

Anak Sastra

Issue 47

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Contributor Bios

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Katacha Díaz is a Peruvian American writer. She earned her B.A. and M.P.A. from the University of Washington and was a research associate of the University of California at Davis. Wanderlust and love of travel have taken her all over the world to gather material for her stories. She has written more than 40 fiction and nonfiction titles for PreK-6 young readers, as well as pieces for theme-based anthologies. Her prose and poetry have been internationally published in literary journals, print and online magazines, and anthologies. Katacha lives in the Pacific Northwest, near the mouth of the Columbia River.




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Along with teaching religious studies to senior high school students in one of the universities in the Philippines, **Jose Joel Robles**  loves to write poems. Because teaching demands more time, he likes poetry because it's direct and concise. As a husband and father, he utilizes some of his spare time for writing. He's a new writer who submits literary pieces both for contests and general submissions. His first published piece appeared in *Teach. Write. A Writing Teacher's Literary Journal* 2022.

[Jacob Christopher-Lee Moak](#)  is an American emigrant, teacher, writer, and voice-over artist living in Surabaya, Indonesia. He enjoys writing poetry in both English and Indonesian.

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James Fleet Underwood  is a poet and English teacher hailing from the Great Lake State of Michigan. After graduating from UMBC in 1995 with a BA in English Literature, he moved to Asia. He completed his Master of Education from Framingham State University in August 2016 and resides in central Thailand. He is an avid cyclist and runner and spends many hours a week dodging the local buffaloes.

[Akmal Hafizi](#)    who grew up in the historical town of Malacca, Malaysia, is now an English and creative writing lecturer, part-time freelance editor, and current student in Liberty University's MFA Creative Writing program. She currently lives in Northwest Florida with her husband and son.

[John C. Mannone](#)  has poems in *Windhover*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Poetry South*, *Baltimore Review*, and others. He won the Impressions of Appalachia Creative Arts Contest in poetry (2020), the Carol Oen Memorial Fiction Prize (2020), and the Joy Margrave Award

(2015, 2017) for creative nonfiction. He was awarded a Jean Ritchie Fellowship (2017) in Appalachian literature and served as the celebrity judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018). His full-length collections are *Flux Lines: The Intersection of Science, Love, and Poetry* (Linnet's Wings Press, 2021), *Sacred Flute* (Iris Press, 2022), and *Song of the Mountains* (Middle Creek Publishing, 2023). He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and other journals. A retired physics professor, John lives in Knoxville, Tennessee.

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“Birds and Bees”

by Angela Lanuza

Three locks separated us from the outside. I refused to tell my little sister, Sarah, where I hid the keys so she spent the entire day jamming her hairpins into the keyholes. *It's raining, I need to go, she desperately said.* The crash of it on the roof, leaking like tears down the stained walls, almost drowned out the music from the clubs nearby.

Mama didn't like it when we went outside, but every Sunday was market day. The apus haggled with the tinderas for lower prices on vegetables and meat. The taho vendors walked around the whole city, always searching for more weary customers. The jeepneys filled to the brim with people, reminding me of canned sardines. The smell of pig ears mixed in vinegar hung in the air from the carinderias. Everybody was walking around as if they had somewhere to be. My sister and I would each grip our mother's arms, and she'd point at people in the street and list all the ways they could kill us. *That woman there, with the big stiff hair, look at her frown, and those sharp nails. I bet she eats children for breakfast. And there, that man in uniform, he has a gun somewhere strapped to his body. Don't make eye contact.*

Mama told us to be extra careful, especially these days, with a war going on in Vietnam, though I've forgotten where it was on the map. More and more foreign soldiers were coming to the military base just two jeepney rides away from our home. Whenever I opened our singular window, I could always hear Mr. Gonzalez's radio from the ground floor. The number of deaths increasing by the day. A few weeks ago, Mama caught me with my head out the window, straining to hear about the anti-war rallies in Manila. *Be thankful you and your sister never lived through war, she said, closing and locking my small source of freedom. Be thankful that you've never experienced bombs or seen Japs killing people in the street.* My sister should learn to be content with the life we have now.

“Ate Gina, give me the keys.”

“No. I won’t let you disobey Mama.”

“But everyone else is inside! No one would notice us.”

“It’s not safe, and you know it!” I yelled. Sarah flinched; it was quick, but I saw it. The same look she’d get when we still went to school and she’d see the other kids pushing me around, pulling my hair, stealing my things, calling me *tisay*, *white trash*, *white brat*, *hap-hap*. I told her I didn’t mind them. She said that whatever hurts me, hurts her too. Guilt stabbed the center of my chest.

“I’ll tell you a story instead,” I said, careful to soften my voice.

“I don’t want your stupid stories,” she huffed back. She swiped a hand over her eyes and sniffed.

“There was once a little girl who had the power to turn people into food.” I paused for effect. Sarah grudgingly moved to sit beside me on the lumpy bed, stuffed in random places with old shirts. She tapped her hands on her lap, waiting for me to continue. I smiled and leaned back against my pillow, and she placed her little head on my shoulder, her black curls tickling my cheek. I reopened the Bible in my hands and went to the Book of Revelations where I hid the drawings I’d scribbled using crayons. One school night, Mama said I’d be staying at home from now on, Sarah needed to be watched over. I never got to return the crayons. Mrs. Romero must have thought that I had stolen them. I had prayed “Our Father” twice before I slept to ask God for forgiveness.

Sometimes, before sunrise, I’d dress up in my old uniform, with my perfectly shined black shoes and barely white socks. My hand would rest on the doorknob, and I’d imagine walking to the jeepney stop, entering the school’s metal gates, passing the little garden with some saint resting on top of the fountain, and sitting at the back of the class so it would be harder to throw paper airplanes at me. When the teacher asked a question, I would stop myself from raising my hand. *Don’t draw attention to yourself, Mama always said.*

I showed Sarah the little girl’s face, an exact copy of her, with her brown eyes, chubby cheeks, and buck-toothed smile.

“This little girl wasn’t afraid of anything, not even the mean people who made her cry.” I turned to the next page, sketches of the woman with the hooked nose and sharp nails, the man with blue eyes in a light brown uniform, the plump landlady from downstairs who

turned red when her equally round husband littered the house with bottles, and the kids who played barungganan-lata or sabatan or taya but never let us join because our mother was a *dirty pampam*, which was ridiculous. Mama bathed every day to shoo away the smell of cigarettes.

I turned to the next page. The picture of the little girl erased all the verses beneath her. “But she had a secret weapon, a golden rosary passed down from her mother, who got it from her mother, who got it from Mama Mary herself!”

Sarah gasped in wonder.

I think she has finally forgiven me as I showed her the next page filled with a rainbow of colors. “The little girl wasn’t mean like everyone else, but she was the hungriest girl in the whole city, and so, she turned the witch woman into kangkong, the white man into chopped babik, the landlady into tamatis, and her husband, the sibuyas, and the mean kids into gabi and bayabas.” Now, the last page, my favorite, the one I had spent hours drawing and redrawing to get the shape of Mama’s smile just right. “She turned them into sinigang for her big sister and her mother and everyone was happy. The End.”

I closed the book, and Sarah began to wrap her arms around me. I gently patted her back, as Mama had done back when she was two and afraid of thunder.

Sarah’s fingers started to dig into the pillow on my back before I could stop her—

“Aha! You’ve always been the worst at hide-and-seek,” she boasted, her fist clutching the keys so hard her knuckles turned white. I tried to grab the keys, but she was fast and, before I knew it, she had run back to the door. She fumbled with the doorknob and it opened, the pale-yellow light from the hallway touched her face. I’m reminded of how much she looked like Mama. The same curly hair that reached the middle of the back, the same light brown skin. Although Mama would always squeeze Sarah’s nose between her index finger and thumb, to make her look like those Hollywood movie stars. I may not look like our mother, but I knew what made her happy. Staying in this room made her happy. I carefully placed the Bible on the pillow and scrambled to block Sarah from leaving, my arms stretching to grip the sides of the door.

Sarah pushed me out of the apartment and ran down the hallway. I raced after her, my heart nearly thundering out of my chest. The wooden stairs creaked under our feet. Sarah skipped steps as if it were a game.

When I caught up to her, she was spinning around like a trompo under the open mouth of the sky. I shoved my hands beneath my armpits and stayed at the foot of the patched-up screen door, grateful for the rain, the annoying music from afar, and the fact that Mrs. Gonzalez must still be arguing with her husband.

"Ate, come dance with me!"

I looked around the street, hoping no one would care that two girls were out in the dark, during a storm, alone.

"Virginia, stop being mean and have fun."

Fun.

Her version of fun was getting me into trouble. When she was three years old, she found Mama's best dress and drew flowers on it with bright red lipstick. Mama didn't threaten Sarah with The Slipper. No, she took the dress to the kitchen sink and began to furiously scrub the red out. Later on, when Sarah had fallen asleep, Mama gave me that look, the one that turned her mouth into a straight line. We entered the bathroom together so that Sarah wouldn't wake up. Of course, she wasn't punished. Mama always said it was my job to do better, to protect *her*.

"Just do whatever you want. It's what you always do anyway," I said. I was tired, and it was almost midnight. When Sarah had a tantrum, a *kasat*, our mother would allow her to exhaust herself. If I did the same thing, she'd make me kneel on rock salt.

I looked at her for a split second, trying to stop myself from shouting. Her eyes were big and pleading, hands in fists at her sides. She hated it when people said no.

"Fine!" She stuck her tongue out in my direction and began to sing that song we heard from Mr. Gonzalez's radio, the one he sang along to whenever he was drunk, we heard it almost every day.

"Let me tell ya 'bout the birds and the bees—"

Someone could hear us. What if soldiers passed by and just started shooting? Whenever I looked out the window, there would always be foreign soldiers walking around the streets, swaggering through crowds that would part for them. The drunk ones were scarier, throwing bottles and words like "gook" and "ching-chong" as if they were knives.

"—and a girl and a guy and the way they could kiss—"

I looked past the neon signs of Paradise, Cindibar, Tavern's, and No Limits Cafe. Something was moving. A car? No. An army jeep, gray and ugly. The headlights flashed past the sheet of rain. It was getting closer, speeding through the street and heading straight toward the spot my sister refused to leave.

"Sarah!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. She continued to ignore me.

"It's time you learned about the facts of life—"

I ran toward my sister to push her away from the jeep's path. I closed my eyes and waited for the crash. What will happen to Mama? What would she do when she sees what I had done to her Bible? Would she leave my body here as food for the rats? She had promised she would come back. Where was she?

Nothing happened.

The jeep stopped a few paces from where we were frozen on the road.

Sarah released a sob and hugged me, her arms pinning mine to my sides with her strength, her tears mixing with the rain.

I looked at the people in the car. The woman's make up was thick, her hair was piled high on her head, her dress low and showing too much skin, but she looked familiar—

"Mama?" Sarah blurted out.

She gripped the arm of the man beside her, his hands still on the wheel. He had gray eyes, light brown hair, pale skin, a face I'd know anywhere. A face I've always hated to see because it was mine.

The strange man put on a hat and jumped out of the army jeep, rushing to where Sarah and I stood, shivering from the cold. *Are y'all okay?* He spoke in English, but it was deep and slow, the sound of it went up and down like a bouncing ball. This man was a soldier. I searched for evidence of a gun hidden somewhere in his tan uniform. I could kick his knees so Sarah would have time to run away if she ever stopped crying.

Mama finally stepped out of the jeep, the rain flattening her hair in an instant as she rushed toward us. She kneeled in front of me so our eyes could meet. She placed her hands on my face and asked me if I was hurt. She then told the strange man to park the car somewhere and to join us in our unit once he was done. *I'll make us some coffee, she said.* Mama never let anyone inside the unit. Not the women from the street who knew her name. Not Mr. or Mrs. Gonzales. I started thinking about demonic possession. An old priest had

talked about it in a sermon once. We would always sit at the back of the church, where no one could stare at us, right next to the large statues of Mama Mary and Papa Jesus. What if a demon had taken over Mama's body? But we recite the rosary at least once a day, and we pray before every meal. It's not possible.

When we finally arrived back home, Mama went to the little wooden cabinet right next to our bed, took out some dry clothes, then handed them to me.

"You might get sick," she said. "I'll warm you both some milk." And she smiled. It was small and close-mouthed, but it brought out the dimple in her left cheek and the lines around her eyes.

I couldn't speak so I just nodded. I grabbed Sarah's hand while she was rubbing the water from her eyes and led her to the small bathroom right next to the even smaller kitchen. The handle of the bathroom door didn't lock so I did what I always did, pushed the blue plastic water bucket in front of the door so it would stay closed. On hot days, it was my job to make sure the bucket was always filled to the brim. When it rained, the leaking ceiling would take care of that for me. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* The water splashed onto the once white tiles, at least I think they were once white, they'd been that color for as long as I could remember. They always reminded me of Mr. Gonzales' teeth, stained from chewing betel nuts.

"Who was that man with Mama?" Sarah said as she shook her head like a wet dog, little droplets flying into my eyes.

"Sarah, stop!"

"You're so dramatic, Ate."

I harrumphed and went back to patting my body dry.

"Well? Who is he?"

"How should I know?" The irritation seeped into my tone.

"Don't you know everything?"

I didn't want to pick a fight so I just took a deep breath and ignored her.

"He looks like you."

I froze. She said those words as if they didn't matter, as if it all made sense.

"Sarah, please."

I turned to the sink stationed to the left of the door and turned it open. With my wet shirt, I scrubbed the rainwater from my arms and my hands. My skin began to turn pink, but

I couldn't stop. I could feel the racing of my heart, the sweat down my back, my breaths were too fast, in and out, in and out. I'm going to fall. I'm going to fall and hit my head, and I'm going to die and—

"Ate Gina!" Sarah took the cloth from me, my arms felt raw, my hands still trembling.

"You said the earthquakes stopped happening."

I tried to stop my voice from trembling.

"I thought they did."

We had a "real" earthquake a few years back. The wooden cabinet had fallen, creating a crack on the floor which we were able to hide by moving the mattress a little bit to the right later on. The cans of carne norte and condensada clanged to the ground like the bells in the church. I hadn't known how fragile objects could be until that moment as we curled ourselves into the corner of the room. One night, Sarah had woken up to the sounds of my harsh breathing. Mama had been angry earlier that day for a reason I no longer remember. But I explained to my sister how I felt, this creeping feeling of fear inside me as if I was being chased by something I couldn't see or touch, and she simply said, *your body went through an earthquake.*

Sarah gathered my hands together as if I were about to pray, sandwiching my hands between hers. Holding on tight, she squeezed every few seconds. The tightness in my chest slowly disappeared. *Drip. Drip. Drip. One. Two. Three.* Another deep breath.

Mama knocked on the door. "Gina, Sarah, hurry up."

"Opo, Mama!" Sarah and I yelled back. I wiped the tears from my face. I handed Sarah our dry clothes that hung from a hook on the door.

When we returned to the kitchen, our mother was humming. Her flowered skirt dripped water onto the floor as she waited for the pot on the stove to start boiling. The strange man leaned on the kitchen counter right next to her. He'd whisper something in her ear, and she'd giggle. Mama never giggled.

We had a small wooden table in the kitchen, it had chip marks from when Mama would cut meat. There were little mountains of gum stuck beneath it, courtesy of Sarah. At the center was a Coca-Cola bottle-turned-vase that housed the flowers I had snatched from the ground around Manang Lena's stall at the palengke. They were beginning to slouch, the soft white turning brown and brittle.

“Taga-nukarín ka?” Sarah asked before she took a sip from her bright pink plastic cup. Pink was her favorite color.

“Sarah, speak English,” Mama said.

My sister repeated her question in English.

The strange man stopped making eyes at my mother and cleared his throat.

“Far away.”

He stood tall, no sign of a slouch, his head almost the same height as the tip of the wooden cabinets on the wall.

“How far away?”

For once, I appreciated her stubbornness.

He had taken off his hat. Under the light, his hair was the same color as melted chocolate or dog poop.

“America, the state of Virginia.” There was a hint of pride in his tone.

Sarah almost dropped her cup. I inhaled sharply.

“Ate, that’s your name!”

I ignored her statement.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I said instead, turning my face to the man without making eye contact. There were little hairs above his lip and his chin, like weeds that wouldn’t stop growing.

“Gina!” Mama yelled.

“You said we couldn’t let anyone inside the apartment,” I retorted back in Kapampangan.

“Yes, I did,” Mama said slowly in English, it was the voice she used when she was about to get angry.

“Hey, hey, Lulu, calm down.” *Lulu?* “The kid has questions, she has the right to ‘em.” He cleared his throat.

“I’m Major Benjamin Foster and I’m . . . I’m your father, Gina.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, Gina, I am.”

I stood up from my seat and yelled, “NO, YOU’RE NOT!”

Mama's nostrils flared. I knew I was about to face The Slipper. I lowered my head and clenched my fists.

"Gina, apologize right now!" A pause. "I'm sorry, Benji."

"It's fine," he hastily said. His hands moved to the tops of my mother's arms, moving up and down. Mama usually didn't like being touched, when someone bumped her shoulder on the street, she would shout after them, saying words she told me to never repeat.

I took another deep breath before I spoke. "Why are you here?"

"Virginia—" Mama began to say.

"I know I haven't been around, but I'm here to help." The man gently said, as if I were some rabid cat that needed calming. His eyebrows were scrunched together, the corners of his mouth turned down. He pitied us. He pitied me. I hated it.

"We don't need your help. We don't need anyone's help." I felt my nails puncture the skin of my palms. I'd have to clean dried blood from my nails again.

The metal pot had begun to boil. It was the only sound in the deadly silent room.

"Are you my Papa too?" Sarah asked in a small voice.

He and my mother looked at each other.

"Sarah, anak, it's complicated."

"Oh," Sarah said as she began to play with the hem of her shirt, pulling at the loose threads.

"I think it's time I head back to the base," the major awkwardly said.

"But your coffee—" Mama began to say.

"Save it for yourself, Lulu." He kissed her forehead. "I'll come back in a few days, alright?" They stared into each other's eyes for almost a minute.

Mama nodded and led him to the door. After a while, I heard the click of the three locks fall into place. None of us spoke to each other for the rest of the night.

The major visited three times. The first visit was on a Sunday, market day. But since he was at the apartment, we couldn't leave. He asked if I was in school. I said no. He asked if I played any sports. I said no. He asked if I had any friends. I said no.

We were sitting at the kitchen table again, he sat in front of me with his hands clasped. He was still in his uniform, the color reminding me of the water from our faucet when the

pipes broke. Mama told me to sit with him while she and Sarah prepared lunch, one of the canned soups he brought over, chicken noodle I think, whatever that was. I have always helped Mama cook meals, I would help her clean the vegetables, and I would watch over the pot so she could rest her feet. He was ruining everything.

“How about drawin,’ you like that?” He asked in a patient voice.

I froze.

“Bingo,” he said triumphantly. I didn’t know what that meant, but he looked as if he had just won a game. He reached into his pocket, and I ducked under the table.

“Where did you go, little mouse?” He laughed.

“Leave Mama and Sarah alone, kill me,” I said, trembling.

“Wha-why do I think I would kill you?”

“Mama said soldiers have guns and guns are used for killing.”

“Gina, look at me.”

“No, leave us alone!”

“Gina, please.”

I peeked up from beneath the table. His arms were up in surrender, in his left hand was a small leather notebook.

“See? No gun.”

He slowly lowered his hand and slid the notebook across the table. I crawled back onto my seat.

“Look inside.”

I took the notebook in my hands and opened it. I’ve never seen anything so beautiful. There were multiple drawings of the same house, one at sunrise, one as the sun set, and one decorated with stars above it. I wondered what crayons he had used. Mine weren’t this fancy-looking. There were sketches of birds, pigs, cows, and one big black dog.

“What’s his name?” I pointed to the dog.

“That’s Buddy. He was my dog growin’ up. He would have loved you.”

I didn’t know what to say to that so I went back to looking through the notebook. There were drawings of flower fields, of cities, of Angeles City. I traced my fingers over the sharp edges of the clubs and the neon signs. There were even sketches of Mama. She was

smiling in every single one of them. I flipped through more pages until I found a drawing of a frowning baby with my nose and my ears.

“That was you when you were just a year old.”

“I’ve never seen a picture of me,” I said.

“Can I draw you, Gina?” he tentatively asked.

I shook my head. I didn’t like looking at myself. If the teachers and my classmates saw a picture of me, they would laugh. There were kids at school who were like me. Light skin. Light hair. Light eyes. Absent fathers. Some had darker skin and curly black hair. But Mama told me to stay away from them. I guess that’s what the other mothers said about me too.

“Gina, get the bowls, the soup’s done,” Mama called out from over her shoulder. I placed the notebook on the table and slid it to Major Foster.

“Thank you,” I said gingerly.

“Anytime, little mouse.”

The second time the major visited, he brought chocolates: Hershey’s Milk Chocolate Bars, Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups, Clark Bars, and GooGoo Clusters. I’ve never heard of any of them. Mama didn’t buy chocolate or candy, she said they would rot all our teeth, and we would have to chew with our gums like old people.

“Mama, please let me eat just one,” Sarah pleaded.

“No.”

My sister stomped her foot on the ground and made whining noises, I’m surprised she didn’t turn into a horse. The major and I were seated at the table, still on opposite sides. We were playing a game. I would say random words, and he had to draw them in his little notebook.

“Babik wearing glasses.”

“Babik?” He asked, two lines forming between his eyebrows in confusion.

“Pig,” I clarified.

“I should have your Mama teach me your language,” he said as he worked on the drawing. I could hear the quick swish of the pencil on paper. Finally, he presented to me a really fat pig with a huge mustache that twirled almost to the top of its head and a pair of

glasses nearly as big as its body. The pig was dressed in a suit. I've seen some of the men wearing them as they laughed and walked with the paint-faced ladies out of the bars.

"Is that a smile?" Major Foster asked.

"I want a dog on a bicycle," I bounced on my seat with excitement.

Mama had her arms curled around Sarah, trying to snatch the chocolate from her tiny sticky fingers.

"No! No! Mine!"

"Sarah, let go, I won't ask again!" Mama yelled, her voice slowing, the anger bubbling to the surface. I flinched. Major Foster's forehead wrinkled, and he turned to what got me distracted.

"Lulu," he said. "Why don't you have a smoke outside?" He took a box of cigarettes from his pockets and handed it to Mama. She pushed a few stray hairs back into her bun before she took the pack from him.

After she left, Major Foster and I went around the unit, picking up the chocolate bars that Sarah had thrown around to aggravate Mama. My sister was in the kitchen, her feet boosted on a chair as she washed the chocolate from her mouth and hands.

"How did you meet Mama?" I asked.

Major Foster froze.

"We-uh-we met at a...party."

"But Mama doesn't like parties, she says that's where the demonyo tricks you into doing bad things."

"It was a special party."

"Was it someone's birthday?"

"You can say that."

"What was Mama doing?"

"She was helping us get. . .drinks."

"It's okay, I know what beer is. Mr. Gonzalez never runs out of it"

"I don't like that man around any of you."

"He smells bad, and he looks like the pig you drew."

I started giggling, and the major chuckled until we were both rolling on the floor, our bellies full of laughter. When Mama came home, he readied himself to leave but not before

showing me his final drawing. It was his dog, Buddy, riding on a bicycle. Two little girls riding bicycles on his left and right sides. A grown man and woman bicycling a few spaces behind.

"I don't know how to ride a bike," I said.

"I'll teach you one day." He promised. He placed a tiny candy bar in my hand and a finger to his lips. I quickly put it into the pocket of my dress before Mama could see it.

Later that night, when Sarah was already asleep, I sat with my legs crossed on my side of the bed as Mama double-checked the locks on the door and window.

"Mama, do you love Major Foster?"

She began to fold the freshly washed clothes from the basket near the corner of the bed. She does this when she's stressed.

"When I was your age, my mama would stay up at night, waiting for my papa to come home after he left us for a *puta*." She paused, biting her lip. "Gina, I want you to have a better life, better than your apu. . . better than me. I don't want you to have the same regrets."

"Do you regret it?" *Do you regret me?* I wanted to ask instead.

"Let's pray together before we sleep." And that was the end of the conversation.

* * *

The major's last visit was the day he said goodbye. He and Mama were talking outside the unit, and Sarah and I had our ears pressed against the door. I could hear her pleading with him to stay. He told her that it would just be a year. Mama said the same thing about me stopping school.

"Lulu, c'mon, don't be like that. A year will fly by so fast you won't have time to miss me."

"You said that before, and I ended up raising our daughter by myself for eleven years," Mama retorted.

"There's no reasoning with you when you're like this."

"I'm sorry," Mama quickly said. "I just love you so much."

There was a pause. The doorknob jangled, and Sarah and I scrambled to move away before we got caught snooping. Mama always said that there was no room for *chismosas* in heaven. We didn't move fast enough, and we stumbled over each other into a pile on the floor.

"Looks like we've got some busybodies here," Major Foster drawled.

I looked behind him to see my mother with her hands covering her face.

“Mama?” I said.

She lifted her head and looked at me. Her hair wasn't in a bun this time, it was free and curling down her back. She was wearing a pale, yellow dress. I remember when it used to be bright yellow, like the sun during summer afternoons. Years of washing had turned it lifeless. Mama's eyes were red-rimmed, and there were dried tears on her face. My mother rarely cried. Not when she came home with bruises on her face or wrists. She never even blinked whenever Mrs. Gonzales threatened to evict us. Mama always had her head held high. She was unshakeable.

She pushed past the major, past Sarah and me on the floor, and stood in front of the open window. The clouds were darkening, and I could almost smell a hint of rain.

My sister untangled herself from me and skittered to our mother, grabbing a fistful of her skirt to draw her attention. She didn't speak, she didn't even move. I felt my blood start to boil. How dare he?

“Gina, I want you to have this,” he suddenly said, handing his little leather notebook to me.

“I don't want it.”

He let out a deep sigh and crouched down so we were eye to eye. I curled my hands into fists, my nails digging into my palms to stop myself from clawing at him. He took my right hand and knocked on it. I grudgingly relaxed my fingers so he could place the notebook in my hand.

“On the first page, I wrote down where I'll be stationed. I hope you can write to me.” He paused for a bit and flicked his gaze to my mother. “I hope you can write to me too, Lulu.”

I clutched the notebook to my chest.

“Take care of your sister and your Mama, alright?”

I nodded.

He pats my shoulder, looking as if he wanted to hug me but decided against it. He stood up and brushed his hands against his pants as if he didn't know what to do next.

“Lucilla.” He looked at my mother again. She still wouldn't look at him.

“Sarah, be good,” he said to my sister.

Sarah ignored him.

“Little mouse. I’ll see you soon.” His gray eyes, a mirror to mine, shone with unshed tears. With a tip of his hat, he turned and closed the door behind him.

Thud.

Mama had fallen to her knees, her hands covering her mouth, unable to stop her broken whimpers. Sarah sat by her side, still clutching her dress, her knuckles nearly as pale as the cloth. I made my way to them. I kneeled in front of my mother. I took her hands and sandwiched them between my palms, just as Sarah would do for me. Our tears were silent as the rain began to fall.

* * * * *

“Dance Me to Your Beauty with a Burning Violin”

by Jocelyn Low

‘Nice ass!’

His lanky frame meant that he had had to bend low with his derriere perked and pointed at the tall ceiling of the University library. Alex straightened up in a hurry. *Darn this Thomas Hobbes for being at the bottom shelf!* Alex assumed an air of being complimented on his ‘ass’ all the time and glanced quickly at the new fan: Chuck Taylor All Star - pink; loose denim boiler suit; a crucifix dangling in one ear. Promising. But he was not ready to meet the face full-on, for fear of being disappointed. His past year at the University had taught him that those who dressed well usually did not have the looks to go with the sartorial titillation.

‘Hey, no offence! That was what greeted me. Name’s Kai.’

Alex had to take the outstretched hand.

‘Alex.’

‘Hi Alex,’ Kai didn’t let go.

Alex had no choice but to look up. How big and brown his eyes were in the dimness of the library. Floppy fringe, a flash of teeth.

‘Do you know where I can find all these books?’ Kai showed Alex a list on his screen.

A module Alex took last Semester.

‘Sure, they are mostly on these two shelves.’

‘Are you free? Can you help me? I’ll buy you a drink after.’ Dimples.

Alex only said yes because of the voice. He never knew a person’s voice could make you feel like someone was stroking you very slowly and deliberately, up and down your spine.

* * *

Alex was always getting A's on the Political Science essays he turned in. A first-year student in the Faculty of the Arts and Social Sciences, Alex was already being asked about his future plans - Honours programme? Maybe even a doctorate? Alex was just glad that getting good grades meant having more friends. The hardworking ones sat behind him in the lecture theatre, burning holes into his notebook and computer screen as they tried to understand the secret of his academic success. The less diligent, and to Alex, usually the more delicious ones, would sit right next to him, or corner him after class. These would usually be the jocks who spent all their time on sports, or the glam boys, who partied too much to do any work. It would usually go like this:

'Hiya, Alex. You know that essay on Leviathan? I got started on it, but...let's just say Hobbes and I no speaka the same lingo! Can help or not? I got that big game Saturday...'

Alex tried not to stare at the vein pulsating under the skin of the rugby captain's forearm. Such a strong heartbeat. Alex wished he himself could be as comfortable in his own skin.

'Sure, I'll take a look. You share editing rights with me?'

'Hey, thanks, Bro. Owe you one.'

For minutes after, Alex would still feel the sensation of the friendly jab on his shoulder.

Alex was fine to go on like this, being one of the guys, blending in. There was no alternative. He could not allow others to see the monster that he was, lurking in the depths of depravity. 'He is sick, Alex,' said Mama, referring to the man in the TV drama or the news item. 'It's not only a crime but a sin, because it is unnatural. It's always been man and woman, not man and man.'

Mama was no longer around to make him feel ashamed, but Alex was not ready to fight the disapprobation from society.

Not until Kai.

* * *

'And then all the boys in the swim team would come out in a row, all topless! They may be only in their teens, but their bodies...Fwah!'

Kai was telling Alex about the school swimmers in the all-boys' school Kai had attended back in Penang. Alex wanted to tell Kai to pipe down. There were others in the

fitting rooms at Abercrombie & Fitch. After hanging out together for a couple of months, Alex should have been used to Kai by now. Kai was the most out-of-the-closet gay he knew. Being around him, Alex was starting to feel he might not be such a monster after all. Love was love was love was love, whether your object of desire was of the same sex or of a different sex. Who was to say what was natural and what was not? These days, he could feel himself moving a bit more comfortably, as though he was trying to shake himself loose, not having to keep himself so compact.

'I wish I had a picture of their erect nipples to show you!' Kai said as he came out of the fitting room.

'Shh...not so loud!'

'I'm only talking about nipples what, everyone has them! You don't have ah?' Kai tried to pinch Alex's nipples. Pink-faced, but a little excited, Alex squirmed away.

'Stop it!'

'Then you'll be famous! And maybe, finally, people will stop thinking you are no fun at all, just another nerd, like the crowd you used to hang out with! At least I introduced you to Fort Road, and not another famous Kway Teow stall!'

Alex allowed Kai to drape his arm around his shoulder, as they walked towards the cashier. Kai wanted the black mesh tank top after all.

* * *

If Mama had been alive, Mama would not have approved of Alex spending so much time with Kai. She would have pronounced Kai to be a bad influence. 'Mama,' Alex said to the mirror each time before heading out to meet Kai, imagining his mother's disapproving looks, 'I listened to you for twenty years of my life. I love you dearly, Mama, but please let me choose my own friends now. Do you want me to continue having friends who look like me - specs, side parting, button shirts?'

Mama stayed silent.

* * *

When Mama was alive, Mama doted on Alex. An only child with a missing father, Alex was all Mama had.

'Go play with Mei Ling, Alex. She just got accepted into the Gifted Education Programme at Henry Park Primary School. Maybe she can give you some tips when it's your turn next year.'

Nine-year-old Alex was afraid of ten-year-old Mei Ling, though. Not that she was older, or that she might be smarter. Alex could not understand the sick feeling he got in the pit of his stomach, seeing Mei Ling now. Ever since that last time when she lifted up her frock and said if I show you mine will you show me yours? And before Alex could turn away, he had seen the smooth taut crotch of her pink panty. Of course, he knew she did not have a penis, but having his own eyes confirmed it made him feel...horror. Like she was an alien. She was incomplete was the best way he could explain it to himself.

'I want to play with the boys there, Mama,' Alex pointed out of the window of his room. Their condominium was in a public housing estate, and from their unit on the fourth floor, Alex spent many hours looking at the moving figures at the outdoor basketball court.

'Boys are rough, Alex, and those look like they would knock into you, and you might fall down. Maybe I can buy an indoor basketball hoop and ball set for you to practise?'

'But Mama, I need to run around. I need to build muscles so I can protect you!' Even at nine, Alex knew the magic words to make his mother tousle his hair and pull him into a tight embrace, kissing the top of his head.

'My sweet, sweet boy,' Mama murmured.

Alex had no choice but to be the sweet, sweet boy, always obeying his Mama and polite to all the adults around him. Sometimes, being the sweet, sweet boy made Mama give in to his wishes. But not in this case. Alex was never allowed to play with the boys at the basketball court. He could only look at them from his window, lingering longer over the shirtless ones among the golden boys glistening in the sun, their beauty like a burning violin.

* * *

Alex was in Kai's dorm. Alex had never been here before, always managing to avoid being in that small room with Kai. He trusted Kai; he just did not trust himself. Today, though, he had no choice. Kai was sick and Alex had to play nurse to his patient.

Alex placed the wet cloth on Kai's forehead to bring down the fever.

Kai held on to Alex's hand and did not let go.

'Don't go, Alex.'

Kai's eyes were still closed. Alex understood this was the fever talking.

'I'm here, Kai.'

'Just don't go, Alex.'

'I won't'

'Don't leave me.'

Alex looked into Kai's face. In his flushed fevered state, Kai's face lay open. Too weak to display his usual cynicism and ironic wit, Kai's natural beauty burnt a hole in Alex's heart.

* * *

Kai went back to his hometown, Penang, over the Christmas break. Alex typed:

Merry Christmas! Thank you for your friendship...

Gag. Stuffed shirt.

Merry Christmas!

Why was the snowman smiling?

Because he could see the snow blower coming down the street!

Cheap.

Hi Kai, Merry Christmas!

Alex stared at the screen. After a long while, he added the YouTube link to *Love is Love* by Culture Club. He typed:

Love is love is nothing without you

Love is love is everything you do

He hit Send.

* * *

Alex saw Kai from a distance and hurried away in the opposite direction. It was the first day of a new semester. Kai had not responded to the last text Alex sent.

'Alex!'

Alex did not stop.

'Alex!'

Kai caught up.

'Oh, hi. Back from Penang already?'

DON'T ask about your last text.

'Alex, I need to talk to you.'

'Aren't you doing that already?' Alex arranged his face into a smile.

'Alex...look Alex, I know we never really talked about it.'

'What?'

'I'm not gay, Alex. I'm sorry if I made you think that —'

'I never thought anything!' A few undergraduates passing by stared at them, curiously. Alex could finally release the weeks of puzzlement, then anger followed by the familiar shame and embarrassment. When weeks passed, and Kai did not reply, he could feel his skin tightening, protecting the monster within that had never really gone away.

Kai was still talking.

'It started as a joke back home, before I came out to Uni here. I didn't mean any harm. I wasn't really sure about you. I thought you were just happy to hang out with me. But when I saw your text over Christmas...I just couldn't anymore. I really didn't know about you. I'm sorry...'

Alex didn't know if he was angrier at himself or Kai. He quickly walked away, shrugging off Kai's hand. He couldn't bear to have Kai see the tears in his eyes.

* * *

Many years later, after a few more heartbreaks and finally settling down to a stable relationship, Alex would occasionally think of Kai. Alex wondered if Kai was still in denial about his orientation. With maturity came wisdom, and Alex understood that Kai was just like him, Alex. After that episode with Kai, strangely, Alex was able to accept himself for who he was. He had laid bare his heart to Kai, and that small step had started him on his journey of coming out to the people around him. He would like to think that somehow, somewhere,

Kai was also able to feel comfortable enough in his own skin, to be dancing to his own tune, as his beauty sang like a burning violin.

* * * * *

“Squawk”

by Christian Jerome

I

Tony dug into the wet soil in front of him, measuring, with his tired eyes, a rectangular hollow six feet deep. Rocks in the dirt scraped against his spade of four years, scratching at the buildup of rust on its surface. The full moon had risen in the cloudy sky. The drizzle chilled his body and hindered his vision, but he could not complain; burying bodies was easier on wet dirt than coarse loam. He'd rush home for dinner, long before the Patrols roamed the streets.

He hoisted the black body bag onto his shoulders, as big as he was and a little lighter. He paused, taking in the crickets chirping and the wind rustling the coconut trees around him. Three crows landed and croaked beside his feet. The birds perched at the top of coconut leaves when he shooed them, eyes trained straight, heads rotating. He listened for breathing, or maybe a groan inside the package he carried. They told him he had nothing to worry about. They had never broken that promise before, but still.

What would he ever do if it started breathing?

He heaved the bag into the hole and shoveled the dirt back. He wanted to say a prayer but thought it unnecessary.

For dinner, he expected chicken and fried sweet potatoes, maybe pork if the prices had wavered down. Etta cooked instead the wild clumps of water spinach growing around their backyard. He sighed, went to their room, and changed to shorts and a tank top with a small hole in the chest from where mice had eaten away from.

Maria and Joy ran up to him and planted a kiss on each cheek, leaving the assignment they'd been doing under the kitchen incandescent light. Etta resisted a hug, unperturbed while facing the pan and the kindling on their little charcoal stove. He did not push. Instead, he handed her the dirty white envelope he got from them.

"30 pesos," he said. "I took out the ten I need to repair the plow and buy a new feeder for the pigs."

"I don't want it."

He held her hand and placed the envelope in her palms. "For the kids," he whispered.

She looked at it, then at Tony, and sighed. "I'm not spending any more than what we need," she said. "Get it away from me."

He sat down and pretended to read his daughters' textbooks, focusing on the snippets his fifth-grade education had allowed him to fathom, skipping on the others he could not.

"The secret to life, really," Mr. Castro said as he strode in between clumps of stalks on Tony's paddy, "is hard work. That, and a little bit of luck. I was lucky to be born into my family, but you can't deny that I worked hard to get what I have. Am I right, Tony?"

"Yes sir. Well, this harvest season seemed to be more giving than last year-"

"And you, Tony, I like you because you work hard. Your family is lucky to have you. And also me. I'm lucky to have you. You work hard so you can make your family rich. In the process, you make *me* rich. Win-win!"

“Yes, sir.” Tony scratched his neck. “I had about eighty cavans last year, I should have about one-fifty this time. All good quality.”

“Ah, yes. The rice. Your rice is good quality. I know that already. My Chinese friends from Manila love your harvest. They sell it in their restaurants near the casinos. You know those expensive ones on the news? Yeah, those ones. They pay so well, I got a new Honda last year. Great machines. Marvelous. The true results of hard work. But yes. The harvest. Even last year, with the drought, your harvest was good. I’m sure you made good money with it. You’re hard-working. You definitely did.”

Past the paddies they went and into the dry loam of the coconuts, patched here and there with grass and bush. Three crows flew around their heads and settled on the ground in front of them. They flew on the crowns of the coconut leaves after Tony shooed them off.

“This is the problem with your coconuts, Tony,” Mr. Castro said as he looked up. “The first time I tasted them, they don’t taste so good. Not coconut-y, you know what I mean. And the flesh is too tough. I mean, just look at the color. Very dark. Looks very old.”

Tony swallowed a lump. The three crows stared down at him, heads rotating. In the distance, the discolored spot in the ground from last night caught his attention. He felt his head float.

“I’ll get your rice. One peso and thirty per kilo. Not bad, yeah? It’s twenty cents less than last year, but oil prices are way too high this year.”

He tried looking Mr. Castro in the eye, but his vision wavered. The crows flew up and around over their heads, landing on a tree branch and flying off again. It made him even dizzier. “That’s a losing price for me, Mr. Castro. And I still have debts to pay from last year’s harvest. Maybe you can up that a bit?”

“Well, I have to survive, too, you know. I have debts to pay and friends to play golf with. Martha wants to try the Maldives this year, that woman. Jesus. Look. The rice is a great deal already, don’t you see? I mean, it’s either that or nothing right? I’m the only hauler around these parts. But I’m still extending you the best offer I can give.”

The birds screamed over their heads. He sweated. "Will you be taking the coconuts? I worked hard for those, too."

"No, it won't be profitable for me. Maybe next harvest, eh?"

Tony went home in a daze, walking slow and shifting, the squawking of the little black birds echoing in his head.

II

It was two weeks later when the black van came, two honks in the night, then three. First Lieutenant Dasinas, in all-black clothing, helped Tony haul the two body bags inside the line of coconuts. The soldier, all smiles, chest pushed out, body upright, handed the farmer a white envelope when they found a spot, with a little extra, he said, for burying two instead of one.

"I take it you had a successful operation?" Tony asked.

"Oh yes," said the soldier, hands on his waist, elbows jutting outward. "Word from up high said the President had been clamping down on strikes all over the country. His businessman friends are getting angry, they say. Means more action for us." He laughed. "There you go: peasant leaders, those ones. Disappeared on the face of the earth." He spat.

"Oh. Heh."

"Uh-huh. Same reaction. And more of them will fall down. That means you'd be busier, too. Soon you'd have so much money, you'd start thinking about starting a second family."

"Maybe." He stifled a smile.

"But in all seriousness, though. You're doing your family a favor. And you're doing this country a favor. These radicals are too unruly. And if you have any tips, don't hesitate to tell me. Or, you know, if people here are bothering you or whatever. Tell me and I'll take care of them for you. Sound good?"

Lieutenant Dasinas left in good spirits, a crow encircling high above his head. When he boarded his black van, the crow followed him out to the road and into the dark of night. Three crows flew over Tony's head.

Tony dug until the crescent moon went up the sky, the wind snapping at the branches of his coconuts. Every few minutes he'd look around, always finding no one but looking the next time again just to be sure. No groans from inside the bags. Under the crows over his head, he threw the two body bags on the same hole.

He put his hands together, but could not think of a prayer to start with.

Miss Mandina discussed right away the grading system to start the PTA meeting, then the borrowing of books, then the documents the parents would submit to the school's office. To make certain nobody forgot, the teacher wrote everything on the banged-up chalkboard in front of the room, the cardboard in its borders revealing itself from use. Twice her chalk stick broke, much to her annoyance. The parents now had no excuses not to comply with the school's rules, she said, and any consequence of non-compliance they should accept without complaint. Tony understood little but nodded with the other parents anyway.

Their turn for a one-on-one came after a wispy girl named Sara, whose mother scolded her in front of everyone after finding out from Miss Mandina her daughter hadn't learned her subtraction yet. Unlike the other girl, Joy pleased her, the adviser said, the little girl picking things up quicker than the other students. "Does she have plans for the future?"

"Said she wants to be a doctor, Ma'am. Her grandmother died of cancer. She said she wanted to cure people like her."

“Well, she has the brains for it. Do you think your parents can pay for it, Joy?”

She did not respond. Tony’s eyebrows creased.

“I have a niece. She’s in medical school right now. Her parents pay thousands every year for her tuition, plus a few thousand more for her equipment. Her parents are both businessmen, though, so it’s not a problem for her.” Miss Mandina adjusted her oval-shaped spectacles, looking delighted with herself.

Joy’s shoulders sank, her stare dropping to the floor. It was when her grandmother died that she last looked like this, Tony recalled, that time when she resolved to achieve the very dream she had just conferred.

“But don’t get too sad about it,” said Miss Mandina, tone turning cheery. “There are many things you can still do in your life. You have your own little piece of land, for instance. Female farmers are not unheard of.” She gave a shrill, high-pitched laugh. “You’ll figure it all out, Joy; you’re still young. Just remember: you can achieve whatever you can if you work hard for it, but sometimes it also pays to be smart.” She signed the report card – all lines of eight – and called the next student on the list, some short, malnourished kid named Jericho.

Tony hugged Joy as they waited at the school gate. Despite the kisses he gave to her cheeks and forehead, the sinking feeling in his chest never left. He felt less of a father, and as he clasped her even tighter, he realized his shortcomings also made him feel less of a man.

III

Second Lieutenant Baisa’s hands trembled as they carried the body bag to the edge of the coconut tree line, rows of golden rice standing proud meters from them, all ready for harvest come a month. The soldier looked around.

“This spot okay? No one will see you here?”

“Yes, sir,” Tony answered.

"It's near curfew, plus the trees provide good cover, aside from the darkness." Lieutenant Dasinas' voice, it seemed to Tony, was lower, his chest more puffed up than before. "We've been doing this almost a year now, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll be assigned here starting next week, Baisa, do you understand?"

"Here, sir?" Baisa shivered. Warm winds blew past the coconut trees.

"Not that I can put you anywhere, can I? If not for your Colonel father, I'd have sent you packing back to Manila to study Art, or whatever it is you softies like to do. No, you stay here, understood?"

"Yes, sir, I under-"

Baisa's ears pricked up. He ducked. Police sirens blared, a black-and-blue camouflaged military Jeep appearing in the distance after a second. Lieutenant Dasinas, Tony saw, stood straight, not a single muscle moving. The car sped past them, its sirens dropping in frequency as it went.

Baisa hunched his back and covered his head when he stood up. When he removed his hands, the Lieutenant hit him in the back of his skull. "That was our Patrol, you fucker."

"I-I'm sorry, sir, I just-"

"Drop and give me fifty, you bitch."

Baisa dropped and started counting, his arms, thick as they were, looking fragile and ready to give in any moment. Tony rehearsed the words in his head over and over again, savoring every word so as not to forget. He hunched as he approached the Lieutenant.

"Excuse me, sir."

"What?"

"Sorry. Erm. If I may just say this. If you have more of them, you know, corpses, to dispose of, just bring them to me. I'd be happy to do the work for you."

The Lieutenant considered this. "You want more?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, that’s new.”

Did that sound of incredulity? Or was that admiration? “Have you heard of a doctor from a farmer’s family, Sir?”

“No, not really. Midwives, maybe. Nurses. But not doctors.”

“Well, my youngest daughter wants to be one.”

Lieutenant Dasinas’ face betrayed a tiny smile, imperceptible for the second it was there. He looked away, past the paddies and the trees. “Well. At the end of the day, you either do succeed in being a father, or you don’t. No amount of excuse or cowardice can hide that.” His face contorted in disgust as he looked over to Baisa. “I can already tell this little boy’s father failed him, for instance. You, on the other hand...”

Lieutenant Dasinas studied the farmer. Tony noticed small shining eyes behind the Lieutenant when he looked back, ten pairs in total, perched on branches and leaves. One gawked first, then the others followed suit. His head spun.

“I’ll see what I can do, but don’t expect anything yet. I’m good friends with those from above, but I don’t want to overplay it. They might suspect me of something, anything, and nowadays, suspicion by those geriatrics in command is enough to put someone in a ditch.” He spat.

With that, Tony picked up his spade and, notwithstanding the numbing pain in his temples, started shoveling.

Second Lieutenant Baisa’s counting echoed on the night air. “Thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six...”

“We Will Never Be Apart Again” played on the radio, about a city girl who fell in love with a poor man from the countryside, to the disapproval of her rich parents. Etta, already frustrated, had them switch the radio to something else. Those voice dramas weren’t for children, she said, and they only serve to patronize the wrong things in life.

The only other station they captured was the local news, two anchors discussing a string of miner strikes in Bambang and Solano, and a peasant uprising in Villaverde. Demonstrations flaring the same day suggested, said the anchors, a group coordinating the workers. The broadcasters praised the swift and decisive action of the authorities who, they claimed, dispersed the militants and damaged their morale so much they stopped their demonstrations on the second day.

“Papa, what’s a strike?” Maria asked in between a spoonful of rice and fried fish.

“It’s when people show their bosses they’re angry,” he said. He felt like he was stepping on a nipa mattress that, any second now, could collapse under his feet. “They organize rallies. They stop working sometimes.”

“Why would they be angry?”

“Sometimes their bosses don’t pay them properly. Or they’re not paid at all. Sometimes their bosses hurt them. Or so they say.”

“Ah. So that’s what it is. Have you been to a strike, Papa?”

“No, Maria, Papa had never been to a strike.” Etta’s leer bore holes into his head. “Listen, don’t talk about these things with other people. Only with Mama and Papa. Understood?”

“Is it because they might make me disappear, Papa?”

Etta perked up in her seat. “Maria? Who told you such things?”

“My classmates tell me stories, Mama. Juan told me the military snatched his uncle from Sibulan because they thought he protested against his landowner once. Miguel had a cousin. He wrote articles in their school paper. Bad articles. He didn’t go home one night. They’ve never found out where he is.” She took a spoonful, chewed, and swallowed.

Tony could not admit that those weren’t just rumors or make-believes. Admitting would make it all real, along with the possibility that the police or the military might knock on their doors one night, touting some trumped-up charges of terrorism or sedition or something else. The possibility that their lives would end on some false claims whose truthfulness they won’t be able to test because the very people who were supposed to implement the law wouldn’t let them. He was protecting his daughters from the world outside if he didn’t let

them know, letting them finish school in peace, move out, get a decent job, and make a better life for themselves. He hoped, at the very least, they'd stay out of the government's eyes and carve a quiet life.

"Was it true, Mama, the story about that bridge in San Simon?"

"What story?"

"That it collapsed when they were building it, but they wanted to finish it quickly so they just buried the workers underneath to save time."

"Dear Lord," Etta said, and Tony clinked his spoon to his plate.

"Why did you ask them for more, Anthony?"

"Etta, I'll just tell you the same things I tell you every night."

The light of the bedside candle lamp reflected off of Etta's face and the flowery house dress she wore. "What if they make *you* disappear next time? What if they make *us* disappear next time? Do you even think about that?"

"Our daughters have bags now. Actual school bags, not woven rice sacks they carry with their arms for kilometers on the way to school and back. We can afford slippers for them now; new ones, not those they've been using for three years. We even have enough to build a stone house, Etta, a stone house! There are no stone houses within ten kilometers from here."

Tony wanted to lie down and sleep. His farm tired him. His life tired him. He said, in a softer tone, "We'd be losing money on this year's harvest, the same way I lost money from last year's. I want Joy to be a doctor, Etta. I want Maria to be an architect. We can't have that if we're dirt poor."

"Oh, they'll deal with it, the same way you dealt with it when your farmer parents couldn't send you to school to be an engineer, or when my farmer father and my seamstress mother couldn't send me to school to be a teacher." Etta stifled a tear. "Do you even think about those people? Do you think about their families, too?"

Tony let out a patronizing laugh. "You think it's that easy for me, don't you?"

Etta glowered.

He remembered Etta's story once, as they ate at the little canteen beside Lopez Mart during their early days, how she gave up school to support her six other siblings her parents couldn't care for. That story captivated him the most. When he married her, he thought he was lucky; he still thought the same now, ten years in.

Tony's knees crumpled from Maria's cries a year later when Etta birthed her. He sobbed, too, as the midwife cleaned the baby and wrapped her in cheesecloth as soft as her newborn skin. The baby's wails rumbled their little hut. The midwife placed Maria on Etta's arms, and Tony huddled close to their baby's face. His wife looked so beautiful then, so dainty and so divine. Now, in the red light of the candle melting beside their bed, Etta looked so disgusted, her stare freezing Tony's tongue and jaw.

IV

Tony,

When you brought money home that first time last year, I did not ask where it came from, but only cared about how your children had a proper meal for the first time in a month. Budgeting money was hard when we barely had any, and even if I grew up with backyard vegetables and canned sardines, it wasn't something I'd like our children to eat over and over for the rest of their lives.

I remember how nauseous I had been when you told me where the money came from. Burying bodies? On our land? Back then, as like now, I thought you had lost your mind.

As a mother, it relieved me to see Maria and Joy have new things every school year, to see them live in a stone house with a proper roof. That much I cannot lie about. I grew up in an old nipa

hut, so worn-out water dripped through the roof when it rained and the heat seeped off the little holes when it's sunny. My children had something better, and I was glad.

But I've been having nightmares recently. I keep them to myself, but when I sleep, I see you and the children bundled in black bags. They make me dig the hole, and make me put you in it. I'd cover you in dirt, and I'd cry. When I wake up, I'd be crying, too, only quietly so I don't wake you or the kids up.

I'm not waiting for those dreams to happen. I know that with those savages, it's just a matter of when.

This is for Maria and Joy. Please be smart enough not to try and find us.

I love you.

-Marietta

V

Two weeks later the black van came, as Tony fed their pigs with leftover rice and greens and a little liquid from the tears in his eyes. He wanted to pretend he did not hear the three honks then two, to just keep on feeding their swine, then to go back inside and sleep, as he had been doing the past few days.

The first body bulged from its container and weighed twice as much as Tony, the biggest he had ever had to bury. The second body he felt was slim and lithe. He felt tired. He wanted to go back home.

Lieutenant Dasinas arrived with a small black body bag, half the size of the others, snuggling comfortably in his folded arms. Tony's heart skipped a beat. Dasinas laid the body on the ground beside the other two. "You told me you wanted more," he said.

"Sir?" Tony had to ask. The rain had started falling, water seeping from his hair down to his forehead and face. In the moonless night, he saw the glimmer of dozens of crows' eyes, perched on the branches and the leaves of his coconuts.

"What?"

"That's... that's a..." Tony saw Baisa staring at the small body bag on the ground, his face changing to a purplish hue.

"It's dead. Don't tell me you can't do it." Lieutenant Dasinas planted his arms on his hips, his shoulders jutting outward.

Tony's hands quivered. Baisa, purple and eyes almost closed, looked straight ahead. He took deep, heavy breaths, the rain running down from his temples and splashing away from the air blown out from his mouth. Lieutenant Dasinas stood straight in front of him.

"What is it, Baisa?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Do you want to let it out?"

He shook his head.

"Puke it out."

He shook his head.

Lieutenant Dasinas slapped Baisa square on the jaw. It left a wide red mark on his cheek. His eyes glimmered for a second. "Do you want to puke, Baisa?"

"No, sir."

With effort, Baisa's breathing slowed and, his face, after swallowing twice, returned to dark brown. He looked the Lieutenant straight in the eye, and the Lieutenant nodded at him.

He turned to Tony. "You can do the job, right?"

He wanted to speak, but his mouth wavered, his lips pursed. He remembered that look Etta gave him that night, and he felt chains clanking down on his arms and legs. The crows kept their quiet.

"I need an answer, Tony."

"Y-yes, sir. I can do it."

Dasinas gave him the thick white envelope. "Here. One hundred. What's that, two, three months' work for you? Damn, that's envious."

Tony took the envelope, and the two soldiers in civilian clothing drove away in their black van. Two crows followed them into the dead night. When they were well out of sight, he puked out the bile building out of his throat. He retched until he was sure he'd emptied what little food he'd eaten for breakfast and lunch that day. His mouth watered and his throat felt sore, but somehow it did not feel enough.

Tony dug, the shovel weighing down in his arms. With every heave his lungs gave way, his shoulders ached, his stomach a carved, dark, empty pit. The two adults he chucked into one hole.

Then he carried the bag with the dead child in it. His knees buckled and his arms almost wavered. The crows cawed. He puked once more. He knelt to the ground and put his ears near the bag. The crows shrieked. No rustling inside. Or was there? Groans? He wasn't certain. Was that a voice? Amid all the squawks and the croaks, he couldn't hear anything. He wanted for there to be one. Why can't there be one? Why can't they lie to him, just this once?

He took his time laying the body on the ground. When he shoveled the dirt back into the hole, he was slow and deliberate, never mind the aching in his arms or the ache inside his temples.

Never mind the crows screaming out into the moonless night, their numbers swelling into the hundreds, the leaves of his coconuts dangling low from their weight. The rain carried his tears to the ground, and when he was done, he sat down and cried some more, and when he went back home in a daze and shut his door to muffle the chorus of the black birds, realizing his family was gone, he balled up in a corner and cried until sleep took his eyes, for a moment wishing this time would be his very last.

* * * * *

“The Heart of the Moonlit Fairy”

by Sofia Syafriza Hashim

The Witch told me there was nothing I could do and there was less that I could be.
This is because goodness comes in two and balance comes in three.
And I was the only one.

I reached out to her, but there she went off again. Pompous prick! Thus, I sought for the jester instead; an eccentric rumoured to be living in the world of dreams.
They say ‘Seek for the jester to be filled with laughter, and anticipate your happily ever after.’
And so, I set off on a journey to the edge of the world with a small bag strapped to my back.
To a world seen mostly in dreams, and in my mind appeared a flashback.

I was nothing but a man. Living in modesty, edging on poverty. But one moonlit night, I caught a glimpse of a fairy. Ever since, my heart belonged to her. There were things she’d tell me, and solace she’d breathe. She’d dance in the open waves and say something that’d make me stay. When we ran in the moonlight, she would show me the way.

But when I met her again, she had told me her plan. A tenderness she’d shown, enticed by a man. A future she designed, where I knew she wasn’t mine. So I tried to say something, something that would make her stay. But we’d run in the moonlight, and the night would turn into day. I cried a river, knowing she’d disappear forever. I spent endless nights bemoaning my curse. I was thinking she would notice how I’d run through the forest just to reach her first. And so there I was then, pacing to and fro. I had seen the moonlight and let her go.

Sorrow filled my heart, and there was nothing I could do. But the fairy gave me comfort and some leftover strength, so I sought for nothing less, and stumbled upon the jester in a jest. "Pray tell, why you've come to me, o' legendary knight. And is that your friend? A sad-looking sap that one, as if they're edging to an end!"

The knight greeted me, and I found that we shared a similarity. A happy ending is what we seek, for our hope had long been bleak. We were then made to be in the company of the jester, and I almost felt a little better. But I also felt a bit funny; I glanced at the knight, and the knight glanced back at me. "Are you sure this will lead us to happily ever after?"

"It'll certainly leave you in stitches." The jester laughed, and made our lungs give out. We clutched our stomachs, and couldn't even stand about. We felt our sides splitting apart. The jester quipped, "Another bud of a flower nipped like a work of art." And I heard the wailing of a familiar fairy, thinking it sorcery. "You-!!" A blast flung me to the door, and I crumpled to the floor. I could laugh no more. The knight dragged his feet and pushed my backside. I tossed him his sword and winced at my insides. The jester was then slain, but I was in a horde of pain. When his magic wore off, a princess was freed from the jester's prison, followed after by a familiar person.

I coughed blood, feeling faint. My heart gave her life to me, and kissed my cheek like a saint. In my hand was her locket, and she slipped it in my pocket.

I staggered along, hugged by my fairy.

Only for her to dissipate, slowly leaving me.

She faded into moonlight, no longer showing me the way.

My hand went through air, and there was nothing I could do.

I started to break, fearing what the witch said was true

Till I started to see how there was something more that I could be.

For I was complete, complete I had been, balanced by three. The knight, princess, and me.

A locket in my hand, the keepsake of the fairy. And in it a woodland, a portal to her family. I trekked the mountains, and crossed the rivers. And beneath the oak tree saw a pair of lovers.

The starlit duo in the sunlit prairie set in motion to offer me a solution. “We see a fellow that’s a little mellow. Someone you had asked for a tragedy undone– go find them, before you see the rise of the sun.” I escaped the jester so the witch was the only one.

The knight and his princess were also with me, and they called forth a mighty cavalry. Into the witch’s abode we went, as rapid as our energy was spent.

But the witch only appeared in front of me, a smile on her lips seeing my bravery.

“It seems you’re not alone. Quite gutsy of you, I’m actually surprised.”

“I’ll give anything to have her back, even at a hefty price.”

“So you have come to me, seeking your bride even with a fee. I understand.

Follow my lead, and I’ll lend you a hand.”

So I went with her, and retrieved my moonlit fairy. The knight and princess I watched them marry. The price I had paid, and we were now the starlit duo dancing in a sunlit prairie. And she told me how she had fallen, drowned, and went all out just to see me again; the writer with a pen. We talked for a good, long while. In me, she had found something that made her stay, someone worthwhile. She wasn’t the only one.

* * * * *

“There Is No Art in Forgetting”

by Agatha Mercado

Summer was already past when Agatha returned home from university. The wind was cool against her cheek as she slowly walked up the steps to her grandmother’s house.

“Lola?” she called.

Her grandmother stared at her - eyes full of love and yet glazed with confusion.

“It’s Agatha,” Mama whispered to Lola. Mama smiled a bit sadly and yet lovingly as she held Lola’s hand.

“Ah Nene, Agatha,” Lola said - nene has always been the way they called her in the province. “My dear princess,” Lola remarked, opening her arms and hugging Agatha.

At that moment, Agatha couldn’t help but tear up. Her grandmother’s eyes twinkled even in age.

“I missed you so much,” Lola said, embracing her tighter - as if she’ll vanish into thin air any moment from now on.

“I miss you too,” Agatha thought, holding on to her grandmother’s arms.

The warm glow of the kitchen lights surrounded them - and in the haze, Lola’s eyes shone a little brighter. They all come home.

* * *

“Where are you going?” Maria asked Teresa as they ran down the hill toward the river bend.

“I’m going to get to Nanay before you do,” Teresa exclaimed, laughing as she lifted her *saya* to run faster.

Nanay was coming home from the *bayan* - and she’ll be bringing home clothes and hopefully chocolates from the *tiange*.

“Why are you so mean?” Maria ran after Teresa.

They reached the dirt road that connected their *linang* to the *bayan*. They saw a figure walking toward them bringing *bayongs* and a *bilao*.

“Nanay,” Maria greeted, overtaking Teresa and hugging the approaching woman.

“I won,” Maria said, making a face at Teresa.

“I’m still older than you,” Teresa said, getting the *bayong* from Nanay. “*Mano po*,” she said bringing Nanay’s hand to her forehead.

“What’s in it,” Maria asked, trying to get a peek inside the bags.

“Wait until we’re home,” Nanay said, patting Maria’s head.

“Okay,” Maria said, pouting. “*Mano po*.”

They walked down the dusty path and down the river bend. A few minutes of walking by the river bend led them to a winding path up the hills.

They climbed up, the grass scratching Teresa’s legs.

“How’s the *tiange* today?” she asked Nanay.

“Nene,” her mother said gently, “let me have a drink first before we talk. I also need to rest my feet.”

Teresa nodded. She gazed up at the blue skies, *mayas* flying across the horizon.

“I love you,” she said.

“And I love you both,” their mother said, bringing the two of them closer to her as they approached the small adobe house.

* * *

“I’ll have the pink one,” Teresa said, holding up a pink laced dress with a white bow. “It’s too long for you anyway.”

“Fine,” Maria grumbled. “Oh, candies and chocolates,” her face suddenly lit up. She grabbed three chocolate bars and stuffed them in her pockets.

“These dresses are all the rage now. Those Americans and their fashion,” Nanay said, shaking her head. “But I was thinking that you can wear those after graduation. If you really want to head to the city to study.

“Thank you,” Teresa said. “Is there any news from Tatay?”

“Yes, it’s been a while since he last came home,” Maria said.

“Tatay is working in the city. They are building a new rail station. When it opens, we shall go see the train. But before that, I have a telegram from him. He sends his love to his darling daughters,” Nanay said, pouring herself a glass of water and propping her legs up the chair.

Teresa would remember these moments even after the Japs arrived and left and soon so did the Americans. She would remember even as she was already teaching language in the big universities in Manila.

“Ate,” Maria whispered as she adjusted the white bow of the pink laced dress.

“I’m scared; but I’m also excited. It’s sending butterflies in my stomach,” Maria said in a low voice.

“Relax,” Teresa said, grabbing her sister’s hand. “It is just a movie.”

“But I like him and his letters are wonderful and he makes me feel like I won’t be an old spinster like you,” Maria said, slowly grinning.

“Why are you such a brat?” Teresa laughed. “It’ll be alright. Just breathe in and out. I’ll be there.”

She elbowed Maria and laughing, they made their way to the train station.

* * *

It wasn’t always like that though, Teresa recalls. Her time spent at the university was tumultuous. The Americans were leaving the country, and there were groups of youth who were starting to embrace the radical following the revolution that overthrew the monarchy in Russia.

Once, she went home to Maria looking distraught.

“I read your letters and I didn’t tell Nanay and Tatay about it, but you can’t just leave,” she said, her tear-stained face illuminated by the soft candlelight.

“I won’t be leaving. We’ll be teaching in Central Luzon, but I won’t leave. I’ll be there in sadness and in joy,” Teresa said.

She left after that.

This rocked their relationship. Teresa knew in herself that she always craved for more than what the world offered - it was either greatness or nothingness. She believed - truly

believed - in the radicalism of the blossoming ideologies. "It was for the betterment of the peoples after all," she thought.

Years later, she returned home. Nanay and Tatay did not say a word about her stint in Central Luzon. Instead, they embraced her warmly, but there was the question hanging. "When will you marry?," Nanay asked. "Your father and I won't be here forever."

* * *

Teresa often wondered how their family stood through the storms that ravaged them.

"You weren't there, so I taught myself," Maria said once when she was cooking adobo. Teresa had asked her how she learned how to cook.

There was a sting there. Teresa simply nodded. It was her fault too - this she couldn't deny. But sisters can't always stay mad around each other, their Nanay chastised.

Time went on - perhaps time does heal old wounds. They were growing up, and nothing is ever the same.

"What are you doing?" Teresa asked as Maria was flipping through an old, worn book.

The seasons have come and gone. Both of them did not end up as spinsters; and Nanay was more than happy to have a bunch of kids running behind her heels.

"I like to remember," Maria said.

It was years after Maria passed away that Teresa had the guts to open the old worn book. It was filled with photographs - ones they took at the *bayan* when they were little, sepia-colored pictures of their graduation and wedding days - all with silly and absurd captions in Maria's handwriting.

* * *

"Would you like to dance?" Teresa remembers a dashing young man asking her at the May Flower ball.

Teresa smiled shyly - Maria would tease her about this afterward - and offered her hand. They danced that evening and the stars shone bright against the sky. A year after that, Luke - who was working in the province's engineering department - proposed to her. A year after that,

Teresa remembers cradling her first child. She named her Catarina after their municipality's patroness. Catarina would soon hold a special place in heart - nestled gently in the corners that also held Maria.

* * *

"Don't go too far," Nanay called as she and Maria ran to take a bath in the river. Nanay was by the huge stones, washing clothes.

"Do you think *sirenas* are real?" Teresa asked.

"If they are, I want to be one," Maria said, giggling as she splashed water toward Teresa.

"You can't even keep your head underwater," Teresa teased, splashing water back at Maria.

Later that night, Tatay finally went home. He brought Spam with him and some chocolate. "It's American stuff," he said.

"Where does the railroad go?" Teresa asked.

"To Manila. We fixed some of the stations," Tatay said.

"Nanay, Tatay have you ever gone to Manila?" Maria asked.

Nanay smiled. "Once," she said blissfully. "After I married your father." Tatay beamed.

"I'll go there too," Teresa said.

After the war, Teresa got a job in the city. It wasn't as big as Manila, but Manila was still recovering from the devastation of the war. She was earning enough.

Maria - being the more ambitious of the two of them - set out not just for Manila but for California.

"I will see what the American Dream is," she said, hugging her sister at the airport.

"I love you," they held hands and like many other times, said their goodbyes. It is just one of life's many farewells.

* * *

Teresa beamed as she realized that it was Agatha who was in front of her. They say the memories that we forget last are the earliest ones.

“Is Maria coming?” Teresa asked.

Agatha smiled, tears brimming again. “They always come home, Lola. We always come home.”

Catarina nodded knowingly. Even her mother forgets her sometimes. Yet deep down, Agatha and Catarina know - as women and as daughters they understand.

The past is slowly slipping through their fingers, but the love burns as bright as the sisterhood between Teresa and Maria; as strong as the love that blossomed from Nanay to Agatha.

* * * * *

“Well Done, Rare Medium”

by Amanda Jaffe

It’s Thursday night in Singapore. I’m huddled at a small table inside a Taoist temple, with a spirit medium who’s channeling Shan Cai Tong Zi, a deity also known as the Child God of Wealth. As the medium fingers a necklace of pacifiers draped across his chest, I remind myself to sit up straight and hope he doesn’t see my knee bouncing under the table. I watch and wait and wonder. Can a powerful Taoist deity and an expat American from the New Jersey suburbs find common ground? I’ve come an awfully long way to find out.

Singapore is home now, eleven thousand miles, twelve (sometimes thirteen) time zones, and one date line away from the place I used to call home. The journey that brought me here was one of time as well as distance. While I’ve lived here almost a year, Singapore and I have known each other a while. We began over a decade ago, with a twelve-hour layover – the travel equivalent of a one-night stand that left me besotted with memories of a briny oyster pancake, simmering laksa and sticky, chewy, sweet cendol. Singapore and I weren’t exactly exclusive after that initial encounter. I’ll admit I continued to see other countries, but when my husband asked if I was interested in relocating to Singapore for his job, I said yes practically before he finished asking. And then, of course, I worried. Would the spark still be there? A visit to test the waters and find a place to live before we moved left no doubt. Whatever I had felt the first time around was still there – but this time, with intention. I was dating my soon-to-be home, and the feeling was exhilarating.

Now that Singapore and I are “in a relationship,” I devote my days to mapping the contours of my deepening commitment. After carrying tubes of my must-have toothpaste from the States, I learn I can buy an identical Indian-manufactured version around the corner from my condo. I manage to obtain a library card (harder than it sounds). I observe the art of *chope*-ing a seat in hawker centers and learn never to leave home without a tiny packet of

tissues. The intimacy of a devoted relationship can be exceedingly granular, but my relationship with Singapore never, ever feels the least bit mundane. I weave myself into the fabric of my neighborhood, woo my fruit guy until he remembers just how ripe I like my bananas, and learn how to order my coffee like a local (*kopi C kosong* – evaporated milk, no sugar). Some expats wilt in the viscous tropical air of this tiny Red Dot, but not me. I thrive like a tiger orchid in the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

The Taoist temple I'm visiting on this sweat-inducing evening is called Chia Leng Kong Heng Kang Tian, a mouthful of a name whose length reflects a legacy of temple mergers. It was formed by the 2010 union of two temples, one of which was itself a conglomeration of four temples that merged in 1972. Chia Leng Kong Heng Kang Tian sits nestled against a public housing block that shields it from the secular drone of traffic on nearby Jalan Bukit Merah (Malay for "Red Hill Road"), a busy artery that cuts through an area to the west of Singapore's Chinatown. I'm accompanying a group of expats interested in the mystical world of the spirit medium, a five-thousand-year-old folk religion that was brought to Singapore by the Hokkien Chinese. Technically, I'm here because I volunteered to organize the tour. In truth, I'm here because of Charlotte. To our group, she's our tour guide. To me, she's my Singaporean superpower. And my friend.

I first met Charlotte on another one of her tours, a journey through some of her favorite hawker stalls in the public housing towns of Clementi and Queenstown. Xiao long bao, otah, fried banana with a hint of durian – on that afternoon, Charlotte upped the culinary ante with each stall we visited, but I refused to fold. Somewhere along the way, we got to talking and I mentioned my latest Singapore obsession, vending machines that sell high-end foods like Norwegian salmon and chili crab. We exchanged phone numbers, and the next day, my WhatsApp pinged. "I've found your chili crab vending machine!" We traded messages about a date to try an amazing coconut pancake I told her I'd found in Toa Payoh. But first, she wanted to know, "Where is the salmon ATM?"

I learn to skip breakfast to make room for hawker center lunches with Charlotte. Whenever we meet, research in the form of newspaper clippings and printouts comes bursting out of her canvas shoulder bag. "Are you keen to try rice wine chicken mee suah?" Out comes a clipping. "That stall over there has excellent roast pork. So *crisp-y!*" More clippings. "Have you tried chee cheong fun? Second-generation hawkers!" We *chope* some

seats and hit the stalls, returning to our table each time with enough food for a Singaporean rugby team. We down it all while we compare Singaporean and American politics, discuss dessert, and plan our next expedition. As we waddle to the MRT station after one particularly fruitful outing, she exclaims, "*Wah*, we forgot to pick up the *dumplings!*" We're both too stuffed to care.

While our friendship has been forged in food, it goes far beyond mere physical sustenance. I'm a human sponge when it comes to Singapore's culture and heritage, and Charlotte, with her encyclopedic knowledge, fills my mind like a relentless firehose. Spirit mediums, monkey gods, silver chariots. She knows them all. When I ask her what she knows about the firewalking festival of Theemithi, my WhatsApp quickly fills with links to articles, photos and videos. The night of the firewalking, I send her photos from amid a sweaty crowd jammed into the courtyard of Sri Mariamman Temple and mention that I can't see any actual firewalking – just a projection screen perched on the temple rooftop. She forwards a link to a livestream in case it's a better view.

Tonight's spirit medium tour begins with an early dinner of popiah, prawn rolls and Hokkien mee. When we had discussed our tour preparations several weeks ago, Charlotte asked me to let attendees know that everyone – myself included – would have the opportunity to consult the medium. At the time, it had taken me less than a New York minute (a Singapore second?) to decide that I would NOT be doing that. As of this evening, nothing's changed. For reasons I've yet to articulate, while I'm keen to observe others consult the spirit medium, I have no desire to consult him myself. None. Over dinner, while other members of our tour group discuss the questions they plan to ask, I remain diplomatically vague but internally resolute.

We make our way through the housing block to the yellow, multi-level temple compound. Awash in the glow of dimly lit altars, I inhale the scent of smoldering joss sticks and look around to absorb my surroundings. A few temple volunteers are setting out seats for attendees on a covered concrete slab. Off to one side, a man relaxes with his eyes closed, leaning back into a plastic chair. "*That's him*," Charlotte tells me, her voice just above a whisper. "*That's the medium.*" I look again. For now, at least, the only thing he seems to be channeling is a dream.

My subconscious must be engaged in a lively debate over my decision not to consult the medium, because fragments are creeping into my conscious mind, conspiring to ambush my resolve. How could I travel over eleven thousand miles, throw myself into a life in Singapore, yet be so incapable of completing just a few steps more? If he were here, the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno would have something to say about my dilemma. To travel the final length between me and the spirit medium, Zeno would say, I'd first have to travel half the distance, then half of the distance that remains, then half of what remains after that. And again and again and again. In short, I'll never reach my destination because it's impossible to do so. Zeno devised this paradox, called the Dichotomy Paradox for its infinite splitting-in-two, to argue that motion is just an illusion. If Zeno were here tonight, I'm pretty sure he'd feel vindicated. As for me, I can't help but think that while his paradox may be a good metaphor for what I'm feeling, it's not a terribly helpful explanation of why.

What's holding me back? I'm a skeptic, for one. Do I believe that a spirit medium can channel a Taoist deity? No. Rather, I don't *think* so, but since I arrived, Singapore has shown me a few things I can't explain. I've witnessed extreme yet amazingly bloodless body piercing during Thaipusam. I've watched – on a livestream, at least – men walk across a bed of seething embers during Theemithi. During the month of the Hungry Ghost festival, makeshift altars and Hell Money bonfires offered constant reminders that the curtain between the earthly and the mystical on this island is thin – when I learned that it was an ill-advised time to swim lest the ghost of a drowning victim try to trade places, I thought twice about visiting the pool in our condo. I may be a skeptic, but I'm not the skeptic I used to be. As I watch people settle into the seats around me, I realize I'm sitting in a temple surrounded by Singaporeans who *do* believe, or at least believe enough to be here. Shouldn't that be enough for me? Compared to body piercing, firewalking and ill-timed swimming, spending a few minutes with a spirit medium feels rather low risk. I could do this. *Should* I do this?

Not so fast. As my inner skeptic takes a step back, something new comes to the fore – the anxiety that if I walk into that room with the medium, I'll do or say something that makes me look foolish to everyone around me, even if I'm not aware of it myself. I've always been struck by the power of dramatic irony – those heartbreaking scenes in books and films where a giant piano (figurative or otherwise) is about to fall from the sky and everyone other than the hapless soul standing in the piano's path knows that the piano is on its way. What if I'm

the hapless soul? I glance up and around for a moment, just to make sure, and find the space above my head is piano-free. I'm worrying for nothing.

And then I find clarity. I want to do this, but what I don't want – what I *desperately* don't want – is for anyone to think I'm just doing it for a cheap thrill. There are ugly tourists, but there are ugly expats, too. Something I would never want to be. And yet, no matter how deeply I try to embed myself in Singapore, I'll always be an outsider – an *ang mo*. For me, this means that I'm constantly compensating, doing whatever I can to share with respect the space on this island that Singapore has granted me. If I consult the medium, there may be Singaporeans who see it as inherently disrespectful, just as there may be expats and people back in the States who question my sanity. I'm caught between the me that I want to be and the me that people think I am, and I'm worried about what everyone other than me will think if I walk into that consultation hall.

I exhale softly. Over the next few minutes, the white noise of the murmuring around me quiets the competing voices in my head, leaving just one. *If you take Zeno's Paradox literally*, that voice tells me, *you'll literally go nowhere*. I, however, am going to see the spirit medium, with deep humility and an open mind. I glance toward the table where volunteers are checking in anyone who intends to consult the medium, and I glance at my watch. It's still early. Plenty of time to submit a question, have my Gregorian-calendar birthdate translated into its Chinese-calendar counterpart, and take a number. I head toward the table before I can change my mind.

But then I realize something else. The substance of my question matters at least as much as the act of asking it. I could ask how long I'll stay in Singapore, but it's probably the most common question expats ask. The answer, moreover, could haunt me. I have to ask a real question, but it also has to be a safe one. I land on something I've been wondering: *When I leave Singapore, where will I go?* The question acknowledges the reality that I can't be an expat here forever, that someday Singapore will insist that I give up my space at the table and turn in my metaphorical packet of tissues, but it skirts the problem of just when that will happen. It's innocuous bordering on inane, but a step is a step. I submit my question and birthdate and receive my token. I'm number twenty-six in the queue. I sit back down to wait and, while I wait, I mull over my number. I don't know if twenty-six is an auspicious number in Chinese culture, but ten months in Singapore has taught me that two and six can each bring

good fortune. Thirteen is auspicious too (Charlotte taught me that), so twenty-six must be twice as good. It also occurs to me that two and six added together equal eight, which is *really* auspicious. This might turn out okay after all.

Obviously, there are twenty-five people before me, but there are people after me as well. Some are from my small group. Others are couples – mothers and daughters, husbands and wives. There’s an elderly Chinese couple and some students poring over textbooks, perhaps here to seek divine guidance for exams. From my vantage point on the concrete slab, the consultation hall is like a stage, framed by a red proscenium arch of wooden panels decorated in glimmering gold. Just inside the hall, volunteers set up a large wooden chair known as a “dragon chair” with its back to us. This is where the medium will sit as he enters his trance.

The last whisper of light leaves the sky as sounds of chanting drift from the consultation hall, invoking the spirit of Shan Cai Tong Zi. The man in the plastic chair leans forward, rises, and strolls across the slab to take his place in the dragon chair, bare-chested and barefoot. While the chanting continues, we watch as he begins to tremble, his legs quivering – as he begins to *transform*. Then, another, wholly unexpected sound demands our attention. Spirit mediums, Charlotte whispers, are supposed to purge the contents of their stomach before entering a trance, and this spirit medium is no exception. I try not to think of dinner but find it impossible to ignore a moment of gurgling in my gut. Fortunately, the medium is turned away from us, although we continue to hear occasional retching as temple volunteers wipe his face with ritual paper. Finished purging, he swings his head around in wild circles until, suddenly, he is still.

Shan Cai Tong Zi, the Child God of Wealth, has arrived.

The medium stands, and his attendants help him don orange vestments and the aforementioned necklace of pacifiers. Sucking one of the soothers, the medium strides out of the consultation hall like a headstrong toddler, to an altar just out of view on the temple’s second level. A few minutes later, he returns and enters the hall, climbs into his dragon chair and tucks his feet under him. With a table and bench in place, the consultations commence.

Those ahead of me take their turns at the table with the medium and his assistants. Some take five minutes. One takes twenty. The elderly couple and the medium engage in an extended session. It’s a long, slow wait punctuated periodically by members of our group

who stop by to say goodnight as they complete their consultations. As we watch the medium, Charlotte and I ease into a soft, rambling conversation that suits the pace of the unfolding evening. We're comparing notes on (what else?) our latest hawker stall discoveries when a *thwack!* slices the air. All eyes turn to the consultation hall, where one of the students apparently needs a little extra intervention. Mid-consultation, he's moved from his chair into a kneeling position with his head bowed, as the medium circles him, cracking something – a flag? a whip? – against the floor. Just as I start to question the wisdom of my decision, the student returns to the table and he and the medium resume their consultation. A volunteer waves me over to the row of chairs reserved for those whose number is approaching. I look at Charlotte and roll my eyes. She smiles. It'll be okay.

When my number is called, the volunteer guides my last few steps to the consultation hall and stands next to me as I join the medium at the table. Seated in his dragon chair, his eyes rolled back in a trancelike state, he resembles the man I saw snoozing on the slab a short while ago, but he isn't that man at all. I watch as the assistants present my question and I wait, unsure of my role in the process. I'm wondering if I should say something, when he begins to speak – not to me, but to the assistants, who translate. It shouldn't come as a surprise, but it honestly hadn't occurred to me until just now: Shan Cai Tong Zi doesn't speak English.

The flow of our time together is steered by a combination of language barrier and power imbalance. This is a consultation, not a conversation. We proceed in fits and starts, as Shan Cai Tong Zi offers words of wisdom, which the translators translate, and I respond with words of acknowledgment, which they translate again. Does he tell me where I'll go after I leave Singapore? No, which is good because even that aspect of leaving is more than I'm ready to contemplate. Instead, Shan Cai Tong Zi speaks to me about the importance of being confident, urging me to listen to my own counsel and not to worry about what others think once I've made a decision. *You've asked the wrong question*, he seems to be saying, *but I'll give you the right answer*. He may be a child deity, but he's a wise one. It's as if he's heard every thought, every fear, every ounce of self-doubt I had out on that slab.

There are pauses, some long enough to bring me to the brink of feeling awkward, but never quite long enough to feel like Shan Cai Tong Zi has nothing more to say. Even so, his advice eventually begins to circle back on itself, and it dawns on me that I don't know how to

end this consultation or, for that matter, whether it's even my place to end it. Am I supposed to stop responding? Say thank you? Does he say goodbye first, or do I? Would a deity even *say* something as mundane as goodbye? Perhaps sensing my growing unease, or reading my thoughts again, Shan Cai Tong Zi falls silent, and the medium nods at the translators. My consultation is at an end. I thank him and, for good measure, I say goodbye.

Walking back to the slab, I feel my heart beating, but it's skipping, not thumping. I'm energized. "You were in there a long time," Charlotte says. "You must have had a lot to talk about." I smile. Looking at her, it occurs to me that Charlotte is a medium, too, channeling the spirit of her country and its culture. I wish I could say something profound, but I'm overwhelmed by that stupid, giddy feeling I get when I've done something that scared me and it's turned out just fine. Instead, four heartfelt words, forming a ridiculous pun in their combination, pop into my head: well done, rare medium.

As we make our way out of the temple toward Jalan Bukit Merah, the sounds of traffic begin to crowd out the details of Shan Cai Tong Zi's words, but that's okay. While a pep talk from a Taoist deity never hurts, it's not so much about the substance of the consultation as it is overcoming the hesitation that almost held me back. I've looked at Singapore on a map, I've passed through as a traveler, I live here as an expat. And now, I've shared space and time in the presence of a deity. I've halved the distance, halved it again, halved it another time. And closed it.

Less than a year later, Covid answers both the question I couldn't ask and the question I did. The answers are August 2020 and back to New Jersey, to a place that looks familiar but amid a pandemic feels vastly different. On our last outing in Singapore (xiao long bao, pork wontons in chili oil, lotus paste bao and a kopi in Redhill), Charlotte mentions other American expats she's befriended in Singapore whom she visited on her last trip to the States. I joke that I expect to be a stop on her next world tour. I sense she's reassuring me that our friendship will continue, but it also scares me. She's one of a kind to me, but am I just another expat friend to her?

A week later, I'm back in the States, trying to walk off my jet lag, when my WhatsApp starts to ping with messages from eleven thousand miles, twelve (sometimes thirteen) time zones, and a date line away. From the place I used to call home. From my friend.

Well done, rare medium(s). And thank you.

* * * * *

“The Etching on the Floor”

by John Mark Parlingayan

The shape was of a human form, on our red tainted floor when the morticians took away the green carpet after the funeral of my grandma and grandpa. It was already there since our family moved from Parang, Maguindanao, to Kabacan, Cotabato Province, but it was the first time that the family gathered to take a closer look at the etching. It was like the infamous poster in hospitals and schools of an image about how smoking could destroy the body of a person. My lolo was once a smoker, and it was the cause of later complications on his health. Before his death, Lolo Isko told us of his recurring dreams of a certain image, that etching and a treasure that is connected to it. It was odd that those were the things he uttered before his rest, the fact that the family didn't treat the image as big as his story. He had the same story as Lola Sabel, who passed away two days after his death due to pneumonia. She was also telling us about some kind of vision, gold bars within the family compound. She said that it was in our backyard, beneath our sole coconut tree. Both thought that it would surely change the life of the family, suggesting that we should try to look for it. Even to their last breath, they still thought of us, of a much more fortunate life for their children and their grandchildren before they left.

Their burial was exactly at one in the afternoon in the warm breeze of July 2012. I was only thirteen at that moment when our family experienced such a turning of the page in our lives, losing both of them in the blink of an eye. I remember that the sky was rare; it was purple just as they were buried. Then the sunset, beautiful and calming. As a child, I grew up listening to my grandparents' engaging stories of supernatural and myth. From mermaids attacking then-teenage Lola Sabel to Lolo Isko's encounter of a kapre, a big and tall creature smoking large tobacco. I was also fond of ghost stories. On the sixth day of their wake, Ate Den told me that she saw Lolo and Lola staring at us and my other cousin while we slept.

They were wearing white, and she said that they were glowing. So far that was the best ghost story I had ever heard, even if it was just a piece of a dream. But my favorite was when Lolo talked about aliens. Lolo had this belief that the universe is as wide as the nothingness, giving the larger possibility of other lifeforms in space. I watched a recent documentary about the mysterious design allegedly of an alien etched into the earth in Oregon in the United States. It was found by a pilot when he was flying over the remote area of the Alvord Desert. It was enormous, unlike the thing on our floor, but both did leave people scratching their heads, now that Lolo and Lola caught our attention to focus on that unusual etching on the floor. Maybe aliens and otherworldly creatures are true. In the first place, our world is full of mystery; life itself is a mystery, just like how we were clueless about what is after death or what is after Lolo and Lola. A utopia, perhaps? If their dreams as weird as others may perceive were true, we are luckier than a lottery if it truly happens.

After the burial of my grandparents, our neighbors on Maharlika Street would still visit our house. They wanted to see the image on our floor after they hear the stories as shared by our relatives. They were in awe of how unusual the image is. It was not perfect like the mysterious Nazca Lines in Peru, but it really has the form of a human. It has this deformed head, a torso, and little limbs. Others find it creepy and some lend the idea of correlating the etching to our coconut tree in the backyard. They said that maybe the etching on the floor is a tell-tale sign of gold buried in our place. They even raised the possibility that it could be the lost Yamashita treasure. That was a legend about the lost hidden gems, golden coins, and even a Buddha with an immense value of General Yamashita of the Japanese Imperial Army here in the Philippines during the Second World War. The tale lured treasure hunters from around the world for years, looking for billions or even trillions. There was also a belief about the curse brought by the treasure. It is something that I was aware of from reading fiction and watching films. Luck has consequences, luck isn't free. The etching may be the luck that would bring us to the treasure but if it was the death of my grandparents that was the curse along with the luck, we better not have it. Life is much precious than a chest of gold, isn't it? Now that we already lost them, what more shenanigans does the curse have to offer? If only we were able to know what would happen in the future. Do aliens have that kind of technology? What could it all be about?

There is a very slim probability of finding treasure in unusual places, such as our home. Tiyo Lando, the eldest of the siblings understands that, as well as the thought of how expensive it would be if they decided to look for something based solely on their parents' dreams. The process is as valuable as the fortune, for it will surely take time if not many days or maybe weeks, months, or even years of digging. It is also a physically demanding activity and only capable people should do. Tiyo has a history of having heart attacks and isn't capable of work. Nor can my dad, who spent two years of his life in the hospital treating a brain tumor. Despite the doubts and worries, the family took the chance to explore. The siblings planned for the supplies and the manpower that were needed. It wasn't as simple as cutting wild grass in the backyard; bet everyone wants to get lucky and get a big sack of gold.

People outside our flesh-painted gate always reminded us to give away balato, goodwill money, if we found the treasure. We were just a normal family residing in Cotabato Province, digging for something that might be as valuable as famous treasures, such as Blackbeard's chest, the Aztec gold of Montezuma, or even the treasure of Lima. The hole we dug became much deeper as days passed, along with the changing ambiance of our environment. We would just stare at the group of men digging, not knowing what to expect or how to feel. There was an impending sense of uncertainty of what could happen if we found ourselves buried in a pile of cash. It was pretty overwhelming to think of what the money could be used for or if the government would enter the picture. Would it make us happier than before? I was already happy just having our breakfast, complete with Lolo and Lola. I was already happy listening to their stories. It was just ironic that we keep looking for some treasure when, in fact, we got to see each other every day.

My mom and dad decided to move to General Santos City, after being called by their work as an authority basing in Camp Lira. It was a difficult decision to take a new path, leaving our family as well as the mystery of Lolo and Lola's dreams. The moment when we were about to leave as we bid our goodbyes, I took a last glance at the hole in the ground. It was deep and dark. What if instead of gold we found a lifeform beneath the ground? Aliens, not just in space, but right here.

That was the last time I saw the house. The last time I had even heard about it was when Tiyo Lando called my mom to inform us that they weren't able to continue the search due to financial problems. The neighbors also stopped visiting our family house. All the hype

went away, leaving only the hole in the backyard and the etching on the floor. Just like the purple hazy skies, everything remained a mystery.

* * * * *

“Ubon Dispatch: 16 April 1973”

by Katacha Díaz

"We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect."

— Anaïs Nin

On a mission gliding along the Mekong River, I earlier boarded the open motorboat from Mukdahan, Thailand, enroute to Savannakhet, Laos. I must leave the country to renew my 30-day tourist visa in the Royal Thai Kingdom. I want to experience life with my airman husband, DJ, who is serving a tour of duty with the USAF 8th Tactical Fighter Wing hosted at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base in Ubon, Ratchathani, a rural northeastern province on the border with Laos and Cambodia.

On the return voyage, I hear the unmistakable roaring and humming sounds of the mighty F-4C/D Phantom fighter bombers flying overhead, returning from a bombing mission. The engine noise is deafening and startles me. Yet I am reminded this is the VietNam conflict, and these missions are an everyday occurrence during the war, so I may as well get used to it for the duration of my stay. I wonder how many of the bombs dropped earlier in the pursuit of camouflaged VietCong, soldiers well-hidden in the jungle, may have killed innocent Vietnamese and Laotian civilians — women, children, and other vulnerable groups simply going about their daily routine in a war zone.

During a visit to the air base the following day I observed the U.S. Air Force's 17 Special Operations Squadron. These were the pilots who flew the missions over Laos out of Ubon. DJ instructs me not to ask questions because I might have been suspected of being part of a news media outlet on a "covert operation in Ubon." Yikes! In fact, it is interesting when I met with the base commander that week, a very nice man with a great sense of wit, but he also reminds me that as a USAF dependent, I am a guest at the Thai Royal Air Force Base, so everything seen/heard is "highly classified."

Even though I don't ask questions when I see the Air America planes out on the airfield, I know, from what I've read and gleaned, these are the pilots who transport personnel, food, and supplies to/from remote bases.

After putting in a 12-hour shift to blow off steam, there were not many options for the airmen stationed at the Ubon Royal Thai Air Force to pursue. At the base everything operates on a 24/7 schedule — PX store, library, post office, bowling alley, movie theatres, swimming pools, enlisted and officer clubs, and American fast food — pizza, hamburgers, hot dogs, french fries, milkshakes, etc. Many of the airmen, however, opt to check out the local scene in search of souvenirs to send back home, order custom made shirts and suits at the tailor shops, try the street food stalls offering an array of delicious spicy Thai dishes, and visit the restaurants where Kobe beef is the star of the menu. Then there were massage parlors and watering holes offering a variety of musical entertainment that will also cater to servicemen in search of an exotic evening companion.

While the majority of the airmen stationed in Ubon are housed in barracks at the base, others opt to rent bungalows in town that, for an extra monthly fee, come equipped with a live-in *teelock*, or girlfriend. The war was a boon to the Thai economy, and for the enterprising folks in Ubon Ratchathani, “can do easy” with a smile is their motto.

Thailand Dispatch: 16 April 1973 Ubon Ratchathani where the climate is always tropical, and the never-ending VietNam War is big business.

* * * * *

“Ramadan Runes”

by Ismim Putera

you assumed you fasted only pure water—
but still, you breathed in ice crystals

that dribbled down the lips of the angels
who scattered pearl-like blessings at dawn;

at dusk you desired solitude
fingers crisscrossed

forming a stretch of matted nets to
ensnare the heaving hymns echoing from

the 19th, 21st, 23rd
or 27th evenings

listened to these superstitious signs—
opened your eyes wide:

dense wind murmured on the ground;
trees unfurled their leafy arms to prostrate;

well water froze so quietly even the sun
didn't have enough daylight to melt it;

those were the many forms of the devouring Night—
Fear it! Fear it!

you slept and dreamt of riding the Buraq—
whilst the devils were

gnawing on the chains to
mark the remaining days.

* * * * *

“The First World”

by Jose Joel Robles

It's so organized—
a plain that displays its yield:
 no skyscrapers above you,
 no walls beside you,
just ordinary dwellings
yet the tops are charming.

Tress sways their branches
at the square like ranches
where kids are playing freely;
everyone's laughing in grace
while the wild beasts graze.

A greenery scene and huge space
with a full granary around the place
feeds the birds, men, and women
and most especially, the children.

No more shops,
no more schools,
no more prisons,

no more polls,
no more temples

in this place of peace.

* * * * *

“Surabaya”

by Jacob Christopher-Lee Moak

(January 2013)

Ah, Surabaya, city of solace for the sad and forsaken,
Remote refuge for renegades on the run,
How humble is your hospitality, and warm your welcome.
I, once a derelict debtor dying in the doldrums,
Left the lonely life I had learned to loathe,
And found in you the faith and fortune that made this fool a king.
I thank you for that, though there is a thing that thunders in my thoughts:
While migrants make their millions in your markets, your own pitiful people peddle
penniless for pabulum.
Ah, Surabaya, where a foreign wretch can rise to riches, and lament for those less blessed.

* * * * *

“The Road to My Hometown”

by Noor Ajeera Azman

The road to my hometown,
From Klang Valley to Kota Bharu,
Either riding a bus, a train, a car or motorcycle,
Will take at least 7 hours.

The road to my hometown,
From the city highway to village street,
Either sleeping all the way or driving on my own,
Exhausting the body but fueling the soul,

The road to my hometown,
Eating away my money and time,
Yet, once arrived,
The triumph was so sweet, and the best!

The road to my hometown,
Is most crowded during festive seasons,
I want to avoid going back home,
But my mother, grandparents, and brothers are waiting.

The road to my hometown,
Now, I long to drive all the way there,
Missing the exciting journey,
And I missed the harmonious laughter of my far-away family.

* * * * *

“Song from the Hot Season”

by James Fleet Underwood

It's easiest when morning doesn't mean anything
more than oatmeal cooling in a bowl
in front of me. The sun's been at its work for hours

and the balcony gathers and releases warmth
like the center of fresh baked bread. I move
my chair to the track of the open sliding door

and watch my elderly neighbor chase three dogs
across her lot with a stick. They scamper round the corner
then cut back through the yard behind her, knowing

in some doggy way she's too forgetful and slow
to look back to where she started. She stops
in the middle of the yellow heat and hears

a children's song from the hot seasons of her youth.
The three dogs return to their curl on the patch
of warm asphalt they've made their morning's bed.

* * * * *

“Of Kampung Nostalgia and Childhood Sweetheart”

by Akmal Hafizi

Blinding afternoon daylight,
Peeking through the shady foliage,
Casting a constellation of sunbeams on dry mud;

The drowsy afternoon kampung ambience,
Has never failed to evoke deep reminiscing,
Of one’s wistful childhood—carefree and of muddy smudges;

Tropical leaves rustle through the humid breeze,
There is swaying and also there is humming,
Serenading the waltz of viridescent sawah padi;

Expanses of azure blue dotted with puffy billows,
Blanketing the greensward as far as the horizon goes,
Of creaking wooden houses and chirping radiant fowls;

And there she is—Bunga—treading gracefully in the sawah,
Donning a bright baju kurung—accenting her elegance from afar,
Her mauvish tudung perpetuating in soft harmonic wafts,
And her soft-spoken voice is mellifluous with mellow words;

The sun lavishly blooms a rose blush in her downy cheeks,
And her honey-glazed fingers running through the sun-baked paddies,
Her sweet sunlit smile is as radiant as the sun reaching its zenith,

She is simply the flower of the serene countryside scenery;

A meld of kampung nostalgia and childhood sweetheart,
Composes my thoughts into ineffable matters of the heart,
I take each step treading behind her with stronger desires,
To wishing this moment with her will linger a little longer.

* * * * *

“Wake Up”

by John C. Mannone

It's dark when I get up // grind a blend of Sumatra, West Java, and Sulawesi beans // I try to savor the bold nutty blend: smoked cedar and cinnamon accented with earth and black truffles // hint of pepper spice // I set the cup down on the kitchen table // there's a rumble rolling like thunder inside the deep clouds of water // many kilometers below the surface // all shook up by a 7.4 earthquake sending shivers down the spine // of the Pacific Rim: Japan, Philippines, Indonesia—upsetting villages, people // an old man peeling coffee berries near the megalithic stones on Flores Island // Vibrations // Standing waves // tsunami // my cup.

The cracking sound on the TV // collapsing buildings // rubble falling // on children // just like the walls of hospitals crumbling, breaking // hearts of unborn infants in the Ukraine // and mine // swelling with fear // of bombs // a Fukushima-fear near Chernobyl // The glow // of the sun splinters through the crazed window // I take the last sip but it just doesn't cut it // It is much too bitter.