

A n a k S a s t r a

Issue 15

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Contributor Bios

[Carla J. Dow](#) (Twitter: @CarlaJDow) is a published writer of both completely made up stories as well as the gritty and often uncomfortable truth of real life. Most of her fiction is inspired by her work as a journalist, as a writer for the international humanitarian charity the Red Cross, or from her travels around the world. The fact that her stories are flavored by real-life encounters from across the globe enables her to talk about them in an engaging and credible way and with passion.

[Lindsay Boyd](#) is a writer, personal carer, and traveller from Melbourne, Australia. He has published and self-published poetry, articles, stories, novels, and memoirs.

[Miles Stearns](#) is a twenty-something writer currently residing in Portland, Oregon. He spent the better part of the past year traveling the country and converting his limited funds into writing. He is now trying to figure out how to turn them back.

[Christelle Davis](#) is a professor of English literature at Gyeongsang National University in South Korea. This piece is adapted from her creative-nonfiction novel, *Mute and Continue*. Her work has been presented at various international academic conferences and recently published at *Deep South Journal*.

Larry Schreiber M.D. has practiced medicine in northern New Mexico for 38 years. In 1980 he led an American team for the International Committee of the Red Cross on the Thai-Cambodian border. He has 14 children, 10 of whom are adopted from all over the world. He met his son Michael in a refugee camp in Thailand. His upcoming publications include *War, Literature, and the Arts*.

Gillian Craig currently lives in Hanoi, Vietnam, with her partner and their young daughter. She has also lived in Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, and Oman, as well as visiting several other countries in the region. She has previously had poetry published in several anthologies and magazines, including *New Writing Scotland* and *New Writing Dundee*.

Brandon S. Roy is an American expat living in the Philippines. He has been published extensively over the years. He does not like talking about himself.

[Jen Ashburn](#) (Twitter: @jenashburn) is completing her MFA at Chatham University and has work forthcoming in *Grey Sparrow*, *Puff Puff Prose*, and *Poetry*, and the anthology *Mike Mine Words* (Trinity University Press, 2015). She spent six months traveling throughout Southeast Asia and hopes to return. She writes poetry and nonfiction.

Kim Nguyen is a Scottsdale, Arizona resident who emigrated with her family from Vietnam, moving to the United States in 1985. She earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Alabama - Birmingham in 2004. These 3 poems are her first published work.

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April 2014 featured author interview with Larry Schreiber

Q. Why do you write? What are some of your motivations?

To bear witness. For my children and grandchildren, and to remember and feel grateful. As my wife, poet Catherine Strisik, says “I write because I breathe.”

Q. What is your writing process like? Do have any quirky writing habits?

I write sometimes late in night when the days feel separate from the past.

Q. You have practiced medicine for several decades now. How do you find the interaction between working as a doctor and writing, in a sense, balancing the arts and sciences?

The practice of medicine has given me more lifetime experiences than I deserve. I am immersed quickly and totally in people’s lives and allowed glimpses of tragedy and delight. Medicine and my 14 children make writing possible for me. Ten of my children were adopted from various developing countries, three from Asia. The children that were in the U.S. foster care system knew too much neglect.

Q. In your creative nonfiction, you have drawn on history that many affected people try to forget. Why do you choose to write about these crises that you lived through, if only temporarily?

If we forget we are bound to repeat the same mistakes. When I was in the midst of events (on the Thai-Cambodian border), I felt remorse in not doing more to bring injustices to the powers that were.

Q. What is your most memorable experience about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia?

Becoming close friends with Ouk Damry, who I stay in contact with and I reunited with 24 years later in 2004. Most memorable was meeting one of my sons in Khao-I Dang Refugee Camp, who

lost his entire family to the Khmer Rouge yet is thriving in spite of his experiences. The gentleness of the Khmer people will touch my soul forever.

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"And Then He Did the Same"

by Carla J. Dow

The boy raced through the forest, huge waxy leaves slapping across his lithe brown body. He ran as his mother had told him to. He ran with the horror that had infected her scream in the dead black of the night.

Shades of green blurred across his vision and he imagined he was moving as fast as a cheetah, a sailfish, or a peregrine falcon. He could hear footsteps but could not tell if they were his own, if they belonged to the bad men, or if it was in fact just his heartbeat thudding against his chest. Dropping to the ground, he wiggled bottom first underneath the rotting stump of a shrub that had suffocated under damp moss. He dug his fingers into the brown dead leaves on the forest floor and waited; head down, ears alert, eyes blind to the night.

He waited and he waited and eventually his heart slowed, his eyelids grew heavy and sleep overpowered him. The next thing he knew, the morning birdcall pierced the anonymity of sleep and the dawn cast hazy shadows before him. Mama had not told him when he could come back. He tried to recall her words, the shriek of her fear. She had told him to run, to get away. But she didn't mean forever, did she? Now the daylight had come it would be all right again, wouldn't it?

The boy stretched up and out of his hiding place. All was still. Quiet. He retraced his steps of the night before, slow paces reversed over hurried strides. He cut through the sugarcane field, snapping off a stalk to suck on as he went. At the edge of the farmland, just half a mile from the threshold of the village, he stopped.

He plucked the silver blade from its nest of dry grass. It was heavy. It was long and elegant. It was a hundred times more wonderful than the grey sickles or machetes he had grown up with. This was a real sword, a sword for a samurai or an emperor. He raised the weapon high above his head. The boy's skinny young arms strained with the weight of it but he did not care; it felt good,

it felt powerful. He continued home at a more confident pace now. He had a real sword. He could defend his mother against the bad men. But after a while he tired and had to drag the blade behind him, the tip carving out a scar in the parched earth.

At the durian tree he stopped. Mrs. Nguyen lay arched over the huge roots, her dress twisted all the way up to her waist exposing her lower region. Her thighs were covered in thick slick blood, some still shining wet under the rising sun, some now crusted dry to her skin. The boy stared. He knew he shouldn't but he couldn't stop. Only the sudden sharp invading call of the broadbill pushed his body to respond, to look away, to move away. It was then he noticed the smoke rising lazily from the houses ahead of him, thick effortless trails snaking skyward; the rage of the fire now spent, the fuel almost all already eaten, life almost all already taken. There was nothing left. The little hut that had been his sanctuary forever, the full eight years that were the entirety of his existence, was an unrecognisable charred mass.

The boy heard crying in the distance and tilted his head to one side to listen before recognising his own voice. He clamped a hand over his mouth. Inside his home were the black outlines of a body. He did not recognise his mother's face in that twisted, open-mouthed horror.

He ran. He ran like his mama had told him. He ran with the terror of her scream fresh in his memory, with the fear of desertion, with the energy of panic. He still clasped the heavy sword, no longer feeling its weight.

* * *

"Come out child, come out," the man's voice grated against the gentle bird song that floated down from a nearby perch. But the boy knew his rotted hiding place was a good one and he stayed put. His knuckles showed almost white in his dark skin as he clenched at the sword, only his eyes moved as the man crept forward with high careful steps like a prowling cat. A dirty foot sheathed in a rubber sandal planted itself just inches from his nose.

"I smell him, we're close," the man's pink mouth fell open as he spoke.

The boy frowned and nestled his nose into his armpit to check if the dampness there did indeed smell. It did, but it wasn't bad, it was just his scent, like any animal. His empty stomach growled with anger calling out to the man to provide the sustenance it wanted.

The palm leaf above the boy's head was swiped away before another slapped him rudely across the cheek - and then the man was in front of him. The child was exposed. He thrust the sword out in front of his chest as if it could protect him without him needing to do any more. He squeezed his eyes tight shut and held his breath. He wanted it all to go away. He prayed for time to spin back to last week when his mama was warm and soft and could hold him close, when his house was not infested with stinking smoke, when his stomach was filled with rice. When everything was normal.

A chuckle, and then; "you can come with us." The man grunted as he lifted the boy with a single hand under a moist armpit. The boy opened his eyes. It had worked. They weren't going to burn him or cut his private parts. The sword had worked.

"Bet you're hungry aren't you?" The man began to walk away, his lumbering heavy frame casting a dark shadow behind him. The boy followed, nervous hurried paces over the top of the bigger confident strides.

"Bring that thing too," the man nodded back to his sword. "You're going to need that."

* * *

They wore as few clothes as they could get away with; the damp air of the forest and constant rain showers meant it was more comfortable that way. They lived in the darkest sections amongst the thickest trees, staying away from open clearings, open villages. Until they were ready.

The boy had learnt to use the sword. He had felt its power from early on and slowly learnt to weald it to his bidding. It worked best when he felt the tight knot of anger grow at the thought of

his lost mama, or Mrs. Nguyen's bloodied thighs spread open at the base of the durian tree, or the black outline of the body inside his home. It worked best when he thought of revenge against the bad men who had come and ruined everything.

The man had taught him how to use the tight knot of anger so that never again was it he running in horror into the dead black of night. Now, he created light. He started fires in houses that contained rotten people, people who did not deserve life. He was the one throwing skirts over the heads of women to cleanse their insides, to give them children of the true race, to redraw the boundaries as they were meant to be and to destroy all traces of the bad men.

The boy was now nearly a man of 12 years old. He was a figure known and feared for miles. He was one they talked about afterwards, if anyone was left to witness. They would recall the long silver sword clutched in his big hands, swiping out guided by the devil and the devil alone. For the boy who was nearly a man always kept his eyes squeezed tight shut - not needing his sight for his sword to be able to kill.

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"Man of the Forest"

by Carla J. Dow

The man of the forest awoke, stretched out his long arms and plucked a single jackfruit from the tree. Breakfast. His yellow stained teeth sunk easily into the delicate flesh and beads of juice rolled down his chin. The forest was quiet but for the gentle call of awakening birds, and he knew from the routine of each and every day that stretched in lazy repetition of the one before, that the song would soon climb to an operatic crescendo as the heat of the day rose with the sun.

The young man of the forest climbed daintily down from the soft leafy bed he'd built onto a fork of branches in the treetop. He would never sleep there again. He stood on his flat feet, toes splayed against the earth of the forest floor and reached up to scratch his chin before running his fingers through the wiry orange hair that poked like needles from the top of his head.

The short man of the forest strolled through the bush, his powerful long arms reaching up to grab at a vine or branch every now and again. He moved faster and faster as the aura of sleep drained away until soon he was flying, speeding in a blur of green, leaves slapping against his belly, light dancing through the mottled shade of the canopy like sparkling jewels.

The man of the forest climbed the biggest tree to watch the world go by. There was a lot of life to watch in the rainforest so he climbed as high as he dared and, swaying on a waving outstretched limb of the tree, he sat back and observed. The hairs on his arms and legs were a darker orange than those on his head, more like rust. He plucked an ant from where it had become entwined in the nest of coarse copper hair, bringing it up close to his face. He examined its tiny, segmented body taking in the dark beady eyes and busy little legs that flailed and wriggled uselessly in the air before popping the small creature into his mouth and sucking a little to test the taste.

The contented man of the forest lay back against the tree. His eyes, as round and deep as an infinite black hole, stroked the wide blue sky before coming to rest on a green Broadbill that opened its beak wide and sang a high note in greeting. The neighbours were always friendly here.

Our little man of the forest was alone with the birds. Not his brothers, sisters nor even his mother swung by to sit with him among the treetops. For they had gone.

The lonely man of the forest was just dozing off again when a raindrop hit him splat on the forehead. His saucer brown eyes flew open as another drip landed between his thick long lashes, making him blink. Carefully he plucked his green umbrella from a nearby branch and held it above his head. The shower did not last long and the animals soon ventured back out from their shelters as the last few warm raindrops sunk into the spongy ground.

Our peaceful man of the forest shifted his weight as he heard strange voices - intrigued by new friends who had come to visit. He plucked a custard apple from the tree and ate it slowly, turning the chunks on his thick tongue, eyes patiently trained on the ground below, awaiting his visitors with curiosity.

An ear twitched as the unnatural hum of a bulldozer engine filled the space between the gentle birdcall and the song of the cicadas. The scream of a chainsaw cut through the muggy heat.

The man of the forest could not fully understand the terror the machines had brought to his home, but he could sense something sad that settled heavy on his heart. He had heard these noises before; he knew they made the forest fall.

The man of the forest - the orangutan - ran. His long strong arms flew powerfully between the tree branches in a blur of copper. He kept going until he reached the edge of the rainforest, where he was driven back again. There never used to be an edge - an end - but the jungle is shrinking. Nature was forced to retreat as the rest of the world grew.

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"The One You Love"

by Lindsay Boyd

Until her knowledge of English improved and she latched on to a more suitable word, Emie would retrospectively have described her father's amorous relations with her mother as bawdy. She and her two sisters – Emie was the second born – were raised in a small fishing village near Chanthaburi. Home in those earliest years was an old wooden hut of just two rooms. The parents occupied the one, the girls bedded down on a large mattress on the floor in the other, which by day served as a kitchen and dining area.

It was Kruu, her elder sister, who first alerted her to the odd noises that emanated from her parents' bedroom at irregular intervals during the hours when everyone was in bed. An amalgam of cries, sighs, grunts and moans, they puzzled the little girl for a long time. On occasions she was afraid her mum and dad were hurting each other. But another noise frequently to be heard – that of her father Toh's saucy laughter – put her mind at rest. Nothing too bad could be happening if he guffawed like that now and again.

Of course she gained insight into such matters over the course of time. Both her parents had many sisters and brothers, all of them married with children about the same age as Emie and her sisters. An affectionate girl by nature, Emie was popular with all her relatives. She was so affectionate with some of her younger male cousins that she could have been accused of being indulgent.

She was just ten and her cousin Top seven when the boy crawled on her lap one afternoon as the respective parents gossiped about village affairs, first and foremost an honour

killing that had taken place in the district recently. Her uncle and aunt were accompanied that day by a *faràng*, a white woman, who looked on and listened as though she was trying to make sense of the foreign language.

Top put his little feet on Emie's and played with her hands. He kept trying to make her wrap her arms around him, attempts that she thwarted every single time. Continuing to try with just the one hand, he began absent-mindedly playing with his penis with the other. No one paid the slightest attention and the cousins, free of self-consciousness, as they went on with their joust.

It was only when she heard her father's old ribald laugh that Emie turned her head and realised someone was watching after all. What had induced Toh to laugh was the shocked expression on the face of the stranger. Emie imagined her father probably pleased himself similarly when he was a boy and cuddled one of his female cousins. There was nothing unnatural or untoward about it.

* * *

Consciously, she forgot about the pale-skinned woman's reaction though it would reside in her subconscious and leap out at her at a much later date. About a year later, Emie received another lesson in love at school, from someone she might once have regarded as an unlikely source. Chinese-eyed Nina, a girl who looked far more quintessentially Asian than Emie, had long been in the habit of spending seconds, sometimes even minutes, staring at her in class, in the school grounds, or on excursions. Still, Emie was surprised by what eventually happened.

On a day-long trip to the Vimanmek Mansion in the capital, they shared the same seat on the bus. Emie made no comment when Nina rested her hand lightly on her lap during the

journey. She read nothing into it beyond a gesture of friendship though in actual fact the two were virtual strangers.

Days later Emie caught Nina gazing intently at her again. With a subtle movement of her head Nina bid her classmate follow. Off they wandered to a sequestered part of the grounds. “Out with your tongue,” Nina told Emie, guiding her to the back of a building and placing her hands on her waist. “Your tongue.” Emie did as asked. Closing her eyes, Nina then extended her own tongue and touched the tip of the other girl's with it.

Both kept their eyes closed, giving themselves up to the sensual enjoyment. What the kiss might have lacked in passion was more than made up for by the concentrated tongue play of the young protagonists. The only thing of consequence to both right there and then was that – the deliberate, unbroken and yet never hurried tongue on tongue movement.

When Nina began sighing softly Emie followed her lead, increasing the tingling sensation in her loins that she first noticed at the commencement of the kiss. After about a quarter of an hour, Nina broke the contact for just the split second necessary to bring her lips to Emie's. Emie responded with the same puckering motion. Then the girls resumed tonguing, breaking every couple of minutes or so for that momentary, loving, meeting of their lips.

The sound of approaching voices put an end to the sublime interlude. Heading back to class Emie was alarmed to discover moisture between her thighs. At first she thought she had inadvertently wet her knickers. She worried for the rest of the afternoon that a stain would show through on the cotton fabric of her frilly dark blue, knee length skirt. But such was not to be. Undressing at home she ran the tips of her fingers over traces of something that was clearly not urine. It had solidified into a crust.

* * *

Both girls would have been happy to partake of an encore but they never had a chance to repeat their bravura performance. Yet Emie thought about it a great deal in the weeks and months afterwards. She always looked fondly at Nina from then on, pleased that her first ever kiss had been bestowed by a master of the art. She looked forward to kissing, and being kissed, in that way again.

But such matters remained far from a preoccupation in her young life, at least until the day she visited an enterprising friend at home. Emie by then was well into her teens and she had all but forgotten the long since vanished Nina and their kiss. Emie's giggling friend drew her attention to some glossy colour photos stumbled upon while surfing the internet unsupervised.

One of them showed two beautiful women, their tongues touching, dark eyes fixed on the viewer. Emie instantly recalled the long ago kiss and became aware of the same charge in her loins. The eyes of the two exquisite females, the invitation, the promise, reflected in them, entranced her.

Every other photo she was shown that day, whether of women with other women or men with women, sent her pulse racing no less. They included one of two men with a woman captured in a pose that Emie would not formerly have imagined even in her wildest dreams. Her eyes shut tight, her face contorted in an extreme of bliss, the model semi-reclined as she was served at both ends, a cock in her mouth, that of another stud between her pussy lips.

The same friend, in time, introduced Emie to porn films. She grew particularly fond of the films of Happy Thai, as she called herself. Emie loved watching Happy's films more than ever in the years after she took up with Niall, not least because she learnt much that she later put into practice.

A good example was the film featuring a sequence in which Happy was alone in a room. A super stud alone in the adjoining room thrust his erect manhood through a specially created hole in the wall separating them. Happy ate him out good and proper, releasing him at the last so he could cum on her face too.

Emie played the sequence for Niall, hoping he would agree to emulate it with her as best as they could at the first opportunity. He was more than willing to oblige his insatiable lover. She chopped and changed to suit her whim, but of all the photos she downloaded from the Internet, it was those of Happy that most often served as the background of their desktop at home. Emie's favourite was a shot of the actress eyeballing the camera with her precious, porcelain beauty, several inches of cock in her mouth, droplets of cum all over her face.

* * *

Approaching her thirtieth birthday, Emie calculated that she and Niall had been together for just under five years. What an extraordinary, transformative period of time it had been. A northern Englishman disgruntled with the stodgy greyness of life in his native land, Niall decided to put all his life savings in the hoped-for restorative balm of a complete change of scene and style. The example of certain acquaintances who had gone to Thailand or other parts of Asia and established new lives for themselves, securing wives or girlfriends among the local women into the bargain, inspired him to make the decisive move at the age of forty.

The country that attracted him the most was Thailand. According to the books and other sources he consulted, he would not find it difficult to establish himself as a teacher of English as a second language. He obtained a teaching qualification and looked into the possibility of setting up his own language school in old Siam. A tradesman for many years, he could claim no

experience in this field. But he deemed it a risk worth taking. If he failed, he failed. He would return home and take up where he had left off.

As to the question of where to base himself in Thailand, he resolved that in quick time. The great metropolis of Bangkok--a city with a population of so many millions, choked with traffic, noise and pollution, with way too much concrete and too little in terms of green space--was the last place in the world he fancied shifting to. It would remind him, to a scary degree, of home. He wanted to be near the sea.

Somewhere remote, like the Andaman coast for instance, was not really feasible. Ultimately, granting that proximity to Bangkok might be handy, he settled on the closest seaside town of some appreciable size, Pattaya. He came to regard it as the logical choice, one that might prove ideal. There were various reasons for this.

* * *

Emie had resided in the city by the half-moon bay for many months when she first met Niall. Her not oft-voiced determination to lead a life other than that traditionally prescribed for girls in her situation only grew stronger upon the death of Toh when she was a mere sixteen.

She pestered her mother from then on about the big city. She would make something of herself there she argued. If she worked hard and gained an education, the sky would be the limit. Emie was careful not to bring up her distaste for her prospects should she not leave, not wishing to cast aspersions on the life her mother had led.

But the role playing that characterised the society, that categorical division between the sexes, disturbed her. She thanked the Lord she only had sisters. Had a boy been born to her parents, he would have been given precedence in everything, regardless of his position in the

birth order. The existence of a brother would have complicated everything, up to and including her eventual flight.

Boldly, Emie questioned why a person's position in the family should play such a key role in determining their individual identity and, effectively, their fate. The vast majority of people were so serious about their familial duties and responsibilities. At the same time, she was grateful she was the second born of three sisters.

If ever their mother required a full-time caregiver--and even in the last stages of Toh's life there were signs that this would one day be inevitable--the onus would fall on her elder sister simply because she was the eldest sister. Emie knew she would unquestioningly take on and perform the role with love and devotion. She would care, clean, cook, mend, sew, propitiate the gods, do everything expected of her in short, with the same mindset.

Good for her, Emie thought. But such a straitjacketed existence was the last thing she wanted. The Westerners she sometimes saw passing through on their way north to Pattaya or Bangkok, or south to Ko Chang, Ko Mak or Cambodia, seemed far freer in their lifestyles. She envied their freedom.

Her mother objected to the thought of one of her beloved girls moving to Bangkok. She imagined Emie falling into the clutches of all manner of unsavoury characters, her village girl innocence lost, and gravitating to an ungodly existence from which there would be no redemption. She did not care how much *baht* she might send home.

When Emie compromised and set her sights instead on Pattaya, her mother caved in. But had she known the sort of place the one-time fishing village had evolved into, the older woman would have had second thoughts. Emie, on her arrival, found it hard to imagine that the town had

once been a simple village much like her own. Now, it was a sex tourist hub with an in-your-face hedonism that struck her as surreal.

Nevertheless, as she expected, she quickly found employment. She was offered and accepted a job as a room cleaner at a small hotel close to infamous Walking Street and began sharing a two-room apartment with two other young women. She could not afford a place of her own.

It was an inauspicious beginning to the life she envisaged but she was confident her lot would improve before long. The overwhelming majority of the hotel's guests were foreigners. As a room cleaner, Emie had minimal contact with them, but she never passed up an opportunity to engage them in English, even those whose English was far more rudimentary than hers.

One of the challenges she set herself in the new environment was the not inconsiderable one of mastering English. She was sure first-rate knowledge of the language would stand her in good stead in the future, even if she could not have said exactly how. The eventual opening of a language school a couple of blocks from where she worked came as an answer to a prayer.

She liked the lanky school coordinator, who also happened to be its one and only teacher, from the start. Niall's unruly mop of auburn hair lent him a boyish appearance though Emie would learn that he was twenty plus years her senior. The searching looks she sometimes gave him in the upper level suite rented out as school premises would cause him to lower his eyes and blush.

He conducted classes in the afternoons and evenings but over the course of a couple of months watched the number of attendees fall away so dramatically that he began doubting that his business venture would succeed. He knew he lacked a tried and true methodology--he had never taught in his life after all--but he reckoned this to be just one part of the problem.

The early evening class Emie enrolled in attracted six students at the outset. By the middle of the second month only she and one other, a young man, still bothered to come. On the final Monday of the month, with no one having shown, Niall thought he had lost everyone and was about to head home for the night when Emie strolled in the door.

He suggested they converse for what remained of the hour; she had arrived a quarter of an hour late. That was fine with her. She was the most adept of his students by far and a good conversationalist who found that more to her liking than dull as dishwater grammar. Alone with her Niall was less shy and more charming than ever. He laughed repeatedly as she entertained him with a monologue about the nicknames Thai folks used when referring to themselves, there being no single word for 'I' in the language.

Emie, when wishing to be deferential and respectful to others, still sometimes referred to herself as Little Mouse, which was the name by which children commonly referred to themselves. Hearing this, Niall laughed loudest of all, his cares completely if momentarily forgotten.

“So, what does Little Mouse have planned for the rest of the night?” he asked, rising, the allotted hour at an end.

“Little Mouse is going home,” said Emie, also standing. “But ... is in no hurry.”

Niall looked at her unblinking for a full ten seconds before pushing her against the wall beside the tables where they had been seated and kissing her. The softness of his lips and tongue made her wet, instantaneously. What he then did stunned and delighted his radiant pupil. Anchoring her against the wall with one hand, he crouched and lifted her skirt up with his free hand and began massaging her pussy through her knickers. Emie's legs almost gave way it felt that good.

After about a minute he pulled her knickers down and brought his mouth to her again, tonguing her between her pussy lips and sucking her clitoris. As if anticipating one of her pre-eminent future joys, he stood back up and soldered his fluttering tongue to hers again, allowing Emie to taste her pussy juice.

Their tongues still caressing, Niall brought his arms about her waist and swung her round on top of the closest table. Intuiting his wish, Emie was sufficiently nimble to prop her legs on his shoulders. Feeling her lower legs round his neck, he pushed her knees in toward her chest and thumped his cock against her womb. They ground each other close and hard, over and over and over again. Screaming loud, Emie had not imagined losing her virginity would be this divine. For his part, Niall honestly believed that only that night did he truly lose his own virginity.

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"On the Motorbike"

by Miles Stearns

That morning was like any other morning: I awoke, showered and shaved, ate breakfast with my host family, and climbed on back of my host brother's motorbike. He kicked it into gear, and we left the concrete walls of the house compound and headed into the streets of outer Chiang Mai. Our helmets sat in the front basket of the bike, as they always did. In my entire time in Thailand, I only wore my helmet three times. The first time was my first day on the back of the bike. The second time was when I was allowed to try and ride the bike for myself. The third time, this time, we were moving quickly down a main artery into town when suddenly he signaled and began to pull over. We got to the side of the highway, and he handed me my helmet. I noticed some other riders were doing this as well.

"Put it on," he said, smiling.

"Why?" I asked. "I never wear my helmet. You don't either."

"Just put it on," he said again.

I did and he put his on, and we threaded back into the mesh of bikes and cars and trucks. It was odd to be wearing my helmet. It was odd to see his helmet in front of me, on his head, like a big red Thai cherry. About a minute later, traffic began to slow and thin. Motorbikes seemed to gravitate to the side of the highway like items falling off a slowly tilting table. Soon there was only a small bunch of motorbikes remaining along with the cars and trucks. I saw police lights up ahead. We slowed further and passed a large police barricade where the cops were funneling every bare-headed rider to the side of the highway and issuing tickets. There we perhaps twenty

police officers at this checkpoint, more than I had ever seen in a single gathering in Chiang Mai. They stood and waved their arms in a classic traffic control manner and the riders, as though they knew and accepted what was happening, obeyed and pulled off the highway. No helmetless riders tried to pass unseen.

“If they try and run the ticket will be much more expensive,” my host brother called out amidst the noise.

Almost no one wears a helmet in Thailand. I had seen grandmothers, children, babies, all sorts of helmetless people on motorbikes with their hair lapping behind in the breeze. Now they were all stopped and idling on the side of the road. The cops walked from one bike to another barely looking up to hand out tickets. The scene took up two whole lanes of the highway.

“Every month they do this,” he said, peering back over his shoulder as we had moved on. “They need money and rather than try and enforce the rule every day they wait until a random day near the end of the month and collect it all in one go.”

Once we were in town we pulled over and took off our helmets.

“Will there be others?” I asked.

“No, none that we will see,” he replied. “Are you hungry?”

I nodded. He smiled because I was always hungry. I realized soon after arriving in Thailand that I could eat Thai food three times a day, every day, for the rest of my life and be completely content. This young man had seen me consume enormous amount of street food, sticky rice by the bag, and he liked to watch me get excited about his home cuisine. Helmetless again, we scooted along the narrow roads to the open market where I picked up some sticky rice, spicy sausage, and grilled chicken on skewers.

“Are you going to get anything?” I asked, stuffing the plastic bags of food into my cotton

yam.

“No, I’ll eat at work,” he replied. “We need to hurry or you’ll be late.”

Minutes later he dropped me off at the gated entrance to the school compound and I was left standing with the familiar, effervescent air of diesel coupled with the mingling smells of the morning market seeping out of my bag.

* * * * *

"Today Is a Good Day to Make a Weapon"

by Christelle Davis

It's hard to find yourself when you have a full-time job, a couple of kids, a mortgage to pay. Most people who pick up this book will know from the very first page that they will probably never have the chance to take a similar trip.

—*Elizabeth Gilbert*

I like a view but I like to sit with my back turned to it.

—*Gertrude Stein*

You never leave this island with a sigh of regret and as long as you live you can never forget this Garden of Eden.

—*The Balinese*

This is how the day starts. I wake up and the waves are roaring so loudly that first I think it's an aeroplane going overhead, then I think it's raining, in the gushing leaden way that South East Asia does so well and finally I sit up and realise it's the ocean. It's only the waves hitting the shore at high tide, about 2 kilometres away and still loud enough to wake me up. 'Tsunami,' I think. 'Tidal wave.' Are they the same thing? I'm sure it doesn't matter. Through the floor to ceiling windows, I scan the papaya trees in front of the house and look for movement from the neighbours, but everything is as it should be at 4:45 a.m. in Tiagan; dark, still and unbelievably noisy with a combination of insects, chickens and vigorous hammering. Valasindro Authorized Money Changer Balinese Calendar of Auspicious Days says, *Today is a good day to make a weapon.*

Since I'm awake anyway, I start to make a mental evacuation plan and immediately feel overwhelmed: we are too isolated; the house is sturdy, but traditional, with a thatched roof and exposed beams; it takes me four minutes to open the silver padlock that holds our gate shut and by that time it would be too late to drag the motorbike down the long rocky driveway and head for higher ground which is actually not that far away since we're sitting on the side of a mountain; our nearest neighbours are about 500 metres away and they have no electricity, let alone a phone.

I can see the tip of the mountain on Nusa Ceningan and the flat mangroves that circle Nusa Lembongan. I can see the black space in the sky where the massive volcano Mt. Agung sits, thankfully still. I can see the white caps of the waves in the distance as they pitch themselves against the shore and I tell myself that this is normal, it's just high tide. I tell myself that, because of recent international events, tsunami warning systems are as effective as they'll ever be, even in Indonesia. I tell myself that this is by no means the most dangerous situation I've ever been in, in fact there is absolutely no sign of danger whatsoever, and I need to stop being silly, breathe properly, let my heart slow down and shake off this fear. I tell myself I am lucky to be here.

What's that other noise? Is it an incarnation of the demon god Macaling? Is it an evil clown from the movie we watched last night? Is it one of those bad boys trying to climb the bathroom wall and enter our room to rape me?

Glen is asleep in the bed behind me, tangled up in the sweaty sheets; head off the pillow, frowning as if in deep concentration. Next to him lies an iPhone which is tracking his sleeping patterns via an app that detects movement and noise. In the morning, he will stare in awe at the graph that tracks his sleep and mutter, 'I just never get into full REM do I? No wonder I look like this.'

Let's go back a while.

After my birthday Glen goes to Australia for a wedding, I go to Indonesia by myself. It's the first time we've been apart in nine months, I am schizophrenic about it; giddy with freedom and anxious about carrying my own bags.

I spend two weeks travelling around Lombok with some high school friends; huddling from the raging storm in the hull of a stationary boat on Gili Trawangan, eating fresh fish and working our way through a bottle of scotch while A and I serenade everyone with 'Total Eclipse of the Heart' and passing two hash pipes around the table. Snorkelling near Gili Air and vomiting a lot in Senggigi. We are unable to speak to each other for a week and instead send late night text messages that are either perky and upbeat (his) or nonsensical and tired (mine).

Then I go to Jakarta. I am met at the airport by a limousine filled with champagne and cheese and went to my brother's house where he was watching blowjob porn on an 8 foot high screen. He has a birthday party and hires dwarfs to dress up as clowns and juggle in the living room. There is a sate cart in the driveway and a children's choir from the local orphanage perform Beach Boys hits in exchange for unlimited coke and BBQ-ed corn. I get so drunk that I vomit in

the lower right hand corner of the guest bed and then put the covers over it before I take a plane to Bali.

I meet Glen, terribly hungover, at Denpasar airport late that night, standing outside the arrival gate, surrounded by uniformed drivers holding signs and Australian boys holding Bintang. Our dramatic and romantic reunion is like everything a 13 year old girl wants in a movie ending.

Things haven't changed much since the 1920s when the first European tourists were enticed to Bali with the promise of topless girls by the Royal Dutch Steam Packet Company. Many people probably still visit for the perky form of the Balinese women's breasts, strengthened and shaped by years of carrying things on their heads. Many of the 20,000 foreigners who call Bali home settle here because it is possible to live like a permanent holiday in a resort-style villa with helpful, smiling servants and excellent food. Most of them congregate in the fashionable Seminyak or the bogan paradise Kuta. A hell of a lot of them, mostly female and middle-aged and following a path set out in Elizabeth Gilbert's 2006 novel *Eat, Pray, Love* (later adapted into the Julia Robert's film *Eat, Pray, Love*) rent a villa in Ubud (Bali's centre of spiritual growth workshops, yoga retreats and vegan baked goods) and work on their memoirs.

We almost do it too. We rent a house on the outskirts of Ubud in a small, traditional village called Bongkasa. We are the only white people in the village, the only ones for miles and when my friends came from Kuta to find us, they get lost and just ask in a shop, 'Where are the *bule*?' and half a dozen hands all point up the hill to our house. We stay there for a week in a luxurious house on a cliff surrounded by the screams from a local white water rafting operation. Our

houseboy drives us into Ubud a few times a week to buy essentials from the huge, unairconditioned Bintang Supermarket and to eat at some of the up-market restaurants selling overpriced versions of Balinese classics.

The expats and tourists in town are mostly middle-aged women wearing long, flowing skirts in aqua and burnt orange or shapeless linen garments--billowy shirts and pants that all flow into one another like a wearable tent. There is a *warung* that Glen and I go to and it is always filled with these women, eating bowls of *soto ayam* at tables by themselves, each with the amount of single diners displayed on their tables: the *Ubud Community* (a monthly publication that lists cultural activities and exhibitions and featured wordy, unpunctuated articles about local events), a Lonely Planet guide to Bali and almost without exception, *Eat, Pray, Love*. I watch these women as they take turns to read their books, glance nervously at each other and stare out into the hot main street of Ubud. When they leave the *warung*, they nearly always go straight across the street to the internet café, then to the organic bakery for gluten free chocolate cake and then finally next door to the second-hand bookstore where they stand in front of the notice board littered with ads for houses, hotels and meditation workshops. They roam the streets like packs of disconnected zombies, wandering in and out of silver shops, fingering Buddha statues, touching babies' heads and holding long book-laden bags against their hips and always looking up, scanning the streets self-consciously.

I get it; I followed Jack Kerouac around Europe, America and Mexico for the best part of my early twenties. This is where Jack got mugged. This is where he got high. This is where Burroughs and Ginsberg invented the Dream Machine. This is where Ginsberg wrote *Howl*. This is

where Kerouac first heard *Howl*. This is where Kerouac is buried. This is the man who slept on Kerouac's first wife's couch—waiting for me in Starbucks on 87th Street, wearing socks and sandals.

One day we visit one of the 'characters' from *Eat Pray Love*. Ketut the palm reader read my palm for US\$20 (which he said would go towards paying his granddaughter's medical school bills) and told me that I should only make love two times a night because three times would be too many. He told me I had 'merry' eyes and that I had two marriage lines which meant I would either be married twice or be married once and take a lover. He said I would come into money when I am 31 years old, and I would live to be 100. Just like he told 'Leeeez' in the book/movie.

One night we go to a local temple and pay US\$5 to watch a Kecak dance: one hundred men in a tight circle rock and sway as they chant *chak chak chak chak, chak, chak*, pulling and pushing each other's shoulders like a cross legged, seated rugby scrum working themselves into a sweaty, messy rhythm that seems to flow out from the stage and into the audience so that we are thrusting our necks in time with the chanting, eyes wide and hearts thumping.

After watching a burned DVD of *Point Break* at the local BBQ ribs and martini bar, Glen announces that he'd like to try surfing. So we move to a house at the romantically named Echo Beach: a thatched roof, loft style, converted graphic design studio. The walls are plastered with colourful pop art canvas prints. There is a large stone bath next to the bed that I lie in during the hot afternoons and study Indonesian (the easiest language to learn ever: no tenses, no plurals and no pronouns). The kitchen fills with ants quicker than the maid can kill them. There are massive

day beds in the living room where I lie and watch pirated copies of the *Real Housewives* franchise with a background view of manicured gardens, and beyond them, a famous black surf beach, with a perfect reef break that Glen nearly drowns in at least twice a day.

In Echo Beach we are surrounded by other foreigners, slightly more permanent settlers who have bought villas in the local expat golf club compound; fully equipped with plunge pools, staff and black SUVs that roamed slowly through the narrow, pot-holed laneways like big black roaches. They send their children to the local carbon-neutral Montessori international school. They have small businesses importing wicker furniture and stone bath-ware to Perth. They (men included) wear a lot of silky pant suits and crocheted headbands. They gather in big friendly groups on Sunday nights to watch the local greatest hits cover band and eat the cheap BBQ-ed lobster and drink the overtaxed red wine. Glen, like all the other guys, wears his shirt open, proudly displaying his battle scars from the reef, dramatically bathed in foul smelling red antiseptic.

It is a comfortable, familiar existence. There are enough expats in the area that the restaurants all serve macchiatos and martinis and host short film screenings. The bar/ café/ motorcycle repair shop/ art gallery at the end of our street holds Sushi Tuesdays and makes perfect eggs benedict. If everyone was on Vespas instead of Hondas we could be in Sydney, back under the flight path, cruising King Street for brunch and book shops.

But then I feel that awkward pull of restlessness. That overwhelming need to move and resettle, inevitably coupled with the fear that we are just part of a pack of white foreigners all seeing and doing the same crappy touristy things. That we are not seeing or doing *enough*. One day, while

picking at his scabs, Glen announces that he's ready to write and record an electro-pop album. I decide that I'll write a novel, so I can say that I wrote a novel before I turned 30. I tell myself that with our projects, computers, journals and goals we will be like the expat writers who set themselves up in places like Paris, Morocco or Italy between World Wars. Like when Eno went to Bangkok in 1978 to 'resolve his future'. For the first time, in a long time, we suddenly have purpose, direction and a 'job' to do.

So we ask around; locals, expats, Dutch tourists and Javanese surfers. *Where have you been? What did you like? Where would you live if you were pretending to be Gertrude Stein?* We flick through *Lonely Planet Guide to Bali* and read the five lines of text devoted to the only place that no one mentions, an island known for its dark magic and is full of witchdoctors and temple caves and decide to go there. Nusa Penida.

Fast forward: emails to an American guy with a house, a speed boat filled with computers and cheese, a bumpy ride in the back of a pickup truck up the side of the mountain, holding hands as we grin at each other and say, 'We're so lucky!'

We end up on the side of a mountain with a view of barren fields, ocean and across the Bandung Strait to the big active volcano that sits on the western peninsula of Bali. This house is actually made up of three buildings: a meditation hut, a bedroom house and a big open-planned room with a living room, kitchen and dining area. It's in a village called Tiagan, which is made up of a small shop and a collection of housing compounds. There are three Norman Kamaru T-shirts in Tiagan, circulated amongst the children for special occasions. We have brought some supplies from Bali, but for everything else we are forced to shop at the local market: a sad collection of

stalls selling sardines, black rice, coconut oil, palm sugar and nearly rotting vegetables for which we pay triple the local price. Here we are still *bule*, but this is a different kind of isolation to Ubud; no more 20 minute chauffeured car rides to buy fresh mozzarella or slip into a jazz bar or to attend the expat quiz night or the Cohen brothers movie night at the art gallery. We have no access to newspapers, television or media. To send a text message I have to stand on the lip of the balcony and stretch my arm towards the phone towers that are installed on the neighbouring island of Lembongan. No infinity pool. No internet. No hot water. No one to talk to except each other and the houseboy Moldy who comes once a day to clean gecko shit off the floor and check the well.

It's unbelievable, I know, but we are blissfully happy. For a while anyway. We tell ourselves that the lack of internet is conducive to productivity. For the first few weeks we have a routine. Breakfast, working, lunch, half an hour of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, a seven minute cuddle on the day-bed. Working until sunset. Drink Bourbon and Cokes or Bintang and Fanta as the sun goes down. Dinner and a movie. More working and then falling asleep under the stained mosquito net in the main bedroom. We grin at each other over sunset in the meditation hut, we fly up and down hills on a motorbike, we get drunk on the balcony and chase geckos across the living room. I laugh as Glen stalks the rooster around the garden at 5 a.m. trying to spray him with water. We rattle around the giant house, just the two of us, both excited and daunted by our isolation. At night we walk along the cobble stone path that links the living room to the bedroom and stare up at the impressive star-black sky-moon arrangement that the lack of electricity offers. I stay awake at night to watch the lizards in the moonlight that pours through our windows, scurrying

up and down the walls, trampling over the high roof beams and shitting onto the tarpaulin canopy that protects our bed.

We tell ourselves constantly, 'We're so lucky.'

We have four computers set up in the dining room, laptops and PCs with multiple monitors for each. There are speakers, microphones, a keyboard and four terabyte hard drives. All day I sit at the dining room table and try to write. I stare at the mountain for hours. I fastidiously examine the top of the volcano, its ridges and curves. I reread old stories and essays from university undergraduate days and edit them. I write cathartic letters to old boyfriends telling them all the things they had done wrong, detailing when and how much they had ripped me off, outlining exactly why it was never going to work. I reread the three eulogies I've given in my lifetime; for my grandfather, my other grandfather and a much loved uncle who died way too young of cancer that started in his blood and finished in his spine, brain and liver.

My soundtrack is the repetitive vocals from Glen's recording studio in the spare bedroom. The 'recording studio' is a vocal booth made out of foam mattresses, a wardrobe and layers of doonas, towels and sheets. He sits on a milk crate in front of the mic stand, sweating it out in there every day for hours at a time, laying down tracks for an electro-rock album that's going to make him famous. Lines shouted over and over again. The forced banter of a chorus. Ten different harmonies for one line of song. The album slowly pieced together in that hot box of a wardrobe.

In between working, eating and staring at the ocean, we play games: The Hiding Game, the Staring Game, the Dancing Game. We choreograph elaborate ninja fights. We make a short stop motion film of ourselves trying on every item of clothing we own.

There is no thought here about *never doing enough*. Time is warped by the three day week that the villagers follow, by the lack of timetables and appointments, by the way that distance is only measured in one of two ways; places are either two or 20 km away, never anything else.

Penidans have no word for ‘future’, no concept of tomorrow. Making plans can only be done at the last minute or in two day increments. Moldy knows the English words for ‘next week’ and ‘next year’ but he has no way of defining them. When I ask him what he wants to do with his life he thinks carefully, runs his fingers through his hair, takes a careful sip of Fanta and finally responds, ‘I need to find my cow, it has been missing for three weeks.’

We try to show him how to use one of the computers but he won’t sit closer than one metre away, craning to look at the screen, too nervous to even touch the mouse. We film him playing acoustic guitar, singing one line from Eminem’s ‘Lose Yourself’ over and over: *back to reality oh there goes gravity*. When we play it back to him, he loses it, bent over double and laughing hysterically, screeching, ‘How? Hooooooooow???’

Moldy has no idea when he was born but thinks he is about 25. He is the youngest of four and he tells us, ‘My parents did not want me and they were surprised.’ He has no birth certificate, no driver’s license, nothing that means he officially exists. He has long, layered hair that he parts on the side so it covers one eye. Despite the humidity he wears the winter wardrobe of a Perth

teenager; Rip Curl tracksuit pants, a Quicksilver jumper and T-shirts bearing the names of fictional heavy metal bands (Dark Slaves, Crowbar, Iron Skyclad). He wears a silver watch that has a cracked face and is filled with water. He smiles constantly and if he is upset he rubs his eyes and pretends to cry and says, 'Moldy is so saaaaad.' But while smiling. His mother looks almost 100 and has three teeth. He calls her The Swamp Witch That Came From The Hell. She comes to the house early in the morning and waves incense over the shrine and I am hoping that it is to protect us.

On a good day for cutting hair. I trim mine using nail scissors over the side of the balcony. We use the last of our supermarket-bought stash to make spaghetti and pizza. We play Uno with Moldy and whenever he picks up a 'Draw 4' card he yells, 'Fuck my life!' in a dramatically drawn out voice. After dinner I play him a 1982 Sonic Youth track which uses gamelan instruments amongst electric guitars. He smiles indulgently and asks, 'Is this Balinese music?'

Let's skip forward a month to when the noise started.

The well dries up and the water pump dies and after three days the toilets resemble music festival portaloos. Moldy's sister and cousins bring water from a neighbouring well, carrying massive buckets up the path on their heads for four hours one morning, while we sit on the steps and watch, giving their children small pieces of chocolate. *On a good day for burning bricks* Glen twists an ankle on the long, rocky driveway leading up to the front gate and we find a cane in the house that has a knife hidden in its body. Glen limps around the house in one of Moldy's sarongs brandishing the cane like a weapon. The village medicine man comes to the house to rub his leg

with a paste made from lemongrass, curry leaves, galangal and shrimp paste. The medicine man has no teeth and skin like a Louis Vuitton bag. I make a stir-fry with the leftover medicine. We get scabies. We eat over-boiled chicken that comes from the market complete with tiny kidneys and heart wobbling around in its skinny rib cage and black rice gritty with small stones; everything flavoured with sickly sweet coconut oil. I have ‘Lose Yourself’ in my head for nearly 3 weeks, but can’t get past the *back to reality, oh there goes gravity* line so it rumbles away in my brain torturing me. When I do sleep I have sweaty, panicky nightmares like I’ve never had before. Trying to find Clinique Clarifying Lotion number 2 in a supermarket. Forgetting to wear a bra. Packing for a last minute trip to Paris. Trying to dial a phone number but getting the digits wrong every time. Inserting a giant contact lens into my eye.

One night (*a good day for mating cows*) a group of kids from a neighbouring village come up the driveway uninvited. At first there are only four of them on two bikes, but then another six arrive. I watch them from the living room windows as they make themselves comfortable in the meditation hut; laughing, pushing each around and eventually staring at the house with such intensity that I duck out of sight. When I pop back up ten minutes later they are standing by the front door, grabbing their crotches and telling me in Indonesian to suck their dicks.

There is *still* no one to talk to except Moldy and Glen. He comes every day, sometime between daybreak and noon, his motorbike roaring up the path, humming as it nearly stalls at the top of each hill, crackling as it hits the limestone that covers the last part of the driveway. He tells us one day that he is ‘stressed’ about being unmarried and goes to the *banjar* at the bottom of the

tapioca field with his friends to get drunk on *arak*, the locally-made, lip-stinging, stomach-burning rice wine.

The starlings attack the papaya in a chorus of infuriatingly high pitched, non-rhythmical bursts. Glen blocks himself in his padded cell of a vocal booth and repeats one line a hundred maddening times. The games get weirder (hide and seek with a cleaver, fights choreographed directly from *Point Break*). We are on a steady diet of pseudoephedrine and rice. The former only 20 cents for 4 pills from the *Apotek* in a cheerful pink packet. To sleep at all we have Panadol Night tablets that are friendly and green and stamped with miniature half moons. I dutifully sit in front of the computer all day. However, I accept that the crushing loneliness, the isolation, the tormenting of each other over small matters like plunging toilets and bones in chicken are a part of this achievement. I accept this as all part of the 'experience'.

At dawn on *a good day for playing music*, there is an ominous crackling, a barking cough and then the speaker tied to three bamboo poles in the centre square of Tiagan starts roaring. The volume is so loud that the words would be indistinguishable even if we could understand the dialect, which is an ancient form of Balinese that only priests are required to use when telling stories or conducting the ceremonies which are mostly devoted to appeasing, deceiving, or exorcising the black-faced demon-king Jero Gede Mecaling and his white-skinned wife Jero Luh. Every line of the story is sung in a deep, distorted tenor. Then followed by a higher pitched, passionately wailing Balinese translation that echoes throughout the valley.

Galungan is a 10 day holiday when the spirits of ancestors return to the family home and must be appeased with offerings and prayers. It is days of unpredictable, un-drownoutable sound.

Sometimes it starts at dawn, sometimes at 1 a.m. Sometimes it finishes at 9:30 p.m. and then starts up again at 10:30 p.m.. There is no pattern, no way of predicting when our day, night, sleep will be interrupted by the insane noise that travels up the mountain with the wind, a point where four to five speakers all seem to intersect exactly at our bedroom. The gas generators are used to their absolute capacity to power the massive square speakers that sit on top of poles and walls in the centre of every village and often, in seemingly nonsensical places, like next to a rocky field full of cows and papaya trees. The villagers like to listen to these wretched songs and audio-plays when they're weaving the intricate braided bamboo leaf decorations that accompany every ceremony, when they're cooking and when they're handwashing their clothes and laying them out in the low scrub to dry.

They don't know the meaning of personal music players and emitting hours of chaotic noise at painful decibels is a sign of affluence and a source of pride. Every prayer is broadcast from massive speakers on high hills, competing with the ones from the village only 200 metres away.

Finally, we are at *a good day to make a weapon*. This is how the day starts. By now we have been through this often enough that I recognise the tune: the high-pitched wailing, the monotone chanting, the ferocious roaring that is followed by what seems like stilted laughing, 'HA. HA. HA.' After a minute a second speaker, this one at the base of the mountain, chips in with a female singing troupe. Then about four speakers from various nearby villages all pitch in and

their sounds seem to stretch over the valley, up the mountain and intersect exactly at our bedroom.

Glen rolls over and moans, 'Who do we have to bribe to shut them up?'

The iPhone app goes crazy.

In the late morning, we assemble in the village: Moldy, us and 35 players from Tiagan's famed Gamelan band resplendent in slick orange jackets over black sarongs. We follow a slow moving black pickup truck for about 45 minutes. Its back tray is crammed with the players and their instruments, metallophones, xylophones, drums and gongs. When we are on the empty spiralling roads at the back of the island, I count the turns on my fingers so we can find our way back: 2nd right, 2nd right, 1st left. These roads may be empty of cars or motorbikes but they are still filled with the cacophony of loud speakers, each turn brings a new onslaught of intelligible screeching.

The 'event' is a wedding, the bride and groom so dramatically made up that Glen can't tell which is which. We sit on small blue plastic stalls and watch as most of the other guests and the family of the groom line up by the pagoda where, one by one, they are held down by four strong young men while a priest files their eye teeth down with a piece of white stone dipped in murky water. Afterwards they chew red betel leaves to dull the pain.

We are served glasses of steaming hot coffee topped up with condensed milk. When we finish, the grounds at the bottom of the cups are tipped back into the main pot. I am brought babies to hold. There are splayed grilled chickens stacked on top of a pyramid of oranges. The children,

who are playing a game with stones and egg shells on the dirt floor, are wearing white T-shirts inside out, a Norman Kamaru logo just visible. There is another priest reading from a prayer book in one corner, the microphone pressed so close to his lips that you can see trails of saliva running down to his hand. I recognise his voice with a shudder.

Gamelan has been described as the most complex musical form in existence, as the inspiration for most modern electronic or trance music. I sit uncomfortably cross-legged on the dirt floor, wrapped in a leopard print sarong and wearing pearl earrings and pink lipstick, listening to the band. I start swaying and end up rocking. Back and forth with an untraceable beat. The music can't be held on to; it scrambles over me, busy and shimmering. There is nothing to grab except the hum of the gong as Moldy beats it over and over, taking some unknown cue from the band leader. He sits on the floor with a drum between his knees, eyes closed, bent over the instrument, tapping its sides with loose fingers. All eyes on him. My eyes are on the gamelan players as they strike the small brass hammers across the metal keys, locking eyes with a partner. Each instrument has a twin, tuned slightly higher or lower and each instrument only plays part of the pattern, so that the tune is only possible by interlocking those notes. Everything vibrates. It is earsplittingly loud. Then suddenly soft and almost peaceful. There is no melodic hook to grasp, nothing progressive to follow, instead it is cycles of fast beats that abruptly change at the bang of the gong. After days of the whining, drawn out screeching this is like a balm.

There is a young pre-pubescent girl dancing the *Sanghyang Dewa* dance to the left of the band. She is twirling and flicking her fingers, her face made up with bright pink lipstick and the same crazy blue eyeshadow that I favoured as a sixteen year old. She doesn't smile, her eyes never

blink, her head moves rigidly from side to side. She exercises such poise and control that it is as if she is moving in what the locals call *taksu*, a trance state that occurs when a higher power enters the body via music. While she dances the priests are sprinkling her with arak and softly whispering prayers with their eyes rolling up towards the sky, only the whites showing. This makes the Kecak dance seem like a Disney performance; fake, polished and controlled.

We turn to each other and Glen whispers ‘We’re so lucky to see this.’

I whisper back, ‘This just made it worth it.’

Is that all it takes? Some strangers’ mid-morning wedding in a town where *bule* bring good luck to babies? Is it the spirituality, beyond riding a bike through a rice paddy at sunset black magic that fixes cars with a sweep of an arm and stops babies crying and unburdens people of demons with the rub of a chicken egg across the forehead?

Some rare glimpse of island life that no one else has seen?

We ride our motorbike back home around the pock marked roads that circle the island and spiral inwards via man-made valleys. I tape the video camera to my arm and hold it up so it can capture the whole journey. We fly past clearings of wild piglets and overtake the locals who are all dressed up ready for temple and they look startled at both our speed and the amount of upper thigh I am forced to show with my legs wrapped around Glen’s. ‘Hello Mister!

Helllooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.’

I'm the radio. Glen requests songs for me to sing above the strangled roar of the motor. Green Day's 'Longview' and 'Welcome to Paradise'. I sing 'Gangsta's Paradise' by Coolio. I sing a screeching version of 'Time After Time'.

When we are riding in the shadow of the mountain on the other side of the island after the sun has disappeared, it is the only time I ever feel cold in this country, the wind whips at my legs and shoulders and I have to press myself into Glen's back, my head between his shoulder blades, made sleepy from the repetitive movements of his back muscles as he changes gears to get up the hills.

I scream over the wind and the motor, 'We'll be watching this one day, maybe at home or wherever our new home is and I'll think wow that place looks amazing. Hello Future Me. Look what you used to do. Look where you lived.'

It hurts to imagine where I will be when I watch this tape. When I listen to what the iPhone recorded while Glen was asleep; the chickens, prayers, a tree falling, a strong wind that sent the pile of rubbish in the neighbouring field flying. The screeching speakers will seem exotic and wondrous from the safe distance of an inner city apartment or a parental lounge room and I know already that I will beam with pride and nostalgia and say, 'Look what we did.'

Back to reality, oh there goes gravity.

* * * * *

"I Know Your Heart"

by Larry Schreiber

It was my third month working in Nong Chan Camp on the Thai-Cambodian border. I'd been there since March, 1980, and now it was June. It was hot and dry, and always dusty. The monsoons would soon begin. In those three months, I worked all day in what the Red Cross called a hospital: a makeshift village of 60,000 refugees. French, Swiss and British doctors also joined the throng.

We were there each day. Each day we fed the refugees – bowls of rice, and handful of seeds for the farmers to go back to Cambodia and plant. But the starving farmers ate the seeds and stayed in the camp for safety.

Whole families slept under their open flat wagons which were covered with blue plastic tarps; others slept in makeshift tents made from the tarps.

On the first day, Pierre Perin, Chief of the International Committee of the Red Cross, spoke to the teams of volunteer doctors: The Americans (mine), the Swiss, French, Japanese, Aussies, Swedes and the British. "You all have to decide whether you are a One: If there is active shelling by the Vietnamese or the Khmer Rouge you want your team to stay; Two: If there is a history of shelling that day you will be available; or, Three, if there is a chance of shelling you want to be evacuated." Each of us was responsible for a team of nurses and assistants. A large responsibility. As I was trying to decide between One and Two, Pierre announces to the entire group, "Larry, you're team is a Three."

Later, sheepishly, I asked him why we were singled out for "protection?"

“Larry, if a thousand Khmers die tonight, the world won’t give a shit; if I or say the French die, it will make back pages of *Le Monde*. But if you or Americans die it will fuck up the entire relief effort.”

I had left my practice in a small rural Northern New Mexican town because I wanted to help in Cambodia. I remember staring at a photo of Rosalyn Carter, in *Time Magazine*, holding a frail Cambodian child. The other doctors felt the same. Like the Australian mother who weaned her own daughter so she could breast feed malnourished Cambodian infants—scores of infants; she would go from malnourished child to another, offering her milk; until she became so malnourished herself, that we had to send her home.

Every day, all day, treating mine injuries, cholera, malaria, and the terrible, wonderful, haunting hollowed-eyed children. I saw more people die in those three months than I would in the next thirty-five years of practice in New Mexico.

Then, one morning at the Camp, in walks a Cambodian man with glasses. As far as I knew, glasses had been forbidden by the Khmer Rouge—a sign of intellectualism, a signal of Western influence, an education denied to most Khmer—elitism.

It turned out that Damry knew a few words of English. (Another sign of Western influence). The Khmer Rouge were reacting to the bombing and invasion policies of Nixon and Kissinger who carpet-bombed the northern portion of Cambodia during the years of the Vietnam War. We soon learned of their “over reaction” in the mass killings, jailing, executions and decimation of their culture: no dancing, no religion—when Khmer Rouge took power in 1975, they emptied the one million residents of Phnom Penh in one day, April 17, 1975. When they gained power, there were 50,000 Buddhist monks; by 1979 there were 500. We were told that 1.7 million Cambodians perished. “Death by starvation, death by disease, death by execution...” Crossing Three Wildernesses, as poet U Sam Oeur put it.

Damry was a thin, short man, with dark black hair. His lips were thin, and his eyes were huge. He hesitated on his words, speaking slowly, each word enunciated. English was this third language; he also spoke French. He was one of the gentlest people I've ever met.

I was in charge of the "hospital," and to have Damry was a godsend. I needed translation, and he fit the bill as best he could. He'd follow me on my rounds, right behind me, learning both medicine and more English. He worked as hard as anyone; harder actually. He worked with me all day long and was left in charge at night.

At night we (the doctors and nurses) were evacuated by the Thais to a huge field with corrugated cardboard houses; they told us that was for our safety. I doubted it. One day I came back into the camp, and saw fresh blood stains on the bamboo beds. When I had left that evening, there were 200 patients. Now there were only a handful. What, I wondered, had happened? History never recorded this. But neither did I. I was so involved with the day-to-day tragedies--almost moment-to-moment--that I simply dove into work. I did ask Damry, "What happened? Was it the Vietnamese, Khmer Rouge? Was it executions, or did they just leave, forced out?" Damry, said only, "It was a bad night Dr. Larry."

One morning making rounds with Damry, we visited a 38-year-old man, actively dying. He was coughing blood, probably untreated tuberculosis, dysentery and malnutrition. We had no oxygen in this forgotten camp. Gasping for breath, his neck sucking in, his intercostal muscles struggling for air. The man was dying, and I could not help. I asked Damry to tell the patient, "Reach out to the Buddha." In retrospect, I remember Damry's look—puzzled. Yet in his respect for me, he obliged. Damry spoke to the patient; the dying man responded. They both looked down. I tried again, (can you believe it?). "Damry, tell him to reach out to the Buddha." The man turned his head and uttered a few words. "What did he say, Damry?" Damry paused. "He says he's got diarrhea, doctor."

In June, Damry and I had been working together for three months straight, seven days a week. It is difficult for those who have never been in a war zone, especially if you are a civilian, to imagine what our days were like. On what would be my last day there, Damry and I agreed to

leave the “real” world, if only for an hour, and share a lunch together, and away from the hospital. We wandered out, walkie-talkie on my shoulder (to alert me, not Damry, about invasions or evacuations). Through dusty dirt fields, placing our feet with care, to avoid mine fields, Damry insisting to go first, we approached the two-story watch tower, where ordinary Khmers could view the forest, to see who or what might be coming for them. The forest was also where couples went to make love. One day, two bodies were brought into the hospital on a bamboo stretcher, naked, intertwined. Their legs had been blown off; they must have lain down together upon a land mine. Making love in a field mined by hate.

To this watch tower, we went with American food: two oranges, two cokes, a tin of tuna, and the Khmer’s staple, white rice. We ate with our fingers. We spent the longest time together in the three months without interruption. We just sat, together, eating, observing the sky. Damry, in his gentle way, said, “Dr. Larry, I know your heart.”

After our hour, we looked down, and surrounding us were hundreds of people, many smiling. Perhaps they were smiling at our friendship; or the quietness of my radio, sharing with us a peaceful moment, isolated in time.

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"Khun Katoey"

by Gillian Craig

Aging katoey you are
still dressed and ready
in floral red and white frills,
black lycra, red hotpants:
your gentle flashy armour.

Hair brittle and voluminous,
like the mane of an elderly lion,
and your face, in older age,
is reverting to former contours
no makeup can camouflage.

This may be the hardest defeat of all,
or merely a skirmish
in a much greater campaign.
Weary-looking lioness,
you hold your head high.

Strut on, lady.
Your smile is beautiful.

"The Hanoi Light Brigade"

by Gillian Craig

In the brightness
of a morning street,
a haunch-squatting man
with crows and thuds sweeps
his rival's pieces from the board in
shadows of sunlight.

In the madness
of a midday street,
a cyclo-perched man,
without hands or eyes sweeps
round a corner, as his cigarette
is lit using both.

In the darkness
of a midnight street,
a bare-chested man,
with a witch's broom sweeps
the moon, the stars and all the streetlights
into a puddle.

"Butterflies"

(Killing Fields of Choueng Ek, Cambodia)
by Gillian Craig

Some notices translated from the French
which blurted facts with sickening honesty.
A typed and tattered card, a dusty trench:
syntactics of unreal reality.
The trees, the ground, the bones, the empty holes,
conductors of the screaming in my ears.
An ossuary can't contain the souls
of lives cut short in mad and cruel years.
But floating lightly over other fields
were swelling surging shocks of butterflies
held back by an impenetrable shield:
they could not dance where fear emulsifies.
There are so many brutal reasons why
on killing fields, the butterflies don't fly.

"The Odd Couple"

(Silom, Bangkok)

by Gillian Craig

An oddly matched pair
with an air of discomfort
choose chairs and they sit down in silence.

There's something quite new
in those two at the table
whose well of expression seems barren.

There is a TV
he can see from his chair
and he seizes the chance to engage her.

His pidgin rings out
in a shout and I guess
that last night was some date or transaction.

She just doesn't care,
smooths her hair, looks away
and the awkwardness steams from the coffee.

It's then, as I think
it's the brink of goodbye,
that I notice the rings on their fingers.

* * * * *

"One Day on a Red Jeepney"

by Brandon S. Roy

This is an automatic motion
to shift funds from hand A to driver B
It looks ordinary but it's really a magic trick

The girl sitting across from us
makes the sign of the cross
she makes it again
and again

This is her magic trick to ensure her safety
inside the sealed jeepney exposed
to the midday sun

The girl makes the sign of the cross again
Her motion of the divine makes my angst rise
She knows something the rest of us don't

I pretend not to notice her actions
I put my head down, slump in my seat
and stare at the floor waiting for my stop

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"Awakening in a Lightning Storm"

(Somewhere in Southeast Asia)
by Jen Ashburn

I hear thunder but think it's music
from a bar in Phnom Penh. I hear
music but think it's a call to prayer
from a mosque in Penang. No, it is thunder,
and under mosquito netting I open my eyes and see

black trees below, where the cicadas screech.
Clear night above, steady starlight.
A thick horizon hidden in between.
Lightning strikes, and the clouds ignite.

Then I know—I am in a stilt house in a jungle
at the crest of a valley. The others are sleeping.
Traveling companions, near strangers.
I listen to their quiet breath, and alone

I behold the dark, the heat, the lightning—
the flash of plum-lit sky.

"Excerpt from the Notebooks--Si Phan Don, Laos (The 4,000 Islands)"

(Don Khone)
by Jen Ashburn

Under the *mai yang* trees a girl dances
as she walks—a strut, a sway of her young hips.

She drags two water buffalo by the rings
in their curlicue noses, the rings tethered
to a sawed-off goat's horn she holds
over her shoulder like an axe.

Like a baton,
a talisman.

It is hers, hers, and she marches—a girl
who won't fear thousand-pound bulls
that only need to quicken their pace
to break her as she sings. As she dances.
As she walks and smacks her lips.

* * * * *

"1983"

by Kim Nguyen

Jagged edges
of coconut, mango and durian
trees touch the moonlit sky.
My daughter sleeps,
curled like a cat in my lap.
A thin and frail thing,
barely through her third year
of suffering.
My son sits beside me,
one short arm about my waist.
The other holding on
to his sister's shoulder.
The little protector.
His bulging eyes
stare into the mysterious silence
that surrounds us.
Farther and farther
away we drift,
fearful,
into the night,
toward the "land of opportunity",
where "money grows on trees".
And everyone has
a house, a television, a car
and always enough to eat.

"1994"

by Kim Nguyen

Mama,
if you knew in 1983
money does not "grow on trees",
and you would have to work
twice as hard
for my books,
would you row
across the ocean
to waste away
two years
in a refugee camp
before America
opened its doors?
Then suffer
ten more years
the sneers
and snickers
from white and black faces
who say you took their places?
Would you be here, today?

"1995"

by Kim Nguyen

She cries and pleads with me
to not let my education flee.
She doesn't understand
the pressure placed on me
to be the perfect son.
To make my life seem
worth something.
Years ago, our mother
placed us in a boat
at the darkest hour
of the night.
My sister's cries
from mosquito bites
crushed my soul.
I tried my best
to fight them off,
and clear her way
for our new life.
I tried my best to be the best,
so she would not sway.
Her accomplishments and honors
now cover the walls
of our small house.
And I can have my life
to live as I please.