

Anak Sastra

Issue 48

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Contributor Bios

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Michelle Chedjou likes to talk about the seemingly ordinary and messy lives of (mostly) urban women.


Adrian David writes ads by day and short stories by night. His work spans across a smorgasbord of genres, including contemporary fiction, psychological thrillers, dark humor, and everything in between, from the mundane to the sublime.


Kevin Nicholas Wong has always been fascinated with storytelling and its power to convey messages through various mediums, working as a film producer in Singapore and recently completing his MA in creative writing at LaSalle College of the Arts. His work, aimed at making people feel less alone, deals with identity, the struggle to find one's place in this world, and the interesting connections humans share. His fiction has recently been featured in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore (QLRS)*.


[John Paul Lama](#)  writes short fiction.

Kevin Browne is an anthropologist and writer. He formerly lived and conducted research in Central Java, Indonesia, and currently resides in Wisconsin.

[James Roth](#) is an English language fellow in the U.S. State Department's EFL Program. He has lived in China and Japan and traveled throughout Southeast Asia. He now lives in Zimbabwe. He has, or has forthcoming, fiction in *Close to the Bone*, *Fleas on the Dog*, *Mystery Tribune*, and the *Bombay Review*. His novel, *The Opium Addict*, set in Meiji era Japan, will be published in late 2022.

Anitha Devi Pillai  is an applied linguist, poet and author. A lot of her work focuses on language, culture and heritage. She is heartened that her poetry has found a place in the classrooms in Australia, Philippines, Malaysia, India and Japan.

Richard Rose  is a British writer who has worked extensively in Asia for more than 25 years. His collection of poetry, *A Sense of Place* (Cyberwit 2020), reflects on his many travels. More recently, *Breaching the Barriers: Short Stories and Essays from India* (Cyberwit 2022), deals with issues of children's rights and the causes of exclusion.

Amizura Hanadi Mohd Radzi  is a photography enthusiast and her articles on photography were featured in *Dream Catcher* from 2012 until 2016. She is also a coauthor of several books, namely *Foundation English*, *Innovations in Language Pedagogy for the Net Generation*, and *Two Strangers & Other Poems*.

Christa Walker is an MFA candidate in creative writing at Mount Saint Mary's University in Los Angeles. She lives in the San Fernando Valley.

Eaint Noe  writes poems.

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“Two Hours”

by Jocelyn Low

In the lobby of Value Hotel, the cream-coloured telephone at the check-in counter rang. Kenny Lim was on duty that night. He picked up the phone on its second ring.

‘Good evening, Value Hotel. How may I help you?’

Silence.

Heavy breathing.

‘Er...hello? May I help you?’ Kenny asked again.

‘Do you have a room with some kind of hook that I can chain my handcuffs to? And do you have pay-per-view TV? Also, if I bring more than one lady friend, must I pay extra?’

Kenny looked blankly at the cheap wood of the counter top. Nothing in the A Levels he had sat for six months ago had prepared him for questions like these. *Shoot. Why do I always get the weirdos? But wait...that voice...*

‘Stop it. That’s you, right, Ming? Stop playing the fool.’

‘Hur hur hur. How did you guess? I tried to deepen my voice as much as possible,’ Ming said in his natural voice.

‘You overdid it man, as usual. Three questions one after the other? Most people who come here can’t even speak one complete sentence lah. How’s the action on your end?’

‘Nothing doing. The only visual I have is of a nerdy guy in glasses picking at his pimple. Not the most exciting scene in the world. I was so bored I even played back what some of the CCTV cameras captured in the previous shift.’

Ming was in charge of the security of the hotel. From a small room on the top floor, he had to monitor the feed from the CCTV cameras placed on all the four levels of the hotel. While Kenny did not like the idea that Ming could see his every move at the front desk, he also felt assured that Ming or the other security guys could spring into action at a moment’s

notice should a guest turn ugly. He recalled the incident at another love hotel recently. An enraged tai-tai and her posse of well-heeled girlfriends had tracked her adulterous husband to the hotel, and insisted on knowing the room number of the “bastard and his whore.” When the hotel manager quoted the confidentiality clause, the wife clawed his arm while screaming into his face. That made front-page news in the next day’s local newspapers. Thankfully, Kenny never had to deal with such domestic drama on his watch.

Kenny had naturally gravitated towards Ming, the only other Singaporean working at the hotel. With the five years age gap between them, Ming naturally fell into the big brother role, taking it upon himself to educate Kenny on the intricacies of their industry. Kenny, a single child, was happy to have someone to look up to.

‘Slow night, huh? Only four rooms occupied and those are overnight guests. Did you see the couple from Room 105 kissing and groping each other before they even got into the room? Or were you busy zooming in on Yuan Yuan’s sexy butt wriggling down the corridor with the cleaning trolley in front of her?’ Kenny asked.

‘Not a chance.’ Was that a hint of a whine in Ming’s voice? ‘She must have finished all her cleaning duties. I’m sure she’s already watching her K-drama on her phone.’

Being at the age of twenty-eight to Kenny’s nineteen and Ming’s twenty-four, Yuan Yuan had been working at Value Hotel for the past five years. For her loyalty to the company, the fair-skinned beauty who hailed from a province in China was allowed perks such as propping up her feet on a couple of stools at the back alley, with a can of Coke in front of her, even when she was supposed to be on duty. Boss allowed her to do that, as long as she promptly cleaned up the rooms after every checkout. Boss usually said yes to Yuan Yuan, though he usually directed that yes to her ample bosom.

‘Stop fantasizing about her, lah. You know you don’t stand a chance. With the kind of salary you draw and this dead-end job, you are lucky she even talks to you.’

‘Good things come to those who wait. And Yuan Yuan has a pair of real “good things” that I would happily bury my face in.’

‘You wish! Now get off the phone before Boss suddenly turns up.’

* * *

Quarter to eleven. *Yawn*...a sudden darker shadow against the tinted entrance doors caused Kenny to lose his sleepiness. The shadow separated into two. One lumpy, one petite.

A slow drag of the automatic doors heralded the couple's entrance into the lobby. He was a Caucasian sumo to her Asian doll.

'Room, please. Two hours.' A deep voice from such a small person. Her silver charm bracelet tinkled prettily in accompaniment as she rummaged into the black leather sling bag caressing her boyish hips. 'Here's my ID.'

'Thank you. We would need Sir's identification document, too.'

'Both?'

'Yes, Ma'am.' Hotel management 101. Sir and Ma'am everyone, regardless of how young they may look. The usual protocol of looking into your guests' eyes to show your sincerity does not apply here, though. Here they would rather you forget their faces as soon as the registration and payment are done.

'Do you have your ID with you,' she asked her companion. Risking a look at said companion, Kenny saw a scholarly face on someone with such a thuggish build. Wordlessly, shrugging his backpack to one side, he reached into the back pocket of his faded jeans to get his wallet out.

Kenny entered their details into the system: Chan Jia Ling, date of birth: ninth April, 1998, Singaporean; Tim Hunter, date of birth: fifth April, 1989, American. So, she was twenty-one and he was thirty.

Kenny printed out the registration form for them to sign. They were certainly different from the usual clientele of taxi drivers and foreign maids. Kenny gave her the key card and gestured to the lift to his right.

'Third floor. Have a good evening.'

A flicker of a smile graced her cherry-red lips to express her thanks. She swept the fringe of her short bob to behind her ear, exposing her pale face. She turned to her partner and Kenny caught the word "camera." Kenny wondered what a nice-looking girl like her who would not look out of place at a library was doing at a place like this. And with an older foreigner to boot.

Half an hour later, the telephone rang.

'Good evening, Va-'

'What the fuck! That's my friggin' sister in Room 301!?'

'WHAT! Are you sure, Ming?' *Of course! He is Chan Jia Ming and she is...*

'Yeah, I came back from a smoke break and was just playing back what I had missed. What the hell?! She's only a baby! Turns out it's a good thing I've never told her where I work, if not I'll never have caught her doing shit like this! Who is that *Angmo*? Preying on young girls! I'm really going to punch his stupid face —'

'Wait! Don't be impulsive. Maybe there is a reason why they are here?'

'We both know what this hotel is for! You think they come here for our cable TV? I'm so going to their room now!'

This raging Ming was one Kenny had never seen before.

'Ming! Calm down. You know Boss won't like it! Then we will both lose our jobs. Let me...let me think —'

'There's no time for that! You know what these horny bastards are like! And it's been thirty minutes! *Don't stop me anymore!* I'm going to kill *him*, then *her!*'

'Okay, okay! How about we pretend it's a fire drill and everyone needs to get out?'

'Then the Boss *and* the police will be notified as well! You want my sister's face to be splashed all over the news?'

'Okay..okay...Er...then how about I pretend the room has been pre-booked or something? And then I can tell them we have no more rooms. Once she is off the premises, you can yell at her as much as you like. As long as it is not here, then Boss can't blame you. Okay?'

'Anything! Whatever! As long as we get them out of the room! Just hurry, okay!' Ming slammed down the phone.

Kenny quickly made the call.

'Yuan Yuan, can you come counter? I go toilet. Yeah, yeah, short time. Yeah, yeah, very fast. *Xie Xie!*'

Yuan Yuan arrived at the counter shortly, with her eyes still glued to her phone screen and her earphones plugged in. She gave a cursory nod to Kenny as she wriggled her voluptuous frame onto the chair behind the counter.

Kenny waited impatiently for the lift. *I hope I'm not too late. I might lose my job anyway. Angmos are not easy to handle... sure to kick up a fuss. But this is for Ming. Lucky, I don't have a younger sister. All the news about girls selling their bodies for branded things... Girls these days...*

Now, Kenny was standing in front of Room 301. He put his ear to the door. No sound at all.

Kenny gave a couple of loud raps. 'Hello, Sir. Hotel management. Sorry to disturb you, Sir, Ma'am. We have a problem.'

He heard the faint, pretty tinkles of a small bell.

'Yes, it's hotel management. Sorry to disturb you, Ma'am. Can you open the door, please?'

There was still no response except for the tiny tinkles.

'Ma'am, are you okay? I am sorry. I will need to come in now.'

Kenny tapped the master key and turned the handle of the door. He entered.

The room was in semi-darkness. The only light source was from the orange glow from the bathroom. After taking a moment for his eyes to adjust, Kenny saw the large Caucasian man, Tim Hunter, still fully clothed, lying immobile on the floor at an awkward angle. His whole body was sprawled across the bathroom tiles, and his head jutted out into the hallway. With only his whole torso lit, he looked like a headless corpse.

Kenny knelt down next to Tim.

'Sir, are you okay, Sir?'

Eyes closed, Tim did not answer. Hands shaking, Kenny placed his fingers on Tim's right wrist. Thank God there was a pulse.

A series of urgent tinkles came from the direction of the bed. Stepping over Tim, Kenny walked further into the room and hit the wall switch for the lights to the bed area.

'What the...!' Kenny quickly stopped himself.

What he saw on the bed that night would become a recurrent feature in his masturbatory fantasies. Dressed in a black lace bodysuit, Ming's sister, Chan Jia Ling, was curled on her side next to the end table, almost teetering off the edge of the mattress. Her lips were wrapped around a tightly secured red ball gag that prevented her from uttering a word. The black leather straps of the ball gag dug into her cheeks. Blood red rope acted as cuffs for her wrists and ankles, with another length of the same rope tying her wrists and ankles together behind her back. The taut bindings forced her to arch her back, causing her breasts to thrust out. Her knees were bent with the sharp heels of her black patent leather boots pointed at her head. More loops of the rope encircled her body, accentuating her

curves. As she squirmed, the restraints gripped her body sensually, her naked flesh straining and bulging from the constriction. Despite her precarious position, or perhaps because of it, she was an erotic vision in black and red. The light flooding the room seemed to throw her sensuality in starker relief.

Kenny could feel Ming's sister looking intently at him. He met her gaze. Her eyes seemed to be communicating an urgent message to be set free.

Quickly, Kenny walked over to remove her gag. He grabbed a handful of tissue paper from the box near the telephone to wipe the drool that had accumulated around her mouth, crimson from smeared lipstick.

'Don't worry. He's just had a fainting spell. It's happened before,' she said in a raspy voice. 'It's just that this time round, he's taken a little longer to come to. Thank God you came! My arms were growing numb. There are usually two of us models, but the other girl couldn't make it tonight. But wait, why did you come into our room?'

'Well, I —'

'Or maybe you should untie me first,' she interrupted, as though this was part of the usual services provided by any hotel.

Kenny ignored his uncomfortable erection. *This is Ming's sister!* Kenny worked as quickly as he could to free her, awkwardly prying at the artfully intricate knots. *How did Tim manage to tie her up so quickly and tightly?* Finding his efforts ineffective, Kenny placed one hand on her waist to steady her slim frame. He noticed how soft her body felt under his grip. Kenny's gaze lingered over her perky bottom, noticing its plump curvature and the creases where the buttocks met her thighs. 'Sorry,' Kenny mumbled, as he braced against her body to pull a stubborn knot loose. Kenny's eyes wandered up her shoulders, where the strap of her lingerie hung limp, threatening to fall off. *Should I pull that up for her?* He noticed how her hair clung matted to her neck, moist from the effort of struggling in her bonds. In the background, Tim groaned softly and made some movements. *Focus!* Kenny shook his head free of the distracting thoughts. By the time Tim was fully conscious and had made himself half-sit up, Jia Ling was also finally free of the cage-like constraints of the rope. She took this opportunity to stretch her sore muscles, and as she bent and twisted her body, Kenny saw the faint rope marks left on her otherwise flawless skin. He had seen his fair share of porn

online. Working here, he also saw more kinky sex than he wanted to. He would never imagine that a woman tied up and gagged, not even nude, would give him this state of arousal.

'Are you alright, Tim?' Jia Ling called out as she reached for her shirt to put it on. Kenny turned his head away and saw a camera at the corner of the bed.

'My head hurts, but I'll survive.'

Looking at Kenny, Jia Ling said, 'See, the man says he'll survive. Don't worry, he won't be having any more fainting spells tonight. Now can you tell us why you came into our room? Not that I'm not grateful...' Jia Ling wiped the smudged lipstick off her lips, leaving a red streak on the white tissue paper. Her pale lips made her look younger and more vulnerable.

'Your brother, Ming, works here!'

A flicker of surprise and raised eyebrows on her part. They could hear Tim splashing water on his face at the sink.

'He saw you and that guy checking in and he asked me to get you out.' *This is awkward. Sounds lame even to me.*

'Get me out? Why? I am above twenty-one. I'm an adult. And anyway, what does he think I am doing in here? Gor is always like that. Over-reacting when it comes to me.'

'But...but...you are...that guy is...and it's Value Hotel...this place...'

'What, Ming and you think I am fucking him? That I am selling my body? Tim and I are both into photography. We both belong to a photography club called Shattered Dreams. Tim is also into Japanese bondage and he has asked a few of us to let him take photos of us so that he can submit the photographs to a reputed Shibari Art magazine. Lynette and I have done it a few times for him. I am not selling my body, okay! Tim only pays for my modeling fee.' Jia Ling took a swig of water from the mineral water bottle issued by the hotel.

Kenny wondered if her photos would make it into any of these magazines. He wanted to ask her how he could get hold of one.

'In any case,' she continued as Tim appeared at the bathroom doorway. 'Tim seems all better now, and we still need some more shots. Could we have another two more hours, perhaps?'

Kenny was thinking of what to tell Ming as he walked towards the lift. *How to explain the photography session to him? Would Ming believe that Tim and his sister are not fucking? We always assume that's what people come here for anyway...* As he walked down the hallway,

he pricked his ears, straining to hear any sounds of activity behind the closed doors. He wondered what other secrets these doors might be hiding.

* * * * *

“The Human Condition”

by Michelle Chedjou

When Lourdes arrived at the mall’s swanky Luxe Lounge, Chris and Nimfa were already there. She went up to the counter and told the receptionist, a suave-looking gentleman who smelled of vanilla and wore a megawatt smile, that she was Nimfa’s guest. Nimfa had the membership, the accumulation of a couple of years’ worth of shopping sprees. It entitled her, along with two guests, to certain privileges. “Hi. For Nimfa Cordero, please.” “Yes, Ma’am. For a while, Ma’am,” the receptionist responded, never losing the smile as he clicked his way through the computer log. “For a while,” he reassured her, unnecessarily so. He must have mistaken Lourdes’ built-in scowl for a volcanic temper, must have worried it would quickly spiral into something worse, way worse, as it often did (a harsh lesson in his first week on the job) with the lounge members. An unusual species they were, he realized, dancing to a cadence that was slow, too slow for the real world, and yet difficult to catch up with. So, he made sure to be one step ahead always, to hone his customer service skills into an alchemic cross between cold reading and babysitting. Better safe than sorry.

Lourdes peered into the main room and saw her friends sitting at a table at the far end. She waved and they waved back. The suave-looking gentleman who smelled of vanilla politely ushered her in, parting with, “If you need anything....” Lourdes forced a smile. It wasn’t the first time Nimfa met them there, but Lourdes could never get used to the overly accommodating staff. They made her feel guilty, just as the endless supply of toilet paper, paper towels, and hand soap (also vanilla-scented) in the immaculate restroom made her feel like a thief.

Nimfa, meanwhile, deserved the golden treatment, the least the mall could do for ruining her financially. It was Nimfa’s fault, of course, one-day millionaire Nimfa. It wasn’t like the mall held a gun to her head and forced her to buy—what was it this time? A special-

edition women's journal for vision boarding or some such nonsense. Nimfa could visualize her dream house all she wanted, but when store hours finished and the last employee took off her company-mandated heels for a pair of more comfortable flats or slippers, gingerly massaging legs turned lead from standing all day; when the fairy lights were killed and the steel accordion doors went down and the hardened locks clicked Nimfa knew, of course she knew, that the magic died too. The next morning the magic was resurrected with a swipe of the card, a "Thank you, Ma'am. See us again," and again and again, but again and again it died. Nimfa knew that too, knew that every night she stepped into her 8,000-peso hole with perpetually cursed pipes and an increasingly resentful landlord; every night she laid her head on a growing mound of half-empty, half-opened junk (because her memory foam pillows, yet unpaid, where nowhere to be found) she had half-forgotten existed.

Chris' crooked not-smile was coded, bitchy. It was about *him*. Lourdes didn't think *he* would be there or should be there, but knowing Nimfa, well, Nimfa did things like that because Nimfa, as Christ put it, was a certifiable mess.

The mess gave Lourdes a bear hug.

"Dear, dear," she purred. "I'm so glad you made it." She whispered, "Are you feeling better?"

"I've stopped," Lourdes whispered back. "No more. I promised myself."

"Good!" Nimfa beamed approvingly, but winced at the sight of her friend's long-sleeve shirt, shapeless and monastic. "I will have to wear these until I can get my problems fixed. I looked it up, just like you said. It's very expensive," Lourdes explained.

"It's okay. I just wish you'd wear color every now and then. It's proven to make a person happy."

"Listen to Ma'am Nimfa," Chris chimed in. "She's an expert on happiness."

"Maybe Chris knows a derma?" Nimfa turned to Chris. "Make yourself useful, *gaga*."

"Didn't I text you my friend's number?" Chris asked Lourdes.

"I can't afford it now," Lourdes, embarrassed, responded. "Maybe next time. Is *he* here?"

"How did you know? You and your big mouth!" Nimfa playfully snarled at Chris.

“But I thought you’re only allowed two guests?” Lourdes asked. “What if they kick us out? I think the receptionist finally caught on. He is looking at us,” Lourdes observed worriedly.

“I’m a Max Member. They wouldn’t do that.”

“But he’s whispering to that girl.”

“Paranoid much? Ha, ha!”

“But they’re both staring—”

“I think they’re staring at *moi*.”

“You of little faith. When Ma’am Nimfa says it’s okay, it has to be okay!” Chris again.

The female staff did approach them. She too wore that same megawatt smile (probably patented; was it a mask you took off at the end of the day?) and offered coffee and tea.

“More coffee?” Nimfa asked Chris. He shook his head. “Lourdes? Oh, that’s okay. You can have as much as you want. That’s one of the perks.” She turned to the waiting lady. “Three cappuccinos and three iced teas. And bring some sugar, please. Brown. And you can take these now, please. So, we can have some space. My friends and I have a lot of catching up to do!” She handed the lady the empty cups and saucers. This barely made a dent on the assorted pile of make-up, pens, and complimentary newspapers on the table. A college English book was left facing down, surrounded by smudged balls of used tissue. Ma’am Nimfa was here.

Chris jerked his head to the right and Lourdes’ gaze followed in its general direction. “In the green shirt with the collar up.” *He* was sitting on a couch by himself pretending to be busy with his smartphone. *He* sneakily looked up from time to time.

“Come on, say it,” Chris teased. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“Say what?” Lourdes asked.

“He looks like—”

“A kid.”

“A *barangay tanod*.”

The kid must have heard. For a second he looked Lourdes in the eye, then back to his phone. He had big round eyes that betrayed a look of confusion unsubdued by performative machismo. He proceeded to uncross a skinny right leg and to burrow his youthful,

undeveloped body deeper into the cushion. He assumed a more relaxed, more obnoxious pose. Right between the legs, now in deliberate display, was nestled an unfortunate-looking not-bulge.

“Do you have any idea how much he’s cost her... so far?” Chris said to Lourdes.

“He’s reviewing for the LET. His parents kicked him out. I’m just helping out a little,” Nimfa explained.

“Helping out how?”

“By paying for everything, what else,” Chris answered. He volunteered the unsavory details: dormitory rent, food allowance, transportation allowance, clothing allowance (“He will need the right clothes for interviews. When he gets his license,” Nimfa interjected, prompting Chris to remind everyone that the kid failed the LET twice already. “Because Dr. Chris, my dear Dr. Chris, not everybody is as smart as you, Dr. Chris.”). There were also review and examination fees apparently, and apparently the ridiculousness did not end there. Nimfa provided a separate monthly allowance, *the* monthly allowance, for “miscellaneous” expenses, sounding to Lourdes like an insult to common sense. And of course, cell phone load, because kids nowadays. And he was, for all intents and purposes, a kid.

“Does he really need that much for load, though?” Lourdes asked. “When I’m broke, food is my priority.”

“He needs it to contact people. To contact me.”

“So, you buy him load so he can contact you, so he can ask you for money so he can buy load, so he can contact you so he can ask you for money,” Chris was enjoying himself too much. Nimfa had always been too easy. “If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.”

Nimfa kept laughing. Maybe the whole thing was a malicious in-joke she shared with the boy toy. Maybe Chris and Lourdes weren’t supposed to get it. Maybe Nimfa was just above basic human comprehension, a conscious self-deconstruction; a quiet revelry, a hidden guile. Like a used urinal in the museum, except this time it’s a middle-aged body drowning in peach. Not pink, because pink was too girly. Peach was that comfortable middle ground, Nimfa would educate her friends, between the dumbness of youth and the resentments of age. It didn’t scream for attention, nor did it cruelly turn people off and away,

as was the tendency with black (Lourdes'). Peach was a polite invitation, hopeful and kind. The color of a world that never ran out of time.

Lourdes surveyed her friend's "OOTD." Yes, that's what Nimfa called it. The backpack looked new, expensive. Peach. The Converse too. Peach. Nimfa's senselessness was down to a science, and it could have been endearing, it wouldn't have been so dangerous if it didn't involve money.

"Everybody's hungry," Lourdes thought to herself. "How exactly did you meet?" she finally asked.

"Facebook. Friend request."

"I mean how did he even end up in your... circle?" A professional circle, supposedly. Lourdes had seen her friend's FB timeline, that pictorial parade of highly accomplished, well-balanced individuals with two master's degrees or a doctorate before 30. Individuals who never missed out on "lifelong learning," who brought out the best in their students and as a result brought out the best in themselves, because again, "lifelong learning"— the accompanying posts and captions (practically essays, and for some reason, always in English) said. These people knew exactly what they wanted and sprinted to get there (who said life was a marathon?), pausing just long enough to thank the Lord, their family, or their immediate superiors. There was simply no time to crash and burn.

The "essays" made Lourdes' head hurt, first, for almost always needing corrections; and second, for the dizzying, intimidating energy that sustained the life stories behind them. Nimfa's face would pop up every so often, her name mentioned by grateful teachers, young and old alike, in tones ranging from appreciation to adulation. She was their mentor, the human dynamo behind their school division's success. No, they couldn't have done any of this without her (and God and their family), and the superlatives they showered her with was proof of that. Could you imagine if Ma'am Nimfa crashed and burned?

"Who knows how they met. Who cares? The pussy finds a way," Chris responded.

"Judge me all you want, but it wasn't like that, not at first. I sincerely wanted to help. And then, I don't know, one thing led to another..."

"And your colleagues?" Lourdes asked. "They'll talk."

"Well, they do already. They always have. It doesn't matter. If they're not monitoring my absences and my leaves and accusing me of laziness, or of going behind their back for

talking to the superintendent— I’m proactive, I always make suggestions— point is, they don’t like me, okay? And that’s okay. Besides, gossip is like oxygen to them. At least I’m not stealing.”

“Haters gonna hate,” said Chris, referencing Nimfa’s favorite pop song.

“I bought the album!” Nimfa said.

“Of course, you did,” Chris responded.

“Why did you ask me to come?” Lourdes didn’t have to meet the kid, did she? She certainly didn’t want to.

“I told you I missed you! And I need you to tutor him.”

“Me? You’re the English supervisor. Why don’t you?”

“I do already. But we could use your help,” she whispered. “He’s kind of slow.”

“He seems pretty smart to me!”

“Shut up, Chris! I don’t need your negativity. Why can’t you be more like Lourdes? You won’t even teach him math!”

“Because I’m not good at math, *gaga*.”

“Or science! You want me to believe you’re bad at that too? Just say you don’t care.”

“Oh please, Nimfa. Enough with the drama.”

The little spat began to gain an audience. Lourdes shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Her eyes took in the hushed, stunned room in one frantic sweep. Her brain registered a blurry mass of turned heads. She saw everything and nothing.

“Drama? Is it drama to help a friend out? Was it drama when I helped you out? That night in Morato. You could barely walk—”

The minute twitches on Chris’ face morphed into an ugly, mask-like grimace that signaled the dreaded crossing of the line. Drama indeed. His eyes were burning slits. “How dare you! You promised!” A quick shot of fury tore through his body and violently jerked it upwards, almost knocking his chair over. “I need some air. There’s your coffee. Ask your lover boy if he wants any. Or would he prefer milk?” Curious eyeballs trailed his departure. Then, suddenly remembering common courtesy, the other guests went back to whatever it was they were doing. “They’re still listening,” Lourdes thought. The female staff hurriedly sat the cups and glasses on the table and left. She didn’t even look at the two women. She didn’t smile.

Lourdes caught the kid staring, smiling. Lord, he sure was slow, so slow he didn't even think of faking it. At least he's enjoying the show.

"Like his shit doesn't stink. At least I'm honest. I know who I am, I embrace who I am. Warts and all, as they say. Saggy tits. Debts. Itch. Chris, that idiot, it's 2020 and he's still lying to himself. I wonder why he can't find the right girl. I fucking wonder."

"I don't know, Nimfa. It's none of my business."

"It's nobody's business but his. Of course. But the hypocrisy! It drives me nuts! And he has the nerve to call me a mess?" Nimfa's tears tracked tiny creases on her foundation. Her matte peach lips, however, remained impeccable. "Looks good on me, don't you think? You should try it. It never stains."

"Maybe next time."

"Buy it with the new wardrobe." She started to delicately dab on her face with a tissue. "Chris is no saint. Hell, he's not even sane. I'm telling you, he's worse than both of us!"

Nimfa reached for her backpack and pulled out her new journal. It was peach, of course. The surrounding lights bounced off its film-bound cover to create a subtle holographic sheen. Lourdes found it quite pretty. If only everything else was this understated, it would have been the nectar of life, she thought, inadvertently touching her own right arm. That. Whatever was underneath the cheap, hot fabric, there was nothing understated about that.

"Do you think I'm a mess? Do you, dear?" Nimfa wasn't waiting for an answer. She didn't need one. She uncapped a permanent marker, filling the air with the strong odor of ink. Line after line of pristine space disappeared in a terroristic blaze of automatic writing. Beside her, Lourdes could easily make out the jagged black letters: "I AM GROSS. AND SO ARE YOU."

* * * * *

“As Luck Wouldn’t Have It”

by Adrian David

‘What’s in a name?’ Shakespeare wrote. For the girl born in the winter of 1991 in Providence, it meant a lot. The day the stork brought her coincided with St. Patrick’s Day, so her Irish-American parents considered her to be a good luck charm. They christened her Fortuna after the Roman goddess of luck. Little did they know her life would be anything but lucky.

Growing up, misfortune became Fortuna’s middle name. From peeing her pants on the first day of school to hitting a wrong note in the annual school concert. When she was locked in the girls’ bathroom at school. Or when she stumbled onto the freshly poured sidewalk with her brand-new Nikes. Missing the school trip to the zoo six years running. Never drawing a Wild Draw 4 card in a game of UNO. If there was a puddle, she stepped on it. A wall, she walked into it. Fortuna was the whole package, all rolled into one. And it was not good. Long story short, there was always something to bring her bad luck.

Her elder brother, named after the wealthy and wise King Solomon of Israel, turned out to be a jackass. Fortuna shook her head the day Solomon told her *Hunger Games* was the name of a cookbook series and giggled when he told her it was Spielberg, the largest of all icebergs, that took out the Titanic. But that’s for another story.

Back to Fortuna. Her elementary years at an all-girls Catholic school were less than spectacular. Her classmates gave her the nickname ‘Miss Misfortune’ because of all the calamities she endured. Once, while raising her hand to use the bathroom, the teacher assumed she was volunteering to solve a complicated math problem. Fortuna stood like a statue in front of the blackboard, stunned, leaving her the laughingstock amongst the

students. Another time, she accidentally rubbed poison ivy all over her face in fourth grade and spent a field trip with horrible red welts all over it.

While giving Fortuna her first Holy Communion, the middle-aged priest suffered a heart attack, and the event was rescheduled, much to the chagrin of her devout parents. In sixth grade, Fortuna was bitching about her art teacher to a friend. Her friend's wide-eyed look told her the 'fat dumbass who thinks she's Frida Kahlo' was standing right behind her. The teacher was livid. Fortuna's parents got involved. A series of apologies ensued.

Fast forward to tenth grade. She was struck by lightning during a cross-country road trip with her family. Two years down the line, Fortuna borrowed her dad's Camry for prom, but of course, she got a speeding ticket and arrived late. During the dance, her dress tore, and she tripped over and fell. To make things less awkward, she took quite a few swigs from her friend's smuggled bottle of beer. She let her hair down and danced like a wild hippie as everyone laughed. Her friends uploaded the video to YouTube and soon, 'Crazy Drunk Girl's Prom Dance' went viral. She became famous, or rather, infamous, for her fifteen minutes of twerking, and swearing.

Meanwhile, things back home weren't good either. She dog-sat a Great Dane for her neighbor, and the giant pooch went missing. The traffic lights always turned red whenever her car approached, especially when she was running late. Once, a black cat crossed her path and a passing bus hit it.

Fortuna waitressed at a local bistro and saved hard to buy the brand-new iPhone 4S — all the rage at that time. Barely two weeks after the purchase, she dropped the phone into the toilet while playing Candy Crush. She somehow managed to take it out, but the damage had made the phone almost unusable. 'Lucky' was not in her vocabulary.

Before long, she enrolled in a community college. There, she developed a crush on her classmate, Gershom. It took four months for her to muster the courage to ask him out. Since it was her first date, Fortuna wanted it to be perfect and chose a cozy downtown café for her romantic escapade.

Only when she was primping in her bedroom mirror did she realize she'd run out of deodorant. To add insult to injury, she couldn't get an Uber. With the café a few streets away from her apartment, she started to walk. The skies opened up, and it started to pour like crazy, ruining Fortuna's chances of looking presentable. A passing car splashed muddy water in her direction. On the way, she broke a heel and limped her way to the café.

By the time she arrived, it was already late, and her white halter-neck dress was decorated with brown spots. Gershom sat hunched at a table, tapping his feet on the wooden floor. After apologizing and ordering espressos, Fortuna tried to flirt with him. Since it was stuffy and hot, she sweated profusely, making her body odor linger in the air. Amid stealing glances and holding hands, she ignored the weird feeling in her stomach. Within minutes, she turned super anxious and upchucked all over the table, staining Gershom's shirt. That was the last time she saw him. Fate ruined her chances of changing her relationship status on Facebook.

Her next relationship came in the form of a Tinder swipe. Lorenzo, a towering hunk of Italian heritage, was as sweet as tiramisu. Indeed, she had found a great guitarist, a great singer, and above all, a great kisser. In her world of misfortune, Fortuna believed him to be her stroke of luck; a ray of hope in a land engulfed by darkness.

At the same time, her bad luck continued. She inadvertently sent an intimate selfie intended for Lorenzo to her grandfather. She lost a hundred dollars in an Internet scam. While shopping at H&M, she got annoyed after a supposed 'perv' grabbed her from behind and turned back to slap the head right off a male mannequin. Talk about unfortunate circumstances!

Finally, after months of dating, Lorenzo invited her to his home for dinner. Determined to impress his mamma, a caring woman with a radiant smile and a Monica Bellucci accent, Fortuna dug out her phone and fiddled with it under the dining table, ready to translate pleasantries from English to Italian.

Mamma laid out the plates on the table and served lasagna. "Would you like more lasagna, Fortuna?"

Expecting a surprised look, if not a charmed one, Fortuna blurted out, “*Vaffanculo!*” What she got instead was a furious one — a look she wouldn’t forget for ages.

When Lorenzo sprang from his chair and furrowed his brows, Fortuna knew something was wrong. On checking her phone, she fathomed she’d searched for ‘fuck you’ instead of ‘thank you’ in the translator app by mistake. Although she tried explaining herself, Lorenzo asked her to leave before slamming the door in her face. It came as no surprise to Fortuna that her Italian boyfriend had broken up with her just because she’d insulted his mamma. As Don Vito Corleone said in *The Godfather*, ‘You can do anything. But never go against the family.’

To move past her failed relationship, Fortuna joined her neighborhood gym, hoping to drop some pounds and perhaps even meet a cute guy along the way. On the very first day, she tripped on the treadmill and ripped her sweatpants. Help came in the form of Alex, a handsome tattoo artist. It’s said that the ‘third time’s the charm.’ Fortuna tried her luck — if she had any — with Alex. One thing led to another, and soon, he began visiting her home regularly. She’d often spotted him speaking to her brother, Solomon, and was thrilled that Alex was bonding with her family.

Time flew like a rocket ship, and it had been six months since Fortuna and Alex started seeing each other. She felt her new boyfriend seemed to take their relationship too slowly, as he only held hands and gave side hugs, never moving any further. Frustrated by his indifference and wanting to take their relationship to the next level, Fortuna decided to take things into her own hands as desperate times called for desperate measures.

During Easter dinner at her home, Fortuna planned to make out with Alex in her bedroom. Alex was watching an NBA game in Solomon’s room. Fortuna noticed the door ajar. Brimming with excitement, she entered the room, only to find Alex and Solomon making out. What she saw broke her heart into a million pieces. All hopes of any romantic pursuit of Alex ended at that moment. Caught in the act, Alex came out of the room, and then came out to her. He confessed his feelings for her brother. Nothing shocked Fortuna more than finding

out her so-called boyfriend had been going out with her only because he fancied her brother in the first place.

Things continued going south in the following months. Fortuna was rejected for every job she applied to. Despite turning twenty-three, she still lived off her parents. Depression sucked the life and soul out of her. Sick and tired of her misery, Fortuna decided to let it go, once and for all. Her hands trembled as she tied a rope to the ceiling fan and closed her eyes for what she hoped was the final time. The fan crashed down upon her. Alas, her innate bad luck neither let her live nor die in peace.

The next thing Fortuna recalled was waking up on a hospital bed with a bandaged head and a broken arm. Her mother stayed by her bedside, reciting Hail Marys without batting an eyelid. Two weeks later, Miss Misfortune was released from the hospital. She frequently attended sessions with her therapist to move past her trauma.

Fortuna often contemplated writing a memoir revolving around her lifetime of bad luck and even went to the lengths of choosing a title. She couldn't think of anything more befitting than 'A Series of Unfortunate Events'. Unfortunately, that was already taken, much to her disappointment.

One fine day, Fortuna ordered a fortune cookie from a Chinese restaurant, desperate for some luck. Even the queen of pessimists wouldn't have guessed the cookie would have a blank note inside. Annoyed, Fortuna pulled out her phone and scrolled through her Instagram feed. A series of hashtags clouded her screen — #Wanderlust, #TravelDiaries, #TravelingIsMyLife, #SoloTrip. One thing was clear — most people she knew traveled around the world. *Not a bad idea!* Ever since a young age, she'd dreamed of visiting the picturesque cities of Sydney and Christchurch. She browsed through the websites of a few travel agencies in her neighborhood before choosing one and booking an appointment.

"Sydney and Christchurch, huh? Sounds like the perfect trip," the travel agent said before he trailed off, "however—"

Fortuna arched an eyebrow as he continued, “However, it exceeds your budget. Let me suggest another package that’s equally interesting yet affordable.” He pulled out a couple of flyers. “Kuala Lumpur and Beijing, two Eastern beauties.”

Misfortune came as the killjoy in Fortuna’s life yet again, but she welcomed the challenge instead of whining about it. “Sounds good.” With that declaration, she awaited her imminent solo trip to the other side of the globe.

The day of departure arrived.

“You got this, Fortuna,” she assured herself in the mirror. Fortuna kissed her parents goodbye and hailed a cab to the airport with her rucksack and trolley bag. The itinerary was simple — fly to Kuala Lumpur, enjoy a four-day stay, and then spend another four days in Beijing before flying home to Providence.

With her fingers crossed, she looked down from the window of the plane, bidding adieu to her dear city as it became smaller and smaller.

* * *

With its towering glass skyscrapers, Kuala Lumpur was a traveler’s paradise. After checking into the Hilton KL, Fortuna set out to have fun. The Sunway Lagoon Theme Park was all a tourist could ask for. There were a variety of rides and activities in the water park that made her feel spoiled for choice. Fortuna had an amazing time on the water slide.

When she decided to go surfing, adrenaline rushed through her veins. As the artificial waves rose, she soared. The breeze caressed her hair. Her eyes spotted a man who had been knocked off from his surfboard. Fortuna flashed a polite smile at him, empathizing with his misfortune. She had always been at the receiving end of bad luck. It was almost as if misfortune vanished from her life the moment she left Providence. Or so she thought.

The next day, she visited the iconic Petronas Twin Towers. At a whopping 1,483 feet, the towering structures kissed the sky. Fortuna stood on the sky bridge connecting the towers and gazed as the horizon embraced the setting sun. Unlike the other tourists around

her, she didn't click pictures with her phone. Rather, she lived in the moment and adored the view. She couldn't remember the last time she could enjoy something without bad luck looming over her.

The third day saw her visiting an elephant sanctuary. She petted an elephant's trunk and felt its crusted texture. With the help of the elephant keeper, locally known as the mahout, she climbed on the gentle giant. Wielding a stick, the mahout accompanied her as the elephant slowly traversed through the grassy terrain. Fortuna closed her eyes and lost herself to the earthy scent pervading the air — nature in its purest form.

Suddenly, the elephant went berserk and shook its head with rapid movements. The mahout tried to control it with the stick, but in vain. Fortuna felt dizzy and clutched onto the wrinkled gray skin. The giant pachyderm swayed wildly and threw the two off its back. Fortuna suffered a fall, but the mahout's body cushioned her. Unlike the poor man whose legs bled, Fortuna escaped with minor scratches. The authorities in the sanctuary rushed to their rescue. Minutes later, an ambulance arrived, and the mahout was carried away on a stretcher.

After the mishap, Fortuna headed back to her hotel. On the way, she visited the bustling Petaling Street, a Chinatown in the heart of the city. Rows of shops on both sides greeted her, while the lamps above her head illuminated the evening. The street food stalls caught her eye, or rather, her nose, owing to the smoky aroma ascending from them. She ordered a plate of satay, a grilled meat dish. Fortuna held the end of the skewer between her fingers, took a bite, and then another, and another. Enamored by the unique flavor, she went on a gorging spree.

It was night by the time she stepped into her hotel room. After kicking her shoes off, she neatly folded her clothes and packed her trolley bag for the next morning's 10.40 a.m. flight. Fortuna set an alarm for 8 a.m. on her wristwatch and snuggled under her blanket. She sunk her head into the pillow and recounted the hell of a day she had. Hardly an hour passed before a queasy feeling erupted in her stomach. At first, she brushed it off as a repercussion of the fall, but the next few minutes saw her rushing to the bathroom.

The door locked. Her toes curled. The toilet flushed.

Repeat.

This ritual went on and on until the dawn sun broke through her window. After flushing the toilet for the gazillionth time, Fortuna cursed the satay for upsetting her stomach and collapsed on the bed, falling asleep.

The next morning, Fortuna wiped the drool off her chin and dreamily looked at her wristwatch. *Shit!* It was 9 a.m.

She sprang to her feet, tied her hair into a bun, and rushed to the bathroom for a quick shower. She then threw on a T-shirt and a pair of jeans. With the rucksack swung onto her back, she grabbed her smartphone and trolley bag and left the room in a hurry. Since the elevator door closed before she could get to it, Fortuna sprinted down the stairs to the lobby. After checking out, she rushed to board a cab. She glanced at the time on her wristwatch every now and then and blew out a series of quick breaths while saying a silent prayer.

Halfway through the journey, the cab broke down. Fortuna frantically fumbled with the lock as she managed to push the door open. Stepping out from the useless vehicle, she kicked the tire and pulled out a wad of ringgit to pay the cabbie. Suddenly, a man on a motorbike zoomed toward her and snatched the smartphone from her hand. As the thief revved the engine and rode off, Fortuna cursed her very existence. With no time to spare, she jumped into another cab without bothering about the exorbitant fare the street-smart cabbie charged.

A few minutes later, a traffic jam made the cab move at a snail's pace. After what seemed like an eternity, Fortuna finally reached the departure terminal. Her heart hammered in her chest as she navigated through the sea of heads and made her way past the security check and the check-in counter. "Beijing, here I come!" With only thirty minutes left before take-off, she raced to the boarding gate, the trolley bag screeching along the way. Gasping for breath, she handed her passport, ticket, and boarding pass to the gate agent.

The agent examined her documents and glanced at his computer screen. He shook his head and frowned. "Sorry, ma'am. Your flight has already taken off."

"What?!" Fortuna's heart skipped a beat. "There are still twenty minutes left. Please check again."

The gate agent punched some keys on his computer and turned to her. "I'm sorry. Your flight took off forty minutes ago."

Only then did it dawn on Fortuna that her wristwatch was an hour slow. Fighting back tears, she dragged her feet to the nearest row of seats and settled into one. She buried her face in her palms and sobbed, "Why, God, why? Why have you made my life so miserable?" She rubbed her red, puffy eyes and rested her head on the cushion. Before she knew it, she dozed off.

* * *

"Ma'am! Ma'am!" The gate agent's voice landed on her ears, disrupting her prolonged nap. Fortuna woke up and checked the time, only to discover she'd slept for almost three hours in the waiting area.

"May I take a look at your ticket once again?" Anxiety was written all over his face.

She languidly handed him the ticket and yawned.

The gate agent examined the ticket and narrowed his eyes. He shifted his gaze to Fortuna and dropped his jaw. "You must be the luckiest person alive!"

Fortuna couldn't believe her ears. It was almost as if she was in a parallel universe. "Huh?"

He held his phone in front of her face. The website of *The Star*, the country's most popular English language newspaper, was open.

Flight MH370 bound for Beijing goes missing

March 8, 2014 — Malaysia Airlines confirms that flight MH370 is missing. The flight, which had been expected to land in Beijing the same day, disappeared after leaving Kuala Lumpur.

According to an official statement, the Air Traffic Control lost contact with the aircraft a few hours after take-off. Malaysia Airlines is currently working with the authorities who have activated their Search and Rescue team to locate the aircraft.

The twin-engine Boeing 777 jet carried 227 passengers and 12 crew members, with the people on board representing 14 nationalities.

As much as it devastated Fortuna that her would-have-been fellow passengers onboard MH370 were now essentially missing, she couldn't dismiss the fact that she had been lucky. This one time. This one time to make up for all the other times in her life when luck deserted her. Only to come and save her. From this one.

* * * * *

“The Two Mrs. Tays”

by Kevin Nicholas Wong

PART ONE: THE FIRST MRS. TAY

There was a shift happening. The air had its own tangible spirit which moved stealthily through people, settling within them and slowly taking root like a cancer. Ronnie felt a chill inside of her as she watched from the side-lines. The actress was lying in a gurney made of old metal which peeled to reveal rusty scabs, like it too was suffering. The lower half of her body was neatly tucked under skin-coloured sheets, about to disappear.

This strange fleetingness made Ronnie think about their arrival earlier in the day, how one of the set decorators had made an about turn as they were approaching the skeletal steel-wired gates, twisting the baseball cap atop his head to signal his surrender. They all had heard stories about the place. Old Changi Hospital, a sprawling compound infamously used as an internment camp for POWs during World War II, was trapped in a bubble of its past. The chalk white building looked grey even against the secluded backdrop of bearded raintrees, its beguiling stature drained of any life or colour that came after the war. X shaped windows which ran round the top created pupils containing a bruised coloured haze, like eyes slowly adjusting to the dark. The wards were equally as gnawing, walls painted in the same masquerading grey that cast obelisks of shadows.

Death was following, or at least making its presence known to Ronnie now, an exigent itch like the two makeup assistants chattering behind her.

“Focus please, we’re filming,” Ronnie whispered.

The two girls stifled their laughter, twirling bubble-gum-coloured tendrils of hair with manicured fingers topped with nail glitter. They were the type who let boyfriends carry their handbags, who used men willingly because it was easier. Ronnie somehow felt lethargic around them; the wheel of her life seemed to be churning through caked mud. Yes, she was

still twenty-nine, which sounded lightyears away from the hollowed decisiveness of “thirty”, but her singlehood was an added taxation. Every woman her age was already married and had become enthusiastically boring, a welcoming assurance for their parents that they had raised normal daughters, possessing a kind of soullessness that made them scurry, lifting their eclipsed, misshapen selves like a stray leaf carried by wind.

For instance, Ronnie recalled visiting a friend of hers, the newly crowned Mrs Vicky Woo, and her husband in their newly renovated HDB apartment the month prior. It was a maisonette on the top floor and had a sky window, *a sky window!*, with a hammock of bleached wicker pitched underneath for them to lie on, gaze up and smile to themselves, thinking just how lucky they were to have reached the pinnacle of Singapore’s suburbia. Blank-faced Mr Woo spent mostly giving a tour of the place, with hairy scarecrow arms pointing about, saying, “The kitchen was inspired by American farmhouses, just look at the gold detailing ...,” and, “This staircase cost us two thousand dollars because we had to hack the entire ceiling ...”, in a mild-mannered way that didn’t want to sound proud, but did. Vicky seemed to have no choice but to watch with googly eyes looking up at her husband, as though admiring an antique painting she had acquired. These ladies would do anything to be seen, nodding along to the men around them and laughing wildly whenever they cracked an unfunny joke, as though the laughter itself possessed an ability to sneeze.

Ronnie herself was by no standards an ordinary woman (no, not a lady; this was a term too frothy): her boyish pixie haircut was a motorcycle helmet strapped over her head ready for a joyride; the pattern of studs hung loosely from her ears glistening like a small constellation at night; those jean shorts she cavorted in, with fringe detailing that stopped enticingly at mid-thigh. She exaggerated these traits intentionally, announcing herself as loud as a siren, a distraction for men to think she was different.

“*Oi, makeup!*”

That was her name around here, being hollered at like she owed them something. But Ronnie never rushed. She eased into the foreground, ducking under a carousel of light stands and mechanical setups, her winding movements effortless as a ballerina’s. With a brush on hand and a utility belt of makeup products strapped around her waist, Ronnie was armed and ready. She enjoyed working on prosaic shows like these with equally prosaic names. *Growing Up* was this country’s *Little House on the Prairie*, draped in a dollop of nostalgia, a

pastiche of simple, old Singapore. The Tays were a family of ordinary working-class citizens, their skin bathed in sepia, humble imperfect faces that resembled hers, but happier. She felt powerful during these days on set, being left in charge of the entire Tay clan; she could forget that her own existence was just as ordinary.

The actress's eyes were closed but not fully shut, like a clam, twitching, typing in morse code. But she did not need to say anything, it was already written on her face, or more so, painted on. Rivulets in tree branching lines prolonged the wings of her eyes and wisps of mauve underneath mimicked dark circles, all to age her. The death of Mrs Tay had begun to unfold in front of Ronnie: liver ripped open with a devil tongued knife wielded by a robber, the wound refusing to close, like petals of a wilting flower. If not stabbed by a thug, she would have been struck by a speeding car, or been given an inoperable brain tumour, some dramatic intervention for the ratings. At the bottom of a cement plastered stairwell, just a staggering few steps from her front door, there Mrs Tay laid, one hand pressed on her bloody side, the other gripping the necklace she refused to part with. It was no Elizabeth Taylor by any means, a flimsy silver chain threaded through a jade eye pendant with no gleam, its colour resembling the dirty Singapore River. She must have thought about Gary, David, Vicky and Tammy first – how lucky of a mother she was to have received such a gift from them.

"I know she's supposed to be dying, but it's too much. Can you make her less pale? Also, her lips don't need to be so dry," Cassandra, the assistant director, whispered, her chicken claw of a hand shaking sideways flippantly.

"But then it won't be real. How can?" Ronnie whined.

"If people wanted real, they would be queuing up in morgues, no?"

Ronnie gave a slight nod but quaked inside. A quickening undercurrent of heat began to emerge, and the weather didn't help with this disturbance either, with mosquitoes reigning and humidity soaring, the wet air clinging onto one's skin like saran wrap. Ronnie dipped her brush into a jar of magical blurring powder and dusted it all over Mrs Tay's face. Then with a finger wrapped around some tissue, pressed some Vaseline onto the actress's mouth, trying her best not to attack with her red acrylic nails, tiny pointed chilis at the ends of her fingers. This was a face that she couldn't ruin, Ronnie thought.

The family matriarch was by no means glamorous or even remotely interested in how she presented herself, always dressed in dumbed down pyjamas with a muted floral print,

or the simplest of dresses that hugged her ankles and restricted her pace. In scenes, all Mrs Tay could offer was a bashful nod and a lash of a smile when comforting her children or questioning her testy husband; it was all they gave her to do. But it was her poise that made her so special, a rigidness that felt like a bottle cap being twisted on too tight, bursting at any moment. But now, all that would result from opening her mouth before dying was a stale croak of air.

“All right, standby everyone?” Cassandra said in a half-yelling, half-asking manner. The actors went back to their positions around the bed and the room fell into an ecclesiastical stillness, the kind that made you painfully aware of your own heartbeat and were made grateful for it. Peering just behind the camera, Ronnie could see the gaunt back of Mrs Tay stiffen as she pried herself off the bed. Her eyes flashed open as the director yelled, “Action!”, a steely gaze containing shallow pools that winced into coin shaped slats, resisting to be filled. She had the same measured breath as she normally spoke, filtered through a tinge of concern, reciting her lines, her last goodbyes. There was affirmation in what she said, no fear. Closing her eyes once more, she fell back into the folds of the mattress, like a gentle flip of a page, a flutter of a wing. A hunger sprang from within Ronnie again, but this time she could describe it beyond a burning in her gut: a quiet desperation for something better, something boring that could fit comfortably in a maisonette.

PART TWO: THE SECOND MRS. TAY

Outside, the evening was just as suffocating. Ronnie drew another breath from her cigarette, thankful for the smoke that cycled through her lungs, but felt no release. She had to wait downstairs. There she sat – at a stone circular table with a tiled gameboard etched onto its surface, where drooping uncles played checkers on warm, meandering afternoons. Tubes of clinically white light illuminated the different shades of dirty concrete; the startling contrast made it more isolating to be in. Families had already retired to their beds this time of night, leaving Ronnie all alone, which made her think what they were doing was wrong.

Her legs continued to shake uncontrollably, still hurting even after she got up to do some stretching, and even as Charlie Tay finally came down to collect her. Charlie was a polite fellow, holding a steady job for an accounting firm housed in one of the cloned glass buildings straight out from a factory line along Raffles Quay. He had thinning hair which he still oiled

zealously each day, shining like metallic blinds; his lanky figure barely held the oversized dress shirt he was in, drowned in spiced cologne that made Ronnie's eyes squint when he leaned in for an evening kiss. Her entire body depressed into a gentle pulse; her legs stopped shaking then.

"Sorry you had to wait, honey. Angela wanted a bedtime story," he said.

They always had to wait until Angela was asleep. Friends chided, "Of all the men in this country, you had to choose one who has a dead wife. And a kid too! You must really love a challenge." To Ronnie, it wasn't a challenge, it was all she could get. A widower and a secondary school drop-out seemed to have equal footing, permanently pegged at a lower rung in society's ladder of matchmaking. Most of the men she knew weren't men at all. They were little immature boys who loved to play games. Dressed in torn up Giordano T-shirts and baggy cargo shorts, the camera crew would usually be found squatting around an inconspicuous corner smoking cigarettes. Their toasted hazelnut skin, graffitied with loud, oriental patterns, carved out their so-called manliness. "Ronnie, why always so fierce?" they would ask during lunch breaks. "Give us chance *leh!* If you get any angrier, you will send us *ronni-ng!*" They were jokers in a deck of playing cards, little use in any game. Ronnie needed a King.

"Didn't know eight-year-olds could stay up so late. Welcome Mr Tay, father of the year," Ronnie said, her sarcasm matching the sly spin of her eyes.

"I love it when you're mad, I –"

She shot her finger up to his lips and said to him curtly, "Don't tell me you love me. Anything but that."

"But why?"

"I don't know anything about love."

What she meant to say was: *I don't know how to love a man like you.* She felt like a mailbox key trying to fit into a door lock that was Charlie, not enough to fill the gaps he required. He had a blank face that was almost featureless, as plain as an oval cotton pad, the ones she would use to apply makeup on clients. And just like those cotton pads that soaked up the milky product upon contact, Charlie too was thirsting.

Their rendezvous were always hurried – Charlie pulling Ronnie tautly as though trying to hoist a kite up in the air, becoming his tilted, ghostly shadow during their brisk

walks along the corridor back to his apartment. They never stopped moving, slithering past the living room and into the bedroom on tiptoe. Movements and sounds during lovemaking had to be stifled, any pleasure derived was a double boiler reduced to a wistful simmer. They stopped periodically, accompanied by a thrum of whispers and sibilant whistles to see if the little girl the next room over was ever awakened. Their two bodies held in repose, appreciating the soft, silent breeze that tickled their dewy skin, then slowly trying to find their place in each other again, never finding it.

Charlie dozed off soon after they were finished, and Ronnie watched him sleep and wheeze, sitting cross legged on the floor, resting her elbows in origami fashion on the side of the mattress that was empty. She tried to see herself being here all day and night with him but couldn't. The place felt too lived in, second hand; the room had a woman's touch that had already borne claim to it. From the tasteful printed bed sheets of pendant sized hibiscuses to the faint smell of baby powder emanating from the half open closet; and in the corner, a makeshift workstation consisting of a wooden desk with skinny varicose legs and a mirror perched ornately above. It was the wife's; Charlie was too dense to have created such an intimate space, owning five of the same dress shirts for work *and* five of the same white T-shirts for home.

It was clear that the desk had been left untouched as Ronnie quietly approached it, with sharp edged glass bottles and picture frames snowed in with dust. An uncapped red pen was left diagonally at its centre, as though its owner would be right back. Something was calling out to her, the bronze plated knobs on the drawers giving a thumbs up to be opened. She had to know what secrets this woman, the dead Mrs Charlie Tay, possessed.

Inside were piles of test papers neatly filed, rubber stamped with fading icons of stars that read "Good Job!" or "Try Harder!", and encouraging words signed in cherry red ink by Mrs Tay. The death of the second Mrs Tay had begun to play out in Ronnie's mind: sketching her name against the blackboard with gritty white chalk, as she did at the beginning of each school year. In big block letters, bigger than previous years, she had covered the expanse for the last time, hoping people wouldn't forget her. *MRS TAY*. She probably revelled in being called by her married name when students rose and greeted her each morning, dragging out the intonations of each syllable, prolonging her. It sounded complete, like she had accomplished something from this pinched existence. The pain would be digging at her side

like a pestle on mortar, but still, she would push through. The young, sprite faces of her students delighted her, each one a complex puzzle to fix. “Mrs Tay, you are going too fast!” they complained, as she zipped through English, Math, and Science periods. She had to go fast, she wanted to teach them all the things she knew before she left, to leave a piece of her behind. In school, there was quantifiable knowledge to be taught – textbooks, assessment guides and answer keys to past year papers. At home, she had no road map. She could help her darling Angela with homework, but what of life? What could she impart to her daughter, so that as a blossoming young woman, years after she was gone, could recall what her mother told her about the struggle of her kind, about men barging past her?

“Girl *ah*, a diamond is pretty when it’s a diamond, not when it’s rough hard rock,” Ronnie’s mother would say. Ronnie shut the drawer and took a step back, her body swinging away like a pendulum. She knew she didn’t belong here. She looked out of the half open window and caught the full moon’s stare; a ghostly champagne face was ready to take over her. The bedroom suddenly seemed too vast to conquer now, a pilgrimage through mounds of unwashed clothes and a deep gorge on her temporary side of the bed dug in by a previous tenant. A high-pitched whimper oozed out of her; she had forgotten that Charlie was sleeping, let alone in the room.

“Hey, what are you doing? Don’t make me carry you here,” Charlie teased drowsily.

“I got to go, it’s late already,” Ronnie replied, about to raise one wrist to her eyes but realising she didn’t wear a watch as her hand reached her breasts. She hopped towards him with an overcompensating energy, her left knee lightly pressed on the mattress while extending herself to kiss his cheek, her right foot on *pointe* against the floor ready to flee.

“Hey, come here, what’s the rush?” His hand was clutched around her. Nudging his arm away from her body, Ronnie pushed herself off the bed gently and started to get dressed. As she pulled her short shorts to her waist, the stitched smile southwest of her belly button suddenly became prominent, the upward motion of her hands an invisible arrow for Charlie to follow.

“Oh, you got your appendix taken out. My wife had a scar like that. But hers was more towards the centre. She insisted on having a C-section, you know. She didn’t want to feel any pain,” he whispered, letting out a drunk hiccup of a laugh. Oversharing on his part was proof that this was getting serious, Charlie said so himself to her once.

“Charlie, I really need to go –”

“Why don’t you stay till the morning, maybe you can meet Angela then too,” Charlie said, dragging himself up to meet her gaze.

“Why not just ask her in? I’m sure she would love to meet us now.”

“I meant in a proper setting. Breakfast, dinner, up to you!”

“But I’m no good with kids,” Ronnie strained, trying to claw her way out of this hole, one she so willingly fell into. His upfront honesty about having a child was initially thrilling, like getting a small glimpse of forbidden fruit, appreciating its beauty from a distance. But now the half-eaten fruit’s been laid bare, left out in the open for six months now, its flesh rotting with flies overhanging.

When Ronnie was eleven, she went over to her next-door neighbour Suping’s one afternoon, as she usually did after school, only to find something new. A dove white cage sat primly on top of the dining table where the girls would normally do their homework. Inside the cuboid frame was a hamster, tiny as a soup dumpling, its pearlescent coat matching the colour of its cage. “Isn’t she just the cutest?” Suping marvelled as she took the creature out, placing it in Ronnie’s hands. The hamster squirmed, its fragility shivering a scratchy beat. She did not like this feeling, the thought of taking care of something so tiny, so vulnerable, when she didn’t even know how to take care of herself. It repulsed her so, her hands parting open like a trapdoor. No sound was made when the hamster fell, only a flash of pink dotted the clean marble beneath them, like syrup. “You killed her! You killed her!” Suping screamed as she lunged to collect the critter. Ronnie suddenly wondered where Suping was now, probably already a mother somewhere, holding her baby far too tight.

“Oh honey, you’re not alone. I’m no good with them either!” Charlie coughed out a harsh chuckle. “I know she’ll just love you. Stay, hmm?”

But Ronnie would refuse; she had to leave. Charlie’s proposition was another furry creature placed on her frigid palms.

PART THREE: THE FUTURE MRS. TAY

Ronnie didn’t know what to do with her, this was not part of the plan. Sitting beside her in the car was the child, whose tiny frame was restrained by the seat belt. If Ronnie faced

the passenger's side window and looked straight ahead, she wouldn't even have noticed her. But Angela could not be ignored.

The plan was simple enough. They would meet straight at Charlie's, seven o'clock sharp. Ronnie would come dressed tamely in a billowy sundress and a plain wool cardigan; gamine pieces borrowed from her cat loving librarian roommate. Dinner would be a simple spread of *tapaw* food from the nearby hawker centre – *orh luak*, sliced fish porridge and Angela's favourite barbecue chicken wings, with extra slices of lime just as she preferred. Ronnie would come bearing gifts for darling Angela, a cute little doll set. They would be friends after. Simple enough?

That afternoon, the sky was covered in a fickle blue grey, and when the phone rang whilst she was in the shower and continued to ring even after she had exited the bathroom, Ronnie knew their eventual meeting would be jinxed.

"Sorry, I'll be late for dinner," Charlie said on the other end, the slight distortion making him sound sadder than he probably was. "Could you pick Angela up from school? She forgot to bring her wallet."

"Oh Charlie, don't make me do this."

"I owe you big time, okay? I got to go," he said peremptorily, hanging up before Ronnie could say anything else.

A ten-minute drive from the school to the house, that was all the time she had to fill. The old Honda reeked of the stale carpet which laid beneath them, never been vacuumed. *Maybe if I rolled down the windows, I wouldn't have to talk to her*, Ronnie thought. As her right hand left the steering wheel to reach the panel of tabs by the car door, the child started to raise her voice. "I don't like it when the windows are down." Angela had been watching her, analysing her every move. Ronnie's mother came piercing through again in that nasal whiny drawl of hers, talking about how the cockroaches, spiders and other ghastly insects lurking in her room were probably more afraid than she was. But this was no insect. Angela was a ball of energy, alive and kicking, clamouring for attention without having the need to ask for it, a sprite little planet, and Ronnie a moon being pulled along into orbit, into a whole new universe.

She didn't bear any resemblance to Charlie. She was her mother's muse – long, straight raven hair tied sensibly in a senescent chignon; olive eyes with no sheen signalling

a doleful obedience; and other unremarkable wallpaper features that merely hung on her face rather than accentuating it. Ronnie knew the type – quiet, stuffy girls who would grow up to date and marry the first man that offered, straight out of school like all the lucky Mrs Tays out there. “Just like a photocopy,” Charlie would say. “She’s blessed that she didn’t inherit my features, all bad,” he lamented, in hopes Ronnie would feed the seedling of his ego, now that he had a woman back in his life who could *sayang* him again. But she wouldn’t. All Ronnie could offer was a pat on the back that shifted into a hinting caress down his spine, accompanied by a tender kiss, so she wouldn’t have to answer.

Passing the last exit of the highway, Angela whipped her head back in the sharpest of right angles. A cool burst of wind splashed against Ronnie’s cheek. All she heard was the squishing of fidgeting leather beside her, a scattered mix of soft gasps and gurgling. In the series of speedy glances, she could see the girl was tense, her cheeks crumpled, seemingly chewing air, cautiously trying to form words like piecing a failing Tetris puzzle.

“Something wrong?” Ronnie asked.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Home *lah*, where else?”

Angela slouched back into a rag doll’s supine, her head shifting to the window again, as if addressing the driver of the next car over.

“You missed the turn,” she announced, almost singing.

“No, I normally take the next one.”

“But that’s not the way Mom drives me home. Her way’s faster.”

Ronnie dug her fingers deeper into the steering wheel and yanked the lever beside it, tilting the wheel to the left, signalling her desire to change. She had hoped this animated move would be enough to quell the frustration; she couldn’t hit a child, not for any reason other than it wasn’t hers to hit. Midway through the lane shift however, a pair of microwave eyes blazed through the rear-view mirror. She could hear the monstrous roar pummeling towards them, almost as if the supposed creature on the road had manifested in the back seat. Ronnie jerked the car back into its original position, their flailing bodies playing ping pong for a single Olympic turn, as a flashy roadster with fins flew past them, a middle finger on wheels painted in chemical blue.

She couldn't stop now. The words seemed to pour out of her, as natural as a baby's cry for milk, unabashed and cutting to the ears. "*Wah lao eh!* Your grandfather's road, is it? *Nabei!*" Beads of saliva hurled from her fire engine lips, accompanying the stinging delivery of dialect that held invisibly in the air for a moment too long, like an echo, long enough to be able to decipher its meaning.

As Ronnie turned to check her blind spot, she noticed Angela's hand clutched firmly onto the protruding slope below the door handle, the child's gaze now following her, expecting some answer.

"We'll be there soon. Don't worry, you can trust me," Ronnie said, the biting grit that accompanied her cursing just moments before still present; the monster was inside her, was her, but was now defending the little girl.

In the open-air carpark just below his apartment, the two lazed in the car with the windows wound down midway, waiting for Charlie to return with the house keys. Their seats were pushed back into a slant, mouths soon ajar with drool. When Ronnie awoke what seemed to be seconds later, she was startled to find the world in the same shade of midnight when her eyes were blissfully shut. Angela was still asleep, head down to her shoulder, one hand half clenched holding someone imaginary.

Charlie's silver minivan arrived about ten minutes after, or three songs on the radio plus ads. She gave a honk to call him as he exited the vehicle, and a longer one when he didn't notice that it was her.

Angela squirmed in her seat, rubbing the salt from her eyes.

"Mommy?" she yawned.

"No, sweetie. Your father's here."

The girl leapt out of the car and ran towards Charlie, clutching at the curtains of his imitation silk pants. He placed his hands firmly on her shoulders, turning her around to face Ronnie. "You know right? This is Daddy's friend, Ronnie *zeh.*" *Older Sister*, that's what he asked Angela to call her. She seemed too old to be labelled a sister, but she was also not yet a mother, somewhere painfully in between.

"Welcome to our home, excuse the mess," Charlie said, one hand by his back and the other gesturing her in.

"Ya, I know, I –"

His eyes had begun to dilate into a frightened cat's, his oddly round head bobbing left to right as if detached from his neck. He had contorted himself into a giant Magic 8 ball to stop her from finishing her sentence; the game of adult charades had begun. She glanced around the room sparingly, asking politely if they took shoes off in this household, knowing full well they did. She pictured the stubby wooden cabinet with one leg sawed down sitting to her right where all the footwear was kept, pretending not to notice until Charlie showed her. Ronnie was aware that her voice had shrunk, the sheer dowdiness of it surprised her.

"Angela, you just sit tight and watch some TV. Help me with this will you, Ronnie?" Charlie said calmly, raising the bags of food he had on both hands to signal her over. Being in the house for the first time with the lights turned on, Ronnie could see that the place was facing a slow death. The kitchen for instance looked like it had been wrapped in plastic, deprived of air.

"You can unwrap the chili they gave and get the plates, I'll heat up the food. Now where's that pan..."

Transparent pyramids containing sliced red chili and soy sauce sat on the counter, wrapped with plastic cord at the top, creating little nooses around their twisted necks. The task seemed like a cinch, but somehow the knot refused to move, no matter how hard Ronnie tried plucking at it. She slyly placed the packet down and picked up another, but the second knot was just as uncooperative.

"Dammit, why are these things so difficult to untie? Where are the scissors?"

"Very funny *leh*, you. Must be gentle," Charlie mused, snatching the packet away from her, slowly tugging at the end of the cord before it loosened willingly. He smiled at her. "What would you do without me?"

"I'm so stupid," Ronnie said. "I don't know what's wrong with me." The cancer had returned, the cold, dark bubbling spreading through her body and pooling behind her eyes. This menial failure was an attack on her entire womanhood, and she hated herself for wanting something so regular; no matter how much she tried, she could not be like all the Mrs Tays out there pleasing their men and children.

"Hey, you're not stupid. Come on." He took hold of her, and before they even noticed, Ronnie knew that Angela had been watching. She observed him stepping cleanly away from

her, one hand reaching for the arch of his ear which was budding a watermelon red, walking into the living room as though nothing had happened.

“Food will be ready in about five minutes, dear,” he said to Angela, who looked constipated. “Oh, what’s this?” Charlie’s eyes were pointed at the nondescript paper bag Ronnie had left leaning on the couch, another soundless clue. She briskly walked over to open the bag, revealing a rectangular hand wrapped gift complete with a satin bow.

“It’s for you, Angela. I hope you like it.”

Angela held the package with her arms outstretched, squinting, as if determining its value, then like a predator, started to attack the gaudy neon pink of its exterior. The sharp crisp sounds of paper ripping were akin to the muscle shredding in Ronnie’s chest. Makeshift confetti sprinkled onto the floor. What remained was a plain cardboard box, and inside, an even smaller box, the width of her two palms combined – a cotton candy square surrounded by a sea of bubble wrap (which took up more space than the actual gift). Flipped around, Angela could see through the plastic front of the package. A Polly Pocket playset, its doll housing in the shape of a heart, dipped in pastel pink.

“Say thank you, young lady,” Charlie nodded.

She was silent, gripping the box with both hands at the sides, her fingers digging little caverns in the plastic. Then, like a football, the box flew up in a diagonal, hitting the plastered wall in front of her just shy of the ceiling.

“Angela, pick up the box please.”

“I hate this.”

“Stop this nonsense. I don’t want to hear another word,” Charlie warned, aiming his weaponised finger at the girl. Ronnie tipped her head southerly, staring at the floor beneath her, trying to chew down a smile. Before her lips could wince and revel in this victory, Angela had let out a scream minced with a familiar phrase.

“Nabei!”

Coming from her pouty mouth, it sounded foreign, this wayward tourist’s attempt at a language Ronnie had mastered. Ronnie wanted to laugh, the incongruousness of a child swearing in a helium voice (in Hokkien still!) would do that to most people.

“Where did you learn such dirty language? Answer me,” Charlie said. The child still didn’t speak. Her arms were now folded, one hand lightly stroking the wisps of dandelion

hairs underneath her elbow. The deep creases of her face were finally unclenched, ironing back out into a clean, fresh sheet.

“Go to your room. You will have your dinner later.”

“But Daddy –”

“Go!”

Angela stomped into the hallway behind her, leaving tepid little tremors that bounced playfully underneath the feet of the two adults, a passing ripple on the skin that would soon fade and eventually be forgotten.

“I’ll go check on her,” Ronnie said, engaging in a half-jog, half-shuffle that feigned a sense of urgency. What would she do if she had entered Angela’s room? She didn’t have the words, nor the talent. All she knew was how to drop a vulnerable thing onto the ground and watch it bleed.

“It’s fine. You’re not her mother,” Charlie said calmly; even he knew.

Ronnie stopped and turned back to face him. He looked different now, someone taller, more whole, whose body filled the empty space between his baggy shirt, a strong gait and head held high, that could (and deserved to) walk into the arms of a still breathing wife. But his arms weren’t outstretched, they were perfectly still by his side, and once more, Ronnie stood there waiting.

* * * * *

“Bad Blood”

by John Paul Lama

It was already dark when the workers’ shift at the new construction site in the barrio ended. The workers were hungry and tired, but boisterous as they headed to the nearby carinderia. Only Anthony Santos, the youngest worker of them all, was quiet. Truth be told, he didn’t say much and kept to himself, but he did eat with the guys just to get along.

They were halfway to the carinderia, walking past a long stretch of talahib, when Anthony tensed up. “Something wrong?” one of the workers asked, noticing.

“I smell something...” he said, stopping.

“What?” the worker asked, sniffing. “I don’t smell-“

He was suddenly interrupted by a rustling in the talahib. The other workers froze too, just in time to see a figure jump out. Although humanoid in shape, its face was a monster’s, something that looked like a cross between a bat and a wolf. Its body was covered in black fur and its claws were long and sharp. It growled at them once before turning around and running away.

The construction workers were all terrified by this sight, save for Anthony, who seemed more confused than shocked. Even before the monster could run out of sight, he chased after it, only to stop when he saw the drops of blood on the grass. He looked back at where the monster came from and saw something that made his eyes widen.

“Guys,” he said. “We better call the police.”

The police arrived less than an hour later. They found the body exactly as the construction workers found it – the workers had seen enough to not touch any crime scene until the authorities arrived. It was easy enough to identify the corpse; in spite of all the slashes on the body and face, it wore an earring that only one person in the village wore. It

belonged to Alice Reyes-Climaco, the wife of Randolph Climaco, a local sari-sari store owner. What's strange though was that there was supposed to be a pair of the earrings, not just one.

They interviewed all the workers, who seemed to corroborate each other's stories that an aswang killed the woman. Only Anthony deviated, saying that they never actually saw it kill the woman and that they don't know what they saw. The workers conceded to his first claim but insisted that they saw an aswang. The police wisely decided to postpone judgment until the investigation was done.

Not so with Randolph. When the rumors hit him that his wife was dead and an aswang was responsible, he made posts on his social media page that he was offering a P100,000 prize to anyone who could capture the aswang – dead or alive. Normally, people wouldn't believe such a farfetched post, but the people in the barrio believed it, for two reasons. One, they knew that less than a month ago, Alice's uncle, Danilo Reyes, died of natural causes and left a substantial inheritance to her. Two, they knew that ten years ago, Danilo Reyes' own wife was also killed. The perpetrator was never found, let alone caught, but its MO was similar to whatever killed Alice.

As expected, many people came to the bulwagan (town hall) meeting that Randolph held two days after his wife's body was found. Most were locals who just wanted to hear if the prize was legit. Others were there to take him up on his offer. Only one was there for an entirely different reason.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have a lot to do today, a lot of calls and preparations to make, so I'll just get to the point. You read my post. I'll give P100,000 to anyone who can find and kill the aswang that killed my wife," Randolph said once everyone had gathered and quieted down.

"How can you be sure that an aswang killed her?" a young woman in the crowd asked, prompting everyone to look at her. "Has it even occurred to you that it may be something else, like an animal?"

"Who are you?" Randolph asked.

"Natalia dela Cruz, veterinarian," she answered.

"Well, no wonder you'd think it's an animal," an old man in the back said.

Natalia angrily narrowed her eyes at the old man. "And you are...?"

"Gustav de Castro," he answered. "Paranormal investigator."

There were gasps from the crowd. The man had made a name for himself on social media as a no-nonsense paranormal investigator, albeit with a little temper. Only Natalia responded with a snicker, which she held back. "You're joking," she said.

"The only joke here is your idea that it's an animal that did this," Gustav answered. "We have eyewitnesses who say they saw an aswang run away from the scene of the crime."

"The police haven't finished their investigation yet. And until then, I just think we should find out what it is before--"

"What it is? It's obvious what it is! It's a creature that can kill a woman with its claws! It's not some pet dog that licks your hand or pet cat that rubs itself against your legs! It's a monster from hell and I'm going to find it and kill it!" He then looked at Randolph and pointed a finger at him. "And when I do, I expect you to pay me P100,000 in cash!"

"Get me its corpse and I'll get you your money," Randolph said calmly.

At that point, Gustav nodded and left to the sound of the crowd's cheers and applause.

"Could you all just calm down and be reasonable?!" Natalia pleaded even as the crowd began to leave. "You can't just kill it without knowing what it is!"

"I need someone who will help me confirm if it's an aswang or not!" she said, but the crowd had already left. "Anyone?!" She dropped her arms in defeat. "Anybody?!"

"This is what happens when people encounter something they don't understand," a voice behind her said. "They become paranoid and violent. Most of them, anyway."

She turned around and saw a young man. "Hey. You're that construction worker who found the body--"

"One of the construction workers. The name's Anthony Santos."

"I'm Natalia."

"Yes, I heard."

"I'm surprised you're not jumping to conclusions like your buddies."

"I don't fall for appearances so easily."

"Then how do you explain what happened to Miss Alice?"

"I can't. It's not my job to explain it, anyway, it's the police's. But I can prove to you that aswangs don't exist."

"How?"

“Simple. But first, you’re going to have to trust me.” He extended his hand for her to shake.

She didn’t know what he meant, but she was willing to take a chance. “Well...okay,” she said, shaking his hand.

That night, the two of them went to look for the aswang, along with a few other locals who wanted the P100,000 prize. Since the place where the construction workers found Miss Alice’s body was still a sealed-off crime scene, they went to a different field of grass, far from the other locals also hunting the aswang. To attract the aswang there, they brought a bottle of pig’s blood that Anthony got for cheap at the wet market.

“I thought aswangs craved *human* blood,” Natalia said.

“Blood is blood. And it’s impossible to get any human blood without raising suspicion,” Anthony said. “Besides, if this won’t work...”

Her eyes widened upon realizing what he was thinking. “You’re using me as bait?!”

“I’m using both of us,” he corrected her. “Not that there’s anything to worry about.”

“You seem absolutely convinced that there are no aswangs.”

“It’s all thanks to science and common sense,” he said with a shrug.

“But what if there is an aswang?”

“Then I’ll make sure nothing happens to you.”

She blushed a bit. She was about to say something when she heard a rustling in the grass. “What was that?”

Instead of answering, he ran to the source of the noise, with Natalia close behind him. When she caught up with him, she saw him standing over a cowering little stray cat.

“Beat it,” he commanded after a moment’s pause. The cat ran away without so much as a meow.

“Well, you sure scared him,” she said.

“I have a way with strays. That’s why they don’t bother us at the construction site,” he said. “Aswangs, though...”

“I’m starting to think that you’re right...” she said.

“Wait,” he said, seeing something behind her. She turned to look at what he was looking at.

It was a simple rusted metal drum, tipped over on its side. They saw nothing unusual about it, except for some flies buzzing around it.

Flies? Natalia thought.

This time, the two cautiously approached it. Instead of manually handling the metal drum themselves, Anthony took a stick and used it to drag whatever was inside the drum out. What they saw shocked them both.

It was the face of the aswang, or more precisely, a full-head mask of an aswang. And there was something else.

“A costume?” she said in disbelief.

“I told you,” he said, letting out a sigh of relief.

“Why would someone pretend to be an aswang?” she asked. There was a very subtle tone of disappointment in her voice.

“I don’t know, but we can go to the police with this. Or even that crazy paranormal investigator, Gustav.”

“And what will that achieve?”

“It’ll prove that whatever did this isn’t some monster, just a murderer. That will make things easier for the police to investigate.”

“You’re right. But still, I wonder who would do this?”

Suddenly, something fell out of the mask. Natalia had no clue what it was but Anthony recognized it immediately. Instead of picking it up, though, he grabbed her by the hand and led her away.

“Where are we going?!”

“To the police. We have to tell them now.”

“Okay,” she said, letting him lead her. “But we have to tell Gustav too. I’d feel bad if he just wasted his time and made a fool of himself in a wild goose chase.”

“You’re much more compassionate than I am,” he whispered with a shake of his head.

By sheer luck, they passed by Gustav on the way to the police. Natalia told him straightforwardly that they found an aswang costume and that he was likely just wasting his time. Instead of going with them to the police, however, he snapped and headed right for Randolph’s house.

“Randolf!” Gustav said as he barged in. “I know you’re in here, you bastard!”

“What is it?!” Randolf said as he opened the door. Gustav then forced himself in and cornered Randolf.

“They found an aswang costume dumped in a metal drum not too far from here.”

“So? What does that have to do with me?” Randolf asked without skipping a beat.

“They also found your wife’s other earring in the costume. She couldn’t have put it there after she died. And the only one who could have possibly put it there accidentally or not was you.”

“You’re saying I did this.” Randolf said. It wasn’t a question.

“I know you did. I just want to know why.”

Randolf’s tone took on a darker tone. “Because I hate that bitch and this pathetic town! I want to move to the big city! That money we inherited from her uncle was our ticket out of here and she wanted to waste it on starting a family here!”

“If you want to move so badly with that money, why’d you offer it as a prize?! Why concoct this whole scheme with the aswang?!”

“I didn’t want to raise any suspicions by having her die in an ‘accident’, so I just decided to kill her and pin it on an aswang. I knew the idiots in this town would believe it since they believe her uncle’s wife was also killed by an aswang years ago. As for you...you were my alibi that I did everything I could to find the aswang. I just didn’t expect a fool like you to be this lucky.”

“Nobody makes a fool out of me!” Without warning, Gustav slammed Randolf to the wall. Randolf retaliated by kicking Gustav in the gut. The two struggled for a while until Randolf got the upper hand and knocked Gustav unconscious, inadvertently causing him to drop the gun he had. Suddenly, he heard someone walk through the door. He looked over his shoulder and saw only a figure in the dark. He didn’t see its face.

“Who are you?”

Anthony didn’t say anything. He just stepped into the light where Randolf could see him. Before taking that one step, he transformed into a real aswang. As shocking as this was, Randolf was still able to point Gustav’s gun and shoot the aswang in the chest. It didn’t die, but it was rendered unconscious.

“You know, I’m actually glad that you’re here.” Randolph gloated over the aswang’s bleeding body. “Now there’s a real aswang to blame for my wife’s death, and Gustav’s. Now I just have to get to that costume and get rid of it for good before...”

Suddenly, another aswang appeared and knocked the gun out of Randolph’s hand. It picked him up and choke-slammed him against the wall, knocking him out too. When it turned around, it saw that Anthony had transformed back into his human form.

“I thought I was alone,” Anthony said with a little smile.

The aswang incredibly transformed into Natalia, who stepped closer to him. “So, did I. That’s why when I read that post...I had to come. To find out if you were real...so I could be with you.”

The two embraced each other, in the way that two beings who had been reunited after being apart for so long would. When they let go, Natalia turned to the two other men in the room who were still unconscious. “What about them?”

“Randolph’s going to jail, and Gustav’s going to get his prize.”

She then looked at him. “What about us?”

“Well, we can’t stay here anymore. It’s hard enough for one aswang to stay here in secret, let alone two.”

“How’d you stay hidden for so long?” she asked.

“Years ago, I saved Danilo Reyes from his scheming wife. She’s just like Randolph; she wanted to kill her husband and take his money. She didn’t expect an aswang to stop her and neither did Danilo. So, out of gratitude, he made me a deal: he’d give me a job and a place to hide as long as I didn’t kill other humans.”

“She tried to kill her husband?” she asked, incredulous.

“Yes. Strange, isn’t it? Humans call us evil, yet they go about murdering their fellow humans, even their own spouses, for money. You want to know why they keep looking for monsters in the dark? So, they don’t have to take responsibility for the monsters inside them.”

“Not all of them, if you’ve survived this long,” she pointed out.

He shook his head. “I am done with them. I want to move as far and away from them as possible.”

She took his hand and squeezed it. “Wherever you’re going, I’ll be right there with you.”

* * * * *

“Through the Night, Burning”

by Kevin Browne

I remember the smell, earthy and acrid. But that wasn't the worst of it. It wasn't the dead dog in the market, either, though that may have been a hallucination. No, it was definitely the burning that was the worst.

It all started, as journeys usually do here, with a delay. We were milling around the fried chicken joint in Jogja, just waiting for the overnight bus to Denpasar. There was the usual mix of sellers of snacks and batik and cheap knick-knacks ringing the restaurant. One self-styled healer in particular caught my wife's attention. He was selling bottles of herbal tonics from Irian Jaya and Kalimantan (for “reumatik” he claimed) and various animal parts suspended in liquid, including deer fetuses from Ambon. To lend legitimacy to his scheme, he claimed to travel to the Outer Islands to obtain these items from the rainforest. As dubious as it all seemed, my wife was looking for some relief for her pain and struck up a conversation as best she could about their supposed healing benefits.

You may suspect a certain home-field advantage in this encounter, and you would be right. There is not only the usual advantage of being the holder of putative arcane and potentially valuable knowledge, inherent in medical and healing encounters of all types, but also a yawning cultural and linguistic divide between my wife and the seller. My wife had pain, and we were about to embark on an all-night bus trip, so she was susceptible to the pitch. After much back and forth, she ended up opting for an oil of some kind that the man rubbed onto the backs of her knees.

Like in most journeys, however, it is difficult to determine actual beginnings. Two days before our trip we were talking with Indonesian friends in our home, and the subject of black magic in Java and Bali came up. This discussion was unnerving to my wife and set a

context for what ensued over the next few days. To add to the unease, it was actually her back that was hurting, but the man insisted on rubbing the oil onto the back of her knees.

The dogs in Bali are not, to generalize, what you might think of as your cuddly family pets at home. Most are free-range and semi-feral; many are mangy and some have been known to carry rabies. The Bali Dog is considered by some to be its own breed, said to have evolved on the island for several thousand years. To many Balinese these dogs represent security, but like in most developing countries, the canines in Bali largely have to make a living on their own. We had never thought much, though, about what happens to them when they die.

It was supposed to be a smooth overnight trip and a vacation from our everyday urban life in Yogyakarta. It was one of the nicest inter-island buses, with air-con that actually worked and comfortable seats. The burning sensation did not start right away, and once it kicked in there was no easy remedy. It was an hour or so into the trip when it began, and grew in intensity as the journey progressed. My wife soon had the feeling of wanting to crawl out of her skin and was stuck in her seat all night.

We passed through the towns and cities of Central and East Java at night, with the deep dark of the countryside punctuated at intervals with city lights. It could have been a very pleasant experience. In the villages the Javanese have an interesting habit of squatting along the edge of the road, including this inter-city one, and socializing and smoking. The accepted rules of the road are paradoxical; the bus is both to avoid casualties in the darkness and to not slow down unless absolutely necessary. This makes for repeated close encounters. In Madiun there was an interesting-looking festival and night market stretched along the highway. The bus did not stop. No, there were scheduled rest stops and no others.

On we went through the night, past Jombang, Pasuruan, Probolinggo, and on to the ferry stop at Ketapang. The smell of the infusion lingered and wormed its way into our consciousness. The burning, though, was much worse. What do you do when you are supposed to sleep and the backs of your knees are on fire? I didn't know, and neither did my wife. No creams or palliatives of any kind were available. Just the cursing of the snake-oil seller and, by extension, the entire country, deliberately trying to hurt foreigners out of spite

and jealousy as she was convinced the man had done (or so the angry bus narrative unfolded).

There are markets and shops in Yogyakarta where a wide range of such healing concoctions are sold. Animal parts and herbal tonics for any kind of ailment, brought from all over the archipelago. For many people they are linked to pre-Islamic beliefs that endure in Java today and are reflected in diverse healing practices throughout the island. I witnessed some of these and heard about many others, including many stories of those who practice black magic for personal gain or out of jealousy. Many Javanese believe that power can be concentrated in certain people, animals, plants, and locations in the natural world. There is a time-honored practice in Java in which people seek to accrue power through spiritual practices, such as meditating in sacred or dangerous places. There is an ominous aspect to this pursuit, of course, and stories abound of people attempting such feats and not being strong enough or sufficiently prepared, leading to mental or spiritual imbalance. Entering the realm of magic and healing in Javanese culture, which we had apparently done, can be fraught with peril.

Coming by chance upon a dead dog lying unattended anywhere can be emotionally jarring. To come across one lying in the village market in Ubud, Bali, after a sleepless night of burning knees and angry rhetoric was an especially unwelcome experience. Pointing out the obvious, that there is a dead dog lying there, which elicits only a grin from the local young, male market-fringers, does not help. In fact, it raises the internal dissonance meter to a new high.

Some experiences are like doorways. My wife allowing this oil to be rubbed onto her leg seemed to have opened one of these for us. Crossing over to Bali on the ferry may have been another. The Balinese distinguish their world between that of the senses (*sekala*, or the secular world) and that which can only be felt within (*niskala*, or the world of emotions, religion and the supernatural). The indeterminate boundaries between these two worlds, the seen and the unseen, are porous and fluid. We had definitely entered a *niskala* realm, a felt realm of injury and suspicion, and it was becoming increasingly unpleasant with each passing hour.

There is a dark side to the image of Bali as the tropical paradise fantasy that so many Westerners have of the island and its culture. Tourists flock there for the beaches and perhaps to skim the surface of some local exotic “culture.” Spiritual seekers of all descriptions have long promoted an idealized version of Balinese society and religion as one of pervasive art and social harmony, without bothering to dig far beneath the surface. To the Balinese the ideal is to maintain a balance between the forces of good and evil. The necessary propitiation of both good and evil spirits and gods accounts for the endless daily and cyclical offerings and ceremonies, a burden that falls mainly to women. It is about achieving equilibrium rather than a vanquishing of evil. Occasionally the collective repressed fury explodes. Some of the worst extent of killings of suspected communists in Indonesia following the aborted 1965 coup attempt, a concerted rampage that resulted in up to a million people killed in the country, took place in Bali. Neither tourists nor the Bali Tourism Board are interested in this kind of darkness.

We were tempted to think that the effect of the oil stopped when the burning finally subsided. But the oil was a portal, we had entered a liminal zone where the boundaries were unfamiliar and fluid and the outcome uncertain. There were many experiences of wonder and beauty, of course. Walks through the countryside, seeing thousands of herons come to roost at sunset, seeing temples and dances. But we also experienced the darker side. During our first two evenings in Ubud, my wife found a metal staple in her restaurant food. It could have been lack of sleep on the bus, but the edges of perception felt fuzzy. We even questioned whether we had actually seen a dead dog in the market. Her sense of outrage when her protestations about the dog elicited merely a shrug and a grin may have seemed disproportionate on its own. She values direct and open communication. The Balinese do not. In Bali people do not readily speak about their *niskala* feelings to others. This is considered a weakness, and they tend to avoid discussions of unpleasant things or even delivering bad news. Out of necessity they carefully manage their hearts. To do otherwise makes them vulnerable to the unseen forces of evil such as jealousy and scorn, even black magic.

In the *sekala* world we would describe my wife’s reaction as typical of the second stage of culture shock, experiencing frustration and dissonance between her customary

approach to life and the radically different way in Java and Bali. In the niskala world, however, there was anger and suspicion, feelings which produced a sense of vulnerability and resentment.

In Balinese society markets are sites of power largely controlled by women, where certain activities may be safely carried out if the right balance of the forces of good and evil is maintained. The presence of a dead dog in the market space is not a welcome occurrence and would require offerings to be made. But this would not be carried out by the young men hanging out at the fringes of the market. They were not the bearers of any of this power, only lurkers on the periphery. What to us seemed like a dismissive shrug and smile may actually have been an effective management of emotion and vulnerability, albeit one that clashed with our own.

The question for us became how to find the doorway back, from moral outrage and suspicion, where so-called healers try to hurt you and dead dogs are left to lie in the baking sun, to the sekala world of rational thought and more everyday concerns. This build-up of emotion could find its outlet in different ways, but it had to go somewhere, to find a balance. Rationalized and emotionally-distanced as culture shock, it could be a learning experience. Expressed as catharsis was another route, one that my wife seemed to favor as the build-up seemed about to burst. For her the leaking out had already begun. There had to be a discharge of the accumulated energy. On our next to last day it occurred, though mercifully invisible to the nearby Balinese people, as a semi-channeled storm of grievances against our host culture. Not that she really meant it, she just needed the release. The Balinese would see this perceived loss of equanimity as dangerous, though perhaps also as a re-balancing of the endless dance between the forces of good and evil. For us, too, it allowed for the necessary transition back to equilibrium and the sekala world we were hoping to return to in Yogyakarta.

* * * * *

“An Old Vietnamese Woman”

by James Roth

All I wanted was a clean, quiet room, which is how I came to walk into the Than Binh III hotel in Hoi An, Vietnam. Hoi An is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that attracts thousands of tourists each year. The old city, on the Thu Bon River, is lined with stone warehouses, from which silks, porcelain, and spices were kept when there was an active trade with China, Japan, and India during Vietnam's pre-colonial period. Now they have been turned into coffee shops, restaurants, and souvenir hangouts. Tourists go from shop to shop, bartering with the owners for silk and jade, and then retire to have a coffee and talk about their prizes. “Isn't it beautiful?” “How much did you pay?” None of this had any appeal for me, however; I'm generally satisfied with a clean, quiet room and a decent breakfast, as I said.

I'd started my journey in Shenzhen, China, which borders Hong Kong, and had, after several weeks of travel, become weary of dark rooms with mildewy tiled bathroom walls. From this I sought a brief respite before pressing on to Saigon, my destination, and I was certain that I'd found a clean, quiet room at the Than Binh III, when I was greeted by two lovely young Vietnamese women in traditional dresses, the hems fluttering in a breeze coming in from the hot, dusty street.

One of them showed me to a room on the third floor. The bed had crisp, clean sheets, and in the bathroom fluffy white towels hung from a stainless-steel rack. I could see my reflection on the wall tile.

“Breakfast is included,” she said. Then she turned on a TV and handed me the remote. The room even had cable television, not something I was particularly interested in, but it was fascinating, how globalization had made inroads into Hoi An.

The breakfast was served on the first floor, breads and fruits and cereals and coffee, in a room near the lobby, just a few paces from a peanut-shaped pool, around which there

were deckchairs and potted plants. A waterfall spilled over a ledge into the pool. Beside the waterfall there was a mural of the sea and some mountains. Blue and yellow traditional Vietnamese fishing boats were in the foreground, and in the distance verdant green mountains.

After about my third day at the Than Binh III, I was well-rested and had become weary of hearing tourists talking of their shopping sprees; I sought some adventure. I rented a motorbike one day and headed west, toward some mountains that rose from a plain of rice fields. The sky was a deep blue, and there were some passing white clouds.

The two-lane highway that led out of Hoi Ann ran along the bank of the Thu Bon for a kilometer or two. At a wide bend in the river, a man had set up a coffee shop. Plastic tables and chairs were lined up under some trees which offered a broad canopy of shade. From them one could sit and watch fishermen in narrow wooden boats cast nets into the muddy, swiftly flowing river. It would've been a good place to pass the time, watching the fisherman while having a coffee, a more interesting experience than a walk through a UNESCO site packed with tourist shops, but I was drawn deeper into the countryside, where there were villages of blue, green, and yellow homes. Many of them were a bit run down, the masonry walls cracked, the roof tiles sprouting weeds, but they seemed to me to be a more authentic representation of Vietnam than any of the restored buildings I had seen in Hoi An.

When I came to a particularly graceful home set up on a hill, I stopped the motorbike to admire it. The naturalness of the home's setting was what I liked most. It was as if the land and the home had grown together, one complementing the other. A line of reed-thin palms, like the bars of a jail, stood between me and the home, as if offering some protection. The red tile roof had faded into a soft pastel, and the walls, a chalky kind of masonry, were painted an aquamarine green that issued an invitation of escape from the stupefying heat. None of the windows had glass; the wooden door was gray and weather beaten.

As I was admiring the home, someone stepped out of the front door. An old woman waved to me. I had no idea what she wanted, but knew I had to find out. I walked up the hill to her. The nearer I came to her the smaller she seemed. She was about the same height as the hoe she was grasping. Like her, its handle was hard and dry, cracked by the sun. She was wearing rubber sandals and a white pajama-like outfit of cotton gossamer. Her hair was gray

and held back from her face by a ragged string. Her eyes were shriveled and small, like two raisins. She was gnashing on betel nut.

She said something to me, but I had no idea what, and, seeing my confusion, she gestured toward the door of her home. I thought that she was going to offer me some tea or water, perhaps even some melon. I could feel the blistering heat on the back of my neck and forearms.

I stepped inside and was immediately struck by the room's austere dignity. Before me there was a small table, covered by red vinyl, and next to it a hardwood chair. Set on the table, as if positioned purposely for a still-life painting, was a battered thermos, a blue plastic pot, and a couple of red cups. Hanging on the wall over the table, all clustered together, there were two photographs, one of her and the other, I assumed, of her husband. There was also a certificate or diploma of some kind and a very large electric clock. The photographs had not been taken when either she or her husband were young. Both had gray hair. She had on a simple black blouse, and a necklace of what resembled pearls hung from her neck. Her husband was wearing a white shirt open at the neck. He looked a bit uncomfortable and unsure of himself. I guessed that he might have been a school teacher or government worker, because of the certificate or diploma. There were no photographs of children.

She began to mumble to herself. Betel juice seeped from a corner of her mouth. Then she began to sob. I felt that I had intruded and turned to leave, puzzled at why she had invited me into her home, but then she nudged me, pointing at the wall, and gestured that I should take a photo. I took a couple of photos, but they seemed lifeless without her in them. I put a hand on one of her bony shoulders, to try and position her in a photo, but she covered her face and would have none of that and pulled away from me.

Once again, I turned to leave, but she began to wail and blocked the door, thrusting out a brown, sunbaked hand. Now, at least, things were clear. I gave her some money. She demanded more. I don't know how much I ended up giving her, maybe the same amount as a night's stay at the Thanh Binh III, and then she allowed me to leave.

I returned to the motorbike and headed back to Hoi An. I was a little bitter for a while. She seemed to me like a spider waiting for a fly to become ensnared in her web. And then I began to pity her, and thought, well, what's a few dollars to me, when she's living alone as a

widow, tending a garden to get by? This experience was what I'd wanted, I had to admit to myself.

When I came to the coffee shop on the bank of the river I stopped and found a chair in the shade of a large tree and had an iced coffee and watched the fishermen, who were still hard at work. A Vietnamese iced coffee requires patience. A stainless-steel strainer is placed over a glass. Hot water is poured into the strainer which contains the coffee, and the coffee, as black as tar, drips into the glass. At the end of the process, the coffee is poured over a glass of ice. All this, too, was more authentic than anything I'd experienced in Hoi An.

Sipping the coffee, I continued to watch the fishermen cast their nets and draw them in against the strong current. I was hoping that the fishermen would haul in a net full of fish, but they just kept on casting them into the river and pulling them in empty in the enveloping dusk of another day.

* * * * *

“Last Journey”

by Anitha Devi Pillai

When it's time, my love,
fill my room, with roses and lilies.

They give some a headache, I am told.
Not me. So, fill my room to its brim
and then stuff in baby jasmine too
in the crevices of the box-home, they will put me in.

Don't let them pile my home with
new cloth nor sarees that the relatives will bring.
I swear, those will suffocate me – it's a just a ritual.

And of the people who may come,
if they were not part of our lives while I was living
make them no part of my last journey.

Tell no one, my love. Absence is not often noticed.
Silence never gets the center seat – only chaos does.
So, make no noise. Hurry me along –
without any prying eyes, incense burning
nor meaningless chatter surrounding.

I swear it's just a social gathering – a solemn one, at most.
So, tell no one.

Just sit in silence one last time – will you please?

And hold my hand as I sleep.

I could never sleep on most days.

Turn your head away when the fire drowns me, my love.

What is left is not me – *not us*. What is left, is a shell.

Waste not on rituals and small talk

nor take heed in their fake tears.

It is not me they cry for, *nor you*.

It's for them – for their own last journey

that lurks around the corner.

* * * * *

“Monsoon Season, Phnom Penh”

by Richard Rose

Percussive spears of rain bounce high and roll across the red, tin roof,
an urgent parradiddle-rattle opposite the window where I sit.
This in turn is overpowered by the rumbling rage of thunder,
that grumbles angry overhead and shakes the room around me.
Steam billows from the tarmac, whirling upwards on the cloying air
as limbs of trees convulse and urge away their dripping loads.
Bamboos tick and clatter their convulsive dances in the wind
while wettened palm barks shine, their lush fronds deluge weighted.
A heavy, purple-mourning sky looms heavy on the city,
where cascades over awnings define safe pedestrian routes.
And in the streets the children carry shoes above their heads
as half-calf deep they rush for home and push against a flowing tide.
Leaf choked drains surrender; their hoped-for task proved helpless,
and women curse umbrellas, so pathetic against the torrent.
Safely seated in this room, I shelter and draw breath,
thankful for cooler air I know will follow this savage storm.

* * * * *

“Liar, Lies, Love”

by Amizura Hanadi Mohd Radzi

The relationship
Was like an indistinct chatter
A brief window of passionate love
Short-lived, laced with broken promises
Never ending flow of tears
Of waiting in vain
Restful sleep became absent
Replaced by anxious nightmares
The word ‘soon’ was loathed and shunned
Because ‘soon’ never came
As time passed, a cut turned to a scar
Fading quickly and evolving into a memory
Of a distant past.

* * * * *

“The Subtle Art of Belonging”

by Christa Walker

it started in the bathtub
skin burning angry
the vicious attention
of my washcloth

trying to
scrub
off my brown

to be white
like them
in Wyoming

they called me Nigger

on the playground

at Greybull Elementary
they didn't know
Nip was the correct name
Nigger meant other
Nigger meant you can't play with us
so I scrubbed myself red
learning early I was dirty

* * * * *

“To Revive”

by Eaint Noe

I used to walk with my friends down the path, hand in hand.
I remember, us running around the field in a red jersey,
And the times we merrily danced on stage.
I may have also glanced at he who stood across the room,
Struck by Cupid’s arrow of love, his smiles like kryptonite.

But, in the blink of an eye, I heard the sound of the footsteps fade away.
The daisies, yellow tulips and hydrangeas
Which were then blooming in the base of my heart
Now wither, only the gloomy clouds looming around.

Every morning, I refuse to wake up from my sleep.
Because when I do, I’ll be standing on other edge of the cliff,
Out of reach from everyone, my walls built up high.

Looking at others glow in lilac flames, I desperately wait for my turn.
I was green with envy, watching them find their light.
Until I saw the fireflies, one at a time
How those little ones flickered, brighter altogether.

These days, the little things have caught my attention.
How my mother smiles at me when I say her food was delicious,
How silly my friends looked when they tried out new filters during our calls,
How my cat waits for me to wipe dirt off his fur after playing,

Or just how the sound of the rain heals my soul.

I realized I was alright, even without him,

Because I have everything else that makes me just as happy.

Now, on the blank canvas I see, a rose garden free of thorns.