

Anak Sastra, Issue 12

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[Elaine Barnard](#)'s stories have won awards and been published in several literary journals, including *Pearl*, *Southword*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Writers' Forum*, and *Timber Creek Review*. In 2010 she was a finalist for a Best of the Net Award. She holds an MFA from the University of California at Irvine.

[Hardy Jones](#) is an associate professor of English and the director of Creative Writing at Cameron University. His novel *Every Bitter Thing* was released in 2010 and his short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in the following anthologies: *Dogzplot Flash Fiction Anthology*, *The Best of Clapboard House Literary Journal Anthology*, and *Southern Gothic*. In September 2006, he was awarded a research grant for which he interviewed members of Lanexang Village, a Laotian community in southwest Louisiana created in the 1980s by political refugees, about their traditional New Year's celebration Songkran. He splits his time between Lawton, Oklahoma, and Sisaket, Thailand, and blogs [here](#).

Billy T. Antonio was born in San Carlos City, Pangasinan, Philippines, and is a graduate student at the Urdaneta City University. He served as a fellow for fiction at the 44th U.P. National Writers Summer Workshop in Baguio City and had his short story, "The Kite," broadcast on 4EB-FM, 98.1, Brisbane, Australia. His haiku poems have been named among

the best haiku of the 1st International Wilderness Haiku Contest of 2011 by the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and given honorable mention in the 13th Annual Mainichi Haiku Contest (International Category) in 2009. He has contributed fiction and poetry to the *New Mexico Wilderness Alliance Wild Guide 2011*, *Philippines Free Press*, *Philippine Graphic*, *Ani 33*, *Liwayway*, *Sirmata*, *Tinig*, and the *Literary Apprentice*.

Gerard Sarnat is the author of two critically acclaimed poetry collections, 2010's [*Homeless Chronicles: From Abraham to Burning Man*](#) and 2012's [*Disputes*](#). His poetry and short stories have been published in over 60 journals and anthologies. Harvard and Stanford educated, Gerry's a physician who has set up and staffed clinics for Viet Nam immigrants to California.

Chang Shih Yen is a writer from East Malaysia. She graduated with first-class honors in English and linguistics, and with a master's degree in linguistics from the University of Otago in New Zealand. Shih Yen also writes a [blog](#) about footwear.

Elaine Chiew lives in London. Her fiction has won the 2008 Bridport Short Story Competition; was shortlisted for the 2012 Fish Short Story Prize; won the 2010 Bridge-the-Gap Camera Obscura flash fiction competition; was selected as Top 10 in the 2006 storySouth's Million Writers Award and the 2008 Per Contra Short Story Competition; was nominated and selected for the 2010 and 2008 Best of the Web Series by Dzanc Books, respectively, and the 2008 Wigleaf Top 50 Microfiction; and was Top 25 in the 2005 Glimmer Train Emerging Writers' Competition. Her stories can also be found in *Metazen*, *African Writing Online*, *Front Porch Journal*, *Alimentum*, *Pedestal*, *Storyglossia*, *Juked*, and *One World Anthology* (New Internationalist, 2009), among others. She also write a "food and fiction" [blog](#).

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July 2013 featured author interview with Elaine Barnard

Q. What motivates you to write? What do you hope to convey through your writing?

An emotional response to a situation or person, a feeling that I must write about this, that I can't let it go. The human situation is mysterious and surprising and so very poignant.

Q. Talk a little bit about your writing process. Do have any unusual writing habits?

I try to write every morning when my mind is fresh. It has become a necessary habit. Without the habit I feel a vacuum inside.

Q. In addition to your writing, you have worked as an educator and as an actor. How does your background in theater and the performing arts influence your writing?

My background as an actor has helped enormously as I find it so pleasurable to slip into another person's point of view or consciousness which is what an actor does.

Q. Your short stories have won awards, you have had your plays produced over the period of several decades, and you have held residencies at numerous writer retreats and artist colonies. Which type of writing medium do you most enjoy and why?

At different stages of my life I have enjoyed different mediums. Initially, I wrote only plays, which was a natural medium for an actor. I also wrote several novels. After my husband's death, I switched to short stories. Currently I'm working on a collection of short stories and a revision of a novel.

Q. What is your most vivid memory about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia?

My most vivid memory was probably expressed in my short story, "Water," which was published in *Apple Valley Review* and was runner-up for Best of the Net in 2010.

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"Hanoi Hangout"

Don't try to find us. We're not your usual gym. There are no neon lights, no windows revealing the rusty equipment, broken stair climbers and sagging bikes. No air-conditioning either even though Hanoi is blistering, trees drooping, bushes begging for water. It'll soon come, I think. Soon the monsoons will hit us. Our streets will flood, bicycles collide, trishaws skid to a stop, their occupants drenched.

Today heat sits like a mantle on the city, unmoving, uncaring for the comfort of its population. But still I love it and would not wish to live anywhere else. I'm intoxicated by the smell of frying bananas, sweet pineapple, roasting peanuts, and coffee. If I could have breakfast all day I would. Who needs anything more than a demitasse of rich French espresso accompanied by a fresh baguette? On Sunday I'll indulge this fantasy. Today, I must restrict myself to the energy drinks we sell here, the vitamin rich

formulae we market, proclaiming their beneficial effects even though we've yet to see any amazing results. I've been drinking them since I was hired, mostly because they're free for employees. And I can't resist anything free. Neither can anyone else in Hanoi. We're a city of beggars, of pretenders. Just look at my shoes. Adidas, yes? No, they're not Adidas; they're pretend Adidas. Knockoffs. Do you think with my non-existent salary I could afford the real thing?

I call myself a personal trainer; it's impressive. In truth, I'm training only myself. None of our clients can afford a personal trainer; most of them don't even know what that is. They were trained in the streets avoiding cars and motorcycles. They learned how to jump, to swing over a fence with a stolen watermelon tucked beneath an elbow. Their personal training was natural, part of daily life in a city where the traffic never slows for a pedestrian.

It's still early. I've been up since 5a.m., when we open to accommodate office workers, paper shufflers trying to maintain a minimum of muscle to impress their girlfriends. I'll be here until 10 p.m. when we close for the night.

When I arrive, I open all the windows to catch any breeze that might sneak through the alley. We're secluded in an old courtyard filled with forgotten newspapers and yesterday's trash. Our building is ripe for condemnation. The walls are crumbling, the stairway to the fourth floor where the weight machines are, unsteady. I warn people to be careful climbing, to cling to the banister in case the steps should collapse. It's possible that at one time this building was a residence for dignitaries. At least that's what I prefer to think. It's in the heart of Hanoi. What could be better? There are traces of grandeur, a sculpted stairwell here, an engraved tile there. I've tried to obtain the history of this building, but no one has any knowledge. Perhaps that's just as well. It makes living in its remains easier, opens its former splendor to the imagination.

The third floor is reserved for aerobics, the lower two for offices and restrooms. The women will soon arrive clad in their skimpy outfits revealing every imperfection. They're so unlike their mothers, shrouded in long skirts and sun hats.

“Good morning, ladies,” I smile as they trudge up to the third floor, while I blast a Michael Jackson CD to get their blood pumping. I shout over the lyrics. I love to shout, it’s exhilarating. The women respond, breathing in time to the music, their flesh jiggling inside their leotards. “That’s it,” I yell, “that’s it. C’mon now, let’s go. One-two-three-four.” We jump Jacks, swing our legs, grind our buttocks, twirl and whirl for an hour. They’re sweating, heaving, some sink to the floor to recover. And then I sell them bottled water with French labels, energy drinks from America, and Nestle’s chocolate. I make a small commission on each item. Sometimes it’s enough to buy a kite for my brother. My brother is two years older than I but has the mentality of a child. “It was a punishment,” Ma said because he was born out of wedlock. So was I for that matter. But Ma claimed she’d been punished enough and that’s why the gods allowed me to be normal.

Flying kites is my brother’s only pleasure. I choose kites that are especially colorful with designs that delight him, dragons and monsters, spiders erupting from the sky.... We fly them on Sundays when the gym is closed. Ma climbs with us to the rooftop. She brings a picnic basket so we can pretend we’re somewhere else, an imperial park maybe or the beautiful beaches we’d seen on television. Ma seems happy then. Her face glows with pleasure as she feeds my brother spiced tofu on rice, a Sunday favorite. My mother is still in her prime, still able to bear more children, that’s why it’s my duty to protect her, guard her against the unwanted advances of adventurers. There are many such men in this city. And vulnerable women like my mother are a prime target. Offer them a new dress or shoes for their kids and they succumb.

It's early afternoon now, a quiet time. The ladies have left for lunch. Only a few hangers-on remain, the ones who watch TV all day instead of exercising. They buy a year's pass, which entitles them to sit and chat as if this were some kind of country club. I don't discourage this, as they purchase energy drinks for their energy-less existence. They love to watch melodramas, the fantasy lives of those richer and more glamorous than themselves. Perhaps we all live in a fantasy world here, imagining our bodies growing stronger and more flexible when there is little evidence that this is so.

I'm wearing clean white shorts today. Ma laundered them over the weekend. My t-shirt reads HANOI HANGOUT in large black letters so no one can miss them as I bicycle to work, avoiding the main thoroughfares, preferring the back alleys where women hang clothes to dry, calling to each other as if telephones were non-existent, as if this were a medieval city, a relic of forgotten history. I try to dodge the drips from socks and sweaters, jeans and jackets, sometimes arriving at my destination with damp hair and soggy socks. But still I prefer the safety of the alleys to the bedlam beyond.

Across the steaming courtyard I view the temple. It must be cool in the interior. I'd love to be there right now, kneeling at the foot of the Golden Buddha. I'd stay there until nightfall, until the lights of the city blazed my way home. I'd sleep on the roof watching the stars retreat behind a cloud, waiting for the monsoon rains to cool me.

Suddenly, from the corner of the courtyard, I see them approaching, one very tall boy and two girls, all of them pale, white as the flour in my mother's cupboard. I wonder what they're doing here, these interlopers dressed in smart running shoes with American labels, Nike and New Balance. The girls have hair the shade of sunshine with frosted lips

and eyes like amethysts. I could fall in love with these girls if the boy were not so present, so large, like an overgrown palm tree making me feel small and insignificant. I hear them enter, climb the rickety stairs remarking on its irregularity in American English, nasal and flat as the rice pancakes Ma fried for breakfast, peanut oil oozing from the edges.

I say nothing, wait for them to greet me, to offer some dong for admission. But they only proceed to the machines, taking over the gym as if it were their own. Their bodies are sculpted and lean. Obviously they've been working out in the incredible athletic clubs in the U.S.A. I've seen them advertised in magazines, sterile and sleek as their inhabitants.

They seem oblivious of me as if I'm merely another piece of deteriorating equipment. Their confidence is intimidating, so I hang with the hangers-on and observe them, waiting for them to complete their workout before I approach with the bill for use of this facility. The girls spend a full hour on the treadmill, keeping time to the music on their headphones. The boy is absorbed by the weights, puffing as he heaves ever heavier barbells, admiring himself in the full length mirror. I envy his muscles as they bulge from his red t-shirt, LA FITNESS emblazoned on his chest. No matter how much I exercise my muscles remain diminutive, like crab apples rather than the full ripe ones they sell in the markets, wrapped in plastic, imported from the States.

I surf the channels to find a station I enjoy while I wait for them to finish. Gradually I become mesmerized by a rerun of "Orange County." Perhaps that's where these kids are from. They resemble the mannequin features of the stars, their botoxed beauty.

The afternoon wears on and still they're here. I begin to drowse, am startled awake by a commercial and drowse again only to hear their voices in the courtyard. For a moment I think I must be dreaming, that someone switched channels on the television. But

no, it's them, loud and clear. I rush to the stairwell and shout for them to stop, jumping the rickety flights as if my legs were elastic. At last I'm in the courtyard. I shout again. They start to run, heading for the archway leading to the street. I must catch them before they head into the traffic. The smaller girl trips on a loose brick and turns, her face flushed as a child's caught stealing a cookie. I help her up as the others escape into bedlam. "Six thousand dong," I say.

"Each?" She brushes her knees. They're scraped and bloody.

"Each." I command.

She searches her pockets. I light the butt of an old cigarette I found in the courtyard to impress her with my importance.

"My friends," she pleads. "I must catch up, I—"

"I could call the police. I could have you jailed. You wouldn't like it. Our jails are unpleasant, no television or air conditioning like in the States."

Tears form in her eyes. She is so lovely, like a forgotten goddess in a desecrated temple.

"If I give you eighteen thousand dong I'll not have enough for a cab home."

"I'll ride you there on my bicycle."

"That's dangerous."

"I'll be cautious."

"One of my friends broke her arm on a bike."

"She must have been with an idiot." I stamp the butt beneath my feet.

“Eighteen thousand I insist although I no longer feel like insisting. I would rather carry her upstairs, clean her wounds with antiseptic, dress the scrapes and bruises, bandage them with care and kiss them....

* * * * *

"Grandmother's Coconut Tree"

After Mother died, women flirted with Father, but he was faithful to Mother's memory. He always told us: "Other women wouldn't love you like their children."

The summer when I was nine years old Grandmother, Mother's mom, decided to divide her land among her kids. But Grandmother didn't ask Father to join them.

After Grandmother divided her land among my aunts and uncles, she called my oldest brother, Pi Sombat, to see her. I didn't understand why she wanted to talk to my oldest brother instead of Father, so I ran to him: "I see Grandmother called Pi Sombat to her house. Can I go with him?"

"You may, but be polite to your grandmother."

When I entered her house I saw Pi Sombat sitting quietly next to her. I sat next to him.

"Grandmother, did you go to the jungle today?" I asked.

She loved to go to the jungle to kill the wild animals and pick wild plants. She didn't like to go to the temple to do good works like Father.

"Not today. Go play downstairs with your cousins."

An hour later I saw Pi Sombat walk back to our house. He didn't smile at me. I stood to run to him, but he held up his hand and his face looked so serious, so hurt, that I stopped.

I continued playing with my doll—an empty fish sauce bottle. In the evening Father called me home for dinner.

After dinner Father sat down and chewed areca and betel nut. I sat next to Father and played with my doll; Pi Sombat sat across from Father.

“Father,” Pi Sombat said, “today Grandmother told me about her land that she divided among our aunts and uncles. She told me that she didn’t have anything to give to us except for a coconut tree. She said that to be nice to our mother’s spirit, she had to give us something.”

Father listened quietly and looked at the mango tree outside blowing slowly in the wind. He took a long breath before speaking. “Son, don’t accept the coconut tree.”

“But I don’t understand. Why didn’t grandmother give us some land?” I said.

“Even though we didn’t get anything from her, don’t be angry at your grandmother’s decision. Forgive her.”

I always obeyed Father, but this time I could not.

Fifteen years later and Father has been dead for six years. Pi Sombat and I have a good life because we always do good work for our parents’ spirits. Grandmother lost the use of her legs, though the doctor could not explain why, and she lived with her youngest son; the coconut tree that she had offered us grew tall in his yard.

I worked in Bangkok, and one day I received I call from Pi Sombat in our hometown on the Thai-Cambodian border saying that Grandmother wanted to see me.

My aunts and uncles sat quietly in the room around Grandmother. When I entered she cried and crawled toward me. I should have gone to her; she looked so pitiful on the floor. But I was not moved.

“You are the baby child of my eldest daughter. I am sorry I never loved you. Please forgive me.”

When she touched my face, I heard Father's words...*Forgive her.*

“When I was a little girl, I couldn't. But now, Grandmother, I forgive you.”

I walked outside, stared at Grandmother's coconut tree, and cried for her spirit.

* * * * *

"Fever"

I felt a stinging pain in my head when I tossed in bed. *Is it already dawn?* Forcing my still-shut eyes to open wide enough without straining them too much, I managed to glance round the room then at the window. It was still dark. It's probably four o'clock, I thought. I pulled the blanket over my body. It was cold. Realizing at that very moment that it was raining, I finally put the blanket over my head without even bothering to open my eyes anymore. I turned to my left with the intention of going back to sleep when I noticed that Rowena was not beside me. *Why is she up this early?* She was not a typical early riser.

She must be in the toilet. It had seemed the most likely reason why she was up this early. Suddenly, I heard the door open.

"Ben," It was Rowena. "Are you already awake? You're late for work."

"What time is it?" I asked sleepily.

"Fifteen past seven."

"But it's still dark," I said.

I pulled the blanket down, exposing my chin, just enough for me to see Rowena already dressed and combing her wet black hair. I looked at the wall clock. It was a square clock with gold and burgundy checkered encasement. Eighteen past seven. I will be late no doubt about that. I felt the stinging pain in my head again.

"Mrs. Hidalgo will not be happy if she finds out your late again," she remarked.

“I’m not going to meet my class today. I don’t feel good.” I replied weakly. “It must be the weather.”

After putting her hairbrush in her brown shoulder bag, Rowena walked toward me, and I felt her hand softly on my forehead.

“You have fever,” she said, her voice full of concern. “I’ll get something for you to get rid of it.”

The door closed after her.

So it was a fever. From the door my attention went to the window. It was dark outside. The wind was blowing hard for it made harsh whooshing sounds. *Did it rain the whole night? Was there a storm coming?*

Finally, Rowena entered the room carrying a tray. She put the tray on the table next to our bed. A plate of steaming rice, fried egg, and a hotdog with a glass of water.

“You’ve got to eat breakfast first before you can take any medicine,” she said.

I got up with much effort, but I managed to sit on the monobloc chair. I felt the stinging pain in my head. I tried to ignore it and began to eat.

“After eating, you can take your medicine,” Rowena said. “Then rest.”

“I heard a storm’s coming.” I nodded. *It will be a gloomy day.* And my fever would made the storm even worse.

“I have to go,” she said. She took her shoulder bag and gave me a light kiss on the cheek.

Classes might have already been suspended in the public schools, but I knew classes were going on in the Montessori school where I teach because the school directress, a stern

and strict old woman in her early 40's, doesn't just suspend classes. If pupils come, we have to teach them. My pupils might be wondering if I shall be in school on time.

After a few more spoonfuls of rice, the door jerked open; my attention fell upon my mother-in-law who entered the room.

"Here's your medicine, son," she said.

"Thanks, mother," I said.

"Are you through eating?"

"Yes. Has Rowena left?"

"Yes," she said as she took the tray.

I took the paracetamol, drank the water, and handed her the empty glass. She told me to rest as much as possible before she left the room.

I got up, shut the door, and slowly went back to bed. I put a pillow behind my back and tried to get as comfortable as possible. I glanced out the window. Seeing the crisscrossing rain and the violently swaying bamboo consistently being battered by the storm, I sulked.

I was alone now. Rowena would not be back until thirty past eleven, and it's ten to eight. I took *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* from the bookends on the table next to our bed and began to leaf through the yellowing pages. If Rowena was here, she would have probably snatched this book from me. I thought she knew about my habit of reading books. I am a bookworm, or in Rowena's words, a "book addict".

I could not recall how many times she had told me she was jealous of my books as if these were pretty women with whistle-bait figures. But mind you, she didn't hate the books. It was the chronic unawareness and inattentiveness that I exhibited that she hated

every time my nose was in a particular book. Her frequent litany was “You don’t have enough time for me anymore! Or is it because I’ve grown fat?” The latter bothered her so much. She used to be slender five years earlier when we were still boyfriend and girlfriend. Five years. That might have been the reason that prompted her to ask me that question-most-of-them-women-can’t-wait-for-us-men-to-answer-at-once a year ago. Maybe.

Scanning the pages further, a line caught my attention.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

My eyes shifted from the first line to the poet’s name below it. Gerard Manley Hopkins. The poet who was a priest or was it the priest that was a poet? I tried to think, but I was unable to because my aching head had become more painful all of a sudden. I put the book down.

I looked out the window. It had grown darker outside. The rain continuously poured down heavily, and the wind swooshed and whooshed with all its might like a native gone amok.

I glimpsed at the clock. It was thirty past eight. When will she be here? I knew I was tired of inactivity. It was the time in between the expectant and the expected I knew I couldn’t control. I was restless. And even worse, the cruel pain in my head I am feeling had grown unbearable. Although it was cold, heat came out of my eyes making way for tears to fall. I knew my fever was taking its toll.

I straightened out on my back, but I knew I could never go to sleep so there was no use forcing myself to. I just lay still.

I could not determine how long I had lain. *Had I fallen asleep?* I noticed the strong winds had slackened: the raging rain had weakened to a casual steady pace. The house was quiet. All I heard was the sound of raindrops on the galvanized iron roof. Pit, pat, pit, pat. I listened. And before I knew it, the rain had swayed me to join in its lively chorus. Pit, pat, pit, pat. The rhythm. *The rain.* I felt a certain lightness of spirit surging through every vein in my body while I lent my ears to the song the rain made as if a resurgent spirituality had given me the assurances I needed. I felt calm inside. Hopkins's line ran through my mind: *charged with the grandeur of God.* I was engrossed with the rain, but I thought I heard footsteps coming. The door opened.

"How are you feeling?" Rowena asked.

"I guess I'm okay now," I said.

She sat down next to me, and I felt her soft hand on my neck. "I think you're okay now," she said quietly, "and to think I was so worried about you not having anyone to talk to."

"No need for you to worry," I assured her and smiled.

She smiled back with the sweetest smile I had ever seen before. I had never seen it because I had never bothered to stop and see the moment.

I looked at the clock. It was twelve o'clock.

* * * * *

"Dreaming Vessel"

(Inspired by aboriginal artist Ngarra's exhibit in Singapore's Fullerton Hotel, May 13, 2013)

Tuckered forbears dry as leaves
try to steal my spirit. Bat
dream, spear dream,

open fire billy-
can rubbish, bastards'
big trouble. Sugar bag,

swollen river, water-washed
rocks. Milk sky, foot-walk
round her black fellas.

"Bali Ha'i"

I am not a show tune from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*.
Dressed in my *udeng* and *sarong*, it's all about Bali mellowness
except for the Denpasar custom's sign: DRUGS WILL BE EXECUTED.

My all-time unique-est experience ever was when our mellow
yellow taxi driver zoomed passed a still mellower police car.

Full moon ceremony next door, dancing and singing, fires all night --
is it their drums or hum of our overhead fan that keeps me awake?
When my wife can't sleep, over early breakfast we compare the same dream.

* * * * *

"My Travelling Pants"

In Malaysia, I bought a pair of jeans. In a Levi's store in the old wing of 1Utama shopping mall, I tried on a pair of bold curve, boot-cut jeans. It fit me like a second skin, hugging my hips, loving my curves. Perfect fit, flattering cut, comfortable and durable--the perfect pair of pants for travelling. I paid over RM200 for my travelling pants, and I walked out of the shop with the jeans neatly folded inside a paper bag.

That night I took my new jeans out of the paper bag and unfolded them. A beautiful pair of jeans in boot-cut dark blue denim. Its button shone under the electric light. I cut off all the tags, and I wore my new pants without even washing them first. I wore my brand new jeans onto the sky bridge that linked, like Siamese twins, the Petronas Twin Towers, the tallest twin buildings in the world. I looked out over the lights of KL city, with all its buildings and roads and traffic, and the view was awesome.

In Thailand, I got a stain on the right thigh of my jeans. I was eating pla saam rod, a sweet, sour and spicy fish dish at one of the many roadside stalls in Bangkok when some sauce fell from my spoon onto my jeans. I didn't notice it, so I didn't try and get the stain out. The red, orange, and oily sauce caked and dried on my jeans.

24 hours after that dinner, stains weren't my biggest problem any longer. Feeling a bit queasy, I ran to the bathroom and threw up a brown mess into the toilet bowl. Later, another brown mess came out the other end. The next two days were spent alternately kneeling by or sitting on the toilet, spewing vomit and watery brown diarrhea into the white toilet bowl.

The next few days, I was doped up on Metoclopramide and Loperamide, prescribed by a Thai doctor whose English I barely understood. On the fourth day, pale, weak and dehydrated, I finally left Thailand. Food poisoning in Bangkok was no fun; the only bright side was that it made me lose weight. My stomach was flat and my stained jeans felt loose on my waist.

In Brunei, on the island of Borneo, I ripped my jeans on the left knee. I went for a ride on a long boat along the Temburong River. I thought it was just going to be a boat ride, but the boat stopped and we all got out to go jungle trekking. I slipped on the mud by the river bank and fell, ripping the left knee of my jeans on fallen tree branches and a sharp rock on the ground.

It was worth it though. On that trip, I saw the elusive proboscis monkey sitting in a tree. The locals call the monkey *orang Belanda* or Dutchman. The poor Dutch people--a monkey with a big nose and a pot belly bears their name. I also saw a *burung kenyalang*, a rhinoceros hornbill in the jungles of Borneo. The hornbill is a majestic bird with black and white tail feathers and a big yellow bill that curves upwards like a crown on its head.

From Brunei I travelled overland, crossing the border into East Malaysia. In Miri, Sarawak, I wore my stained, ripped jeans to an evening barbecue, thinking jeans would protect me from mosquitoes. I was wrong. I made the mistake of wearing sandals with my jeans. The Asian tiger mosquito feasted on my feet. It felt as if a hundred needles were poking me like I was a pin cushion. Because the bottoms of my jeans were flared, the black-and-white striped mosquitoes flew up under my jeans, biting my lower legs and ankles and also my left knee where my jeans were ripped. I was bitten on my arms as well. After the barbecue, my feet, ankles and left knee were a mess of red, bumpy, itchy mosquito bites.

I scratched and scratched the bites. Two days later, the itchiness wasn't my main problem anymore as a high fever raged through my body. While sucking on my blood, the *Aedes albopictus* mosquitoes had infected me with Chikungunya fever. On my bed I lay, barely conscious, sometimes cold and shivering from the fever, then alternately hot and sweating. My sweat stained the inside waistband of my jeans.

It took months to recover from Chikungunya. I lay in bed a lot of the time, hardly able to move as the virus ravaged my body, making all my joints ache. I felt like I had been hit by a bus, as if I was a young person trapped in the body of an 80-year-old woman with terrible arthritis. Many months later when my joints no longer felt like they were pieces of broken glass grinding together, I picked up my stained, ripped jeans, brushed off the thin layer of dust on them, and I was on my way again.

In Singapore, my jeans came off second best when they came up against an MRT train. I was running in the underground station to catch an MRT to Chinatown. I just made it inside the crowded train, but the doors of the train slammed shut and caught the flared bottom of my jeans. The right hem of my jeans frayed when the sliding doors of the MRT train shut on it.

When I got to Singapore's Chinatown, I went to the historic Buddha Tooth Relic Temple. Inside the temple, it was all red and gold. Fresh flowers, smoke and incense perfumed the air. I wanted to pray, but it was so full of tourists that it was hard to get into the right peaceful and quiet frame of mind for prayer. I took off my sneakers and knelt on the floor to try and pray, but it was too noisy and crowded, and people kept stepping on the frayed hem of my flared jeans.

In Bali, Indonesia, I tore the back pocket of my jeans. I also learnt that stiletto heels, alcohol, and potholes do not make for a good mix. After a night out club hopping in Bali, I found myself walking alone along congested Jalan Legian. That road was always choked

with traffic and pedestrians all hours of the day and night. Being slightly tipsy, the sharp heel of my stiletto caught a pothole, and I fell on my bottom. The jeans cushioned my fall, but my left back pocket tore on the gravel.

I have come full circle, and I found myself back where I had started, once again in Malaysia, where I had first bought my travelling pants. I noticed for the first time that the crotch area of my jeans was getting faded, frayed, and worn. Maybe it was from all the travelling and walking

I had done. In Malaysia, I was refused entry into the Genting Casino, not because I didn't have the proper ID on me, but because of my jeans. I looked down at my stained, ripped, frayed, torn jeans, and I guess that was fair. My jeans could no longer be considered smart casual attire.

In Sarawak, East Malaysia, I lost my heart (and my jeans) to a tall, handsome Iban stranger. I met him while taking an express boat on the Rajang River, and I went with him back to his longhouse by the river. I've been at the longhouse a while now, and I think my jeans have shrunk because they feel tighter. Maybe washing my jeans in the river and drying them out in the hot tropical sun shrank them. Or maybe I've put on weight, but surely the Iban food I've been eating can't be fattening.

How fattening can fish, chicken cooked in bamboo or midin forest ferns be?

My Iban warrior has dark brown eyes, the color of dark chocolate. He has traditional Iban tattoos on his shoulders. He has the traditional tattoo of a *bunga terung*, a flower on each shoulder. Both tattoos have been painfully, painstakingly hand-tapped just under his collarbone on both sides. He got these tattoos when he became a man, and they protect him on his journeys away from home. On his fair skin, I traced with my finger the spiral in the centre of his flower tattoo. As I lay in bed on the floor of the longhouse with my Iban warrior, I saw my faded, frayed, flared jeans a crumpled heap on the floor. My jeans were slightly shrunken, torn, ripped, and stained--its cotton threads barely holding together after so much travel. I thought to myself that it might be time to buy a new pair of travelling pants.

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"Night Ranger"

There is a bend at the foot of Bukit Mawar, this hill that the villagers have taken to calling Bukit Maut – death hill – after the highway is built. Some evenings, after the *azan*, the clang and rattle of yet another crash travel up the length of the hill and down, with a sepulchral echo that makes my mother look up from her knitting with hardened eyes.

Tonight, I've timed myself to twenty minutes max, five minutes to cross Mak Sena's coconut grove, the wild grass and pinching brush, then a quick lope down ten meters of asphalt and fifteen minutes to do the rest. I've wrestled between poverty and fear; I've no choice. I give myself a nickname: Night Ranger, in awe of Lone Ranger, and life is a cowboy adventure. I've chosen my instruments with care: a butcher's knife and a pair of sharp shears, a torch, a black T-shirt over my head with slits for eyes.

I won't linger. I won't choose pieces that are slippery with blood or have engravings (those will be hard to pawn to Muthusamy who doesn't want his hands tainted). I won't look at them with the open eyes and garish maws.

I'm no dreamer. I don't believe any of the local-boy-made-good stories I hear. These young able men return to Bukit Mawar with the used Rolex, the beat-up Mercedes, and the scuffed gold signet ring. They've escaped our small town with the few poorly shingled shops and *papan* shutters, fat bunches of hanging bananas attracting nothing but flies. They've escaped the lone factory making motorcycle spare parts, men burnishing metal in masks like aliens, others of us scrounging around for twisted scraps to salvage for a few ringgit.

But I can see through their thin shreds of patched-up facts, detect the shifty tired gaze, the yellow pallor of the malnourished, the stealthy odor of nights camped out in urine-seeped corridors, shooting up until the drug lords come calling.

It's not my fault that a road sign misplaced by 400 yards creates an opportunity. Those careening into the bend of Bukit Mawar won't see the sign at all. I do know that one doesn't pass through to *syurga* with worldly possessions. In the grip of death, does it matter to the dead that they are parted from their gold bracelet or ruby ring?

The wind whistles, a high-pitched sound effect produced by the razor-sharp bend. The night is full of small shrieking creatures. The grass slithers with lizards and creepy-crawlies.

The lone banyan on the hillside stands sentry over the compressed metallic trap plowing into the highway divider. Broken glass scatters all over the blacktop, a black head of hair floats out the window rim. Four hulks in contorted positions, a sharp splay of highway kliegs illuminates some choice pieces. My eyes miss nothing. I get down to work. In a few minutes, I've bagged everything.

My heart bangs like a snare drum. The air smells foul and acrid. I tell myself not to look. I chant it in a whisper. Slumped over the steering wheel, his eyes wide open, his forehead coated with blood shining like black metal, the face I see has thickly-bunched lashes, dark opalescent irises, a feebly questioning look. A whiff of cloying cologne mixed with musky sweat and Indian food. It is a face I recognize. A face belonging to my childhood days, spent in a small schoolroom, my head falling even as I cradle my chin, my tutor shouting at me. He carried a *rattan* cane, and inattention was rewarded with two quick slashes of the cane. Once, he had caught me cheating on an exam. He had hit me so hard the cane splintered.

Spinning, the night is compressed into a vortex of darkness, solid and thick, peopled with shadows. In front of me the road fades into an endless stream of cement blocks, everything glitters beyond the jagged windshield; the banyan weeps.

There is a hollow rumble in my throat. The road sign swims into view with breathing, squiggling lines. I see the mirage, papery thin, swaying in a film of desert dust. A man cracks, divides in two. And another one cracks with him. One splinters off in search of the past, another in search of his conscience; but the shell of our bodies remains, as dry as husk.

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"Monkey Dancer"

My brother is blind and schizophrenic. The doctors warn me he might try to take his life. But this is not news for me. He's been trying for the last ten years. Death eludes him, as if it's playing a cruel joke.

His fingers tap along the bedside table. I've just told him about a dream I had about Father. His fingers find mine; they grasp, hard, not letting go. "The Eight Principles, have you forgotten?" His eyes rotate wildly, the white milky, swirling with depths. His fingers are brown, callused – hangnails grow around the grime-encrusted rims. "As long as there is suffering, may I never cross over into Nirvana."

Meditation is the one thing he does that makes me pay attention. Every time he talks about it, I feel its empty shadow in my life – a kind of absence resembling loss. I sit up. My back has sagged into the spine of the old plastic chair in his ward. My brother is reciting the vow of the Bodhisattva, the way Father used to do.

"I'm trying to tell you about Father," I say.

"You have forgotten the biggest thing." His tone changes, becomes low, hoarse.

"Understand suffering. Forgive. You are a Buddhist."

Many things can be forgiven. Treachery, betrayal, deceit, greed, cruelty in one form or another. Even beauty – beauty so sharp and pure it can survive pain. Even that can be forgiven. But not evil. How do you forgive evil? It is sufficient unto itself. It needs no forgiveness. How does my brother not understand this?

In my dream, I once again saw Father – his pallid, forgiving face, his smile calm as the Bodhisattva, holding his palm out to enfold mine. Our hands touch. In my dream, he is sitting on a plain wooden ancestral chair, his back straight as a slab of stone, regal and alone.

That night we left Phnom Penh, that night the Khmer Rouge soldiers came for Father, my hands released themselves from their leaden weight. They grabbed an oil lamp and flung it, watched it break against bone and fabric, watched the blaze consume all.

They held my brother tight against my ribs, prevented him from running after the soldiers taking Father, prevented him from seeing too much when he comprehended so little. Later, my brother lost his sight and his mind – but it isn't those who lose their sight that are blind. It isn't those who lose their minds who can't retrace their souls.

I was a classical dancer. Before they broke all my fingers, the soldiers taunted me for a dance. In my dream, I had refused. Those lithe bodies, writhing in mockery, turmoil and corruption, those young bodies full of intransigent innocence, sparing no destruction, those faces of snarling masks and maddened glee, seemed to contain a kind of beautiful evil. But they too faded before that of the Monkey Dancer. My brother's fingers curl, twist, bend, reach; his legs bow, buckle, concave.

Many things can happen in dreams that are bold and so beautiful.

Nirvana awaits only when I dance. That is something we dancers believe as a philosophy of life. In this empty hall, class has dispersed. The music softens the chant in my head. I am Sovann Macha, the golden mermaid flirting with Hanuman, the monkey general. I am Moni Mekhala, female protectress of the waters, flinging my magic glittering ball of dew at Ream Ryso, the lord of storms. Dramas bleed into one another. I am apsara, I dance to convey the king's messages to the celestial divinities. I dance for mother, father, brother. I dance for myself. I dance because the river of life flows like a ritual. It courses through my veins, a tributary that is witness to the dark lake of history, like the River that reverses direction and floods the Tonle Sap. I do not forgive. Once, taunted, I had danced for Khmer Rouge soldiers. I had danced and they had laughed.

The phone call comes. My brother has succeeded. The years of fear dissolve like a monument of salt, a thick rope corded with hope for release. My brother used a rope fashioned of blankets, they said, the blankets which they will now use to shroud him.

There is no goodbye. The bones in my finger throb, as they often do at dusk. Twilight is fallen. I walk down the usual trodden lanes, littered with spilled, trampled pods from the over-arching tamarind trees. They crunch underneath my shoe like bones. In front of me is a temple. The Buddha statue adorning the exterior is carved in teak, his heavy-lidded eyes closed, a spire rising from his head.

Tonight, something compels me to study this face, rather than the Dyana Mudra clasp of His hands in meditation. Across the tops of low-lying branches, a crack in the velvet sky warns of thunder.

My brother's peaceful face steals across This face, slides through the indrawn rasp of my breath, leaving in its wake a piercing ache and a dusky halo. He is right, how beautiful is

the face of the Bodhisattva, how beautiful the night, like in my dream. The dreams that stay with us, rather than depart like a wisp of smoke when morning comes, they are here to remind us that they live alongside reality in a filmy balance, a membrane separating the dark from the light. They bring the dead back to visit us, so that what we seek – sense and tranquility, a return of feeling, a single touch – may lie as transparent as a blank palm.