Bà Trưng. She was leaving as I was arriving. Is she still a Saigon Special girl?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Anyway, we chatted awhile. She was lookin' fit. I thought you were still in contact with her."

"No."

"Too bad. She was lookin' fit."

"You said that."

“Did I?” Jackson got up and walked across the street to piss into the canal. The breeze had died away and with it the rustling of leaves in the trees lining the water. Everything was motionless. Cole felt sort of motionless. His head was swimming a bit from all the beer. He cracked his knuckles and flagged down the waitress and asked for a bottle of water. Before he knew what he was doing he’d sent a message to Phuong:

I would appreciate it if you didn’t accost my friends in public.

She responded right away: *Your friend accost me.*

That’s not what I heard.

Ok.

He waited a couple minutes before typing: *What have you been up to?*

There was no response that time. Cole sat in his chair looking sour, unconsciously digging his fingernails into his palm. The waitress had forgotten to bring his water. Jackson finished his beer and took a phone call.

“That was Chelsea,” he said when he hung up. “She’s with some friends in District 4. I told her we’d come by. Is that alright with you?”

“Sure. I was thinkin’ it’s about time to mosey along anyway.”

“Cheers.”

After splitting the bill, they walked over to Jackson’s bike. Cole got on the back. “No helmet,” he said. “Hope we don’t get stopped.”

“It’s a short ride.”

They got stopped. There were two policemen. One spoke fair English which made things trickier. Cole acted French. "*Je ne sais pas*," he kept saying. The policeman asked if he spoke English. "*Anglais? Non. Français*." He asked if Cole had a passport. "*Je ne sais pas.*"

The cop pointed at Jackson who was still straddling his bike. "You drunk?"

"Not drunk," Jackson said.

"When you in Vietnam you must follow the Vietnam law. You drunk. We take the bike."

"This bike's a rental. It doesn't belong to me."

He demanded to see Jackson's driving license. Jackson pretended not to understand what he meant. The other cop had produced a notepad and was pretending to write out a ticket.

"You come from where," the first one said.

"Belarus."

"You must follow the Vietnam law. We take bike now." He tapped the seat with his club. "Come. We take you to the office."

Jackson turned to Cole. "How much have you got on you?"

Cole took a couple hundred thousand from his pocket. He gave it to Jackson, who put it together with some bills from his own pocket and gave it over. The cop counted it. He glared at Jackson.

"That's all we've got."

He pocketed the cash while the other one walked around to the front of Jackson's bike, bending over and reaching behind the wheel. Without another word they hopped on their cruiser and left.

"Well," Jackson said, "could've been worse. They've been confiscating expat bikes left and right. Some even refuse bribes now." He tried starting the engine but it wouldn't turn over. It took them a couple minutes to figure out that the spark plug had been ripped apart.

That was the beginning of the rest of the night. Seeing as they weren't far from Pasteur Street and the surrounding nightlife, Cole suggested they push the bike in that direction. After fifteen minutes of walking and sweating— "wankers," Jackson kept muttering under his breath—they stopped in front of a girly bar. Not quite a cathouse but close enough. Cole hadn't been to one for the better part of a year. "Okay," said the man sitting in a small plastic chair by the door, "Two handsome. Enter. Many girl inside." They gave him ten thousand to watch Jackson's bike and went in.

Many girl was right—they outnumbered the patrons five or six to one. Two sidled up to Cole as soon as he took a seat at the bar. Through the cheesy hip hop music, he ordered a Tiger. The lights in the bar were all colored blue and pink and purple. It was like a dance club without the crowd. The cool air felt good on Cole's sweaty face.

"Was that really all the money you had?" Jackson asked him.

"No." He patted his left front pocket. "I keep most of it here."

"I'll have to find an ATM."

"Don't worry about it."

"Sure?"

“Yeah, I got plenty.”

“Cheers.”

The girls were asking Cole all kinds of questions. What was his name and where was he from and what was he doing in Vietnam? He wasn’t paying much attention as it was hard to understand them, and he didn’t find either one attractive. After his second beer he ordered whisky and asked for an ashtray. He offered the bartender one of his Cafe Cremes, but she only laughed. Then he got up and went over to join Jackson and a couple other girls at the pool table. They shot around while smoking and sipping whisky and buying the girls drinks. One of them had a nice face and an even nicer figure accented by a glittery black dress. Cole let her put her hands all over him and give him kisses on the cheek and pretended to be strung right along. “Why you so handsome?” she said again and again. Maybe he’d get lucky.

Back at the bar they ordered beers. The girls wanted more drinks too. “You think I’m made of money?” Cole said with one eyebrow cocked, but he told the bartender to go ahead anyway. They played Connect Four—the girls were pros at it, and Cole lost every game. Jackson ordered a balloon. He took a few pulls on it and offered it to Cole, who shook his head. He was done with that stuff. Once Jackson had finished it off, Cole asked him how he planned on getting home.

With drooping eyelids, he said, “Chelsea’s comin’ to get me.”

“Will she care that you’re here?”

Jackson made a face and shook his head theatrically. “No, mate. She’s a good sport about it.”

“What about your bike?”

“She’ll sit on it, and I’ll push her while drivin’ hers.”

“Have fun with that.”

Jackson shrugged. A few drinks later he was gone. Cole hadn’t even seen him leave. The only other customers were two middle-aged English tourists. One of them, a paunchy man with a gleaming bald head, had tried to dance on top of the bar a little while earlier and fallen to the floor with a loud crash. The girls seemed to like him better than they liked Cole, who was now holding forth drunkenly to one of them at the bar. The one he liked and thought might give him a freebie had disappeared. This girl, the one he was talking to now, must have asked him why he came to Vietnam, because he suddenly heard himself spilling the whole farcical story, how back home his girlfriend had left him for his kid brother after carrying on with him behind Cole’s back for six months, and it turned out his mother had known about it without telling him, and it was all just too absurd and he’d had to get as far away from it as he possibly could.

“So, I’m here now … An’ now they’re gettin’ married, and they want me t’fly back t’N’York t’see it. Ha-ha … ’magine it … T’hell with um. All of um. Thass what I say … I’m way pass it. I didn’ liker much t’begin with … An frankly, I never liked that little bastard much either. My brother I mean. Nick. He was a’ways a little bastard … I can do w’thout my mother’s company too, if ya wanna know the truth. A’ways preferred my ole man … Wonder what he’s doin’ these days … The ole man I mean … Iss been a while since I called him. He’s livin’ in Florida now, the shun sine state … My mother divorce him when I was fourteen. No, fifteen—no, fourteen. Cheat on er once. A brief affair. Nothin’ really. But thawas ’nough for her … I’m way pass it …”

The girl he was talking to had walked away and another one had taken her place. Cole hardly noticed.

“An’ while’m at it, t’hell with *her* too … Phuong I mean. She can go piss up a flagpole … for all I care. Never liked her …” Hiccupping, he let his head drop onto the bar. After a minute one of the bartenders tapped him on the shoulder. “I’m, *hic*, fine,” he said, looking up.

“Wuh more?” she asked and indicated his empty beer glass.

“Okay.”

Another Tiger. He drank it off and swayed to the bathroom. The bill was waiting for him when he got back. He stood blinking and frowning at it. They’d charged him twice the menu price for nearly everything. And he was pretty damn sure he hadn’t bought sixteen drinks for the girls.

“Hey,” he said, trying to shake the booze out of his head, “juss how, *hic*, drunk d’you think I am?”

The girl in the black dress had suddenly reappeared behind the bar. She asked him what his problem was.

“You wan’ me t’pay three hunderd, *hic*, thousan”—he started to repeat the number in Vietnamese for emphasis but thought better of it— “fer one balloon. Thass my problem.”

“That is price.”

“I’m not payin’ it. *Hic*.”

“You have to pay. You drink all this.” She pointed at the bill. “I see you drink it. Your friend too.”

“So, the fix is, *hic*, in, is it?”

“If you don’t pay, we call police.”

“They won’ come in here an’ you know it.”

“Okay, we call and see.”

“Bullshit.”

“What’s the problem here, mate?” The bald Englishman had made his way over. He put his hand on Cole’s shoulder in a manner that was more menacing than friendly. Cole turned to look at him.

“Nothin’ that concerns you.”

The Englishman asked the girl in the black dress what the matter was. The Englishman’s friend was watching from across the room, smoking a cigarette and sipping from his glass of beer.

“He doesn’t pay the bill,” said the girl in the black dress.

“I’m not payin’ *this* bill,” Cole told her. “Gimme the, *hic*, real bill.”

“That’s the bill, mate,” the Englishman said. “Right there. If that’s what they charge, that’s what you’ve got to pay. They’re running a business here. Foreigners pay more, mate. We all know and accept that, don’t we? I paid a bloody sight more than that in Nha Trang the other night. If you’re short a few quid, I’d be happy to lend it.”

“Lissen,” Cole said, “you, *hic*, bald-headed bastard. I live here. I’m a *resident*. Are you a resident? I didn’ think so. Stay outta my affairs. *Hic*.”

“I’m afraid you’re making this my affair, mate, especially when you start hurling personal insults that way. You’re out of line. Now be a good bloke and pay the bill. I tried being civil but you insisted on being a bloody tosser. I don’t get on with tossers. That bill’s going to be paid, and you’re going to be the one to bloody pay it.”

“Firss of all, I don’ take orders from any—” Cole began, but the Englishman had put his hand on his shoulder again, this time clamping down on it with a vice grip. Before Cole could turn around to take a swing, he’d been knocked clear off his stool and lay staring up at the dark smoky ceiling. The room spun. He closed his eyes. He wasn’t sure if he’d been hit or merely shoved, but his head throbbed with a splitting pain anyway. The Englishman was standing over him saying how he hadn’t had a mind to do that but that Cole hadn’t given him a bloody choice. The music was still blaring—it seemed to cut right through the side of Cole’s head. He was thinking that he wouldn’t mind it so much if he went to sleep right there on the floor and never woke up again. He figured this dump was as good a place to croak in as any other. At length he opened his eyes and hauled himself up. Without saying anything he put all his cash on the bar.

“That’s it, mate. See? That wasn’t so hard, was it? Sorry it had to come to that, mate, but you bloody well insisted.” He was still talking when Cole moved woozily out the door into the starless night that was so muggy it was almost airless.

Cole stood on the sidewalk trying to work out which direction he should walk in. A few girls were sitting outside the adjacent bar in their stilettos and gaudy dresses. They called to him and whistled at him to coax him inside. The pain in his head was awful—it was hard for him to keep his balance. His ears rang shrilly. He closed his eyes and felt he was falling a great distance. Then he vomited and sat down on the ground.

* * *

Around nine the next morning he woke up in his own bed with Tam lying beside him. She was wearing his shirt. Cole was naked. What in the hell is this? he thought, but he was too hungover to puzzle over it and fell right back asleep. When he opened his eyes again it was past eleven. The inside of his mouth felt as though it were made of cloth. Daylight bled in through the thick gray curtains that hung down over the window, coloring the room with a reddish-purple tinge. A pungent savory food smell came from the kitchen—someone was

moving around in there. On his nightstand were a glass of water and two aspirin. He took both and drank down the water. His head and stomach didn't feel all that bad anymore.

"Did you sleep okay?" Tam asked him when he came into the kitchen with a blanket tied around his waist. She was back in her own clothes and her face was neatly made up. Squinting against the bright lights on the ceiling Cole said "Fine" and took a seat at the table.

"How is your head?"

"It's alright." He rubbed at his brow with his fingertips. He was still confused by the whole scenario.

Tam set a glass of orange juice down in front of him. A minute later she set down a big bowl of *phở*. Then another one for herself, and a plate of herbs and chili peppers and lime wedges for both of them. She sat across from Cole with an eager, contented smile on her face.

"You made this?"

"Of course not," she laughed. "I can't make *phở* like this."

"You went out and got it?"

"Mhm. From the place down the street." She started on hers, slurping a noodle through her plump pink lips. Cole hadn't sat down to breakfast in years, unless he counted the boozy six-in-the-morning food he sometimes ate following a night on the tiles, as Jackson would say. As for last night, he was drawing blanks. He held up the glass of orange juice. "Here's lookin' at you," he said.

They ate mostly in silence. A couple times Cole opened his mouth to ask her for an explanation, but he decided he'd rather not know. To hell with it—all of it. He was looking ahead. After they were finished eating, he helped her clean up the kitchen. Then he shuffled into his room and ditched the blanket for a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. Back in the kitchen she was getting her things together.

"I have to visit grandma now."

"Okay."

"Do you feel better?"

"Much better."

"That's good. I'm so glad I could help."

"Yeah, me too …"

There was a silence. Tam said:

"Will you call me later?"

"Sure thing."

She came up to him smiling broadly—he let her peck him on the mouth.

"Bye, Cole."

"Goodbye."

Watching her leave the apartment in her formfitting jeans and heeled leather boots and washed denim jacket, her hips toggling back and forth with each step that rapped the hard wood floor, Cole found that his feelings hadn't changed. A spasm of regret passed through him as he closed the door and killed the light over the kitchen table. He shook his head. It was a tough break, but then he never could tell a good thing from a bad one.

* * * * *

“Nagbabagong Balita”

by Bea Pauline Salcedo

Quarantine for our family has nurtured a new tradition: eating dinner while watching the news on TV. We have gotten used to waiting for the 6:30 pm news before sitting down at the dinner table. And as we tune into the sole station that is able to deliver, we wait for the punchline at the end of the headline reports: “*The struggle is real para kay Juan sa paglilihi ng kanyang misis…”.*The four of us are hurled into fits of laughter while someone almost chokes from the idea that this is the marker of Philippine news. News that surprises and fills the otherwise palpable silence that drapes the dinner table. It is the only thing that allows for a conversation and a confrontation in our home. “*Ganyan talaga sila!”* my dad would say, followed by an almost forlorn “*ano ba naman ‘yan..”* from my mom. Our thoughts are muddled by one helpless word after another as we struggle to insert words between cacophonous sounds. These dinners bring the sort of comfort only a natural calamity can bring after it has passed. *“At mula sa kanilang mga bakasyon na hashtag travel goals saan na kaya nila napiling manirahan?”* People don’t choose their homes, they are born into homes. The hand holding the silver spoon aches to hurl the next mouthful of food towards the TV. Our sounds and silence are sounds threatening to be heard through the paper-thin walls. The family that eats at 6:30 pm, is amused by the reporters reminiscent of heroes by speaking of so-and-so’s new house and *Mali’s* new breasts. My sister cackles at around the time the camera pans to the news anchor who looks as if she spends more time fixing her hair than she does screening her lines. The channel is flipped to the station in anticipation of the next thing we might poke fun at night after night. Do the anchors know that news becomes news only when news is done right? A couple’s new fitness routine is delivered with the key hashtag ‘going strong’, and our dinner reaches a close with the faint scraping of utensils on plates. Plates clatter across the kitchen sink, and our family disperses into the usual nooks for the night. The table is wiped and cleared of any clues that the table had

been used and alive with voices, and the sounds we made with our mouths only moments before, are heard even when the doors close. Our family dinners engender this humor for the amiss, and yet true shame is engraved in the mind as our chances to revisit what is remiss have been missed.

* * * * *

“Promises at 8pm”

by Julia Hlaing

My nine year old sister closes her ears when we talk about the day’s news at dinner time.

/did you hear about that girl in mandalay/yes, it was all online/she was just nineteen/were there any more deaths/52 in total, i think/ 52??/ 52?? /yeah/ killed?/ yeah, or arrested maybe/their families must be devastated/ how awful/i wonder about the other nameless victims that died, what if no one remembers them/don’t say that, they died in bravery/no one’s going to remember them/don’t say that of course we will/i meant individually, you’re going to remember the names of all 52 individually?

The conversation stops. We sit and have our dinner.
The harsh banging of pots and pans accompany our meal.

/oh/it’s 8pm/are you banging your pots and your pans today/will i get shot if i bang my-/don’t say that, you won’t get shot/but people got shot/you won’t, you’re safe at home/you promise?

A moment of hesitation. My parents look at each other once before turning back to us.

/i promise.

We bang our pots and pans for a few minutes. I look at my sister in envy.

/she doesn't understand anything/well, i mean, she shouldn't have to/does this seem like some sort of game to her?/ she's just a kid/ she doesn't understand how severe this is/ she shouldn't have to/ then why do i have to?

That night, while she lies in bed next to me, I think about the 19 year old's death and cry quietly.

———————

A month has passed.

———————

My nine year old sister doesn't close her ears when we talk about the day's news at dinner time.

have you seen this/seen what/ a seven year old was killed/ seven?/ yeah, she was sitting on her father's lap when she was shot/poor baby, i can't imagine what her family is going through right now/it's because she was a muslim/ no, no one would know what their religion was/they're targeting muslims/ they're targeting everyone/let's not pretend what i said isn't true.

We know it is. They've always been targeting Muslims, since before the coup.

The worry intensifies after that brief argument. My father is a Muslim. His side of the family is all Muslim.

don't think about it/what if/stop/what if/no/what if someone from your family gets murdered next/don't think like that/but what if/you have an economics exam to revise for/yes, but what if/no what ifs/are we really safe?/we are, stop it/we aren't/no/they're going to kill all of us/no, don't think like that

I go to war with my thoughts as I blow steam off the hot beef on my spoon before I put it in my mouth. The sweet melody of the banging pots and pans signals the time.

After we bang our pots and pans, my sister and I bake in the kitchen. She stops mixing her dry batter for a moment and looks at me.

/ ma ju / hm? / is it true she was only seven? / the girl that was murdered? / yeah / yeah, she was / oh. she's younger than me / yeah / do you think she's in pain? / no. death isn't supposed to be painful / you promise?

A moment of hesitation. I look at the floor before I turn back to my sister.

/i promise.

That night, while she lies in bed next to me, I think about the 7 year old's death.
I can hear my sister crying quietly.

* * * * *

"Lockdown Feet, *or* Because the President Said So"

by Pauline Mari Hernando

Strengthened
now, forcefully:
It is patience
not resilience
that's been witnessed
by our feet.
Interminable as EDSA
Quezon and Rizal Avenue;
Constant as Commonwealth,
Marcos and Sumulong Hi-way,
Sprawling as Monumento,
C5 and Roxas Boulevard.

These thickened,
calloused feet
are compelled
to restraint.
Crossing over
many moons
in the flickering asphalt
road, towards both borders
of Express Way
from March till now.
They strived to cross

Every fuming bump,
flood and narrow dump
of deep-seated lane
in this lockdown capital.

These footprints
Condemn and curse
the grounds
and its whisperer
that drove the steamed
and fiery soles.
Now the detriments
are rested to the road—
unfortunately,
that which remains
the sole listener.

The intent to dare
the vigor and verve
of our feet commenced
when it was ordered
to cease the public wheels,
when you denied access
and deserted the penniless
masses from one social service
to another.

* * * * *

“Dear brown girl”

by Nashrah Hassan

Dear brown girl
Who lives in a world
Where there’s no freedom
And no choice

Who lives a life of others
And has lost her way

Dear brown girl
Who lives in a world
Where honor is upon her
And society dictates her

Where she dances
In the word of others

Dear brown girl
You are heard
You are seen

Your words matter
As much as the other

Live your life

As you matter

Dear brown girl
You are your world.

* * * * *

“Spectators”

by David M. Som

i.

a line of fake gold chalices squat filled with fake flowers
in the plastic green tub full of our props. all of us, the dancers,
idle in the monks’ meditation room, a small flock of women yanking us by the arm
once it’s our turn to get dressed. we have to look perfect for Khmer new year.

all but one of the monks duck out into the back room,
the last wandering outside to the garden where he stands,
his faded ochre robes fluttering under the slightest touch of wind,
gazing at the plants below as if the Buddha himself is speaking through them.
I wish I could hear what he hears.

when I was in middle school, my dad spent his midnight lunch break
sanding down two halves of a coconut shell. he drew landscapes
of his home country on each side, wrote messages in Khmer along the edges
in sharpie and coated them in sealant before gifting them to me,
rambling that they were for dance, excited
that at least I could carry on the culture he was deprived of in his youth.

in temple, we speak in Khmer,
in endless safety pins shoved haphazardly in our dance clothes,
in beautiful sarongs folded and twisted to create makeshift trousers,
in dark toes crushing prayer mats and in metal belts so tight

we can’t breathe.

ii.

the main building of the temple is adorned
by a painting of the demon Rahu swallowing the moon.
my bare feet swallow the pebbles of the dirt street outside the monks’ building
as I practice alone for the performance ahead while the others are still dressing,
the music playing perfectly in my mind, a soft april sun kissing my nose.

a couple near the main entrance point at me, stare at me,
musing as if I were a rare bird in a cage, calling me “exotic,”
mimicking my hand movements with stiff fingers and laughing.

iii.

once the dancers are ready and festivities have begun
the drum procession starts down past the parking lot leading up to the temple.
we are all barefoot now, our shoes and socks in a pile still in the meditation room.
we paste smiles on our faces until our cheeks hurt, balancing the fake gold chalices
with fake pink flowers on our palms. the gaze of spectators
bores holes into my head, my face, my body.
we waddle forward to the beat of the drums at the front of the line:
tarun tuk ta, tarun tuk ta, tarun tuk ta.

* * * * *

“The Famous Family Laundrette”

by Michael Mintrom

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak professes innocence to corruption charges — Five Re-enactments

1/ *Kuala Lumpur Skyscrapers*

Everything must be spick and span.
We’ve given our best to Malaysia,
erecting tall, curved towers.
How confidently they caress the sky,
how deftly they emanate power.
Through much toil with soiled garments —
pants of factory workers, shirts
of farmers, aprons of surgeons —
we’ve built a penthouse nation.
Trust me. All is spotlessly clean.

2/ *Winning Votes*

Sartorial elegance signals integrity.
My father taught me that. He was not
in the laundry game, though some
now suggest as much. My father,
my uncle, and their father before them,
knew every turn and twist of politics.
Powerful people, ambitious for Malaysia.
But I’m self-made at wheedling

white shirts from filthy rags.
The laundrette helped in each campaign.

3/ *Making Movies*

Attractive protagonists dress in style.
I'm proud of my boy, 'the auteur'.
I love that he shops on Rodeo Drive,
that he views Malaysia from the world stage,
that we can talk freely father to son,
of character, plot, the fall from grace.
Martin Scorsese led us to his lodge.
We watched 'Good Fellas' then 'Raging Bull',
three pals in the Hollywood Hills.
Blessed be filmmakers. Blessed be laundrettes.

4/ *The Hajj*

The godly nation is a well-dressed nation,
the reek of squalor is blasphemous.
Since my school days in England,
since reading The Canterbury Tales,
I've set great store on pilgrimage.
Malaysian factory workers,
ones who could hardly imagine paradise,
have now prayed in Al-Haram Mosque.
For my benevolence, I've been mocked.
The laundrette enabled epiphanies in Mecca.

5/ *Terrorism*

Now I’m accused of funding death squads.
Sniffy Malays scorn me. Scorn
my predilections, my pedantry.
I’ll tell you I’ve been faithful to friends,
to people who’ve been faithful to me.
I played golf with the rich, soccer with the poor.
I’ve lent necklaces to many old chums,
handbags too, tiaras for galas.
Our laundrette’s global — outlets all over.
All should wear immaculate suits.

* * * * *

"Founded"

by Janii Yazon

To have the words to describe is to make an idea a part of the collective reality. To realize something that can be sensed and consumed by someone beyond your own mind. That isn't to say something cannot exist without a name or a description, but to designate is to recognize and to identify. Isn't that a fault of society, really, that internal identity depends so heavily on external validation? You become what others say you are. Those without names exist in a strange intangible space and once they receive a name it's almost as if the mind sighs and the wheels turn easier. As if the sidewalks can finally exhale when they know where they belong. As if buildings can relax their shoulders and settle deep into the ground.

Los Angeles's Historic Filipinotown received its official designation in 2002.

* * * * *

“Dirty boxing”

by Janii Yazon

My father tried to teach me *panununtukan*
when I was thirteen years old. I remember his
initial insistence that I never use it
as he positioned my feet and forced my fists shut.

“*Kuya*,” he said, invoking my role as eldest,
“you have to be strong, *anak*, you have to be strong.
You have to be smart and choose your battles wisely;
you have to be smart and always ready to fight.”

In the rainy season, the ground’s not meant to be walked
and yet there we stood, my bare feet sinking slowly,
swallowed by the soil, my father’s eyes leaden
as if he were seeing far beyond the storm clouds.

It frightened me to feel my father far away
while the merciless Ilocano dirt held me.
With my childish cry, he returned to our home,
his eyes as wet and brown as the upturned earth.

“*Kuya*,” he said, reminding me of my duty,
“you cannot stay too still, not in these conditions.
You must move faster than the earth can hold you down,
anak, you must not step where you have stepped before.”

I picked up one small, muddy foot and stepped away.
I picked up the other small, muddy foot and walked.
My father followed, his eyes still wet and brown and
rainwater filled in the shadows of our footsteps.

Later that year he would teach me how to break limbs,
to see a body as the sum of its targets,
but I carry most clearly in my memory
the feeling of my feet escaping the field—

* * * * *

“Oppression”

by SK Musairah

We are not allowed to give opinions,
We are not allowed to give feedback,
We are not allowed to comment,
We are not allowed to complain,
We are not allowed to even talk…

We are being oppressed,
We are being shunned,
We are being discriminated,
We are being ostracized,
We are being undermined…

We are not treated equally,
Not given equal opportunities,
We are being humiliated,
And judged without the chance to defend ourselves,
By those who are corrupt…

How long do we want to be victimized?
How long do we want to be bullied?
How long do we want to be mistreated?
How long do we want them to make us feel small and unappreciated?
How long do we want to let them do all these to us?

Come what may, we will support each other.
Help each other, so that none of us would feel alone.
We don't want to drown in sorrow and depression
We don't want to be the prisoners of oppression
We want to live our lives our own way,
Do our things and be happy about it.
We want to value each other
Love each other and stand up for each other.
We believe in ourselves
We can do it
Yes we can.

* * * * *

“Home Away from Home”

by Lorelei Bacht

Full moon. Tree tops a kaleidoscope
Above my head, and the persistent
Chatter of the frogs in the rice field:
The mating season has begun.

The patterns of the year deepens
Its groove in me; I am becoming familiar
With every little happening: the millipedes,
The orb weavers, the downpours, the orchids,
The highs and lows of fervour and moisture,
The long and short cycles, nested rhythms,
Circle of the sun over the house: first,
A defiant red, a grandiose beginning, then
The flutter of the wind in the cotton fruit trees.

I have made friends amongst the birds
And know them by their song:
The turtle doves that bicker in the pines,
Unruly children in grey school blouses;
The coucals whose hoarse cry signal humour,
Irreverent wonder at the size of the sky.
The owl at night: a long and worried crescendo
Resolved in moonlit abandon.

I have learned to decipher the multitude
Of shapes, the shades of green over green:
In the tangled jungle, I now discern epiphytes,
Bromeliads, minuscule and gigantic—I have grown
Intimate with their seasons, and observed
Their yearnings: how they advance in stolons,
Creep in obstinate silence, wait for the rain,
To cover up the feet of the old tamarind—
Flush upon flush of tourmaline.
I know of their battles, having studied the work
Of termites in the hollow of the fishtail palm
That fell: a treasure trove of larvae and mulch.

Oxidised clay, wet pine needles,
Work of the millipedes: the ground makes us.
It is dissolved in every morsel our food: rice bowl
Of mud and fighting fish. The corner shop:
I have begun to tell apart the many greens,
The flower parts, a world of sweet and sour, tart,
Rich tapestry of tastes the people back
Home merely call "too spicy."

Morning: on my way to work, every seedling,
Slowly finding its way through sun-cracked
Concrete, every lantern bug, weaver bird,
And timid golden snake whispers:

This place is becoming your home.

* * * * *

“Of a Desert”

by Nayli Nasran

You were a forest, I was barren land at the edge of your roots hoping for a sip of hydration.
I was a desert, you were a swamp, drowning me in you, losing breath in my lungs.
I disappeared. I existed in the memories of our first meeting and not a second after.
You ran out of nutrients, your generosity; a plentiful resource had finally come to its peak.
At the ashes of our saplings, the embers burnt the minuscule.
Your exhausted supply began to wane, the fire in your belly extinguished.
Earth choked fire, the stifling of the giving, I made it harder to breathe.
Quicksand; passive and consuming, ingesting the flickers, subduing them silently.
You uprooted your tendrils and broke away from the dunes.
Raining on the hearth for the remaining summer and drifting away with the gust.
Expecting a cool breeze as my toes dig into the blazing granular erg, the hot licks of the inland sea seared my skin.
The arid land watched the coast, reaching out onto the shore, dissolving upon making contact.
I was the coast: stretched out into the calm night, watching the moon call the sea towards itself and against,
I could only lay there and watch stagnantly.

Devoid of motion; thirsty and salty.

* * * * *

“I Could Have Died in Lautan Pasir”

by Agas Ramirez

I could hear the desert
Better than I could see it
Because the expanse wouldn’t fit in my mind.
The grainy white waves went on and on
Rippling up Mount Bromo
And down the savannah on the other side.
And all the horse riders looked the same
Faces covered, clothing faded
To a desert color, a worn color
As if they were almost, but not quite,
Made of sand.
Sand has a way of getting to you
Under your nails, into your shoes
Into the crooks of your arms
And if you listened to it long enough
It has a way of getting to your mind.
It is a calm you could get lost in…
And people have gotten lost before.
But standing in the middle of it
Almost blinded by light that bounced
Off the sand, into the sky, and back again
Feeling the sand on the wind
And the wind on my skin
I was nowhere and everywhere at once

And I swear to you
I could have died in Lautan Pasir
And it would have been perfectly fine.

* * * * *

“Khaosan Road”

by Agas Ramirez

We’re in the middle of the city
But the farang wear bikinis
And the men sport straw hats.
They start drinking at midday,
No, noon,
No, sunrise,
No, on Khaosan, it’s difficult to tell time.
You can swing into every corner bar,
Or sway under neon and lamplight –
The street is an invitation to dance.
You’ll find us there on Friday,
No, Thursday night,
No, Saturday morning,
No, on Khaosan, it’s difficult to tell time.

* * * * *

“Silom Road”

by Agas Ramirez

For three days, everywhere you turn,
There’s only water and chalk.
Colored chalk on your face,
On your hair, your clothes, and hands,
There are no qualms about painting
Everyone on the street with chalk,
There are no strangers during Songkran.
And, always, the water coming at you
From vans and cars and guns and hoses
And old men watering gardens.
It would be a miracle if you stayed dry
Before you reached Silom,
But on Silom there’s no chance.
There’s only water and chalk
And music and dancing
And getting completely lost
In the throes of people moving
To a festival as old as Thailand.