

Anak Sastra

Issue 45

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[Derek Yong](#) is an aspiring writer who has often in his life been visited by the muse Grief. He desires to touch those who, too, are familiar with suffering in life and offer what hope he can.

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Ismim Putera (he/him) is the author of poetry chapbook "Tide of Time" (Mug and Paper Publishing 2021). His works can be found in numerous online journals and recently in *Tapestry of Colours: Stories from Asia*.

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“When the Tide Ascends”

by Carlo Bautista

You first met the boy at a time when you believed that being caged was better than being drowned.

On a mid-March evening, you watched the waves crash and recede against the stone-strewn shoreline of the Lingayen Gulf. You were well beyond the sight of your family’s summer house at the edge of the beach. You picked up shells as you threaded your way through the coast, turned them over in your hands, observed the way they mirrored the sky and the clouds that smeared against midnight blue. Breathed in the salt and spray and swallowed when your mouth tasted of the air’s rust.

Then the boat appeared, a shadow bisecting the moon’s reflection on the water. It ripped through the surface and stopped when the boy dropped a grapnel near a spire of rock. Bent against the wind, he disembarked, lugging an empty fishing net, tying cork to its ends and splaying it over one of the seats. From afar, he was a rippling shadow. Like someone tore a piece of the sky and fashioned it into bone and sinew and flesh. And as he made his way through the sand, he speckled it with seawater that he flicked off his hair.

“You lost?” he asked.

You shook your head.

“You’re from the city,” he said.

“No, I’m not,” you lied. There was something about being told you are from the city, even if it’s the truth. Like being called an intruder. And rejecting it made the guilt melt away, even just a little.

“Yes, you are. Look at you.” He pointed his chin at your shirt. The top button was missing. Pale blue against green board shorts. You wore it that afternoon when your cousins dragged you there. You wore it to feel what it was like to frolic in the ocean without having to. You’d let the tide chase you until it pulled itself back with its own gravity. You’d let the

froth fizz against your calves. You'd let it bubble against your ankles, drag the sand away from your feet. But you'd never let it reel you in.

"City folk aren't usually out this late when they're here." He was closer now. Suddenly, he looked less of the sky and more of the earth. Scars on his shoulder blades like roots protruding from the soil. Black lentil irises. A mole sprouting from the corner of his lips. Hair that held dew the way grass did.

"Just wanted to see more of this." Your hand swept across, tracing the line of the horizon.

"There's not much to see." He frowned. "You'd have to go farther down."

His words took you underwater. There you were again, water wrenching you down. A scream they couldn't hear. "I'd rather not."

You left soon afterwards, your footsteps dragging along the sand, snapping scraggly pieces of driftwood. Underneath the ground, there would've been hermit crabs folding into their shells. Within the maw of the sea, a school of sardines would've been warding off a shark trying to pick them off one by one. Hidden by a fortress of coral, a stonefish would leap out of its niche to catch shrimp. Clownfish would be darting from rock to rock.

You didn't ask for the boy's name.

The next day, you asked your mama and papa if you could stay behind while they went to the poblacion to sign a contract with the mayor. Partly because of disinterest. Partly because you knew you'd be a burden--they were tired of explaining which governor married who and which mayor slept with which governor's daughter. You were too naive, too uninteresting. A decoration more than an asset. The socialites would regard you out of respect for your parents, tell them how their hijo has grown so much since the last time they saw you. But no one would wish to actually speak with you when you're invited to their dinners unless they had to ask you if you were alright after turning red from a glass of champagne.

You weren't looking for the boy when you found him again.

It was overcast, slightly drizzling. Silhouetted against the pale dawn, the fishermen were busy tethering their nets, loading galvanized buckets for their catch onto their boats.

He was sitting nearby, trailing his fingertips against the sand. Windswept locks. A dimpled cheek. Sun and earth and salt turned human. Lazily, he picked up a tiny scone, balanced it on his palm. The rest of the fishermen set their boats out. Their motors groaned and belched, until eventually they were far off. Soon, they'd reach open water.

"Why aren't you with the rest of them?"

"I don't fish. Only tatay does that for now. He says I'm not ready."

"Then what were you doing last night in the water?"

"I sneak out when I can," he said, scooting to the side. You grimaced at how easy it was for you to take your place at his side. "Then I release what I caught."

Waves leaped out of the water. Curled as they rose, curled as they crashed back down again. The boats bobbed as the current rolled underneath their bellies. The fishermen were little more than dark smudges in the distance. You leaned forward with your nails digging into the sand. Anticipating the first capsized vessel. The first cries of drowning men. Waited for when you would cry for help.

"They won't drown, don't worry." The boy giggled, like he sensed your agitation. The way he could sense a gathering of minnows before they fell victim to the grab of his net.

"How do you know that?"

"It's not a storm," he said. "And they're not too far off. They should be fine."

You didn't want to refute him; he knew the sea, lived on its spoils. What you knew was the city. It was always the same, unchanging, moving ever so rapidly that it became predictable. The same forest of concrete latticed with asphalt, dust for air, scuttling footsteps, sewage bubbling beneath it all. Harsh neon, oxides, car smoke. Streetlights and crushed cigarette butts. All moving at a fast but steady pulse. The sea was too different, too violent to you. It bombarded seawalls, churned and gnawed against cliffsides. In its bowels, in its currents, you would be torn apart. It could snap skulls from spines, peel flesh from bone. But the boy set out to greet it every night, seeing life instead of danger. Seeing a mother instead of a beast. He knew the sea, and you did, too. But perhaps not in the same way.

"They can swim," you said to reassure yourself.

"Of course, they could. They have to," he said. "Do you?"

You gulped and shook your head. The last time you were caught in the ocean, you were close to never getting out. Saltwater sandpapered your throat and stung your eyes. The

current rammed against your ribcage, threatening to squeeze your lungs until it burst. You never would've returned. Had you been lost then, your parents would've hired a PA to drop a bouquet of marigolds and dandelions into the water. They'd grieve for two weeks, then cry for the rest of the month afterwards because it was good publicity. Your father called it sympathy support. He'd establish a new apartment complex, name it after you, tell the media it was what you would've wanted to give people homes. They'd say it's their way of healing. At last, they'd never have to wait to make some use of you.

"Do you like it here?" you asked.

"Yes," he said. "I live here."

"But you want to run away." A guess. You didn't know him, but you knew almost all boys your age wanted to be somewhere they weren't. Your friends back home talked about how all of you would land jobs in a corporate district somewhere in Taguig or Makati, backs sore from hours in an office loft. You'd earn six or seven digits, wed your college sweethearts and make a midlife crisis out of the failing marriage, then become soured old men who frequent the Intramuros golf course by forty. And the monotony of it all terrified them. Terrified you, though you'd hate to admit it.

"Only sometimes," he admitted. "But I don't know anywhere else."

"And if you did?" You'd imagined the boy beside you would wish for something else, too. A life where he didn't have to strain his back and shoulders with oars. Days spent commuting on rundown railways instead of a boat being rocked back and forth.

"I'd stay." He kept his gaze on the boats. You watched a seaweed weft glide on the water until it snagged on a rock jutting out from the sand. It curled around the top like a laurel crown. "I mean, if this is all you have, wouldn't you do the same?"

You wanted to offer him a glimpse of the city, its chemical haze and its skyscrapers that tore incisions in the sky. Wanted to take him to where his footfalls would land on pavement instead of sand. But you looked at him again and thought better. He'd be a captive from the sea, a parrotfish snagged from its reef. As he rose to meet the return of the boats, you watched him intently, realizing that there was something about him you didn't want the city to taint. A languidness to the way he moved. Gliding instead of walking, eyes half-shut accenting the length of his lashes, a deftness to the movements of his hands. The grace of a manta ray. You imagined him the way you stubbornly envisioned the mermen of local

legends, how they were supposed to be beastly but, in your mind, they were beautiful, fish and God and man. You imagined the way he'd spin through the depths, a cacophony of iridescent colors refracting from his scales. He could command the ocean and it would obey. Unlike the city, he wasn't meant to be static. You knew what it was to be trapped, and you'd never want the same for him.

From your vantage point, his head was haloed by a radiance peaking through the clouds. You wondered what it was like to be him, to move through the air as if making it sift through your body. To move as if made of light warping through glass. To command attention without wanting to just by being placed where you are placed.

That night, the sea drew in to visit your dreams again.

Head beneath the waves, you tried to kick, tried to scream. And that was all that the ocean allowed you to do: try. This time, the sea had no bottom, no sand nor bedrock for your corpse to rest on. You kept sinking, sinking, so rapidly it felt like falling. The light from the surface tunneled into a singular pinprick above you until it disappeared. It was only then that you woke up in a sweat, sucked in as much air into your lungs as you could.

In the kitchen, bent over the counter, the sea greeted you through the window. Moonlit. Tamed. No longer surging, as if it were asleep.

You had thought that living a good distance from the ocean didn't mean it would haunt you. But it did, it always did, and not just in your nightmares. That time at a pool party at your Aunt Teresa's home in Ilocos, where as you jumped in the pool you thought you tasted salt instead of the bitterness of chlorine and felt hands pulling you downward. That time when you froze in a hot spring after feeling something brush against your legs. Or that other time...

"You should get some rest." Your mother was at the base of the stairs, nails digging into the railing. "Or is it the heat? A nightmare?"

"Airconditioning is working just fine," you said, dryly.

She sighed, approached the cupboards, took a wine glass and some whiskey from the bar. "Your father's still awake," she said. "Phone calls."

"U.S. escapade?"

"If it were an escapade, it'd mean we'd be coming back."

Your mother was as apathetic as you were about your father's plans to migrate to the U.S. Your father labelled himself a visionary: it said so underneath his photos in the foyers of the apartments and condominiums he founded, in the flyers, in the billboards. And your mother tried to keep up, albeit with less and less enthusiasm as the marriage progressed. She had roots in this province, ones which were all but severed after decades of forcing herself to fold naturally into Manila's way of life, after her parents and aunts and uncles died, cousins migrated, until all that remained for her to remember her life here was herself and the memories that the city hadn't yet tainted with its grime.

"But I just tell myself it would be a good new start for us," she continued. "Especially for you. I've seen you grow, anak, and you're strongest when you're finding your way in the dark."

"I was never strong." You played with a scab on your knuckles. You got it after you unknowingly scraped them too hard against a barnacled pier post on a visit from one of the other fishing villages.

That time, when the boat sank. A private yacht that was given to your family by your father's business-partner-slash-fling. A burst rudder punctured a hole at the starboard, and soon it tilted to throw you and your family out. No lifeguards at midnight, only fishermen who saw the distress signal lights from the coast. It was one of them who pulled you out from being wrenched deeper into the ocean's bowels. You were five, and the only thing you could do was flail and cry. You weren't strong enough to hoist yourself onto a piece of debris.

And wrapped in a towel as you sat on the coast, you shuddered while your parents argued over whose fault it was. Your father called your mother senseless. Your mother called him reckless. And under your father's breath for years after that, he'd talk to himself and say he regrets marrying her. Regrets having you. And he thought you wouldn't hear, because you were too small, too thin, too oblivious. You were never strong enough, even after you grew into clearer eyes, that you agreed with everything.

Or that time, when your father found you with the boy from the robotics team. You were sixteen. His name was Liam. His parents owned a tikoy stall near school. He wore dark blue Lacoste jackets and giggled when you said they didn't go well with the school uniform's beige pants. You fell asleep on each other's shoulders, seated on the cold tiles of the corridors,

notebooks open and unread on your laps. He liked working on circuits and motherboards and microchips and programming, and while he was bent over a drafting table, he asked you to explain Edgar Allan Poe and Sylvia Plath because he was too bored listening to the English teacher.

He understood when you told him you needed to hide. And for a time, it was easy. The excuse was that you shared a playground when you were seven. You rode the same school bus. Classmates ever since fifth grade. Your closeness was inevitable. But the ease in the cover-up didn't tame the guilt.

"Don't you sometimes wish," you asked once, "that you were with someone who didn't have to keep you a secret?"

"I don't mind." He pushed his glasses up. His nose was red from the sun. "I'll wait until you're ready."

But your father was driving home one day, saw you together on a park bench near school. A kiss, an innocent one on the cheek. But your father didn't believe in innocence, did he? To him, actions are calculated, played in a mental chess match. A handshake meant a trial for dominance. A smile was only either snide or seductive. A kiss was an act of rebellion. And he wouldn't have a rebellious son. He dragged you home. Filled the sink with water. Forced your head under. He was all hard muscle and violent rage and feral yelling. You were all burning lungs and incessant pleading and thrashing limbs. The next morning, you removed Liam from your contacts. You pretended not to smell his cologne on the keychain he had given you on your birthday. He passed by you on the hallway, said hi, and in return you treated him like a faint breeze; there and felt but given no mind. Eventually, he gave up too. You were never strong enough, not even after years of contemplation, to tell your father that sometimes you think you were better off under the ocean, that you were better off with sand sifting over what was left of you.

And you were never strong enough to accuse your mother of never trying to leave.

She stepped to trace her thumb against a mole at the corner of your lip. Brushed a finger against a loose strand of hair hanging over your brow.

"Since you almost drowned," she said. "It feels like we never got to pull you out of the water. You were always giggling, always playing and fooling around and then suddenly you looked as if you were always walking on tightrope. Always afraid."

You weren't afraid when you kissed Liam, weren't afraid until the water siphoned into your lungs and almost killed you. The braver steps you took wrenched you underwater, and now everyone wonders why you are frozen where you are. But doesn't everyone do this? Doesn't everyone have a prison they've forged for themselves that they call shelter?

But you were tired too, from always giving in. You knew this safety came at a price. And soon the image of the boy fluttered into your vision. For once, you wanted to call the cards. You'd be sixteen again, unafraid and blissful in your naivety. You'd kiss a boy and run to tell the story; you'd say his name without trembling. At least once, you promised yourself, before someone else's call puts you on a plane to a country you've never been to before.

And so, you told your mother you're going out for some air. She kissed you on the forehead. And though it was summer and the heat of daytime made the air shimmer, the wind that night was crisp.

It was firelight that led you to him. Nestled on a mound of stones, he sat before a bonfire. He poked the heap of wood with a stick, agitating the cinders, sending the flames sputtering. And when you asked for permission to sit with him, he nodded without looking at you. He took out a wooden comb from his pocket, began fiddling with its teeth.

"I'm leaving soon," you said. At times when the light shifted, the shadows turned over as they touched his face, and suddenly you saw Liam and not him. They had almost the same curves and slopes, the same bend of lashes, the same kind of gaze that puts back together the things that came undone under its hold.

"What's the city like?" He asked. His voice slid over your skin like the wind.

"Well," you rubbed your hands together, "it's loud."

"And?" He tilted his head.

"There's also lots of smoke." Then it was your turn to ask him questions. "So, you're someone who likes to stay dapper?"

Upon realizing that you were referring to the comb, he chuckled softly. "This isn't mine."

"Your father's?"

"My mother's actually."

Then he looked up, a stare that tried to hold the entire horizon, the entire expanse of dark blue. His eyes darted from star to star, like he was waiting for one of them to be dislodged from their place in the heavens and scalpel the sky with a trail of light. But they stayed where they were, and as you looked at him, his form aglow, you thought that maybe the legends were true. Each star was a god, either pulsating with a desire to burn the things they touched or too apathetic to intervene. And when they fell, it meant that a god had died. Or maybe they chose to fall to the earth, incarnate themselves as human, and sit beside you on a beach in the middle of the night.

“I was five. Tatay had a really high fever. While he recovered, mama took over his place, chose to fish. Then a storm hit and the boats were capsized. They didn’t find her among the bodies.”

When you turned your head to look at the ocean, you thought about how it insulted him with the roar of its waves. It would take and steal and devour. Every roll and pound of water against the sand would remind him of what it did to his mother. But this boy would return to the sea every day, to ask for a living from the thing that took her away from him. He knew the sea, and perhaps you did too. And you both knew firsthand that it could kill. But while you could choose to run away from it, he’d return, almost devoted to it.

You told him you were sorry, because you couldn’t expect the ocean to apologize for itself. The ocean couldn’t feel any remorse. It played a gamble, a coin toss of sorts, chose to either be a murderer or life-giver.

“Sometimes, I hear her singing.” He picks his nail against one of the comb’s broken teeth. “When I’m out there, I hear her, and it keeps my thoughts clear.”

“Is that all it takes for you?” you asked. “To pretend?”

“I wouldn’t call it pretending.” He looked longingly at the comb. “If I were pretending, I’d believe she was really gone. I don’t. I think she’s still out there, and she waits for me when I set out.”

The flames seemed to quiet down too, faintly crackling.

He continued, “I remember a story she put me to bed with once. Whenever fishermen are lost at sea, Amansinaya, a sea goddess, has a kingdom for them waiting below. And they become her servants. They never really die.”

You turned your gaze to the sea, where a ship in the distance tore through the chevrons. All those years ago, when you looked down below your feet, all you saw was darkness. A chasm. There was no glittering city. No sea goddess decorated in gold. And when your father tried to drown you, there was no one to reassure you of salvation. But if all it took was to convince yourself, to believe so stubbornly, then maybe you could kiss Liam again. Maybe your father wouldn't have the power to drown you. Maybe you could take your mother, escape. Maybe all you needed to escape was to believe that you already have.

And that night, you were willing to try.

"Show me that, then." You rose. "Teach me how to swim."

"You seemed afraid last time."

"I still am," you said. "But that doesn't matter."

It was then that he stood, took your hand, and you stiffened with the suddenness. You let him guide you to where the water met the stones. Barefoot, you were aware of every grain of sand, felt the movement of every crustacean hiding beneath. You let the breeze caress your cheeks. And then you focused on the feeling of his calluses and let his fingers curl over yours.

"High tide," he warned.

You nodded, urged yourself on.

You moved forward with him. You felt your pulse quicken, a river straining inside you. You kept your sights on the horizon. A vastness that once tried to feed on your corpse. You were about to go into its maw again, and this time, you were gambling that you could escape it. This time, you knew you could win. This time, you had the mercy of a hand to pull you back up if you slipped, to hoist you into the surface if you sunk.

You were already chest-deep. The water jumped at your neck, the spray assaulted your face. But you breathed. You focused on his skin touching yours, on the warmth that not even the water could choke out with its cold. When he halted, he told you you've reached the place where the seafloor was too steep to walk on. You'd have to jump. Toss yourself into the current. There'd be nothing for your feet to plant themselves on. You'd be at the water's mercy.

"Sure you're fine with this?" he asked.

"Yes."

“A lot of things could go wrong. I might not be able to hold you. You could be swept away.”

“That’s not the worst thing that could happen.”

You looked at your skin. Blue from the cold, palms already wrinkling. This would be your first time to submit to the ocean predisposed. And maybe that was what it wanted. Perhaps it preyed on those who scrambled away from its trenches, feasted on those who tried to escape its maw. It was a monster that loved the chase as much as it loved the reward. All you needed to do was be its willing victim. Perhaps that was when it decided to let you go.

“I’m going in now. Just follow me.” He studied the waves, looked down at the drop. Sized it up. “Do you trust me?”

You remembered the first night, the net thrown over the boat. Remembered him sitting on the coast, staring with reverence at the sea that held his people’s boats. And then you remembered Liam, the untamed nature of his hair and his smile and his being. If you could, you’d be holding him now. But the ocean swept your thoughts away.

You asked for his name.

“Miguel.” Then he asked for yours.

“Julian.”

Then he told you to follow his lead once more. Told you to inhale and balloon your lungs, and then he jumped. His head disappeared for a few seconds before popping out of the surface.

You remembered the boat with the burst rudder, the water and the abyss, being pulled into the maw. You could’ve turned back, run to where the sea would be of no power.

But his name was Miguel. He wasn’t Liam. Your father wasn’t there. You would choose to jump. And so, you did. You’d let yourself learn to be like the ocean you once feared, unrestrained, unbound.

You inhaled, clung to his elbow and jumped. Your feet landed on nothing, and soon your head was below the surface. You were a bird with your wings spread out. Weightless. A gull in flight. Nothing was pulling you down. Instead, you were clinging onto his arms, and for a moment he let you see what was below you. A reef, fish flitting in and out of their niches.

Urchins on the seabed, anemone dancing to the tide. Light filtering through, spotlighting corals and flashing off scales. A kingdom instead of a graveyard. No dead bodies, no skulls. The coral no longer looked like tombstones. And when you rose, you saw only his face. You wanted to reach for him, pull him close. Be like the sea and take something that isn't yours.

And when you kissed him, you didn't see Liam anymore, didn't recoil from visions of your father. When you kissed him, even with water all around you, it was the first time you learned to breathe. You wished you didn't have to pull away. And when the ocean visited your dreams again, you would throw yourself into the deepest of its trenches. You'd allow yourself to drown, allow yourself to fall.

* * * * *

“Scissors Paper Stone”

by Barbara Kuessner Hughes

Steven Foong.

I haven't read or spoken your name in years, but it has never completely faded from my thoughts.

On Saturday mornings, my daughter and I eat breakfast in the coffee shop of our condo. Normally, I flick through the news on my phone. But, as you always did, I enjoy the sensation of paper between my hands, so on weekends I treat myself to a copy of the *New Straits Times*.

Today, suddenly, there's your name, striking at me from inside an article on page three.

Dr. Steven Foong, distinguished surgeon of Malaysian origin, residing in Toronto, Canada...

There's a photograph of you with your wealthy Canadian wife. *Betsy Mayhew, 36, originally of Calgary, Alberta.* Dainty, probably auburn-haired, photographed in a skiing outfit. Standing next to her, you look as handsome as ever. You and your wife were childless and, according to the newspaper, *enjoyed a hectic and glamorous lifestyle.*

I read the short article again and begin to tremble.

'Mum, what is it?' Kim Lan asks, peering at my face. 'What's wrong lah? Are you OK? You look like you've had a shock!'

I open my mouth to say something reassuring, but all that comes out is a choking noise. I've spotted the article halfway through our kaya toast and coffee. Result: a stain spluttered down the front of my blouse.

A tremor passes through me. You have relatives sprinkled throughout Kuala Lumpur and across Selangor. I imagine people all over the region feeling the same emotions as me,

men shaking their heads in bafflement and women letting out cries of dismay. Thank goodness you're an only child and your parents are dead!

Kim Lan's eyes follow mine, and I see her skim through the article. 'What... You know these people?' she asks. I shake my head; only one of them.

Kim Lan is twenty, a law student. Her eyes are strangely like yours, I've often thought, the same bright, rich brown, but their expression is gentler. She's attractive without being vain, clever without being arrogant. And now her curiosity is focussed on me. I can't help it; I start coughing again.

Charlie, the coffee shop waiter, rushes over carrying a glass of water and a cloth to dab at my clothing. 'Are you OK, Mrs. Goh? Drink this, ma'am!' Kim Lan wipes brown liquid off my Rolex, the knees of my Gucci trousers, and I let her; at this moment I don't care about possessions.

When my body has calmed, my mind is starved with shock, as if somebody had tried to push me out of my apartment on the twentieth floor of the building. I wrap my fingers around the green hardness of the jade pendant which Abah bought for me when I was a little girl. Normally it acts like a talisman, a physical link between him and me. But today, it isn't working.

The truth is not something I feel capable of sharing. Kim Lan and her brother Benny know little about my history before I married their dad. Nor do they know why I divorced him. I'll never tell them that during the ten years of our marriage, Simon Goh was constantly unfaithful. I got tired of it, got tired of him. My children and I are close, but I know they prefer to think their dad's been my only love. I let them keep their illusions.

Then a second shudder hits me, and it's worse than the first. My mind is full of the possible future which awaits you. It's a vision too terrible to bear. I throw some cash on the café table.

'Maybe I should take you to the hospital for a check-up,' Kim Lan says.

I manage to shake my head. 'I'm not sick.'

Then I go up in the lift to my apartment, leaning against my daughter for support. By this point, she has stopped asking questions, but I avoid looking at her. I don't want to see the disquiet shading her eyes.

'I'll be fine,' I tell her. 'I need to rest only.'

An hour later, when I've reassured Kim Lan that I'm OK, she goes to meet her friends at a shopping mall, and I step outside into my roof garden, adorned with pots of bamboo and violet orchids, and gaze out over the city.

I left suburbia and moved to central Kuala Lumpur after my divorce. I was so happy to be starting afresh in a new location that I celebrated by making a donation to my favourite Buddhist temple.

My windows look out over the condominium's swimming pool on one side and a park on the other. I like being at the centre of activity in my country, a privileged citizen of a city where so much is happening, watching miniature figures live out their stories below, and savouring the night-time sparkle. I feed on the city's vitality, the delicious aromas in its streets.

Nowadays I'm the CEO of the family leather goods business, and thanks to hard work and good feng shui, the company has expanded. I have everything I could wish for except a loving husband, but today I feel as if I've fed on something dry and suffocating, like paper. Through my tears, the structural blades of the Petronas Towers, normally so distinct, are blurred.

Abah started his business from scratch. It took him from sharing a bed with three siblings in a rundown shophouse to a spacious bungalow and a factory employing one hundred and fifty workers, but inside he remained a modest man. His breakfast was still simple congee, his lunch mee from a hawker. He would deplore my current existence as extravagant.

It was due to him that I met you, and that special day is still seared into my memory. It astonishes me, thinking how easily pleased we were. Simple games still delighted us. Two teams of children playing scissors, paper, stone on hot sand beneath casuarina trees on a beach in Port Dickson. I was ten, you were twelve.

A tall girl walked towards me, Indian, with an encompassing smile. 'Hi, I'm Bina. Want to play? What's your name?'

I was unused to talking to strangers, so I told her solemnly, in full. 'Ng Mei Hwa Bernice.'

'OK, Bernice, you stand here.' She placed me at the end of one of the lines of children, who were gesticulating wildly, and it was then that you came straight up to us, a good-looking

Chinese boy with unusual eyes: a bright, rich caramel colour which reminded me of the cognac my uncles drank at celebrations. Your boldness made me think of the monkeys clambering up the steps of Batu Caves, choosing whom to rob of their food. You declared, 'I'm Steven Foong.'

We began to play the game, facing one another, then swapping places with the other players, and I think I was a bit delirious, dazed not only by the heat. My rock blunted your scissors many times, but you didn't seem to mind.

Eventually Ama, fearing the ruination of my complexion by the sun, called me away to eat fried rice. 'Do I have to come?' I protested, but my mum had a good line in firm looks.

As soon as I could, I ran back across the beach to join you. I remember telling you about my school. I couldn't stop talking, which was unusual: I was an only child, and unused to mixing.

'Your school sounds nice. I don't like mine so much. Most of the other boys don't like me, just because I get good grades,' you said in English, but when you could see I didn't fully understand, you switched back to Cantonese. 'My dad wants to send me to the boarding school he went to, but I don't want to go. Europe and America are OK for holidays, like when my family went to Paris and London. I like the museums. And New York is interesting. And we had fun at Disneyland in California, but I don't like hotdogs... Where do you like to go?'

I didn't know what to say. I'd never been outside West Malaysia. But the awkward pause didn't last long.

What was it about you? What was the big attraction? I think I know. You acted as if every syllable I spoke counted.

My parents loved me, but Abah was usually busy at the company and Ama was sick and spent most of her time in bed. 'Be a good girl,' they'd say. 'You know what you've got to do.' Which normally meant schoolwork. And my teachers barely noticed me; I was an unexceptional student.

You and I whiled away several joyful days, splashing in the shallow water and sprinting up and down the beach. Every morning I couldn't wait to burst out and greet you. It was my family's first vacation, apart from trips to visit family. I think Abah arranged it because it was a middle-class kind of thing to do, but he spent the first day sitting on the

veranda of our chalet, staring at the sea as if he didn't know what it was for and checking his watch every few minutes.

Abah was stocky, and many things about him were short: his barked commands, his bristly hair, his restless tapping fingers, sometimes his tolerance.

'You're so restless!' my mum scolded him. 'Relax lah!'

'OK, OK,' he said. 'I'm trying! I'm trying! Just for you!'

On the second day, he announced that there were problems at the office; he had to leave, but Ama and I should stay for the rest of the week as planned.

'Eat well and rest well,' he told her, the line between his eyes deepening as he looked at her. I know Abah worked so hard not only to grow a financial buffer for the family, but to distract himself from his worries. To me he added, 'Help your mother with anything she wants. Have a nice time lah! Bye-bye!' And with that, he jumped into his car and drove back to KL.

Ama was glad she didn't have to keep me occupied. I suspect her problems were emotional as much as physical because her energy level seemed to fluctuate so much. My anxiety about her always surrounded me, like a black edge to a photograph. But I probably worried even more than necessary because I didn't know what I should be worrying about. In those days, nobody talked about such matters to children.

On that vacation, she was at one of her lethargic lows. She spent most of the time lying on her bed, face puffy, hair scattered, facing the door of the chalet. I knew from photos that she'd once been as pretty as her favourite singer, Teresa Teng. 'Play where I can see you!' she'd say. As soon as I was out of her line of sight, she'd call, 'Where are you, you naughty girl? Come back where I can see you!' but often when I checked, her eyes would be closed. I'd sneak into the chalet and tiptoe around the bed just to test whether she was really asleep.

If she was, you and I were free to do things which were forbidden. Ama had said, 'Don't go into the sea. You might drown!' so we'd wade out to where the water was deep, and another guest had warned us about a dangerous undercurrent. And Ama had said, 'Don't climb on the big grey rocks. You'll crack your head open like a coconut!' so I'd leap from one boulder to another like a mountain goat. By contrast, your parents seemed to be completely relaxed and let you do whatever you want.

I'd see them on the veranda of their chalet, or strolling around the hotel compound, smooth, well-groomed, nonchalant people who'd smile and walk on, your mother protecting her face with a floppy batik hat.

Ama consumed little herself, but every day, we took our meals in the open-sided hotel dining room, watching the rufflings of the sea and the Malay women selling vivid baskets under a tree. To this day, the sound of surf lapping on sand reminds me of that trip, of Ama. Of you.

At home, life consisted of study-study-study with an hour or two at weekends to play with neighbourhood children, but during that week, my taste of liberty was intoxicating. You taught me Chinese chess, and whilst my mum dozed, we drank Kickapoo Joy Juice and ate sweetcorn ice cream and sweets, feeling sugar coat our teeth like fur. When I think back to those moments, my pleasure and sadness that they're in the past are so close to one another, like notes from a violin, that I can't separate them.

'We're going home tomorrow,' Ama said on the last night of the holiday. 'Abah's coming to get us, so you must get your things ready tonight.'

I pulled out my little suitcase, purchased especially for the trip, and began to put my belongings in it. I weighed up what to say next, whether to say anything at all. 'You know Steven?' I began.

'That boy you've been playing with?' Ama smiled. 'It's nice that you've had somebody to play with.'

'Can I see him again after the holiday?' Ama looked nonplussed. 'I like him. He's nice.' Ama still looked puzzled. 'He's my friend. I want to play with him again.'

She turned away and began folding her clothes. 'You'll forget about him in a week or two, and you'll be too busy anyway.'

'But -'

Ama glanced at me, and suddenly she had the strained look which presaged an attack of physical weakness. 'It's silly rubbish. A waste of time. Now, don't forget to check everywhere.' She added, tenderly, 'Silly melon!'

Fortunately, you and I had already had the miraculous realisation that we came from adjacent sections of Petaling Jaya, separated only by a few streets and a park, and we'd made the decision: whatever the obstacles, we were going to stay in contact.

We couldn't see each other often, but whenever Ama was having one of her energetic phases and went out to run errands on a Saturday, a furtive phone call would take place, and we'd meet in the park.

I'd told you I enjoyed reading – my comprehension of written English far exceeded my understanding of speech - so you'd lend me storybooks which you'd bought at Jaleel's Baby Centre. 'This is a good one,' you'd say. 'Exciting lah!' You brought me books by Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie, Nancy Drew. 'You might like this one. The detective is a girl.' One day you presented me with a serialisation of the adventures of The Monkey King. 'My dad says it's important for us to know our own culture, not only Western.'

It was always fun with you. Although we were not so different in age, you were my teacher. You showed me how to fold a sampan out of paper, how to make origami frogs, cranes and boxes. One day you demonstrated a folding exercise. 'It's a love knot,' you said, a faint blush spreading over your hairless cheeks. I blushed back as I accepted it from you. That was the first acknowledgement that we were not merely friends.

Another time, you spread a scrapbook open on the bench between us. 'This is a secret. My portfolio. I want to go to art school when I'm older. I'll have to show them my work.' You had pictures of everything from kampung houses to stray cats, bougainvillea and orchids, an elderly woman who you said was your grandma, and a girl who resembled me, immersed in a daydream. I couldn't believe you'd created these images using simple paper, pencils and crayons. That was when I concluded once and for all that you were a genius.

I'd never met anybody like you before, and I never have since. 'The other boys at school think I'm strange,' you said. 'They don't understand how somebody can be interested in many different things at the same time. They think it's either *this* or *that*. They're so *boring*, lah!' You were the first person who told me not to fear being different. 'Why do you think you have to be the same as everybody else? You don't!' You were starving for knowledge, and whatever you read seemed to become part of you, like fluid in your bloodstream or flecks in the irises of your eyes.

You were gifted at everything you tried. I used to tease you – 'You boast lah! You're so big-headed, I don't know how you can get in your house!', and you'd shrug as if to say, It's not my fault, I can't help it.

One particular day has been etched into my memory, the transformative day when I got my first real insight into the cycle of life. An afternoon in the school holidays. Ama was going to a series of medical appointments. It was too good a chance to miss.

No sooner had Ama left than I got ready to go out, too.

'Where are you going, Missy?' Sow Lin, the amah who was working in the house that day, asked me. Sow Lin, with her jaundiced complexion and muddy eyes. Now I wonder if I disliked her because of her appearance, and that makes me feel bad.

'Out,' I said, and I admit it: my tone was insolent. For a moment we just looked at each other, and I wondered if she was going to try to stop me. In unguarded moments, Sow Lin's eyes betrayed the fact that she resented me, resented my family, for our prosperity. She didn't care what I did as long as I got home before Ama and didn't get her into trouble. I knew how to turn Sow Lin's attitude to my advantage, but the sense of her dismissal simmered inside me. It made me feel like clinging to you even more.

At that point, I often felt rather alone; even Ama seemed to have lost interest in my activities. I'd go into her bedroom and try to talk to her. 'Ama, guess what happened today? A new girl's coming to my school!' or 'Ama, would you like some of the yummy chicken rice we had for dinner?'

'Oh...' my mum would half-groan, her face grey, legs sticking out from under the sheet, one wrist dangling over the edge of the bed. Sometimes I thought I saw traces of tears on her cheeks. 'I'm too tired. Maybe tomorrow, OK?'

But tomorrow nothing would have changed.

I had the feeling I could run away from home, and nobody would notice. I felt like staging a grand test of my relatives' attentiveness, committing some outrageous offence in the middle of Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, painting rude words on parked cars, perhaps, and seeing if they'd urge the police to let me go or let them drag me away to Pudu Prison. I imagined myself woefully peering out between the bars of my cell.

However, that day I was with you, so I was happy. It was even hotter and more humid than usual; ribbons of heat shimmered up from the soil. We met at the park and strolled around the lake. At any moment, the sky was going to rupture, but we were contented, playing a nonsensical game, comparing one another to the plants we came across.

You pointed to the large leaves of an 'elephant ear' plant. 'That's what your ears look like! And -' indicating a hibiscus, 'Your nose is like that bunga raya over there - so big and red and pointy, only no yellow hairs sticking out of it!'

I kicked some bamboo. 'That's what your legs look like! Long and skinny!'

We were so busy pulling faces as we came around a clump of pagoda flower bushes that we nearly tripped over it: a huge crow stranded on the ground, struggling to raise its head, beak stuck in the soil, feathers the same lustrous black as your hair, wings flattened as though rocks had been placed upon them. So magnificent, with its stern eyes regarding us, yet so helpless.

'Either it's suffering from a disease,' you diagnosed, 'or it's got a wound underneath, where we can't see.'

I'd never been so close to a bird before, nor to an injured animal. I couldn't decide whether to observe it or run away in fright.

'You should take a good look,' you said. 'This is a rare opportunity.' So, I stepped closer and studied it, my heart banging in my chest like a gong. I feared its eyes, which were far from friendly. And even though I was accustomed to a certain amount of animal discomfort - beasts kept in cages, guard dogs out in the sun - I really began to feel for this creature's plight.

You stepped towards it, and suddenly I was scared. Its eyes were turning angry.

'It's suffering,' you said. 'You know it's got to die, right?' Reluctantly, I nodded. 'Close your eyes.'

'What are you going to do?'

You didn't answer. There was a hoarse squawk, and when I opened my eyes, the bird was dead. You showed me the blood-stained stone in your hand. I started to cry. I couldn't process the way the crow had gone from being alive to being a lump on the path, head dented, eyes without vision. And I couldn't comprehend how decisively you'd acted.

'Don't cry,' you said in a soothing voice. 'Its soul is flying away now. You know it would have died whatever we did.'

I knew you were right, and it made me feel better. You nudged my shoulder with yours. There was a new glow on your face. 'Let me show you something interesting.'

You fished in your trouser pocket and held out a small red-and-steel object. 'This is my Swiss army knife. Look what it can do! All these things!' You opened out the attachments, one by one. 'Bottle opener, scissors, ruler, nail clippers...'

I was fascinated. 'Why have you got it?'

'I use it to help my mum. I open bottles and cut things.' You bent down over the bird. 'I've got a schoolbook with pictures showing the anatomy of plants and human beings and animals. But that's just ink on paper. We can have a look for real!'

Exotic colours were shining in your eyes. You drove the blade on your knife straight into the chest of the dead bird. I felt pushed into a well of disbelief; nothing on earth would have induced me to touch that feathery black corpse. Your knife was small, but you were surprisingly strong, and you wrestled until you got the abdomen open, and your hands were covered in blood. Flashes exploded inside my head. I sank to the ground, but you continued, pulling the bird apart in front of me. I felt revolted, but most of all, astonished at your bravery.

'Look,' you said. Suddenly you had the bearing of Mr Tan, one of my teachers. 'This is like what my father does every day. He's a surgeon.' We never really discussed our parents. 'He performs operations on sick people, makes incisions in their skin, removes the diseased sections of their organs, and sews them up again. He's normally successful at saving them.'

'Wow!' That was even more impressive than what you'd just done with the bird. But I sensed a dip in your spirits.

'My father wants me to become a surgeon, too,' you said. 'But as you know, I want to be an artist.' Then you became matter-of-fact again. 'Look, this is the bird's heart.' You poked your knife at a small, squishy scarlet object like a bud.

I gazed at the heart, and thought, So, that's the thing causing Ama so much trouble, only hers is a larger version? 'My mum's got a sick heart,' I said.

'Oh. Sorry.' You looked at me, eyes full of sympathy. But then your interest in the bird's organs took over again. You dropped the heart onto the ground and scooped out another blob of redness. You pulled out organs one by one, not seeming to mind that the metallic-stinking, messy stuff was going all over your fingers. 'Lung, stomach... This is the kidney.'

'Ama's got a sick kidney, too,' I said. 'I know because I heard her talking to my auntie.'

'Oh.' On your face, compassion edged out the animation of the keen dissector. 'Sorry lah. I was going to show you the liver. But forget about that now.' You nudged me with your shoulder again. 'Want to get some ice cream?'

You washed your knife and hands clean in the public toilets, dried your prized instrument carefully on your T-shirt, and folded each accessory back into place. Then you bought me an ice lolly. 'Sorry about your Ama, ah?' As soon as the cold hit my tongue I felt better, and we didn't refer to my mum's health again that day.

Looking back, maybe what you did should have driven me away, but I think the uniqueness of that day brought us even closer; we were bound together by its secret drama. And even though I felt repelled by the internal organs of the bird, I valued anything which connected us.

I can remember the day when we became more than playmates: my hand, resting on a bench in the shadow of a flame-of-the-forest tree, was edging towards yours like a shy little spider when your larger one engulfed it. 'Got you!' We looked into one another's eyes, and suddenly there was a whole new dimension to the gaze. The love which was already between us transferred to a different plane. Our emotions were not expressed in words; they were a force field between us. But that day, you made a statement. 'I love you. I knew as soon as I saw you, you're the most special girl in the world.'

As time went on, Ama began to go away for periods of weeks, and if it happened during the school holidays, I would stay at my Auntie May Ling's house in Ipoh. Auntie May Ling had dazzling skin which reminded me of the pearly flesh of a mangosteen, and with most people she had a sweet, unassuming manner, but for me, she reserved a special strictness. I knew it was intended to give both of us strength. Looking back, I'm sure she was stalked by dread of losing her only sister. She was a much more observant person than my parents, so during those periods, my relationship with you was suspended.

Whenever I asked Auntie where Ama had gone, she'd change the subject or heap more food onto my plate. 'Eat your cabbage! And have some more chilli and onions. Pungent food is good for your lungs.'

'My lungs?'

'Your lungs and sad emotions are closely linked.' Then her face would soften, and she'd give me a pat. 'No need to worry so much. Everything will be OK.'

Just to please her, I'd get my chopsticks moving towards my mouth once more.

A couple of times, I overheard Abah and Auntie murmuring to one another about doctors and medical bills, but as soon as I entered the room, they fell silent. At one point I knew things were not good because Auntie bought me three new dresses and took me to a Jackie Chan movie and her favourite bakery, all in one day.

'Want another one?' she asked, when I'd devoured a whole roast pork bun within seconds. 'You can have another one. Or two, if you want.'

But on that occasion, my mother rallied.

Those were difficult times: I missed my mum, but I missed you even more.

If Ama went away during a school term, I stayed at home, being looked after by Sow Lin and the warm-armed, soft-voiced Filipina, Ligaya, and I'd only see Abah in the evening. He was a well-meaning father, but he didn't know what to do with an adolescent daughter any more than he'd known what to do with the ocean.

'How are your maths lessons going?' he might ask.

'OK,' I'd say, trying to strike the right note between honesty and modesty. Maths was the only thing I was good at.

'Excellent! Keep it up. Numbers are important, as you know. Even though people have calculators nowadays. When I was a boy, we only had this.' He'd touch his temple. 'And this -' Sliding his fingers along an invisible abacus. Then he'd hover nearby, watching me as I ate or leafed through my schoolbook. I'd sense words fumbling about behind his lips. 'Well... So, you're all right...?'

'I'm all right, Abah. Please don't worry. I'm fine.' I always said the same thing whether I was all right or not, because I couldn't stand to see concern tauten his face.

'Well... Good. Any girl stuff, ask your auntie, OK? And remember to go to sleep soon, ah? Your mum asked me to remind you to sleep enough and eat enough. Now, I must go and...' He'd leave the room in a hurry.

At the weekends when Ama was away, he'd invite his friends to play mah-jong, and I'd lie in bed listening to men's voices and the frantic clicking of tiles into the night, and it wasn't Abah's fault, but those sounds made me feel even more alone.

Alongside you and me, technology was developing, but you disliked emails, insisting on letters. 'A letter is like a gift. If somebody wants to, they can keep it for the rest of their life.'

'What makes you think I'd want to keep your letters?' I'd tease, but I hid them in a secret box under my bed. Sometimes written in English, sometimes in Chinese, they were beautifully decorated and full of precocious eloquence.

We had an arrangement: on the special occasions when you wrote to me, the letter was timed for a day when I could await the postman's arrival in person. Our system worked well, but I dreaded the day when somebody noticed I was getting letters from a boy who lived nearby. My parents would fear inappropriate behaviour and a distraction from my education, and if they found out how long I'd been deceiving them, I'd be punished. I was happy whenever I saw you, yet on some level I was always in a state of fear and stress.

You'd write about my sparkling eyes, my soft black cloud of hair, the dimples in my cheeks. You quoted poetry, Classical Chinese and, once you'd discovered him, the American poet Ezra Pound. You wrote out 'The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter' and embellished the edges of the paper with tiny illustrations. You wrote, 'This poem expresses some of how I feel about you.'

I read that page over and over again, savouring the story of those two children, their early marriage, mournful parting and anticipated reunion, especially liking the mention of sad-sounding monkeys.

Once a month or so, when Ama stayed in her bedroom for several days at a time—by now my poor mum was maimed by depression—we'd catch separate buses into the city and wander around neighbourhoods where nobody knew us, hand-in-hand. We'd have fried mee or wonton soup at a hawker stall and follow it with fruit juice. There was no opportunity for physical affection. We both found it frustrating, but you didn't want me to feel bad.

'We can wait,' you'd say. 'No hurry lah! One day we'll be married.'

Meanwhile, Abah began to groom me for the day when I'd take over the business. 'A company boss is like a big fish,' he told me.

'A big fish?'

'Swimming on the surface of the river. Your workers are the small fish and frogs in the waters underneath you. You need to know what they're doing at all times. You also need to be able to spot if a crocodile is lurking.'

'A crocodile?'

Abah looked impatient. 'Your business rival. The accountant attempting fraud. The lazy worker. The spy who's trying to steal our designs.'

'Oh, I see!'

'So, you're going to learn everything from the bottom to the top, starting in the muddy weeds. Understand?'

I did understand, but I felt daunted, unworthy. And not so enthusiastic about starting in the muddy weeds. 'Yes, Abah... But I don't know if I can...'

'Can lah! Of course, you can do it! No problem! Only need to pay attention. Attention to detail is the secret of every success. Which singer or movie star is admired right now? What's her style? Which supplier is offering the right quality of leather at the best price? Which employee has a special skill? Embroidery? Engraving? And so on.'

'But I worry...'

'No need to worry. Just make the products with sincerity and do your best to keep the customers happy, and everything will be all right.'

As Abah took me with him to the godown where the materials were stored, and to the factory, where I saw the leather sheets being cut and the pieces stitched together, witnessing how much he was in charge of began to give me a new feeling of confidence and pride. I became more assertive and started to question things you said. You didn't like it. You'd say, 'Are you sure you've considered that matter properly? I don't think you have.' And that annoyed me.

But I never looked at another boy. Looking back, I wonder how it was possible for me to have such tunnel vision, but it felt natural at the time. My life was narrow. School, home, Abah's company, stolen dates with you. I had two female schoolfriends, but I didn't trust them enough to tell them about you.

Then one day you made an announcement. 'You know, Bernice, I'm more serious than ever about becoming a professional artist...'

'Oh...' I felt as if somebody had dropped large, heavy stones onto my feet and broken them. Art as a pastime was one thing; saying you wanted it to be your full-time occupation was another. I'd thought your earlier statements were a passing whim.

'Look what my dad's brought me,' you said. 'He travelled to China recently.' You produced an envelope containing orange tigers and crimson dragons leaping across invisible landscapes, their muscular energy carved into fragile paper using a razor. 'Aren't they amazingly skilful? It's a traditional craft which I'm going to try.'

Within six months, you'd managed to persuade a small gallery to display some of your paper cuts. I was proud of you, but uneasy. My ancestors hadn't escaped poverty and instability, hadn't toiled and sacrificed in order for my children to live with uncertainty. I wanted to be a successful businesswoman married to a successful businessman or professional, with children who'd know as little insecurity as possible.

A few months later, exuding defeat, you announced, 'Dad says I've got to follow in his footsteps and study medicine. He believes I'm "uniquely suited to surgery and will derive great satisfaction from it". He's sending me to Cambridge University.'

I was relieved to hear you apparently giving in to common sense. But I wept copiously. I was such a wreck that for the first time, my health instead of Ama's became the target of everybody's attention. The dreadful-tasting potions boiled up in the kitchen using tonic roots improved my digestion and cleared away the eczema on my hands but did nothing to improve my state of mind.

Then, whilst you were in England, Ama passed away. She'd managed to hang on to her life until I was seventeen. I was devastated. You wrote me consoling letters. 'Your mother's spirit is enjoying itself in the afterlife. Remember all that stuff you and your dad burned for her? The paper house, the car, the food? Everything she liked on earth she has where she is now, even bigger, better, more comfortable and delicious. As long as you honour her memory, she'll never die in your heart. And don't forget, you'll never be alone because I love you.'

Your letters helped, but they were no substitute for being with you. It took me a while to think of a solution.

'Abah...' I said one afternoon. We were recovering from a banquet held to celebrate his friend Boon Hwee's sixtieth birthday. Slumped at our table amid gilt pillars, red lanterns

and winding carvings of dragons, we'd feasted on everything from abalone to lobster, bird's nest soup to wagyu beef, and Abah was in a genial mood.

'Yes, daughter?' He was not too tipsy to miss the seriousness behind my tone.

'Abah... I've been thinking... I'd like to go and study in England.'

He scrutinised me for a long moment, his eyes shrewd, and suddenly I wondered whether he knew about you after all. But I dismissed that notion. He narrowed his eyes, took a few deep puffs of his cigarette, shook his head. 'Go so far? What for lah? You've got everything you need here!'

'But...'

'Want a new car? No problem. I'll buy it for you. Want to go on some trips? OK, no problem. But England?' He pondered for a long moment. Then a look of decisiveness came over his face. He shook his head again and stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray, grinding it into the base as though pressing his chop onto a document. 'I'll make you a special offer. You can take charge of the design side. Right now. That's a great honour for you. It demonstrates my confidence in your judgement.'

'Oh, Abah, I *am* honoured, but...'

'This is a good opportunity for you.' For a moment, his eyes were as steely as if I were a stranger sitting across from him at a negotiating table. But then they softened and blurred. 'Please stay, lah. Don't go away. I've lost your mother already. I don't want to lose you, too.'

I considered arguing with him. I considered threatening to leave anyway, which would have been difficult because I didn't have any money of my own. But I knew he'd never change his mind. And I was deeply moved. Tears trailed down both my cheeks and his. He handed me a napkin, I wiped my face dry, and I accepted.

As it turned out, people really liked my ideas for shoes and belts and handbags, and I was much happier working for Abah than I'd expected to be.

You, meanwhile, were miserable in England for the first year or so. I received letters full of love and despair. 'I take a train to London at weekends and wander around Chinatown, seeking connectedness. The food's so bland here. And the weather's so gloomy. Luckily, yesterday I found a shop to buy belacan and chilli sauce and Maggi mee.'

But gradually, your tone changed. 'My fellow students, Jim and his girlfriend Lorna, are taking me on a sightseeing tour of historic buildings. They're nice, and we've got many

interests in common.' Another day you wrote, 'I expressed curiosity in the concept of blue cheese, so my neighbour Samuel bought a selection of different blue cheeses for me to try. I'm not a fan, but we enjoyed ourselves. We drank a lot of wine...'

You began to perceive that there might be art as well as technique in surgery. 'Maybe my dad wasn't completely wrong...'

You wrote about your experiences of dissecting cadavers. You vomited the first few times. Even for you, there was a vast difference between cutting up a bird and another human being. 'It's strange,' you wrote. 'When the life force has left it, a dead body is simply an object. Yet, you must treat it with respect because it was once the dwelling of a human soul.'

Then, one Christmastime, a masterwork arrived. I weighed it in my hands, marvelling. The paper was blinding white. Children frolicked in snow, just as we'd played on the sand at Port Dickson. Figures sledged, snowflakes fell. Hills in the background were draped in drifts. 'You have to see snow to know how incredible it is,' you wrote. 'It's a gift from the heavens. I wish it fell more often.' I was reminded of how special you were, and of the fact that we were operating on different frequencies.

I think that's when I knew you weren't coming back.

I told myself there was no future for you and me. You enjoyed the distance from your father's demands, even though you were emulating him. You'd grown a taste for winter sports and log fires. I started dating Simon, the son of one of Abah's business associates.

When I told you, you argued with me for months. But finally, you wrote, 'I'm forced to accept your decision, even though I think you're wrong, wrong, wrong. How can you say there's no future when you could join me?'

I considered the freezing temperatures of winter and the distance from my home and Abah, from warm nights and sun-flooded days, and I told you I was sorry, but I'd never join you.

I didn't know then how love lingers, and how hard it is to find.

My imaginings of a life with you may have drifted away, but a tiny part of me stayed warm, like a pebble when the sun has left the beach.

Then one day I heard you'd moved to Canada and were finding success. But I still told myself I'd made the right decision.

Now I just don't know.

* * *

Calmed by the city vista and the breeze, I leave my roof garden to go inside and sit down at my rosewood dining table. I rest my chin in my hands and reread the article, taking my time.

The details wind themselves around my intestines, python-like, but I tell myself it's important to ignore my own discomfort, to think clearly. It's vital for your sake.

Your wife disappeared. Five months later, parts of her body were found in a forest by lumberjacks. Somebody had split open her skull using a heavy stone implement and chopped her into fragments, like a roast duck dismantled by a cleaver.

The authorities were quick to charge you with her murder, but you're adamant that you're innocent.

Your wife was rich, charismatic and opinionated, notorious for her controversial charities, and mired in countless disputes over finance. She drew resentment from relatives, death threats from strangers, and the sinister attentions of stalkers. I may know nothing about solving crimes, but it's obvious to me that there's a multitude of potential suspects.

What must these events have felt like from your perspective? Someone took a blade to your wife's body, the body you'd lain beside and made love to for several hundred nights. Could there be a greater horror for a husband?

I remember one of the last things you wrote to me: 'One slip of the knife and you could cripple or kill your patient. I think having that power makes some people arrogant. Once or twice, I've glimpsed wickedness in other medics' eyes, and I can't understand it. If you have the determination to become a surgeon, you should have the determination to be a benevolent person!'

You were different from other people, but I can't believe you're evil.

I visualise you sitting in a prison cell, watching the time stolen from you by injustice evaporate. The years which have passed since we were together are pared away in an instant. You're the kind boy again, the artist, and my heart is full of affection.

I feel myself crossing into a different realm: the realm of those whose actions are seen as incomprehensible. People will think I'm insane. They'll compare me with the crazy women who marry convicted murderers and sometimes get killed themselves. But I don't care. I'm

going to find out where you are and write letters of comfort like the ones you sent to me all those years ago. I'll even contribute to the costs of your defence.

If I don't do my utmost to save you, guilt and regret will grind me down for the rest of my days.

We may see one another again.

I switch on my laptop.

* * * * *

“The Turtles of Lombok”

by Erik Krauss

Anahita loved water. Even when she was a toddler and could barely walk, Anahita’s parents needed to keep her under constant watch when they were outside, because their inexplicably fearless daughter would be drawn to any pool, stream, or pond and would always attempt to jump in.

“I feel like we’re raising a river otter,” her father would remark. “She’s just as sleek and as tan and has two black dots for her eyes.”

“I’m not surprised because those who believe in the stars tell me she was born under the sign of the fish, and I can feel that someday she’ll swim far away from us,” her mother would reply.

Anahita’s affinity for water remained with her throughout her life. She chose Indonesia for their second honeymoon because it was surrounded by water, all 14,000 islands defined by the sea. Swimming, snorkeling, and waterfall chasing could be found at every turn.

Her husband, Richard, reluctantly agreed to visit Indonesia. Unlike his wife, he was a person moored to solid ground. Five years before their Indonesia trip, he had taken her to Italy for a grand tour. She was impressed by his mastery of Italian and the extensive knowledge he had of the art museums and cathedrals they visited, but she would have preferred to sail to the Isle of Capri to explore and swim through the waters there.

But this destination was Anahita's choice so she picked a place where she could bathe in the ocean, and lounge on the beach, and receive exhilarating showers under shimmering waterfalls. Richard went along with her plans, but she could tell he felt apprehensive. His impeccable German, Italian, French, and Spanish wouldn't accomplish much where they were going, and he knew not one fact about Indonesian art, except he did mention he was under the impression they liked to make puppets. She was pleased that they would be traveling to a land far from his comfort zone where they weren't relying on his prior knowledge.

And she was excited to be visiting a culture where the food was peppery and fiery enough to strip the bark from a tree, not the refined and predictable continental dishes that Richard enjoyed.

After a day of flying they landed in Jakarta, then connected with a flight to the island of Lombok. Anahita had wanted to visit Bali, but Richard said that it was overrun with plagues of tourists as thick as an infestation of ants. Instead, Richard was certain Lombok was just as beautiful and surrounded by water as well. She said she didn't care as long as there were waterfalls and they had a room with a view of the sunset over the sea.

The trip from Lombok's airport on the south side of the island to their hotel in the north took almost two hours, as their car took a winding route through fields and rice paddies, dozens of villages, the disorganized outskirts of the provincial capital, Mataram, where none of the buildings or intersections seemed to be at a right angle, past a hundred mosques of every shape, size, and color, and finally along a curvy road following the island's western shore—all while dodging thousands of small motorbikes, some carrying four people at a time. "I can't believe how far our hotel is from the airport," Anahita noted. "Couldn't you have picked something closer?"

"The hotel where we'll be staying is very close to the Gili Islands and all the watersports there, not to mention its proximity to Tiu Kelep, the island's most beautiful waterfall," Richard rebutted.

Anahita realized she was exhausted from their long journey, so she didn't press her point. Besides, Richard always picked luxurious hotels when they traveled. She was certain their lodging would be nice.

It turned out the hotel was beautiful—a series of modern villas, variations on the traditional Sasak style of Lombok, elegant wood structures with rounded roofs curving up to gently pointed tops. But Richard had chosen a hotel tucked into a cove that happened to be the only property on the west coast of Lombok that faced to the east where no view of the sunset could be had, as the western vista was blocked by the hilly peninsula that formed the cove on which the hotel was situated.

“I couldn't tell from the pictures that this hotel faced east and that the view to the west was blocked,” Richard apologized. He suggested they take a walk each evening to find a spot to view the sunset, but Anahita just shook her head and said “it's ok” while letting out a slightly exasperated breath. She let it go because she thought her desire seemed rather childish, but the picture she had formed in her mind of sitting together on their hotel balcony watching the sunset over the sea was hard to erase.

The next day was the boat trip Richard had booked to the Gili Islands where they would go snorkeling and search for sea turtles, because Anahita had always wanted to see them up close. They met their *jukung*, the Indonesian version of an outrigger canoe, on the beach behind their hotel. It was faded, and the paint was peeling from it in broad slivers like a snake shedding its skin. The guide and the driver greeted them politely—addressing them with the formal Indonesian gendered titles *bu* and *pak*—but the two seafarers were distant and seemed wary, conditioned by their previous experiences with day-trip adventurers.

It took over an hour to reach the three Gili Islands because the *jukung's* tiny outboard motor had almost no power at all, and they had to stop every ten minutes to untangle the ocean plastic that kept getting stuck in the tiny engine propeller. Eventually, they managed to reach the northern tip of Gili Meno, where they stopped to snorkel and hunt for sea turtles.

The driver anchored the boat in a shallow, where the guide said they would encounter brilliant schools of tropical fish and, with some luck, they might meet some sea turtles too. Anahita was excited to pull on her fins and snorkeling gear, but she noticed that Richard was flapping around, unable to get his fins on right. “Here, let me help you,” she puffed.

Finally, as if assisting a child, she methodically assembled Richard in his gear, and when she was done, they both jumped out of the *jukung* into the warm, turquoise waters. The guide took handfuls of bread from a plastic bag and tossed them into the sea, which attracted a rainbow of fish wearing colors she had never even imagined were part of the spectrum. They swarmed all around, some even nudging against her. Anahita was filled with an exhilaration she seldom felt as she glided through the water enjoying the sight.

Her euphoria was interrupted a few minutes later when she heard the guide yelling from the *jukung*. She lifted her head out of the water and noticed that Richard was nowhere to be seen. She swam along the path of the current and soon discovered that Richard had drifted quite a distance from the *jukung* and was bobbing erratically like an oversized buoy that had become untethered from its mooring. The guide threw a long rope into the water, but Richard was floundering about and didn’t see it. It took a few minutes for Anahita to swim to the rope, but she managed to reach it and hand it to him and, after a struggle, the guide and the driver were able to reel Richard back to the boat.

From her vantage point, she watched the guide and the driver grab Richard by both his arms and haul him back onto the *jukung*, because he didn’t have the strength to pull himself up over the side of the boat without ample help.

It was the first time in their marriage she had actually felt the 22-year distance that separated them. When they had celebrated his 65th birthday earlier that year, all the guests at his party marveled at Richard’s stout health, wiry frame, and seeming youth. But while she floated in the Strait of Lombok, surrounded by hundreds of sparkling fish, she realized that the tide was heading out and probably not coming back.

As she swam toward the *jukung*, Anahita heard the guide call out her name and then noticed him pointing toward the northern horizon, repeatedly shouting a message of precisely one word: turtles! It only took her a moment to spot the bale of turtles 40 meters away. She skimmed through the water and was soon upon them.

The dozen black turtles, each about a meter long, paid her no attention as if she were a fellow ocean creature, one of Neptune's daughters coming to play. She arched and angled around them, swooping by like a comet, as they weaved their way through her course, their flippers swiftly propelling them onward. She wished she could have floated with them forever, but soon they paddled well beyond her and she had to return to the *jukung* where her moment of bliss disappeared.

After she had climbed back onto the boat on her own, Richard told her he had been worried because she had swum so far away. Anahita shook her head and scoffed silently at his concern; how ridiculous he was, she thought, to be anxious about her in the water when it was he who had less mobility in the ocean than a barnacle snugly attached to a ship.

After spending a couple hours searching in vain for more turtles, the guide insisted they return to the hotel because jagged thunderheads were forming all around them. The trip back to the hotel was almost silent. Anahita gazed across the Strait of Lombok deep in her thoughts. She spent the quiet moments firmly anchoring the memory of the sea turtles into her mind, interrupted only by the cursing of the driver the many times he had to stop the journey to clear tangles of plastic from the propeller.

* * *

The air-conditioned, black SUV picked them up at their hotel after breakfast the next day to take them to Tiu Kelep. It was another winding road along the coastline, then a gradual climb through the foothills surrounding Mt. Rinjani, until they arrived at the entrance to the trail that led to the falls.

Anahita and Richard were met by their guide, a young Australian man in his 30s named Jack, who said he lived on Lombok because he was a surfer. He wore his hair in a blonde man-bun and had a small swagger built into his walk. "I'd rather be surfing, but everybody's gotta make money, so I'll be your guide today," was how he introduced their excursion.

After Anahita assertively rubbed sunscreen over Richard's arms and his face, the trio began their hike down into the canyon where Tiu Kelep could be found. They soon entered a thick woodland of towering Java olive and tamarind trees, bushes covered with white flowers shaped like tiny pinwheels, a sea of luxurious ferns, and a dense carpet of assorted plants Anahita couldn't identify. She heard rustling in the forest during their descent, the sound accompanying them as they hiked. If it had been nighttime, she might have been worried, but with careful observation she noticed a scattered legion of grey macaques with their sullen faces and long sweeping tails, engaged in surveillance, moving beside them from tree to tree, as if plotting an attack.

As they followed the winding trail, Anahita noticed Richard lagging behind. Usually, he would be up at the front, peppering the guide with questions, but he seemed to be laboring down the steep path. Instead, she was the one who experienced the unfortunate pleasure of receiving the full brunt of Jack's monologue describing the great surfing on Lombok's south coast and all the trophies he had won while riding the waves.

Within half an hour they arrived at the bottom of the canyon at Sendang Gile, a fall smaller than Tiu Kelep. The falls were about 25 meters high and broken into two tiers, the upper one two-thirds shorter than the one below. Sendang Gile was special because, though it was relatively tall, its waters were gentle like a ribbon shimmering in the breeze, allowing a person to stand in the shallow pool directly underneath it as comfortably as in one's own bath.

Anahita immediately pulled off her t-shirt and shorts, displaying the firehouse red, one-piece speedo racing suit she used for lap swimming. "Come on, Richard, let's jump in," she enthused.

"I didn't bring anything to swim in," Richard said glumly. "If you give you me your phone, I'll take pictures of you."

Jack took off his clothes too. His swimwear was also a red speedo, but it covered only the minimum requirements. Ordinarily, Anahita wouldn't have frolicked under a waterfall with anyone other than Richard, especially with someone so clearly obnoxious, but Jack was intensely handsome and chiseled, so she decided to enjoy a guilty pleasure or two. She didn't see any reason why she should deny herself fun just because Richard hadn't possessed the foresight to dress properly, especially after she had reminded him to wear his swimwear underneath before they departed the hotel.

Anahita posed under the falls and Richard took photos and then she resumed her play. While she enjoyed the refreshing cascade pouring over her, she noticed that Richard was checking each of the dozen vendor's carts situated on the shore near the foot of the falls. She was grateful he had something to do while she enjoyed Sendang Gile, rather than just standing there anxiously watching.

When Anahita and Jack had finished their shower and began to towel themselves off, they were greeted by Richard who had purchased a bottle of water for each of them to enjoy. "Thanks, mate!" Jack exclaimed. "I knew I forgot to pack something today."

Once everyone was dressed and ready, they continued their hike toward Tiu Kelep. "This part of the trek is much tougher," Jack warned. "Do you think you can handle it, mate?" he asked, pointing the question directly at Richard.

"Of course, I can," Richard insisted.

“We do have to wade across the stream twice. It’s not that hard, but it might be a challenge for a senior like you.”

After a few hundred meters, the trail disappeared, and they were forced to climb repeatedly over large wire bales filled with rocks that required each hiker to lift their legs as high as their waist to ascend them. The bales had been stacked in an uneven wall along the riverbank, like massive Lego blocks, to help keep the shoreline from washing away.

Jack and Anahita bounded up over the bales with relative ease, but Richard struggled and had to get down on all fours to crawl over them.

“Let me help you,” Anahita offered, but Richard refused. Five bales later, Anahita heard a clatter behind her and an exclamation of pain. She hadn’t seen how Richard had fallen but he seemed to have misstepped while climbing down from one bale to another and now he was lying flat on his back. His right hand and shin were scraped and bleeding.

“Are you OK?” Anahita asked as she examined Richard’s injuries.

“Yes, of course I am,” Richard shot back, with a grimace on his face and his voice laced with pain. “These injuries are just superficial.”

Anahita knew it was pointless to argue with one of Canada’s leading orthopedic surgeons and medical school professors, so she enlisted Jack to pull the first aid kit from his backpack so that they could clean and bandage Richard’s wounds.

After they rested for a while, Jack posed a question. “Mate, maybe you should abandon the rest of the hike?” He proposed that Richard sit on one of the bales while he and Anahita continued to Tiu Kelep. “We’ll be back in an hour or two, and the bale next to me is in the shade.”

“No, I will keep going,” Richard insisted, so the three continued, although Jack and Anahita had to take turns giving Richard their hand to assist him each time they had to climb over a bale.

The remainder of the journey was slow and uneventful, except for the second river crossing. Jack and Anahita were helping Richard across the rushing stream that came halfway to their knees when he lost his footing on the slick rocks. Luckily, they were both strong and were able to keep him upright, even though Anahita came close to losing her balance, almost dragged down by Richard into the rapids as well.

It had been such a stressful hike, Anahita was as exhilarated as if she had reached Shangri-la or some other mythical place, when they finally arrived at Tiu Kelep. They left Richard seated on a rock about fifty meters from the falls, despite his protests. “There’s no possible way you could climb over these giant boulders to get to the base of the falls. Enjoy the view from here,” Anahita insisted.

When the two of them arrived at the falls, Jack asked, “What are you doing tonight? I really love Indian women, so why don’t you ditch Grandpa, and we can do something fun.”

“I’m Canadian,” she corrected. “And I don’t think being with you would be any fun at all. So, why don’t you go back and check up on Grandpa, while I enjoy the falls.”

Jack objected, but Anahita would have none of it, and finally he complied with her request.

Grandpa. She was upset she had joined Jack in disrespecting her husband so flippantly. Anahita loved Richard because he was an exceptional person who cared deeply about her. They had met in Africa. He was the lead doctor of a medical non-profit that provided desperately needed medical care to the poorest people across the continent. Richard was the medical director for the entire organization and was stationed at the most isolated clinic on the continent, where he used his expertise as an orthopedic surgeon to put

people back together in a war-torn land. Anahita utilized her MBA as the business manager for all the organization's African operations. They would meet three or four times a year when she would visit for a week to audit his clinic's finances and discuss the organization's performance at all its African sites.

They would cook dinner together in his tiny house made of dried mud with walls as rough as an elephant's hide. Almost every night of her visits, they would talk for hours after he completed his evening rounds. They were both on sabbatical from civilization to escape relationships that had collapsed and to give something to those who usually received nothing or worse. Anahita fell in love at some point in year four of her visits, but she couldn't say exactly when. She could feel his love too in the chummy and teasing indirect way he communicated affection, as men often do, and from the funny notes he slipped in her backpack each time she'd depart, often accompanied by little gifts from the heart. And she enjoyed how they spoke in a language of secret acronyms they had invented and an endless series of inside jokes that only they understood.

They both left the organization to return to Toronto, on the same flight, at the end of their five-year terms to attempt to reconstruct their Canadian lives. As they stood waiting for their luggage at the baggage carousel at Lester Pearson, just as they were saying what felt like a permanent good-bye, Anahita asked, "Why didn't you ever tell me you love me?"

At first Richard was silent, surprised by her question's unexpected topic. "I didn't want to risk our friendship with any unwanted 'me too' moments. I thought it would be sketchy for me to say something without you expressing your feelings for me first," was Richard's explanation.

"For five years?" Anahita snorted incredulously.

"I mean, I'm old enough to be your father. I felt like it would be an act of a foolish and arrogant man to be explicit in any way, so I just enjoyed the beauty of our friendship, because

I needed it so much living in that forlorn place. And I was too afraid I would lose our friendship if I ever opened my big mouth.”

“To me, it sounds more like you also have an intense fear of failure and rejection,” Anahita laughed; she relished any opportunity to contribute to the sassy banter they shared. Besides she already knew him too well. As the carousel spun in circles beside them, they both agreed to discard all their fears and capture as much happiness together as they could.

Up until their pathetic hike to Tiu Kelp, Anahita thought that the passionate kisses and destiny snatched at the last possible second at Lester Pearson Airport was one of the best moments of her life. From the day of their quickly planned marriage until their trip to Lombok, they’d had a spectacularly wonderful life, blessed with a cheerful domestic existence filled with good fortune and calm compatibility. But now she felt a heavy, dark fog descending upon her, colder than the thick mists of Tiu Kelep that were drenching her and making her shiver. For the first time ever, she recalled Richard’s warning that same day at Lester Pearson: “You do realize that everything will be great for several years, but time will eventually catch up with me and suddenly one day everything will start getting worse.” This abrupt realization of the truth of Richard’s prophecy felt as though it had soaked through her skin and lodged itself into the pit of her gut.

Anahita fixed her gaze on Tiu Kelep. It was one of the most stunning views she had ever witnessed. It was a rare two-tiered waterfall where the tiers were horizontal: the back tier was a wide, curved wall of water, the front tier was shaped like a comet, creating the impression of two cascades affixed to each other. She savored Tiu Kelep for a few more moments, then headed toward Richard to begin the hike back to the SUV.

The return trek possessed no extraordinary adventure; it was just a slow unpleasant slog, guiding Richard along while listening to Jack boast of various insignificant exploits. When they finally arrived at the hotel, Richard discovered the hole in the pocket of his shorts. “That must be how I lost the room key,” he guessed as he prepared to negotiate a replacement key from the front desk.

“Dear God, I told you before we left not to pack those shorts because of the hole in the pocket,” Anahita fumed.

They ate dinner in silence, no sunset to watch. Then they went to bed early without even saying good night.

* * *

It was three in the morning, when Anahita woke up and felt a sharp pain in her stomach, and then she became nauseous. She hurried to the toilet to vomit up all her dinner. She returned to bed, still in considerable misery.

“I don’t know what’s caused this, but that spicy dish you ordered might have contained palm oil. When you were in Africa you seemed to get sick whenever you ate something that was cooked with it,” said Richard, suddenly morphing into a doctor. He administered a couple of medicines from his travel medical kit, one to soothe her stomach and one to help her sleep.

Anahita woke up just before sunrise. Richard was sitting in a chair, under a floor lamp, reading a book. “How are you feeling?” he asked. He got up and stroked his hand across her forehead, a gesture that was simultaneously a comforting caress and a temperature check.

“I’m better, but I still don’t feel very good,” Anahita groaned.

“Let me make you some Rooibos chai tea,” he offered.

“I’m sure they don’t have any here,” she replied.

“They don’t have it, but I do.” He went to his suitcase and pulled out a small teak box with brass hinges. It had figures of turtles carved on each side and was just large enough to hold several teabags.

“That’s the box I gave you for your birthday, the last one we celebrated together in Africa,” Anahita exclaimed.

“I always have it with me, wherever I go. Inside it are a couple tiny treasures that remind me of you and five bags of rooibos chai, in case you ever need them.”

As Richard prepared water in the electric kettle, Anahita recalled why she had given him the box engraved with turtles.

Late one night in the clinic ward during one of her visits, as she accompanied Richard while he was doing his rounds, two rebel insurgents had snuck into the poorly lit ward under the cover of darkness and grabbed a woman lying in one of the beds in an attempt to abduct her. Richard saw what was happening and approached them. He demanded they stop what they were doing and leave at once.

One of them pulled out a machete and waved it at Richard, who deftly moved to the side, avoiding the attack. Richard then grabbed a sturdy metal bedpan that resembled a large tortoise shell and he swung it at the one wielding the machete, knocking it out of his hands. At the same time, Anahita jumped into the fray, surprising the other invader with a wicked attack, using another tortoise-shaped bedpan to administer a swift blow across his face that knocked him down and rendered him semi-conscious. She then joined Richard, pummeling the other intruder too.

The night security team heard the commotion and rushed into the ward and finished the job that Richard and Anahita started, dragging the bruised offenders away to an unpleasant fate.

“I am Donatello and you are Michelangelo, it appears,” Richard said after the incident was finished and the ward had calmed down.

“What are you talking about?” she wondered.

“We pounced on those men as though we were Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, battering them with our turtle shell weapons, though teenage we’re not.”

“You know about Ninja Turtles?” she laughed.

“Hey, I worked in a pediatric orthopedic ward once, dearest Michelangelo.”

From that moment on they carried new nicknames and became connected to turtles and all that they symbolize.

After the water finished boiling, Richard handed Anahita her cup of rooibos chai. “Here you go, Mikey. I hope it makes you feel better.”

“Thank you, Donny,” she replied, remembering once again the many reasons she cared deeply for the man who could display total devotion to all three wildly diverse Michelangelos in his life: the Painter, the Ninja Turtle, and his MBA Wife.

Richard suggested they go out to the veranda to watch the sun rise over Mt. Rinjani looming large to the east. They snuggled together, Richard protectively wrapping his arm around her like a gently curved wall. Anahita was astonished at the brilliant red glow of the rising sun. She had never really taken the time to notice a sunrise before and, after a moment exposed to the soothing light, she realized that the dawn held a certain steadfast promise that sunsets didn’t provide.

As they enjoyed the new day, Anahita smiled despite the discomfort in her gut because ultimately, she knew that no matter what happened in any looming desolate future, as long as they both remained two loyal turtles, they would somehow endure.

* * * * *

“Through a Glass, Darkly”

by Janos Runan

We met that same evening, just hours after talking for the first time online. I was still unsure of her name, and when she told me I could call her Rita, as her friends did, I joked and told her that from that moment forward she would be known as Virgin Margarita. What little cool formality there was that lingered between us by that point dissipated like a glaze of ice on Mount Kinabalu under the Malaysian summer sun. And it never returned. We became inseparable, and neither of us, it seemed, wished for anything else.

Years earlier, she told me over spring rolls, she'd been a singer in an M-pop girl band, Gula-Gula Kapas. It hadn't been the life she'd really wanted though, so she found her way into real estate and was doing quite well in the business thank you, working for one of the high-end leasing agents in Mont Kiara.

“Marry me,” she used to joke during those first few weeks. “Sure,” I'd reply, “Let's go to the masjid. Be sure to call your mother.” By the fifth week, I could see that both of us were now only half-joking when we went through this routine, that certain were we that there was no need to keep looking for anybody else.

And so, in very short order, we melded into one, willingly bound together by an inebriating blend of passion and relief at having finally left the lottery of singlehood behind. I'd not felt this way in any of my previous relationships – those that I'd skipped lightly through during the fifteen years since I'd emerged into adulthood – those during which I'd assembled a compelling resume of social graces. There was some unseen tipping point along the course of those short and long-term couplings when I'd transformed into “the marriageable one,” the smart choice, the one who finally wasn't either a stunted child or a

jackass, the one who you eventually parted ways with on good terms and would still see every now and then for coffee, the one your parents still sent Facebook messages to on birthdays or holidays.

Not to sound too mercenary or narcissistic about my situation, but in retrospect all of those previous relationships now looked like my practice runs, opportunities to hone my demeanor and sand down the rough and ugly knots of my personality until I found now, in Rita, the one I'd been destined to be with all along. She was the first one with whom all of my separate parts aligned and locked perfectly together, and I was certain, beyond any trace of disbelief, that she felt the same way about me.

I was thirty-five when we met, Rita twenty-seven, and we had both seen enough of the other options available to close our eyes and plunge unreservedly into each other. Our first two months together felt like an extension of that moment when, on the precipice of sleep, you fall backwards into oblivion, or when you become so flushed with alcohol that your heart begins to palpitate, and as I was a foreigner in Kuala Lumpur, each new side street skirting Bukit Bintang, each unassuming *mamak* café, each secreted alcove in the Perdana Gardens became one of "our" places. Bounding down the oversized stairs of the park behind Suria KLCC and into a gazebo one afternoon, Rita smiled and let out a short, unbelieving laugh, turning to look at me and then back at the crowds lazily ambling along the esplanade beside the lake fountain.

She turned back to me, her eyes more liquid than usual from the September heat, still smiling. "Tom..." she started, her accent dancing along the edge between Malay and London English. I encircled her lightly with my arm, "Yes?" I said, fluttering my eyelids in mock innocence, "What is it, *gula sayang*?" "Stop!" she feigned exasperation, but I could tell that she was amused. She batted her eyes back at me and I melted inside a bit, drunk from the way the colour of her pupils shimmered between black and prismatic blue, like sunlight on a raven's wings. "Tom, we really are going to grow old together, aren't we? I mean, this is the final stop for both of us, right?" That was the moment, and I can remember it shuddering through me like a seismic ripple, that sealed everything between us. And it was everything I

wanted, beyond fear or doubt or worry, from now until doomsday. I dropped my joking tone and turned full toward her. “Rita. Love of my life, heart of my heart. Yes, it is.” She put her head onto my chest and we both looked back across the fountain, and there was the smell of lavender lifting lightly off her hair. “I wish,” I told her, “I could make the sun stand still right now. To keep things like this forever.” “Hmmm,” she offered, seeming to signal her agreement, and then murmured, “Baby, I’m hungry. I want noodles.” With that, we both sprang up and darted toward the cool air pumping out of the mall’s whooshing glass doorways, shadowed under the immense steel towers that loomed darkly against a butter-coloured sky.

Shortly after Rita and I married, I determined to settle in Malaysia for perhaps a lifetime. I opened a small coffeeshop near Chow Kit, in the shade of the Menara KL. Having served my time as a barista and café manager for four years during my undergraduate studies in California, I already had the skills and, with Rita’s family’s help, the connections to local distributors to make a go of small business ownership in my new foreign home. After checking against the names of other local cafés, Rita and I settled on “Sacred Grounds,” and she styled the décor as a Thai Buddhist garden, replete with miniature koi pond and a water system that misted the indoor tropical vegetation. Business, as I had expected, was terribly slow during the first six months. Other than my perpetual presence at the shop, I’d hired two young locals to help cover all shifts for the week: an ambitious Malay business student, Ery, and a cheerful Tamil boy getting his degree in computer science, Bandhul Devar. I felt liberated during my morning walks from the Bukit Nanas metro station to the shop as I watched traffic whoosh past me along Jalan Sultan Ismail.

To take the edge off the constant stresses involved in navigating the Malay bureaucracy and getting all the necessary paperwork and tax documents filed after filling my mornings with meetings with suppliers and tending the counter at the café, I began to nip a bit more than usual during cocktail hour, perhaps more than I would if I didn’t need to dull the caffeine haze that surrounded me at all hours. Just enough to sleep at night, I told Rita. My reward for keeping the business open another day, I told myself.

Two years out, in blissful self-exile, there were so many minor American cultural neuroses that I didn't miss. I remembered the zombies, young and old, women and men, screaming at each other in public, caroming into each other on sidewalks and in grocery aisles. Passive-aggressive, sarcastic, self-absorbed, bereft of shame. While glimpses of these same behaviours came up in the places that I'd light upon internationally, they happened at such a low rate of frequency that I fell in love with the way that I felt freer, less anxious than I was when back in the States.

And yet, when I first arrived in Kuala Lumpur, I found that there was a whole new, wonderful world of psychopathologies to explore, unique to the Malayan sensibility. After my initial adjustments, I learned to relish the more relaxed attitude toward punctuality, something that reminded me of time spent in Mexico, a "what's the rush?" approach to meeting with friends, but every now and then, I would encounter someone whose concept of time seemed utterly delusional. Going out to dinner with Rita and her family one evening at a Spanish tperia we'd discovered a few weeks earlier, we set our meeting time for 7pm, which meant that the two of us were able to stay and people-watch near the fountain outside the Pavilion Mall with our hazelnut lattes and mochaccinos for an extra half hour before mom and dad eventually arrived, big sister drifting along ten minutes behind. Our exchanges of "where did you park?" and "looking dashing, Tom" and "hey, sis, how are those babies?" were punctuated by messaging bleeps from Rita's phone. "Zul says he's almost here and not to get started without him."

"Should we go inside and wait at the tea garden then?" "Yes, let's" followed by another half hour of small talk that eventually dwindled, only to be revived periodically by an update as to which metro station Zul was approaching. An hour had passed, and Rita wandered off with her mother to go look at sunglasses, while I chatted with her father about the upcoming elections. "Do you think Mahathir has any chance at all?" and "that would really be best for the economy," and "when *was* he in office again last?" Eventually another half hour had burned away before the ladies strolled back, Rita taking long loping steps and swinging one hand clasped in her mother's. "Any updates?" I asked. Rita puffed out her cheeks and offered a light roll of her eyes. "He says five more minutes."

Later that night, back in our apartment overlooking the park in Sentul, one more glass of burgundy in my hand as we sat on the balcony, I looked to Rita and asked, “Now, just what the hell was that with Zul? He’s not even family.” She looked genuinely surprised. “It’s nothing, babe, he just lost track of time. Why?” “Well,” I said, and then my eyes softened because I was with her and the summer air was cool under the charcoal night as we looked back over the KL skyline in the distance, “I mean, it’s just that back in America, if anyone held up dinner for an hour and forty-five minutes, there’s no way that one person wouldn’t be leaving in an ambulance and someone else in the back of a police car.” She laughed and pulled me in close and we kissed, our eyes spinning hypnotically into each other’s and then we went back inside to fall asleep together on the couch while watching some forgettable romance on the giant screen.

With strange incidents like this, I had Ery at the café to give me a cultural insider’s perspective. He was young and slightly gruff and wouldn’t dance about in the dismissive and non-committal pleasantries of the very rich. When I explained what had happened with Zul the night before, Ery turned, squinting and gave a rapid shake of his head, his long hair leaping wildly about. “God! I hate those fuckers that do that. Gives Malaysians a bad name” and then went back to polishing the brass on the espresso machine, explaining that some of the less socially polished upper middle-class Malays would do this as a game of one-upmanship, likely learned from low level government ministers who reinforced their standing in the hierarchy by seeing how long they could make people wait for them to arrive at political functions.

Armed with this new cultural insight, I began to experiment in my dealings with my usual suppliers. A year into ownership of the café, with a steadier stream of clientele now frequenting the business during the morning and early afternoon rushes, it had begun to rankle me how much of my energy and attentions were wasted by the still mystifyingly complex machinations involved in simply coordinating timed deliveries. I missed the relatively reliable punctuality of business dealings in the States, which seemed to be a rare luxury in Kuala Lumpur. One distributor in particular, Mohd Zikri, my dairy supplier from

Susu Moo Farms, had a nettling tendency to insist on 10am meetings with me at the beginning of each month to sign off on invoices. In the twelve months since we'd been open, Zikri had arrived on time to precisely two of these meetings, more often coming in between 11:30 and noon, yet he insisted that we not push back our meeting time to a more reasonable hour. Always, Zikri would show up an hour and a half late, with a smile and a shake of his head, followed by "Sorry, there was traffic."

And so, in January, on the scheduled day of our monthly ritual invoice signing, I left the counter at 10:15 and told Bandhul to watch over the store and to have Zikri message me when he eventually arrived, then made my way to the stationary store on Jalan Tun Razak. As expected, at 10:43, just as I arrived at the print shop, my phone gave off a series of pings, and I looked down to see that Zikri had sent me four consecutive messages. "I'm here where you at?" followed by "when you coming??", "hurry back," and "need to get to other meetings."

I responded by setting off a cat-and-mouse game played strictly through text messages, informing Zikri I was at the printer's and requesting that he come meet me there. After picking up the new glossy take-away menus for the café, I headed back to the metro station and on to my next task, picking up fresh flowers from a shop near Masjid Jamek. After arriving, I looked down to see another message from Zikri, who'd arrived at the printer's, and followed it with my own, "sorry - couldn't keep waiting - now at Summer's Florist on Jalan Tun Perak. meet me here." I then began a leisurely walk back to the café. Now nearing noon and having just arrived at the shop, Zikri sent me another message, frantic. "Hey stop playing with me. I'm at the flower shop you're not here," to which I responded that I was waiting for him back at the café. When he arrived, now ten minutes past one, he was red-faced and enraged. "Sorry," I said when he huffed in through the front door, "There was traffic." Zikri slammed his clipboard down on the countertop, pushing it across to me for my signature, then whirled back toward the front door shouting, "Never again!" before rushing forward, late for his next meeting.

Some mornings were more jagged than others. After the debacle with Zikri and another bout of the dull nag of insomnia that I would occasionally experience, I slunk out of

bed without waking Rita, who remained unmoving, one arm stretched out from her purple silk night robe as if she were reaching for something from the glacial mountains of the peaked bed covers. I shuffled lightly along the carpet and went to the kitchen in darkness, carefully pulling a tumbler from the top cupboard and opening the refrigerator door, one hand pressing inward to muffle the noise. I slid a fifth of Gordon's from the icebox and placed it on the countertop, watching as trickles of steam rose from the bottle and small beads of sweat began to form over the crimson letters and canary background of the label. I twisted at the cap and tipped the bottle to the rim of the glass.

The ripple of liquor first touched the tumbler, pouring thick and oily, a straw tinted ocean, fragrant juniper rising in a cloud and carrying me back to the Alaskan pine forests of my childhood. I drank, the liquid first touching the back of my tongue, welling up into a steam of warm vapour that poured through the caverns and tunnels of my mouth and nostrils, coating along the back of my throat before warming down through my gullet. It had become easy to romanticize my drinking this way, long after any of the pleasant sensations had been stripped away and all that remained was catastrophe. I went to the balcony, taking the bottle with me, and drank in considerable gulps as I looked toward the city.

The next morning, I arrived at the café early, the morning air damp, not yet hot, sunlight spilling in too heavily through the street-facing glass. I checked the gauge on the espresso machine and saw that it had built up enough pressure. I filled one of the metal frothing pitchers with milk and a dollop of half and half and placed it under the nozzle, skimming just above the surface of the liquid, soothing myself with the low bubbling chirr that it made, a satiny froth gradually rising from the surface of the milk. I tamped espresso into one of the portafilters before wedging it into the machine, and watched closely to make sure the shot spouting downward took on the colour of burnt caramel. I poured the shot into one of the oversized mugs and thought for a second. *Fuck it*, I decided, and pulled a bottle of Torani butter rum syrup from beneath the counter, pouring a healthy dose over the espresso. *No liquor*, I thought, *but maybe the taste will do well enough to tide me over*. I bent down to put the syrup back in place under the counter, clanking it clumsily alongside the other

bottles, which rocked like bowling pins. A shout from behind caused me to spring up and stagger backward.

“HEY, boss!” accompanied by the sharp slap of a shoe against the tiles of the floor beside me. I turned to see Ery, standing with a smarmy grin, pleased that he’d caught me unprepared.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ery!” I barked. My hand, I noticed, had reached up unconsciously and clutched at my chest.

“Why so jumpy?” he asked, clipping his syllables as he swung his backpack behind the counter with one hand and shovelled his long bangs back under a hair clip with the other, all in one fluid movement.

“Phhhhhh, yesterday didn’t go so well. Troubles with the milk distributor. The guy was acting like a jackass, so now I have to drive around today and find another supplier to replace him.” I bent at the waist and propped my chin atop the counter, stretching one arm out and carefully tipping the mug back toward my lips with the other. “There is a *lot* of bullshit in this world, my friend.”

“Ha, yeah, don’t need to tell me that,” Ery shot back, already moving to the espresso machine to foam himself a latte, “Bullshit, bullshit everywhere.” He stopped and looked up as if searching for something then looked back at me. “Rabbit shit better. Don’t smell as bad.”

“Well,” I nodded, trying to make sense of what he’d just told me, “Whatever type of shit I was dodging yesterday, it’s days like those that make me think one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You see, Ery,” I said standing up again and bowing my shoulders inward to stretch out the pain that ran along my spine. “I am the camel. Sobriety is my back. And that asshole from yesterday? He’s the straw.” Ery rolled his eyes and returned his attention to the frothing milk.

As the days drew out that long summer, everything started to become “the straw” for me. Four visits to the tax revenue office on Jalan Tuanku Abdul Halim instead of one, spinning the lottery wheel upon each arrival until it finally landed on a bureaucrat who felt like doing some work that day. Other times it would be a random auntie who’d wedged herself across the whole escalator, causing me to miss my train by seconds. Sometimes, the straw was simply that it was Tuesday. So, I’d find myself, after leaving Ery in charge of the café around two in the afternoon, walking two doors down to Mari Ristorante, where I’d have my usual bowl of salmon ravioli and two or three Beefeater martinis, expertly mixed by Calvin behind the bar. I began to plump out a bit that summer and things started to get ragged when I’d return home to Rita, exhausted and drawn from the combined baking heat of the Malaysian sun and the liquor that would inevitably stew me into a foul temper by the time I reached the front door. One morning, I caught myself muttering “shut the fuck up” to the geese who gabbled outside our condo tower as I walked past the Nepali security guards. I started to become punchy during any of the social interactions I had outside of business at the café.

It couldn’t have been easy on Rita, dealing with this low-level mayhem on a regular basis. We still went to the movies or for late evening strolls under the banyans along Jalan Ramlee, but I could sense a distance between us creeping in. Time at restaurant tables was spent less in conversation and more in checking the sundry media channel updates competing for attention on our phones. Often, this silence between us became nettling, and I’d sit and seethe and torture myself, then dampen the irritability with a pint of beer, eventually feeling relief when the appetizers or peri peri chicken arrived.

One evening, sitting over a plate of Chinese dumplings that both of us had barely touched, Rita placed her phone face down on the glistening maple of the restaurant tabletop and gave a barely perceptible shake of her head before breathing in quickly to gather herself. “Tom, are you seeing someone else?”

“Huh?” A potsticker hung in midair before me, the chopsticks wavering from the irritating tremors that now perpetually inhabited my hands.

“Put the food down, Tom, I’m being serious,” and I now noticed tears lightly glazing her eyes. She looked away and dabbed at them with the back of her thumb and let out a short anxious laugh. “I mean, I don’t even know why I wouldn’t expect this. We’ve only been with each other for two years and it’s like we’re not even together anymore even when we’re sitting across the same table. Forget it. Forget it.”

“No. Noooo, Rita,” I said, placing the chopsticks back on the plate with as much care as I could muster and reaching out for her hand. “Why would you think I’d ever do something like that to you? To us?” In the moment, I understood precisely why, and I felt an immediate shame, thinking on the extended neglect with which I’d attended Rita over the past year. Afternoons, always “the last one” as I got soused in one of the sky bars at midday, looking out over the canopy of jungle vegetation that dotted the Kuala Lumpur cityscape. Hours at evening wandering about our condo in darkness, tending to one of my Winston Churchill martinis, long since graduated from cocktail glasses to highballs, while Rita slept in the other room. “I know. I’m spending too much time at the café. I’ll stop. I can hire a manager to take over.”

Rita had cooled a bit and turned back to look at me, face to face. “You and I both know that that is not the issue.”

And so, we resolved, the two of us, to take on my drinking in a way I could no longer manage alone. A scheduled visit with our general practitioner, a kindly old Malay man who had likely never taken a drop in his life, recommended I play racquetball or drink lemonade whenever the twinging for alcohol set upon me. This benevolently unhelpful advice was followed by visits to a therapist, a woman from New Zealand, Carla, who prodded me to open up about my history with drinking, my childhood, my feelings toward Rita, my daily routine. After three visits, and some slight progress in dampening the volume I was consuming after

a half-day at the cafe, she put a question to me in her light Auckland accent. “Why do *you* think you drink, Tom?”

There was a half-minute during which I looked about the room, puzzling to answer her. “The stress?” I offered, and we both sat in silence and looked across the desk at each other, a low, warm light pulsing from the lamp next to her. “I mean, I don’t really know what it is you want me to tell you.”

Carla cleared her throat, tapping her pen lightly at her notepad before placing it on the desk. “Have you considered that there may be no answer hidden at the bottom of the well that we haven’t yet discovered? Have you considered that perhaps there is no answer other than you simply like to drink but cannot at this point, or perhaps ever, properly handle it?”

“I don’t think I understand what you’re getting at.”

“Tom, we can continue meeting. I think that would be a good idea, in fact. But there’s not really much more that we’re going to unravel here, and I’d like to move into more of a support role if you decide you’re ready to sober up.” She pulled a teal sheet of paper from her desk and turned it in my direction, sliding it across to me. “That is a listing of meetings and phone numbers here in the city. I’d like you to look it over, talk with Rita, and then *go*. It’s much more likely you’ll make progress there than if you’re only coming to meet with me once every two weeks.”

And so, for the next three months, things began to brighten. A Tuesday evening meeting at a Lutheran church little more than a ten-minute walk from the café became my weekly refuge, populated with an even mix of local Malays, South Indians, and foreign expatriates like me. At the end of my first visit, after exchanging social media accounts with two of the old-timers, I was invited by Adam, the group leader, to join him for dinner at a Tamil restaurant a short walk away in Little India. Adam was local, married with three kids and a house in Titiwangsa. Worked as a city bus driver for twenty-two years. Sober for thirteen.

“So, tell me your story, Tom,”

“Well,” I hesitated. I wasn’t quite sure where to begin. My head was still foggy, so I kept it to the same basics he’d shared with me. Originally from the U.S., came to Malaysia for vacation in 2014 and decided to stay. Had my own business not far away. Wildly in love with my wife, and certain I’d lose her if I didn’t get things together.

“Do you want to stop drinking?”

I thought on it for a few moments. I really didn’t know the answer, but he was waiting for something, so I answered. “Sure.”

“Good,” he told me as he nudged a basket of naan across the table, “Then you’re one of the ones who stopped in time.”

For ninety days, my time in the wilderness, Adam offered me guidance and Rita became my salvation. She took a short break from her job at the leasing office and began managing the café, taking over the more stressful aspects while I worked to train new employees and tended the register. We began working out together at a rooftop gym in one of the high-rise hotels a short walk from the coffeeshop, productive work to fill the time in the early afternoons when I would previously start drinking.

Rita’s mother and father, as an advance gift for our three-year anniversary, surprised us with a trip to Borneo, a place Rita had told me her family used to visit every summer when she was a child, roaming along beaches then climbing into the mountain peaks where you could see as far as Indonesia. We drove to the hilltop town of Kundasang, winding along the two-lane highway from Kota Kinabalu until we saw Gunung Kinabalu looming above us, only a moonlit shadow in the twilight. On the eve of our anniversary, we walked around the small bordered pond in the town centre and had a candlelit dinner on the screened patio of a local restaurant before returning to the hotel room to sleep.

“Promise me we’ll stay like this forever, Tom,” Rita said, running her fingers lightly along my chin, the sound of crickets chirping and a party far in the distance that echoed faintly up through the canyons.

“Of course, darling,” I said, my mind wandering toward our future. What would there be? Children, old age, eventually slipping into darkness, then perhaps the rest of eternity together. I wasn’t fooling myself about loving Rita, immensely, profoundly, to the spinning core of my soul, some bright spark of God we both had within us, and I only desired my spark to be mingled with hers forever and forever and forever. What I had with Rita, whether it was to only last tonight and a bit into tomorrow, or whether it was to last until celestial horns blared out for the resurrection, meant more than anything else in this world. And it would have been nice to follow that sentiment through to the end, but there was an itch within, something that nagged at me, like the obsession to pick at a scab that’s just about to heal over if only to see what lies beneath, some self-destruct button that had been tempting me because everything in life was beautiful here, in this night, with her in my arms, and a lifetime of bliss waiting before us.

“I can’t ever go back to the way it was before, Tom,” she whispered, “Promise me this will last.”

At mid-morning, as Rita hiked into town to rent the scooter that we’d ride before sunrise the next day to the foot of Kinabalu, I walked aimlessly next to the pool on the planked deck beneath our room balcony, turning my vision from the hills that stretched off in a steep drop beyond the railing back across the patio to the bartender, in his crisp, tidy uniform who was arranging glasses at the start of his morning shift. He nodded my way as I walked along the length of the bar.

“You climb Kinabalu before?” I asked.

“Hmm, many times,” he replied, opening a thin bottle of maraschino cherries and arranging them in geometric rows in his bar tray, “You?”

“No,” I chuckled, “First time here. Wife’s going to be our trekking guide tomorrow.”

I watched as he took out a small wooden cutting board and began to slice thin wedges of lime, delicately, like a surgeon. Without looking up, he posed a question. “What you drink, my friend?”

“No, no, nothing. Just browsing,” I offered, wobbling my head and running my fingers along the bar’s edge.

“Hmmm, okay, you try something. House specialty. No charge. First-timer at Kinabalu,” he looked up with a wink, quickly dabbing his hands at his apron.

“Well,” I murmured, raising an eyebrow and purposefully shutting a door on the voice that spoke from a room at the back of my head, “At that price, I’m afraid I can’t say no.”

Three hours later, when Rita returned, I was splayed on the bed in our room, stripped down to nothing but my boxers, my right hand idly flipping through cable news channels on the wide-screen television, empty glasses littering the bedstand next to me. She stood in the middle of the doorway, a bag of groceries hanging at her side, and her look – of realization that fell into disbelief – threw me into an immediate pit of gloom.

“I fucked up, Rita. I’m sorry. Sorry, sorry, so damn sorry.”

* * *

The shambles I’d reduced everything to be damned, we set out the next morning for the foot of Kinabalu. Rita hadn’t spoken to me since the previous afternoon, simply setting out ahead of me without looking back. I wheezed my way up, chuffing along twenty steps

behind Rita the entire six hours to base camp at Panalaban, and she seemed to derive a perverse delight in putting me through these rigors in my hungover state. We stayed the evening in one of the unheated huts, shivering next to each other in silence, and rose at 5am for our summit attack, switching on headlamps with gloved fingers and setting off in the pre-dawn quietude, marching in a line with the others. I was still woozy from my bender two days prior and too little sleep the night before, but kept pace much better than I had the previous day. By sunrise, we stood on the peak of Kinabalu, looking out across the sweeping rocks of the summit plateau, sunlight sparkling through the dancing mists that obscured the valley below.

Near the edge of a rock ledge that jutted out from the summit, I had steadied my feet reasonably well, though my eyes seemed to telescope in and out over the vertiginous landscape. Rita brought her phone out to memorialize the occasion with our requisite victory portraits.

“A little to the left, Tom,” she proffered with an inching motion, “Come on, the sunlight is flaring off your forehead too much.”

“Very funny,” I shot her a wry smirk, “But you’re supposed to be the fashion model in this shoot. C’mon, your turn.”

“Noooooooooooo, one more. Come on, move those old bones,” and again she motioned me leftward. As I shuffled over, still tremulous from the lack of sleep and dehydration from the past two days, my boot caught against a small rock and I teetered backwards, placing my other foot instinctively behind me. The footing that I expected to catch hold of in order to rebalance myself, however, dropped away into nothing, into empty space, and I pinwheeled my arms frantically, reaching out for a brief second to Rita, who reached out herself as if by reflex, a vanity of mirrored movement, she too I, considering the distance there was between us, until the full weight of my body followed my lost foot into the vacancy behind me.

There is a moment when you fall, a moment immediately following the abrupt realization that all is lost, when the world feels as if it is a massive machine coming to a heaving stop, everything suspended briefly in eternity. It is the same as in movies, a moment that lingers while the universe condenses and time is reduced from its usual torrent and elongated into a sludgy dribble, some trick of the mind produced by the instantaneous release of chemicals flooding into the chambers of the brain and surging through the body to numb everything before impact. In that short span of time after I fell, before everything lost speed, I heard, as if from outside myself, my own reflexive scream, an agonized howl of surprise. Of cosmic betrayal.

My flesh, soft in feeble contrast to the rocks where I landed, seemed to melt as it struck the granite beneath me, and in my final moment, the only conscious feeling that presented itself to me, brought forward like a murder weapon before a jury, was a profound sense of doubt. Even now, in retrospect, it's difficult to corner the precise sentiment and scrutinize it. It would oversimplify and alter the meaning into something it was not to say that it was a doubt as fundamental as *why*? At times, I have thought that it was *why* combined with *this is it*? But there was something more, something that runs off like a laughing ghost through a false door in my brain every time I chase after it. I can only say that this impression was the only thing there in my final seconds as I lay paralyzed on the rocks. I felt no physical sensation other than unbearable heaviness, as if a horse were sitting atop of me, before everything became clouded by darkness.

And then, as if I had been awakened immediately from a dream, I found myself on the edge of a lake, standing within arm's length of the water. I pivoted to scan the periphery, and realized in my confusion that my body was unbroken. I saw no life scrambling through the geography, not even the bubbling stir of fish beneath the lake surface. The landscape was stripped of vegetation, only rough sand and rocky soil for as far as I could see. A towering black monolith, the size of a small mountain, shaped like an arrowhead pointing downward, hovered some hundred meters above the water near the centre of the lake. The whole face of the rock was jagged, towering far upward into a bank of clouds darkened to the colour of

smoke burning above a gasoline fire, clouds that roiled like waves in a storm, clouds that veiled the brick-red sky that punched sporadically through the haze in erratic patches.

I watched as the wind stirred slowly over the soil by the lake's edge, all the while listening as the water murmured near my feet. Lapping, lapping, it licked at the rocks and pebbles on the sand. As the movement of air over the water picked up, I recognized the sound the wind made, hypnotic. It was something I'd heard years before, on a cliff overlooking a red-rocked canyon as I sat at dawn above the blackened wood next to a campsite in the American desert. A wind obstructed by nothing, it whistled past you and fluttered your clothing, shifting directions chaotically. The wind at lakeside blew upon the dry soil beyond the damp sand, turning first toward the reddened hills and then circling around again in the other direction, returning to its point of origin and then circling around once more, a dancing funnel of water, air, and dust.

In the distance, there emerged along the sullen skyline the outline of a body walking toward me. At first, just a silhouette, a dusky shadow emerging on the horizon. I stood frozen, unsure of precisely what was happening.

As the figure approached, I could make out a man, perhaps in his sixties, gray hair flying off in wisps in all directions, eyes wild and staring as if through me. Even from a great distance, I could hear him speaking. His arms hung directly at his sides, as he stamped forward in my direction.

When he reached a distance of perhaps twenty feet from me, maintaining his bulldozing pace, I began to back away. I understood nothing of what he said, a torrent of garbled ranting. The words sounded Slavic, and they came from him in a low roar.

As he reached within arm's length, the feral man grabbed at me and I stumbled backwards, falling to the ground. He pounced atop me, his legs straddling my stomach, his hands clutching at the cloth of my shirt at the chest, shaking me, his eyes still boring through me, his rant unimpeded.

“Off!” I yelled, wriggling in an attempt to free myself from his grasp, “Get off of me!”

“Hey! Hey! Pssst!” I turned and saw a second figure run toward us who set upon the wild man, hoisting him up from below the shoulders and throwing him to the ground. This new arrival looked quickly down at me, furrow-browed, “Get up, get up! Hurry!”

I quickly regathered myself and rose to my feet, brushing at my pant legs. The man who’d rescued me grabbed me at the elbow, “There’s no time for that, come with me.” He began jogging off at a rapid clip, still clinging to my arm, and spoke to me while keeping his eyes ahead of us, “You’re English?”

“No, wait – what’s going on here?”

“I’ll explain when we arrive,” and with this he looked back over his shoulder. I followed his glance. Behind us, the wild man had resumed his stamping pace in our direction, but quickly receded again in the distance. Despite this, the new man quickened his cadence into a brisk run. I kept pace and soon realized that I was unwinded, an absence of tension in my legs. No sensations at all in fact. The man who’d come to my rescue, I observed, had skin the colour of dark chocolate, close cropped hair, and was perhaps in his fifties.

“Quickly, quickly,” he spoke in a subdued tone, “We’re almost there.”

Ahead of us, over a small ridge, I saw a complex of several squat, long buildings, the colour of bleached bone. We arrived under an awning next to the door of one of the buildings.

“I am Abeo,” he motioned for me to sit, “What is your name?”

“Tom,” I muttered, still dazed from all that had happened, “Now will you tell me where we are?”

“You’re Christian?”

“No,” I answered, confused. “I mean somewhat. What exactly is happening? I need to go back and find my wife.”

“Thomas,” the man’s face settled into a look of concern, “You will not find her. Not here. Not in this place.”

“I don’t understand a thing that’s going on.”

Abeo asked me what the last thing was that I remembered before standing by the lake. I told him about the morning hike with Rita to the summit of Kinabalu, her taking my photograph, my fall.

“I see. Let me tell you something of myself,” said Abeo. He turned to look toward the ridge we’d descended before arriving at the compound, then returned back to face me. “Before I arrived here, I lived in Abuja. Do you know it?”

I stared blankly at him.

“It is in Nigeria. I had a wife, Binye, and three beautiful children,” he smiled, the skin crinkling around his eyes. “Yesssss, yes. Beautiful family. I worked as a banker.”

Abeo sat down, facing me, and pressed his hands symmetrically on his knees. “Beautiful family, beautiful job. And then one morning, sitting at the breakfast table, I was speaking with my eldest, Samuel. He was pestering me for a new phone,” and with this his smile grew broader, “‘Papa, I can’t do anything with this rubbish model.’ He was in his second year of college then.” I watched as Abeo leaned in, his smile drifting away, his eyes staring directly into mine. “Thomas, that morning, as my wife Binye was placing the ogi and plantains on their plates in the centre of the breakfast table, I had a heart attack.” Abeo snapped his fingers, “Like that!”

There was a long pause, and I listened as a light wind whispered, blowing dust along the compound walls. Abeo's glance had not faltered, still set on my own eyes, now searching it seemed. He spoke again.

"Thomas, I tell you, I did *not* survive that heart attack. Before my body fell from the chair and hit the earth, I found myself here. Just as you have now found yourself here today. That was in 2006."

Abeo's eyes had stopped searching and his face relaxed, an aspect of compassion washing over him. "You understand now, yes?"

"No," the word shot out of me, not from a lack of acknowledgement, but as a protest. I stared at the hazy crimson of the sky. In the distance, from the doors of another low building, emerged a woman, Indian I surmised by her dress. She looked in our direction, vacant eyes, then down to her feet as she plodded forward, walking off toward the ridge. I did, in fact, comprehend what Abeo had said and was waiting for the panic that I knew would geyser forth at any second. Nothing came.

Abeo gave a brief chuckle. "Yes, doubting Thomas, you do understand me. I can see. What have you eaten today?"

"This morning on the hike. We had some protein bars."

"And nothing else? That would be hours ago."

"No, nothing else."

"Yet you feel no hunger, do you?"

At Abeo's question, I realized that I felt no pangs in my stomach at all. A curiosity. I felt no tiredness, no hunger. No ache in my legs or lower back from having sat here during the entirety of his story.

"And you will feel none. No desire to eat, no feeling of thirst. No desire for *sex*." At this, Abeo tapped lightly at my knee with the back of his hand and chuckled again. "You are freed from all of that now. But I tell you, you will grow to miss those nuisances. And now, I will show you one last thing." Abeo stood up slowly and looked about him at the ground. He walked away, perhaps five paces, and picked up a rock, coated in tan dust, perhaps the size of a small grapefruit. Without warning, he spun, and with an athlete's deadly aim hurled the rock at me.

Caught off guard, I barely had time to flinch when the rock struck me with the force of a fastball, squarely on the forehead, before it fell to the ground in front of me. My head rocked back, but I felt no pain at all, not even a sense of being stunned from the blow. I had felt the pressure of the rock against my skull, but no sharper sensation than as if someone had nudged me back with the light touch of a finger. Abeo laughed.

"Pain," he said with a smile so full that it almost made his eyes disappear, "Is a nuisance you will not miss. Come now, I will find a room for you," and with this, Abeo walked back to me, offering his hand and lifting me to my feet. As we entered the low light of the compound and walked along a narrow hallway, Abeo spoke again, putting his hand on my shoulder, "You may sleep, although there is no need for that here. Other than to pass some time."

We walked along a corridor with several doorways. Some rooms I saw already occupied, most of the bodies within uninterested as we walked past. We arrived at an empty room, bare other than for a low rectangular bed made from the same dried mud as the walls of the compound.

"Sit here some time and think about what I've told you, Thomas," Abeo said, his hand pressing against the doorless frame of the entrance, "Our purpose in the past world was to honour

and please God in all things.” He let his hand drop again to his side. “Our purpose in this world is simply to wait.”

I sat on the bed and looked through the barred window at the landscape outside. Three or four people walked aimlessly about the compound, purposeless. I turned toward the bare wall facing me and closed my eyes. I may have remained there for hours. There was no sound other than that of the wind. No conversations, even distant. When I opened my eyes again, I saw that there had been no change in the cast of light through the window, just the same perpetual reddened twilight that had met me when I’d arrived at the lake. I walked along the corridor, counting the number of doors in the building. Twenty-four. I returned to my room and, sitting again, thought of Rita. What would she be doing now?

“Come,” I looked to the doorway and saw that Abeo had returned, “There is one more place I need to show you.”

The buildings of the compound, numbering twelve in total, formed a circle, with an opening facing farthest from the ridge we had descended earlier. A short distance beyond this opening, perhaps twenty yards further, was another building made from the same white baked mud, but circular. Abeo looked to me as we walked in the direction of the round building.

“This,” he said, “Is what I call the vision room.” We entered the open doorway and I could see that the room was darkened, no light shining in other than from the entrance behind us.

In the vision room, near its centre, mounted in a deeply-oiled hickory frame, there stood a tall oval glass, like a mirror, or a screen. But no, more like a window. The entire surface of the silvered pane had lost its clarity, frosted by a thick constellation of blotches that ran over the glass like algae on the surface of still water. Abeo pointed for me to observe the pane more closely.

“It lets you see someone on the other side.”

I walked slowly forward and peered into its burnished surface. “Who?”

Abeo walked to my side and looked into the glass himself. “Whoever you are hoping to see. There’s only one person who ever appears there for each of us, and from what I can tell, it is only when they touch some object that holds a connection between you and them. The one who appears to me is my wife. Who will it be for you?”

I remained transfixed on the dull black reflection of the glass that looked back at me. “Rita,” I whispered.

“Then give it time,” he said in a soft tone that offered a small flicker of hope, “She will be there. You will never know when. So come and visit now and then.” He put his hand on my shoulder and motioned for us to leave. “The only thing we have here is time.”

A ceaseless period of languishing monotony followed, with nothing to occupy my time other than the short fragments of conversation with those who could speak my language. “You,” Abeo had told me on the day that I’d arrived, “are a lucky man. You speak English, which means most when they come here will be able to talk with you. If they have the desire to do so. Many of them don’t.” The older man who’d attacked me after my arrival, at this point likely several months prior, spoke a language that no one else here did, and without any means of communicating, nobody had been able to explain to him where he was, as Abeo had done for me. The confusion must have maddened him. I would see him on occasion, and most often he simply wandered about like the rest of us, muttering softly to himself. Every now and then, however, when a new arrival appeared, he would set upon them in desperation to find someone who could tell him where he was.

The first time I saw Rita at the glass, after an interminable stretch of futile hoping, occurred three years into my stay—time markers were gleaned from those newly arrived who would reveal the date they had passed over from the other world. I’d gone to the vision room often

when I had first crossed over, but had left without results so consistently, always in quiet devastation, that by now I would visit only once in what might be several weeks, a cursory chore to break up the nagging monotony of eternity. Each occasion when I'd visited before, the glass only cast a dull reflection, its hard surface staring back at me with frigid emptiness. This time, however, as I entered the room, I could see wisping electric tendrils emanating from the surface, a soft purple that shifted to pale green and then back again, rising like smoke just above the glass. I was startled, struck by the immediate knowledge that I would now be able to see Rita. If only for one long-stretching moment, there was fear, a great unsurety about what would meet me when I looked in the glass, of who she might now be. That brief moment of hesitation was quickly overtaken by a more animal terror, the thought that if I lingered too long, mired in doubt, then the moment would disappear. I rushed forward, my hands grasping at the sides of the immense frame like a child, and looked within.

Rita was older. Grey had begun to shade the hair above her ears. Heavier too, just different enough that my mind for a moment wondered in panicked confusion if it were really her. This feeling faded rapidly, and then an image from just below the surface slowly emerged: the Rita I remembered, the shade of a memory playing like a shifting holographic spectre that hovered above the actual figure in the glass. I could see, confirming Abeo's theory, that Rita was holding a mother-of-pearl hair-comb, patterned like tortoise-shell, that I'd bought her from one of the high-end stores off Jalan P. Ramlee. She looked idly at the comb, then paced slowly across the room, dreamlike, appearing as an actress moving on a screen, and I noticed that as she moved, ever so minutely, the focus of the glass followed her. A slow pan right.

Eventually, it reached the point when I was blind to the inevitabilities of age that began to weigh in on Rita. It wasn't simply that I saw her more frequently now, but that perhaps I had begun to view her through my past eyes, an illusion of the mind in which the reality of her image in front of me had become permanently glossed by a thin layer of the Rita I once remembered. Throughout her thirties, she moved deliberately in the world – tending to business accounts for the shop, attending social events with her family, eventually marrying again, this time to a Malay man who looked to be her same age. Handsome enough,

I'd seen him pop his head into their kitchen one morning as I watched Rita make tea in one of my old ceramic mugs, and from the relaxed set of her eyes I surmised that he treated her well. Children appeared. Rita stood one evening over a tiny shadow in a crib, dressed in the familiar silk night robe that was once half of a matching set we'd been gifted for our honeymoon, and then perhaps two years later, another baby, a girl who I would watch grow as if I were standing behind a glass wall at the zoo. Time was spent with Rita behind the counter at the café or speaking with distributors on loading docks near the Chinatown bazaars. I saw her with her mother once, laughing at some story I couldn't hear under the dappling sunlight on a restaurant patio, and I felt an aching tug of longing for the first time since I'd begun viewing Rita from beyond, an emotion that surprised me, the bubbling of water above dry earth in an otherwise lifeless desert.

And between my visits to the looking glass, these too-short periods of respite from the thirst I felt in the desolation of waiting, I shambled around lost, as we all were, across the red stillness of this ghostly plane. I moved about almost entirely in silent solitude. Those few occasions when I'd seek conversation with someone else, or they with me, were almost exclusively met with utter disinterest from one of the parties involved. We spoke to each other in broken fragments until only shaggy remnants remained of whatever social personalities we'd possessed while living. I'd known since that first terrifying encounter, moments after I'd arrived in this otherworld, that all of us were limited by the languages we'd spoken during our mortal lives, and this, too, frustrated any desires that many of us had of approaching any of the new arrivals.

Some, when they arrived, like the old man who appeared to me at the lakeside, couldn't communicate with anyone, simply because no one else existed who spoke their native tongue. With no shared language to use with the rest of us biding our time in this holding area, I couldn't imagine the magnification of loneliness that set upon those who arrived here from less dominant linguistic domains. All they could do was patiently wait for one of their countrymen to die, just so they'd have someone to speak with.

We could have learned each other's languages. All of us had nothing but dull, slow-dragging time while we were here, but there was something numbing in the atmosphere around the lake, a vapor that rose above the waters that filled us with lethargy and hopelessness, sapping our desire to do anything but wait. I remembered when I was alive, occasionally taking long bus rides or airplane flights, ones during which I'd take work or reading along with me and then do none of it, just staring out the window and waiting for the journey to be over. That is what our time in this place was. An interminable, cramped bus ride.

To occupy myself, to dull the constant restlessness that lingered with me like a toothache, I became obsessed with observation, filling file cabinets in my mind with precise details of every banality that passed before my field of vision, searching for patterns of meaning to stave off the insanity for a little while longer. How many steps did it take to circumnavigate the brackish lake? How many while walking backwards? What was the daily population of this place where we were all biding time? What if by nationality? By age at death? Who had arrived here due to disease, who from misfortune, who from bodily excess, who by their own hand? I had already noted, with slight surprise, what seemed to be an overrepresentation of those who'd died unnaturally. Had the world we'd arrived from really been that violent and dangerous a place? It was only after considerable practice sharpening these mental instruments of scrutiny that I began to make sense of one odd recurring event I'd taken notice of early in my stay. These occurrences offered me my only moments of reprieve from the long stretches of monotony between the times when I'd see Rita at the looking glass.

I learned that our time here was not, in fact, eternal. That all of us were simply serving a term that would one day expire. I had noticed already that some of the familiar faces would occasionally disappear from our midst, but had assumed that they just wandered further into the geography, setting up residence some distance away. It wasn't until one day, standing not far from the compound and staring across the waters of the lake, that I noticed on the periphery of my vision two figures approach one another, speak for a moment, and then completely vanish from sight. After I'd seen this happen once, I began to notice it with more frequency, two bodies coming together and then either melting or snapping into

nothingness. These occasional vanishings would have been obvious to me sooner had I spent much of any time paying attention to the routines of those around me rather than observing them as abstractions to be calculated toward some grander unified theory of meaning. Some of the new arrivals, it became apparent, were only here for moments before they disappeared again. Upon entering this world, they would materialize next to someone who had already served time here, someone with whom I surmised they'd had a living connection. The answer finally occurred to me: all of us who'd arrived and remained for any longer than a minute or two were *waiting* for someone else to arrive, someone from our past life sent to liberate us and ferry us off to whatever existed beyond.

And so, I began to wait for these appearances, watching more closely when anyone new arrived, testing to see whether they were someone destined to wait or someone sent with the keys to free one of us from our cell. After having observed perhaps twenty of these meetings, I began to notice a discernible pattern, filtering each encounter into one of two distinct categories. The first of these, the darker reunions, involved a new arrival who had somehow contributed to the death of one who had been spending time here waiting.

In these cases, the new arrivals always said the same thing, or some variation of it—"I'm sorry I did this to you." Fragmented though the conversations with my fellow wraiths most often were, after enough time you begin to assemble the bits of talk into a rough narrative of what circumstances had brought each of us here. In the previous world, sometimes these new arrivals had exacted grave physical cruelty upon their victims, an extended period of fatal abuse. Sometimes it had been the deliberate infliction of a deep-cutting verbal assault that contributed to their victim's suicide. Sometimes, they had committed murder. Always, and I knew this from having already heard the circumstances surrounding everyone's death, these events stood out to their victims as the deepest acts of betrayal. Always, there had been violence involved, whether it was the violence of words or of actions, and always, I noticed, there was the necessary ingredient of an intent to harm on the part of the perpetrator. Never, for example, did I see someone confront, at long last, a new arrival who had long ago contributed to their death through negligence or by accident. Never in these final meetings were there acknowledgements of a fatal drunk driving incident

or lack of caution with a loaded pistol. And thus, as a vital component in the resolution of these betrayals, there was always that one simple, unqualified acknowledgement: "I'm sorry I did this to you."

This elaborate arrangement, this ritual that I eventually became inured to because it was so common and repetitive, was directed and refereed by no visible agent, and yet there was always a lawyerly orchestration to how the dramatics of the scene would play out. There seemed to be an intuited understanding within each of the two parties, both victim and violator, as to the precise order of events that were to take place, how lines were to be spoken and with what inflection, what gestures or minor shadings of emotion were required at any given step in the process. I had seen this so often that I studied it the way an anthropologist might in spying on a foreign ceremony, noticing patterns that I believe neither of the participants were consciously aware they were performing in the moment. Always it would end the same way. "I'm sorry I did this to you," at which point both parties froze momentarily in tableaux, and then...literally nothing. Both of them would immediately vanish, without so much as a rippling of the air.

The rest of us, who stood as witnesses, awaiting our own eventual reunions with those with whom we had unsettled accounts, always spoke of these scenes with the same false optimism. Those who disappeared, of course, had now moved on to a next, better existence. And yet, and I sensed this quite deeply, we all feared the same thing. The shock and the swiftness of these disappearances produced such an impression of finality that there was dread among all of us that this marked the utter end of things. That those who vanished simply stopped being. In the absence in this place of any evidence of a loving god or even of a something beyond, we bore the same fear of annihilation that all of us had felt at one time about our own earthly deaths, before we had crossed over.

For others, like me, mired in limbo while awaiting ones we'd left behind out of love, these final encounters followed a less structured script. Both parties here, too, would vanish, but more gradually, like the slow dissolve or fade into black at the end of a film. The scene was suffused not with a sense of annihilation, but of resolution, and the feeling that washed

over those of us who stood in audience was one of hope, a to-be-continued transcendence for both players toward a higher plane.

Because of this, I found my strength in the deep-sworn hope that Rita and I, when we reunited, would have an eternity together in front of us. After she spoke her words to me, we would dissolve into wherever else our meeting would take us.

All time blurred into a morass, the angry crimson cast to the sky never shifting between light and dark. So, to say “One day such and such happened” would only be the result of a mechanical habit of language. Which is to say that one day, while sitting on the banks of the lake, with the arid plain behind me, I heard in the distance, someone in conversation. I turned and saw two men walking from the ridge above the compound toward the lake, at an angle from where I sat.

One of the men I recognized. Seventy years old, perhaps Chinese, but he walked like a much younger man and reminded me of Rita’s father. Kindly. Demure. I’d never talked with him, merely passed by him on our circuitous perpetual loop enough times in the two years since he’d been among us that to attempt to speak to him now, after such a long silence between us, would seem absurd. He had another man at his side, much younger, who spoke rapidly in what I assumed to be Mandarin. I’d not seen this one previously. Likely a new arrival receiving the deluxe tour. As they passed within closer earshot, I caught a phrase I’d heard before standing out from their encrypted dialogue – *kenapa kita di sini* – before his words returned again into a tongue I couldn’t comprehend.

When I returned to the compound, I saw the younger man sitting outside my building, legs propped up at the knee, reclining against the baked mud wall and staring off in the distance. As I approached, he looked at me, sullen. The range of emotions on his face, not yet smoothed over by the wearing abrasive of time, confirmed for me that he must be new.

"*Apa khabar*," I said, stopping a few feet away from him. Immediately, I saw a look of joy emerge, and he jumped to his feet, firing back with a stream of Malay spoken so quickly that I understood nothing more than a few syllables.

"Wait, wait," I said, raising my hands in a motion for him to stop, "I'm not fluent, I just heard you speaking with the older man earlier."

"Ha-ha, yes, okay, no problem," he responded, "Understand in English too."

"I'm Tom," I said, "I assume he explained to you what we're all doing here?"

"Yes, but don't believe it. Think this is all a dream. I'm Alvin."

I stooped down, remembering the occasional creak of my knees when I'd performed this action in the previous world. "So, you lived in Malaysia?"

"Yuh..." I recognized his distinctive Kedah accent, "Live with my mother Sungai Petani."

Alvin was my first, my only companion on this barren plane. Abeo remained cordial when he saw me, but after our first conversation, he offered me nothing more than a 'hello' or a friendly nod as he walked about. He reserved his energies, I eventually surmised, to help shepherd new arrivals, as I once was. With Alvin, however, things were different. He was unlike anyone else I'd seen here, even myself. Most often, his overenthusiasm for conversation was something I wished to find shelter from so that I might simply pace about in silence, but his demeanour was such that it would more frequently draw me out from the crevasses of my interior cell and provide some solace in the camaraderie he offered. After he'd been with us for what may have been a week, he appeared at the door to my room.

"Want to go to lake?" He drummed his fingers on the wall.

“Not really, but sure.” I had been lying there half in a daze, one leg stretched out in front of me, one knee bent up, feeling a dull ache within, trying to summon tears that wouldn’t come, thinking of Rita with the abandoned desolation that I imagine a soldier at war or a prisoner must feel for the object of his love, investing all hope and desire for the future into the one he’ll see when he’s finally home. Alvin and I walked to the pebbled shore of the lake, a faint acrid aroma lifting, as it always did, from the water. I looked to Alvin, who was staring at the towering monolith of rock that stretched ever upward, his mouth slightly open and speaking silent words to himself.

“Hey, Alvin. Don’t mind me asking, we all eventually talk about this. How did you die?”

I could see a seriousness settle in over his face, nothing pained or disturbed, but a thoughtfulness I hadn’t seen in him before. “*Wen-yi*,” he said, enunciating slowly.

“*Wen-yi*,” I repeated back to him. I turned and looked across the lakeshore, dusty and cracked, the wind whispering like a devil above the red soil. “What is that?”

“You know in Malay. *Wabak*.”

I turned back to Alvin, whose black eyes bore deep into my own, and I could tell after a few seconds of him searching that he realized I still didn’t understand. After some thinking, his eyebrows pressed down slightly, and he asked, “When you arrive here?”

“Me?” I said, half grinning. “Summer of 2018. Fell off a cliff in Sabah. Splat.”

His face lit up in a broad smile. “Really? That better than mine. Ha-ha, that good. Hmm, yes, like that one. I die in a hospital bed hooked up to machines. Couldn’t breathe. Feel like I’m falling under an ocean. Can’t even see my mother one last time. Miss her a lot.”

I nodded, then turned, facing away from the water. We started walking back toward the compound, my feet stirring at the dirt to loosen up pebbles. As we arrived outside the

rippled stucco walls, I sat on the dry earth beneath the flat pavilion. “You know, I’m really curious about something else too. It’s like the ending of a book that I never got to finish.” Alvin remained standing, and kicked lightly at the wall, his shoe bouncing backward in a hypnotic motion. “Whatever happened after the election? You know, New Malaysia and everything?”

I knew enough not to butt my nose too deeply into local political affairs when I walked among the living in Malaysia. I was the foreigner there, and I had been particularly sensitive to the fact that the whole region had already had its fill of hundreds of years of white men arriving only to hold forth as the self-satisfied voices of final authority on what the country *really* needed to do to remedy their social ills. But here, in this place, all arbitrary past dividers – of nation, of race, of religion, of gender – were genuinely meaningless. There simply wasn’t anything to pull rank or construct hierarchies over. Resources weren’t scarce here; they were non-existent. Perhaps, as some inadvertent blessing in an otherwise damned place, all the stakes were removed from talking politics.

“Ha-ha, what you think happen?” Alvin dragged it out, teasing me, but I suspected I already knew the answer. “Six months go by, everybody behaves. Then one day, all the new government look around,” and with this, Alvin mimed with a melodramatic air a wide-eyed look, first over one shoulder and then slowly over the other, “And then they go right back to being Old Malaysia again.”

“Hot damn, I knew it!” I said, the first ripple of any interest I’d felt in...maybe it was the first time I’d felt anything like this since I’d arrived. “Nothing gets in the way of a government worker skimming a little bit off the top for the ‘tea fund.’”

“Hee-hee, yeah good one. Hey, you know what face of Old Malaysia is?”

“No, but I’d wager you’re about to tell me.”

“Face of Old Malaysia some forty-year-old *bumi* loser grumbling on the commuter train, coming back from the protest rally in a racist ballcap. Worthless.” When Alvin mentioned this, I suddenly remembered the surly faces that would occasionally glower at me with suspicious eyes on the transit system, for no reason other than that they perceived me to be a foreign interloper at their party. I remembered too the conversations across coffeeshop tables, infrequent though they might be, when I stood witness to someone in the group unabashedly holding forth on the inner nature of the South Indian or the *mat salleh*, as if enacting some anachronistic racial kabuki performance or reading a sermon or medical text written by a nineteenth century colonialist.

In the slow lurching passage of time in this place, a train moving in the dark, a day could have been a thousand years, a thousand years a day. So little existed to occupy our time with useful labour that we walked about, sat idly, stirred with restlessness, and eternity stretched on before us. For perhaps the same reason that all physical sensations had left us, the psychological torment of waiting never metastasized into insanity nor the reprieve it might offer. Mental pain, in a sense, was felt, but like the landscape around us, it was barren, worn by epochs of erosion, until the only thing that remained in each of us was a levelled affect, all emotional experience bereft of any complexity.

My solace, I found, came in the repetitive pilgrimages I took to the vision room, watching on the screen, enraptured even as Rita performed the most mundane of tasks. What I found in this ritual – meaning, or at least some variance from the meaninglessness of my otherwise existence – met its contrast in Alvin, who gained nothing from watching his mother through the glass other than a deepening frustration, wishing on her the death that he felt was long overdue. He’d been thirty years old when he’d transferred to this plane, his mother twenty years older. By his calculation, if he were lucky, he’d serve perhaps one or two decades among us before she would arrive to liberate him. He revealed to me that he had seen her more often than not when he visited the glass, but couldn’t bear to watch as she marched, always in good health, into old age, a perpetual reminder of how long he might remain here beyond what he felt was a just sentence.

My own time watching, waiting for the rare occasions when Rita would appear, had become wearying as well. What had begun as invigorating occasions that allowed me to remember the emotional universes I once contained within me had melted away to reveal a deeper desperation. I worried that she, with enough time on her side of the glass, might eventually forget me. And what would happen then if we reunited?

After living with this fear, tumbling into as deep a depression as the atmosphere of this netherworld would allow, which is to say not noticeably different than any other mental state I'd experienced since arriving, I entered the vision room and saw the dancing lights shimmering over its surface. I paced forward and pressed my forehead against the glass, peering within. Rita was there, in her mid-fifties now, perhaps older as she had always worn her age well, standing at a bookcase in a darkened room, her back facing away from my perspective. She now most often wore a *tudung*, taking on the aspect of a Malaysian Madonna, and I could see along the folds of the velvet cloth a light emanating from something she held in her hands, which I couldn't see.

"Rita, look at me," I whispered, even though I knew from experience that nothing I could do, whether it be pounding on the glass or screaming into it, would reach through to her side. What was she doing? I could see her shoulders trembling upwards, as if in laughter, subdued at first but gradually increasing. Some funny video on a screen, I suspected. This continued for perhaps a minute.

"Rita, please," I pleaded, "I need to see your face." On uttering these words, as if by dark magic, Rita turned in my direction and I could see that I'd been mistaken. She hadn't been laughing to herself, but weeping. As she moved toward the glass, exeunt stage right, I saw for a brief moment what she'd been looking at. It was a photograph of me, displayed on a small digital screen the size of a picture frame.

As I walked outside the vision room, I came upon Alvin, who'd been pacing the circular pathway in front of the compound houses. He looked at me absently.

“When you leave that room, you become a fool for three days. Stare at the wall. Stare at the floor. Can’t talk to you like that.”

“Fuck off, Alvin,” I mumbled, but my mind was already adrift. Alvin was still talking – had in fact not fucked off – but all I could see now was the half-faded image of Rita at her bookshelf. In my mind’s eye, the scene had already lost its sharp lines and detail, and yet I was in a trance thinking of her. She still cared for me, deeply and wildly. She, after all these years, still cried for me. My waiting had not been wasted time. I felt myself now moving forward, my body propelled in the direction of my room, a double-vision filling my sight, one replaying the reflection of Rita at her bookshelf – with the grain of the image slowly degrading – and one showing the vague shapes of the actual world underneath. Eventually, I found my way back to my bed.

I remained there for weeks. Perhaps it was longer. By this point, I wasn’t so far gone that I couldn’t see that my time at the mirror had begun to manifest itself in the same way that my drinking once did. I might spend no more than a few hours there drawing deep from the images, but the aftereffect was debilitating. My stints at the screen were like my binges with a liquor bottle. I consumed quickly, with insane focus, over a short period of time and then became consumed myself for weeks, collapsed in my bed in a state of dissipation, bled of all momentum and desire, drunk on the vapours of remembrance of what I had seen.

I was with Alvin, there with him the day that his mother crossed over, unannounced, and I could tell from the rapid change in his demeanour that her appearance was entirely unexpected. It had been years, by whatever vague measure I’d devised to quantify time, since Alvin had gone to the looking glass, so whatever lingering infirmity it was that likely brought his mother here would have been something of which he’d been unaware. We were sitting outside the baked walls of the compound, Alvin clumsily whistling a song I’d never heard before while I tried to land flat stones in a circle, I’d drawn in the earth some distance away. We both looked over and saw his mother standing no more than a few yards from us. Alvin leapt to his feet and ran to her, burying himself in her enfolding arms, and I felt jealous that in all the years he’d passed in this place, he’d still retained a humanity that had drained from

me long ago. I could hear his muffled voice speaking rapidly in Mandarin, and occasionally he'd lift his head so that I could see his face streaked in tears that trickled down into his thin moustache, before he buried his face again in her bosom. Her whole countenance was beatific. I hated seeing it, not from envy, but because I knew what would come next. She raised her son up, squaring his shoulders in front of her and said something to him very slowly that I couldn't understand, her eyes creased in...what was it? Pride? He wrapped his arms tightly around her, half stooped to meet her at her height, and both of them gradually faded from my vision. My eyes remained lingering on the spot where they'd stood, now filled with nothing more than air and space and blurred hills in the distance, stirred by the always circling wind. I turned back, dolefully lifting up another flat stone before flinging it again to the earth in front of me.

* * *

A great deal of time passed like this. Years. Decades. My only sense of how long this interval lasted came from watching the lines deepen on Rita's face, her features becoming rounder with the accumulated weight of age. She was now an old woman, stooped and heavysset but frail, hair the colour of whalebone when it wasn't covered by her mourning *tudung*. Wrinkles crisscrossed the geography of her face like rivulets through russet-coloured soil, and she rarely smiled, only appeared to be waiting. Children ran through the rooms where she sat unattended, invisible in the way that women of a very advanced age most frequently are, someone to be checked absent-mindedly now and then, like a soup pot on the stove or a windowsill plant. I spoke to her from behind the glass, reassured her that I hadn't forgotten her even if her world had, and imagined she heard me. I became lost in thinking over what she might say to me in return. She now wore our wedding band on the same finger as the ring from her second marriage, and I held on to desperate hope that she'd been the one who'd made the decision to put it on and not one of the younger relatives in the family.

Even so, when she finally appeared, I had become so used to the unbreaking monotony of waiting that I was startled, lifting my shoulders rapidly from the ground where

I lay outside the compound doors. She stood above me, looking down silently, dressed in the same summer clothing she'd worn on that day in Sabah that was now an eternity ago. Our eyes locked in on each other's, my face registering dumb shock and nothing else. All the things I'd rehearsed to say to her, for decades, were torn from me. I lifted myself from behind and stood there, my lower lip hanging, the rise of my cheeks pressing upward from the tornado of emotions that churned within. "Rita," was all I could manage, and from her, only, "Tom."

And immediately, this desert of eternity that had stood between us, these years of fading in and out of her life like a puff of cloud, this endless agonizing midpoint between here and there, only viewing her as through a frosted pane, so maddeningly out of focus, this screaming into a void and never being heard – immediately all barriers were obliterated as we stood once more, for the first time in seventy-four years, face to face. All of the intervening years were lifted and she looked as she did on the morning when we were last together, when I was still alive. There was something there in her eyes, whether joy or relief, some unburdening, something elusive which I couldn't clearly discern. She ran to me and we brought each other in close, clutching on as if this were all an illusion and we'd be torn away from each other again, cast back into solitude.

"I hope you always knew that I would be here waiting for you, all this time. Waiting so you and I could be together again," I whispered, my voice rasped from a shiver of emotion. As I spoke, I could feel her hitching breath, a staccato of soft sobs into my shoulder as she grasped me tighter, her fingers needling deeply into my skin. And then she spoke, a phrase momentarily baffling as I fumbled to orient the words into meaning, until my confusion fell away into a torrent, first of realization, and then of horror.

"I'm sorry I did this to you."

* * * * *

“An Ode to Burmese Mothers”

by Juliet Way-Henthorne

The parents and grandparents of the most active fighters of the People’s Defense Forces—those between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five—remember life under the military junta’s rules. They remember the back-breaking labor that it took to earn less than fifty cents a week. They do not want their children to go off to fight, but the cause is so important, the fight of a lifetime, that they let them go, but not before praying over them and wishing them a safe return. Mothers and fathers speak ancient Burmese prayers over their children, who wear makeshift armor, some with helmets that say, in black scribbles, “Don’t cry if I don’t come home, mom.” And often, these children do not come home. People say that it is the most unnatural thing in the world for a parent to bury a child, but what if the parent never even receives the body? The body that grew inside of them, the flesh of their flesh. And yet, painfully, they grieve and keep going—the revolution is so much bigger than any one person or life. The hollowness might live inside of them forever, but they have given the best of themselves to the promise of a better future, even if they too will not live to see it.

You wake in your small home, and the daylight is muddled with the darkness of smoke—eerie and strange, but everywhere is a war zone now. The morning brings the memories back like a tidal wave. From your small mattress on the floor, you weep and weep, your womb aching for the child you once carried in your belly. You say your morning prayers and will yourself out of bed, because, despite a brief taste of democracy, you have known the evil of the junta all of your life. You wash the small golden statue of the Buddha, a tradition of purification and veneration, before you even wash your own face, the morning’s tears still sticking to the corners of your eyes.

Perhaps out of habit or just because it makes the sting of loss less sharp, you go to your small kitchen and prepare breakfast, just as you would if your child were still there. Mohinga is the national dish, but it is also the most traditional breakfast—a comforting soup of spices and fish flavors that your own mother would’ve made for you, and her mother before that. You begin by cutting a couple of inches from the base of a lemongrass stalk, slicing it into thin pieces. Its odor stings the senses, but your senses are dulled anyway. The strong smell, unlike any other, brings back a bit of your own strength. The busyness of doing something, anything, is better than staying in bed, staring at the ceiling and thinking of a child’s lost smile. As you begin to grind the lemongrass stalk, the odor becomes even stronger—it, like your emotions, is overwhelming. You would rather put a bit of that overwhelmingness into your broth than carry it all in your heart. In the broth, it will simmer and marry with the other flavors, making something harmonious. You hope that, like the flavors mixing together, your emotions will settle, the cycle of grief becoming milder, mellowing the intensity, turning something stingingly sharp into something more balanced.

You boil ten cups of water, just as if you were serving your family, the family that no longer exists on this Earth. As the water boils and bubbles, a bit of your rage transfers from your burdened mind to the pot before you. You sprinkle in dashi powder, the complex umami of its flavor almost as deep as your feelings—your heartache, your grief, your pride. You find that you only have one tablespoon of fish sauce left, but it is okay—your tears will salt the broth. Next come the catfish fillets. You pause for a moment over the dead fish, your cleaver hovering inches from this animal that dwells at the bottom of muddy rivers. You think of the bodies, the missing people who could be lying in muddy waters or ditches or even in moist earthen graves. You find a moment’s relief as you slam the cleaver down upon the body of the lifeless fish. But still, you think of the mountain-dwelling villagers whose food supply has been cut off by the junta. They drink dirty water from pools in the ground like pigs. You think of them and of all those who are hiding in the deepest corners of the jungle, eating grubs and rodents while foraging for plants. These thoughts lead you to cut off an extra fillet of the muddy river fish to simmer—you will place it on your shrine, before the statue of the Buddha, an offering to all those who have fallen and may wander

the Earth as hungry ghosts and a gesture of love towards those whose bellies will grumble with hunger tonight and many other nights.

In these quiet moments of gratitude and remembrance, you feel stronger. You reach for your skillet, heating it until the oil sputters and splashes—careful not to get too close to its angry hiss. You add garlic, ginger, and more lemongrass to sauté before realizing that you’ve forgotten the onion. You peel back the sheer skin of your onion, exposing its bare flesh, and something about this makes you uneasy. You slice it in half and place a small shallot at the tip of your knife’s blade—you have been taught that this helps to stop the tears. But on this morning, the tears flow like rivers as soon as you begin to chop. Muffled whimpers escape your mouth, the onion letting you spill your pain without guilt, like a mask. You are supposed to let the dead go, to have no earthly attachments, to swallow your pain so that your loved ones can go to the next life rather than being pulled back by your cries. And as you slide the diced onions into the skillet, your tears have already begun to dry on your cheeks.

You add pinches of paprika, salt, and turmeric—a spice almost as bitter as your heart can be when you think of the world just outside your door. As you stir, the turmeric and paprika color everything. They are the shade of the monk robes that are given to young boys when they complete novicehood, a rite of passage for all Burmese boys. They now fight on either side of the war. In the bubbling pot, the catfish fillets are cooked—soft and flaky, fragile. You take them out, setting one aside for the shrine offering. With your chopsticks, you barely need to poke the other fillet before it all falls apart.

You add the fish to the skillet, where spices and herbs dance in the oil. Soon, the rich bubbles of fat from the river fish rise to the top of the skillet, a symphony of flavors forming. You return to your bubbling broth and spoon the mixture of fish, herbs, and spices into the liquid. The rice flour that thickens the broth looks a bit like cremated ashes. You watch it fall into the pot from your fingers, where it becomes lost in the yellowish-red liquid. Once, you would have set aside two bowls, generously heaping rice noodles into each before spooning in the thick fish stew. Once, you would have lovingly boiled and peeled an egg, carefully cutting it down the middle before placing it into the child’s bowl, arranging cilantro leaves, red pepper flakes, and a wedge of lime beside it. All of your love would have gone into making the most perfect bowl of mohinga for your child. But now, you place one small bowl in front

of you, spooning in the liquid. Even eating drains you, so you will simply sip the broth, its taste carrying you back to the time before, when Burma was less broken and satisfying your child's hunger was the greatest of delights.

* * * * *

“If I Were the Orangutan”

by Christina Yin

If I were the orangutan Peter—an adult male with cheek pads enlarged, confiscated and caged at Matang Wildlife Centre, unable to be released as I can’t fend for myself even if there were an area of rainforest large enough for me to roam—I might ask:

“Where are the trees?”

“Where are the branches and leaves to make my nest?”

“Where are the females?”

“Why am I here?”

“Why can’t I leave?”

If I were the orangutan Edwin—a young adult male born of two confiscated orangutans at Semenggoh Wildlife Centre and raised semi-wild here, sitting on a feeding platform—I might be thinking:

“I turn my back on the humans and their noise and eat this fruit.”

“I wish I could eat in peace. Should I break this branch and throw it at the bothersome humans?”

“It’s too crowded here. I just want to be alone in the forest and eat in peace, but there are too many orangutans here.”

If I were the orangutan Analisa—born of a confiscated mother, semi-wild with my own infant moving through the trees at Semenggoh Nature Reserve—I might say:

“Come, little one, grasp this branch with me.”

“Yes, there’s a human there, and he will give us fruit to eat. We have nothing to fear.”

“Don’t worry about the humans over there watching us. They’re far away, and they’re weak. They can’t climb trees or break branches to throw at us.”

If I were the orangutan Anaku—a juvenile who knows no other home than Semenggoh Wildlife Centre and its Nature Reserve—perhaps, I would say this:

“I love my mother. She teaches me to climb.”

“She teaches me to make a cosy nest to rest and sleep in.”

“My mother tells me where I can roam and what I can eat.”

“I ask my mother, why don’t we leave the forest and explore the villages we can see from the treetops? Couldn’t we eat the fruit in the gardens? Why is it dangerous? The humans will let us eat from them. They give us fruit to eat here every day.”

If I were the orangutan bundled in a suitcase in Bali in March 2019—snatched from my forest home and drugged to be smuggled out to become some human’s exotic pet—I might ask:

“Why did you kill my mother?”

“Why did you take me from my home in the forest?”

“Why do humans want to own wild things?”

If I were the orangutan in 2013, wild and angry, fighting a bulldozer that is destroying my home in Sungai Putri Forest, Borneo, I have

no words for this.

And yet.

If I were the orangutan in Kalimantan, Borneo in September 2019, reaching out my hand to a man chest deep in a river, I would say

“Let me help you.”

“Let us help each other.”

* * * * *

“Some Musings on a Holy Genocide”

by Farid Hamka

The eve of Idul Adha takes me back to a night in my childhood. A cow, tied up on a rope outside. My father bought him to be sacrificed. We would wait as his blood drained after cutting his neck. Then his flesh would be sliced up, divided in flimsy plastic bags given to the poor. The first time I heard of the ritual, I asked the executioner to save me the horns as a relic.

Yet through the night, the cow howled, pleading for something. His wail suggested a profound sorrow. His murmur like my own sobbing, He knew his life would be taken away the next day. I quivered. How many murders would happen for a ceremony supposedly done to highlight kindness? It was difficult to fall asleep.

The next day, I did not go out of the house, feigning sleepiness. I could hear the ecstatic chats of people outside, getting an additional share of meat, as if it had been a blessing from above.

Was it the death of a cow that disturbed me?

Or was it a death of my naivety? That faith that somehow, we are inherently good?

When I received the soggy horns, I wrapped it up in tissue and threw it in the trash. I still stay at home each year during Idul Adha, silently protesting against a force that I will never convince.

Here is my devotion, I show it without taking the life of another.

* * * * *

“Isn’t It Strange? (Silly Humans)”

by Nur Farah Arina

We used to dream,
the dream of a dreamer,
the stars are our friends and the moon is just a mile away,
but then life happens,
dreams shatter and love remains unanswered,
our night darkens, stifling, suffocating,
moon and stars stolen.

Then come hopes, golden hopes,
far too bright to let go,
its warmth burning our beating heart,
souls filled with daylight,
and our veins bursting with sunshine,
finally, we can breathe again.

But good things don’t stay for long,
cause soon after, a friend called age comes whispering,
that the shining hope is just morphine,
in disguise, as collateral for our dreams,
addiction to paint the world grey.

Apparently, our tall houses are prisons,
glitters on us when we walk around,
fighting ‘bout who’s shinier,

because greed is the fruit,
that grows from a tree called wealth.

But we still walk the earth,
like we own them,
as if we are not just slaves to the rules,
boasting about our chicken coop,
to another clucking chicken,
as if we are in control,
to whatever the hell this is.

Isn't it strange that eyes are kept shut?
that line between pleasure and pain are blurry,
what is happiness?
what is suffering?
Isn't it strange?

* * * * *

“In the Paddy Field”

by Elvis A. Galasinao, Jr.

I took a walk
to our small village

when I reached
the paddy field.

Amid the tall green straws
and ears of soft gold

moves the unseen wind.
It kisses my cheeks

and whispers a
different story.

But something else
moves unseen—

do they always spray
pesticides this much?

It smelled like a plastic
shrink-wrapped forest

burned with gasoline.
My lungs were felled

as if there were tiny
chain-saws inside.

I almost stepped on a
dead brown Maya bird

camouflaging on a dark
brown ground. Beneath

my feet, cracks grew
deep, parched soil like

a wizened old face, baked
hard. What else is there to

plant on this degraded
dirt when it is no longer

hospitable to the delicate
seeds than a scorched rock?

* * * * *

“Past Bowls of Broth and Chicken Rice”

by Derek Yong

At the table, where we laugh,

I spot my *Ye Ye's* glassy eyes:

staring past our silly jests,

past bowls of broth and chicken rice.

He hears the echo of *their* speech

and sees the shadow of *their* figures:

brothers jesting in Time's belly,

sisters feasting with cold fingers-

his dead kin, who too once laughed

around a lunch of chicken rice-

whose Patriarch once also stared

into The Void with glassy eyes.

* * * * *

“I Wanna Be a Beach Bum”

by H.L. Dowless

Way up on a high beam the job is ending,
Angel asked what I was going to do.
“Make a new beginning,”
I said,
“living the freeborn lifestyle I once knew.”

I’m gonna be a beach bum,
drifting from couch to couch.
Living life playing volley ball in the sun;
rum,
hell man, I’ll ne’er be without!

Small driftwood fires behind the sand dunes,
sleeping soundly underneath a lonesome cottage porch,
living from day to day in the month of June,
fire-lighting as we spear fish by a driftwood torch.

Digging holes when the waves surge in for fish traps,
leaving five or more when the waves go back out,
this style of living is where true life is at,
on a beach is where I wanna be without a doubt!

Playing volley ball all day long in the wind and sun,
surfing on the next huge outgoing wave,
feeling cheerful beyond belief when one’s day is finally done,

Lord man, I can't wait!

Being adopted by a tribe of older ladies,
running from bar to bar all night long,
one of them pining to be my steady baby,
in this lifestyle I could never go wrong!

Working day labor from time to time,
otherwise on the unemployment dole,
spending it all in cases of beer and wine,
this way of life never gets old!

Making traps from castaway hardware cloth,
catching fish and blue crab in a nearby salt marsh,
cooking them up inside a dumpster-found pot,
savoring salmagundi soup from seaweed, crab, and turtle parts.

Spending rainy days listening to a reggae band
inside open-air dive bars,
sleeping underneath some abandoned cottage porch,
hanging out in libraries or in a mariner's museum yard,
or underneath a bamboo she-bang by a tiki torch!

A beach bum is what I wanna be,
living a life that's wild and free!
A beach bum!
A beach bum!
What a perfect life for me,
finally fading away in a misty sunset
holding a cup of coconut juice & rum by the sea!

* * * * *

“The Amalgamation of Soul”

by Arjun Dhillon

The Gertrude of Power
Lies in its sleeping coil
Often untouched
Often unknown
Often feared
To bestow knowledge infinitum

Fiends and humans alike
As ravenous as it might seem
Ravishing its delinquency
Thrown into a quagmire of sentinel
No longer looks too far.

Mind and body
Entwined in one
Fishing deep
In the furnace of thoughts
Looks no longer in doubt
What seems near is afar.
Far, far away.

* * * * *

“When the Spirits Were Wed at Pili”

by Kayla Geitzler

you and I were ghosts in machines stalling when we ascended the island’s summit under clouds coiled with thunder roaring like earth splitting as a sheet of wavering benedictions shattered against us steady swift as puncture tattoo thorns on our cheeks and throats warm rain that promised *mambabatok* bruises as it beat a delta into gravel under yamaha treads

we were two friends trekking your country skimming archipelago at ferry bows and in jeepneys straddling trikes on a rented scooter arcing and coiling through Siquijor’s interior revving and coasting along that mountain’s route we were bruised sacrum and aching lumbar bones we were ephemeral balanced above the motor thighs and glutes numbed by dirt track along

jungle floor dodging pullets that foraged in palm groves bowing and twisting with low barometer zephyrs as we undulated passed *bahay kubo* and houses of concrete we were strangers waving to children and villagers but when we stopped for water we feigned deafness shivering under our long sleeves our moist skin raised by eerie callings out that susurrus a chatter preternatural—you

handed me the bottle you said *don’t look for them the tikbalang* while humidity stroked its tongue across the napes of our necks and overcast sky caressed sun reigning on mountain’s summit we were tension in the scooter’s shocks poised on the peak and awash when the *tikbalang* were married their vows uttered in sun flare and deluge we were heartbeats and tires slipping

through grit and mud slithering over pitted asphalt we were bare legs and perilous on edge *relax* you insisted and I replied *what do we do if*—you said *don’t ask that just relax*—my fingers jewelled with downpour were gripping your hips and my ghost with my loved ones was sleeping through the night and so straddled behind you I yelled *Go—my friend I am with you* sharp as a heartbeat

or a trickster’s whim the *tikbalang* or maybe it was the wind’s hands that fell between my scapula

and unwound us down the mountain perilously drenched no engine slipping past families parked on bikes under umbrellas held above dry heads that turned in disbelief at our laughter even though a blink would tip us to tragedy as we picked up speed and plunged passed perfumed branches heavy

with frangipani and skidded by brahma bulls *barangays* plumeria blossoms covered with hollowed eggshells—downwards towards the sea we were breaking squall we were tongue-less and evanescent safe-guarded by what had drawn us together by chance one afternoon some time ago in Moncton now the spirits were wed at Pili.

* * * * *

“Smoke”

by Ismim Putera

In
this
urn,
your
smiles
swirl
into
smoke.
Grey
and
reddish-
brown
scents
pull
our
tongues
closer
to
the
mouthpiece.
Your mantra
condenses into acrid extracts of
sirih and buah keranji. We laugh at the
bitterness of the kelulut honey and tongkat ali.
We were once fireflies in the mystified swamp.
Mist shrouded our bodies. In this smoke I
have found my wings and you have learnt
how to fly around the pedada tree.

* * * * *

“Semangka”

by Ismim Putera

the orchard is blooming with semangka
smooth oval orbs ballooned out from the sandy soil
all night I pick them up amongst the
frizzy vines
and roll them one by one into my shirt
the orchard a garden, the canal runs steadily
in a loop, from the sky to the earth
and back to the sky
like a tall four-walled rectangular mirror
I stand in front of it
with a semangka in my shirt
like a pregnant lady
carrying my own seeds
the canal reflects my bamboo-like body
and the vines entangling on my hair
I drop the semangka into the canal
and watch it buoy upwards
while bobbing in the mirror
I see a third of my face
is as red as the fleshy pulp