

# *A n a k S a s t r a*

## Issue 20

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## Contributor Bios

[William Tham Wai Liang](#) is currently a cherry analyst born in Kuala Lumpur but currently working in the Okanagan valley. He writes to pass the time and also to preserve any interesting stories that he comes across.

**Thomas De Angelo** is an author in the United States with a particular interest in Southeast Asia. If any readers wish to comment on his story, he can be reached at ThomDeAngelo{at}aol.com.

**Barry Rosenberg** was brought up in England but moved to Australia after completing a Ph.D. After a few years, he left research to concentrate on tai chi and meditation. He started writing poetry around 1974 before moving into writing stories and plays. He lives on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland where he combines writing with woodwork. Since 2008 he has been active in sending material out and has published 3 novels ([\*Call of the Swami\*](#); [\*Glide in Slowtime\*](#); [\*The Buddha Leaves\*](#)) and 20 short stories, and has won or been commended in a few competitions.

[Lindsay Boyd](#) is a writer, personal carer and traveller still waiting for his boat to come in. When not emulating his poetic heroes, among them Dostoyevsky, Hesse, Kazantzakis and Cavafy, he likes to rub shoulders with marginalised people and look after gardens, pets and houses he does not own. While no reflection on his attention span in maths classes at school, he long ago lost count of his publications and the number of countries he has been in.

**Hank Herreman** retired from teaching after 33 years and now works part time at the St. Joe County Public Library where writing blogs is part of his duties. He and his wife, Bonnie, live in Granger, Indiana. They still keep in close contact with Kim and Seng Ly.

**Iris Orpi** was born and raised in the Philippines and currently resides in Lansing, Illinois. Her poems have appeared in more than a dozen online and print publications around Asia, the US and the UK. She is the author of an illustrated novel, [\*The Espresso Effect\*](#) (2010), two books of compiled poems, [\*Beautiful Fever\*](#) (2012) and [\*Cognac for the Soul\*](#) (2012), and is a part of a Filipino book of collected biographies.

**Carl Wade Thompson** is a poet and instructor of writing at Texas Wesleyan University. He has been deeply influenced by his travels to Thailand.

**Clara Ray Rusinek Klein** is the founder and editor in chief of [A Quiet Courage](#), an online literary journal of microfiction and poetry in 100 words or less. Her one-hundred-word story “Defector” was chosen as the winner of the April 2015 Photo Story prompt on *100 Word Story*, and her one-hundred-word story “Ostdeutschland” was chosen as an Editor’s Pick on *Postcard Shorts*.

**Abigail Bautista** (Twitter: @wanderingdakini) was born in Manila, Philippines. She now works as a full-time editorial associate for Barnes and Noble. She holds a B.A. in print journalism from St. Scholastica’s College. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Off the Coast*, *Stone Highway Review*, *Blackberry Magazine*, *North American Review*, *MEAT FOR TEA: the Valley Review*, *Porkbelly Press* and *Arsenic Lobster Poetry Journal* among others.

**Gerard Sarnat** received his education at Harvard where he was the editor of the freshman literary magazine *The Yardling*, and Stanford. He established and staffed clinics for the disenfranchised, has been a CEO of healthcare organizations, and was a Stanford professor. He is published in over a hundred journals and magazines and is the author of three critically acclaimed collections: [Homeless Chronicles: From Abraham to Burning Man](#) (2010), [Disputes](#) (2012), and [17s](#) (2014) in which each poem, stanza or line has 17 syllables. In 2015 he was featured as *Songs of Eretz Poetry Review’s* Poet of the Week with one of his poems appearing daily, the second poet ever to be so honored. He and his wife of 45 years split their time living above their daughter’s family’s garage and in their son’s family’s yurt between the Klamath River and Marble Mountains.

**Gary Singh** (Twitter: @gary\_singh) is an American travel journalist with a music degree who publishes poetry, paints and exhibits photographs. As a scribe, he’s published nearly 1,000 works including newspaper columns, travel essays, art and music criticism, profiles, business journalism, lifestyle articles, poetry and short fiction. His poems have been published in *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Dirty Chai*, *Maudlin House* and more. He is the author of [The San Jose Earthquakes: A Seismic Soccer Legacy](#) (2015, The History Press).

**Pauline Lacanilao** is a writer and development worker living in Manila, Philippines. Her work has been published in *Kritika Kultura Literary Journal*, *Journal of English and Comparative Literature*, *Women’s Voices for Change*, and *Eastlit*.

A Native New Yorker, **James Penha** (Twitter: @jamespenha) has lived for the past quarter-century in Indonesia. He has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes in fiction and in poetry. *Snakes and Angels*, a collection of his adaptations of classic Indonesian folk tales, won the

2009 Cervena Barva Press fiction chapbook contest; *No Bones to Carry*, a volume of his poetry, earned the 2007 New Sins Press Editors' Choice Award. Penha edits *The New Verse News*, an online journal of current-events poetry.

[Lana Bella](#) has a diverse work of poetry and flash fiction anthologized, published and forthcoming with more than ninety journals, including a chapbook with Crisis Chronicles Press (2015), *Aurorean Poetry*, *Chiron Review*, *Contrary Magazine*, *Poetry Quarterly*, elsewhere and Featured Artist with *Quail Bell Magazine*, among others. She resides in the coastal town of Nha Trang, Vietnam with her novelist husband and two frolicsome imps.

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## **July 2015 featured author interview with William Tham Wai Liang**

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

I write to express things that I don't normally say, which allows me a certain flexibility in getting messages or topics across without the awkwardness or reservations that normally accompany conversations. My primary motivation for writing is simply my desire to have something published and made public for readers to explore and question, and to a lesser extent, it's the thrill of seeing my name in print.

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

When writing, I usually go between two extremes. Sometimes I get struck by ideas, more often than not regarding people in out-of-place situations, like a diplomat being recalled over seditious remarks, or a ghostwriter searching for her equally ghostly past. I spend some time letting those ideas simmer in my mind for a bit before getting down to the actual writing process, where I will usually write or type agonisingly slowly before losing interest. One day that spark of inspiration will come back, and I will simply sit down and write all day without a break--the adrenaline is enough to keep me going to the end.

### **Q. You work as a biochemical laboratory analyst and have also made short films. How do either of these tie in with your writing? Or do they reside in completely separate realms in your life?**

I briefly worked in biochemical analysis in Interior BC as part of my co-op or internship year, and right now I'm on a work placement in China for some reason. I did dabble in making short films for some time a few years back, but that's mostly just a hobby now. They don't tie in to my writing per se, but I have certainly met some interesting people and heard interesting stories through them--so in that sense, life inspires art.

### **Q. You were raised in an urban setting in Malaysia but now live in rural Western Canada. In what ways has this contrast in physical environment (and cultures) aided your writing?**

I grew up in KL for some time before moving to nearby Petaling Jaya, and then I suddenly found myself as a student in Canada without totally comprehending how I ended up there. I live in the Greater Vancouver area in British Columbia, so definitely not rural--although I have spent some time in a small Canadian town in the Okanagan Valley and served eight months in Edmonton--a

quiet and sometimes almost lifeless city right on the edge of the prairies. By moving from one edge of the Pacific to the other, the shifts in perspectives have been huge, I really grew up after running into all sorts of situations in my four years on the West Coast, and this newfound maturity really helped me out as a writer. I was particularly entranced by the spread of the Malaysian Diaspora in Canada--the old guy playing badminton in Richmond was formerly a middle-aged uncle from Cheras, while the wife of a retired major in the Reserves also hailed from the Peninsula. These stories of suddenly-displaced people sometimes find their way into my fiction, since I am in the same situation myself.

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

In the middle of the summer of my first year, I jumped on a train at the old KL station that took me south. I hopped off at Kluang where the Sultan would sometimes eagerly take the train to the cafeteria for its famous coffee, and then slept on the rickety Jungle Railway to end up in Tumpat, waking up in the gangway and watching the rolling flatlands and distant mountains of the East Coast rolling past, before stumbling over to Georgetown and back home again. I had never travelled through Malaysia on my own before and my appetite for adventure had been ignited by my adventures as a freshman. It was a glorious week on the road, being a traveler in a country that I had left behind.

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## **"Nasiruddin"**

by William Tham Wai Liang

Nasiruddin stirred. The bedroom of the old shophouse was filled with the detritus of someone else's life: photographs and sewing-machines and boxes of silverfish-infested books and musty clothes from another decade. He lay in the very same bed that Comrade Ah Chuen had slept in many times before during sojourns in the Kinta Valley. Perhaps the leaders of the rebellious 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment had once stayed there too. Countless other Party members would have hidden in the shophouse, their pockets filled with codes and bullets for the rifles they would pick up in the jungle camps, but most of them were now dead, executed in the purges, slaughtered by the police and the bombs that rained earthward, or felled by the starvation that pervaded them during the long marches.

\*

Siu sold bicycles in the shop below. They were stacked forlornly to one side of the room, awaiting owners just like the new flats that had mushroomed over the last few heady years, already greying while the tin miners began pulling their investments out. In the evenings, she locked up the shop while security vehicles patrolled the streets, enforcing the latest curfew. The jati stairs creaked as Nasiruddin pushed past the grille on the bottom rung that keep the rats away, and he emerged silently on the stone floor of the shop amidst rusting bicycles that had been salvaged from the fleeing Japanese at the end of the last war.

"Do you remember when it ended?" Siu asked suddenly from behind the immense counter, her ledger neatly filled in beneath the dim electric lights. "The MCP was everywhere. I was a girl then, watching from the Padang while the Communists drove into town with trucks of prisoners freed from the jail. One of them was my father. That was the first time I ever saw them."

Nasiruddin listened. He did not speak much nowadays.

Siu regarded him with tired eyes. Nasiruddin remembered her a lifetime ago, when she was a volunteer in the olive-green uniform as they marched through jungles, across the mountainous spine of the peninsula and towards a vague dream of a red paradise. She was still fighting for the Cause from the safe house on Jalan Bandar Timah, despite the fact that age had started to creep up on the both of them.

“This is the man the Central Committee wants dead. He is Kwan Toh Eng,” Siu said, looking up from the dossier that she usually kept buried in a pile of old records dusty with age. “He’s back in his ancestral house in Ipoh. He’s on leave from his bank at the moment and is trying to keep a low profile here. Things haven’t been going well for him since the British left.”

Nasiruddin read the documents. Kwan was a typical middle-aged Chinese towkay. He looked ordinary. He was the Chairman of the United Straits Bank, headquartered in Jalan Ampang, and had returned to the ancestral home of the Kwan clan. Reasons for assassination? Kwan had been an informant during the war, accepting kickbacks from Japanese generals whom he happily pointed to the MCP strongholds in the mountains while continuing to keep his fledgling business afloat after desperately torturing the knowledge out of his guerrilla nephew who had come for him for help. He had hushed up his complicity by persuading the Kempeitai to butcher most of his confidantes, one of whom fled and joined the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, informing them that Kwan had made a killing by importing arms to be used against the Communists in the subsequent purges.

*‘This is in line with the Central Committee’s decision to pursue a strategy of increased militancy to fight the corrupt Malaysian administration, by showing that we are not afraid to punish anti-revolutionary sentiments amongst its cronies. The people have been subjected to racism and unspeakable barbarity-as long as the current Administration remains in power, traitors like Kwan will continue to profit from the butchering of the proletariat...*

“They want him terminated swiftly,” Siu told Nasiruddin when he returned the dossier. “Comrade Yat informed me that Kwan is leaving in a week’s time on January 25<sup>th</sup>. He needs to be targeted while he is out of Kuala Lumpur. He is also accompanied by an Indian bodyguard called Mohan.”

Nasiruddin nodded again and left for the kitchen where rations had been delivered by the local Min Yuen. He turned around at the door, half-expecting Siu to follow him. But she remained where she was. So he continued alone.

\*

“Are you sure that you can handle it?” Ah Chuen said the day before after they clambered aboard the train at Johor Bahru, their tickets paid for with the money extracted from the pockets of the traitorous Lim, whom they had left for dead in a mill outside town.

Nasiruddin nodded.

“Good,” Ah Chuen said as he swung the door of the compartment shut. There were whistles from outside as blue-uniformed conductors, watched by stern policemen, closed the doors, and the train rocked abruptly as they began the journey north. Nasiruddin understood what was expected of him. While Ah Chuen was summoned from advising the Workers’ Unions in the south to investigate the rogue 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Nasiruddin was tasked with performing assassinations. Three traitors had already been killed.

Ah Chuen opened two bottles of beer, handing one to Nasiruddin as they began rolling past the hills and over the bridges that would take Nasiruddin to Ipoh and Ah Chuen to Padang Besar, where some of their Thai comrades would take him into the interior to track the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment down.

“Do you still think of her?” Chuen asked.

“Siu?” Nasiruddin asked distantly, sipping his drink.

“Yes.”

“She means nothing to me now,” Nasiruddin replied coldly. “It was simply an affair. It happened only because her husband was absent. We were both stupid.”

Ah Chuen stared outside. “How strange, kan, that sometimes you find hope in the midst of despair. Even when you’re being starved out by those bastards in the Security Forces, with no idea if you will be alive tomorrow or gunned down by Iban mercenaries in your sleep, you still dream. You know, I can ask Comrade Choy to take your place instead--he has been itching for redemption ever since allowing Hor Leung to escape the hanging.”

“I am fine.”

\*

Under the shade of some of the trees planted by the City Council, Nasiruddin waited. His skin prickled even in the shadows, sipping teh ais from a plastic bag as he watched the roads. Kwan's Mercedes, inherited from one of his millionaire ancestors who had made a fortune from the mines, had stopped outside the Courthouse, where he spoke to some of his former Oxbridge friends who had schemed their way into influence. There had been no sign of Mohan, who was probably still sitting inside the tinted-glass car with the air-conditioning turned up to escape the blistering heat. Kwan emerged fifteen minutes later, and Nasiruddin tailed the car through the Old Town on Siu's motorcycle to a fancy restaurant which had once been the headquarters of one of the Hakka associations, now said to be owned by the triads who operated massage parlours throughout the Kinta Valley.

Nasiruddin had learnt to be anonymous. Sometimes, when he looked at mirrors, he hardly recognised his own reflection. He could have been anyone: the Indonesian construction workers in New Town, the security guard at a posh club in Taiping, or even one of the plantation hands who picked up their joloks to pull down oil palm fruits. He could walk past a policeman on a city street and not be connected with the execution of the rebels in the mountains or the beating of a racist Englishman when he was a boy in Teluk Anson.

Each evening Kwan was delivered to a nightclub called the Albuquerque, filled with GROs and desperate women not far removed from the prostitutes in the old Concubine Lanes. Nasiruddin kept watch. He needed to find the right time to kill Kwan.

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Siu was tense when Nasiruddin returned the motorcycle, wheeling it past the grille doors under the swiftlets that hung from their nests along the ceilings of the five foot way.

"Did you see Kwan?" she asked once Nasiruddin had locked up, evading the glare of the jumpy night-watchmen who hoped to avoid seeing a bloodbath on the streets.

"His schedule is not difficult to follow. He spends most of his day in the town and his nights at the rich man's club off Jalan Sultan Iskandar."

“With any luck your job will be over soon,” Siu said. “Madam Wong delivered more food today. She sent over some chicken rice. Consider it a treat. You should enjoy it while you’re here. I imagine that it is still difficult to get enough food out in the jungles.”

“We’re alright nowadays,” Nasiruddin admitted. “In Thailand...we have food. The Party has farms there. And if you are part of Central Committee, they send you to China. You can meet the Chairman.”

“It is so different now,” Siu said softly. “You do remember the old days, don’t you?”

His eyes met hers.

After he had eaten and offered his prayers to the heavens, praying for a divine intervention that would bring their fruitless struggle to an end, he found himself involuntarily thinking of Siu. He remembered their first meeting, when he was still part of the 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment, marching through kampungs to convince the villagers to join the struggle, while she had arrived at the camp beyond the limestone cliffs that ringed the valley, ready to join the struggle.

“Why do you wish to join us?” Ah Chuen had demanded back when he was simply a junior commanding officer in Perak, before his promotion to the Central Committee.

Siu’s husband had left town and joined the struggle two years before. Comrade Ching Kee had sold his inheritance in a heartbeat, left Siu at her father’s shophouse, and approached a member of the Min Yuen who had slipped him past the security checkpoints and into the jungles where he was presented with a gun, just like his old days as a Dalforce man. From time to time, Siu received letters from an illiterate, rubber-tapping courier who smuggled letters in the hollow buckle of his belt. In the letters, Ching Kee boasted of his time in the jungle: living rough like the Maoists who had marched through the Chinese badlands, sleeping under open skies and fighting off starvation while their plantations were doused in chemicals, fighting against the puppet army on their tracks as they resisted the imperialists. In the shophouse in the Old Town she had followed his exploits, trying to picture herself there beside him while her father coughed asthmatically, trying to eke out a living while his regular patrons were rounded up for questioning or thrown into New Villages. The final straw was when a business rival accused him of being a Min Yuen, and despite his protests, he had been beaten. She had left

after convincing her sister to return from Taiping to take care of him while she too joined the Cause to find him.

“Comrade Ching Kee is up north at the moment,” Nasiruddin informed her. He had once fought alongside the man, but Ching Kee’s violent moods and bouts of drunkenness that other soldiers were too afraid to reprimand were extreme. Ching Kee’s fighting prowess was needed up in Hulu Perak, where the MCP was running dogged attacks on the highway as troops were transferred back and forth between them and the East Coast, and it had been weeks since he had been transferred out.

“You wait first,” Nasiruddin said as gently as he could manage. “He will be back soon.” They had first met after Siu’s first nightly lecture, where they studied Marxist texts in the tent that doubled as the camp’s library. Ah Chuen had assigned him to look out for her until her husband returned to Perak.

“Why are you here?” she asked Nasiruddin. He shrugged. “My family was tortured,” he said. But he did not elaborate.

Siu trained with the guerrillas, taking to their dangerous jungle life. She learned to use a gun while Nasiruddin was called to and from the villages, trying to drum up support from reticent villagers who were happier keeping their doors shut when he came into town with leaflets and pogroms. Then the air strikes came and they were marching again. They left the Kinta Valley. They starved as their links with the Min Yuen were cut off, sleeping with their eyes barely shut as they expected to find death each morning, desperate for food and rest.

It came as no surprise when somehow, in the midst of the uncertainty and with the world falling apart as they marched on, they fell for each other.

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Nasiruddin watched.

Each night Kwan’s schedule never changed. While he sometimes went to the Turf Club in the day to gamble on horses, throwing away sums that would have brought in a month’s worth of supplies, he was always at the Albuquerque each night. Conversations with the old women who sold pudding in the alleys brought him rumours of the towkay’s doings. His bank was on its knees, and his divorced wife was hounding him for money with the help of his estranged lawyer

sons. His heaven-bound relatives urged him to be Confucian. Pressured, he had left the city to return to Ipoh, letting his assistants sort out his problems while he drank and ate and persuaded his friends to loan money to him. But each night the sums he scraped up were invested in the lines of bottles awaiting him in the club, and destined for the pockets of the women that he entertained.

One night, Nasiruddin had been startled when Mohan emerged from the car while awaiting his boss, stretching his legs as he wandered to the bridge overlooking the moonlit Kinta River. Nasiruddin had followed at a distance, transfixed. His suspicions had been right the whole time. So it was him after all! The same Sergeant Mohan who had rounded his family up one night many years ago after Nasiruddin had run away to join the MCP.

“Your son is a Communist!” the Sergeant had screamed at them under the glare of searchlights when his men drove into the village on the edge of Teluk Anson near the yards where ships were built by the river. “Where is he?”

His father stepped up to defend him despite their arguments over the years when Nasiruddin was still part of the anti-British student unions. And he was thrown to the ground by a laughing gaggle of bored, skinny farm boys from Kedah who took turns to punch him. “Pengkhanat bangsa!” they cursed him enthusiastically as he writhed.

“Your son was seen in Baling,” Mohan had snapped viciously. “He was distributing flyers. One of our boys who recognised him is from here. You know where he is? Tell us then!”

Nasiruddin knew this because when he had completed his training as a sniper, he had been granted permission to see his family again. Ah Chuen had released him from duty when they were patrolling near Setiawan, and he had put on the civilian clothes again. He had returned to find that his family was gone. In desperation he had even approached the neighbours, who had turned against him after the rumours first began. “Sergeant Mohan, at the station,” Pak Wahid had said edgily. “He beat your parents, he took them away. I don’t know where.”

Nasiruddin, sweating, had to run. The rest of the village must have seen him, and they weren’t going to help. They might have called the police already.

He did see Mohan once after his family had been deported. His cruel face in a uniform. Saluting the departing Resident on the eve of the bogus Merdeka in Ipoh. Nasiruddin, dispatched to kill a rogue Min Yuen, had wanted to walk up to Mohan and shoot him in the face out of anger. But the moment elapsed and Mohan was hidden behind a platoon of policemen, while he was forced out of the way as the motorcade departed for Ipoh Airport where a plane was already waiting. After that, it had proven impossible to find Mohan. Some said that he committed suicide to cover his gambling debts, others said he was demoted and working as a police clerk in KL. Nasiruddin never expected to see him as a lowly bodyguard to a corrupt banker.

Without warning, Mohan had turned. Both men stared at each other, and Nasiruddin wondered if he had been recognised. But Mohan turned back to the river, and Nasiruddin vanished silently into the shophouse.

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At night, he had a dream.

His son. Born in the camp, still crying. Siu had told the comrades that Ching Kee was the father, never telling them that their only meeting at the camp had been disastrous. Ching Kee had violently admonished her for performing a man's job in the silence of the night. Nasiruddin had wanted to walk forwards and to calmly slit the man's throat as he slept before departing for Kelantan. Siu certainly no longer loved him, in fact barely remembering anything but his brooding temper.

"We need to bring the baby somewhere else," Ah Chuen told Nasiruddin softly when he had visited Siu under the pretext of delivering medicines. "The child cannot be allowed to stay, his cries might attract attention."

Nasiruddin did not blink. He understood Ah Chuen's true meaning. The older man, soon to be promoted to the Central Committee as its members concluded the Peace Talks not far away, did not even look him in the face. "Do you understand?"

Yes.

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Nasiruddin remembered the ugly fury on Ching Kee's face when he was next back in camp, backtracking as his march neared Tanah Merah. He had entered the camp, screaming. "Where is the slut?" he cried, rousing the camp. Nasiruddin had awoken, instantly recognising the violent screams of his former trainer. He clambered outside to where Ching Kee had dragged Siu from the hospital tent by her hair and into the clearing where recruits had knelt to reload their rifles with military precision. He threw her down, telling her to give up the name of her lover, and Nasiruddin could no longer stand it. He raced forwards, and Ching Kee's red eyes bulged as he tried to reach for his pistol. "You goddamn bastard!" he spat in disgust, but Nasiruddin had already barrelled into him, both men brawling until they were pulled apart by the rest of the regiment.

After that, they went their separate ways. Ah Chuen knew just how efficient Nasiruddin was and refused to give him up for trial, claiming that Siu's real lover had been killed in a mortar strike some months previously. Ching Kee had not bought it, and he screamed into the radio that he was being lied to and that the entire regiment was full of spies and counter-revolutionaries, and that his own wife was a traitor! He was ordered to continue the march to the east, while Siu, despite her dedication, could not be allowed to continue. She had broken the rules and was lucky to escape the noose. Instead, Ah Chuen ordered her back to Ipoh to keep her shophouse open as a safe house and to wait for instructions.

Nasiruddin later heard that Ching Kee had been killed not far from the camp, and suspicion was that he had been unwittingly felled by the security forces patrolling the forests of Ulu Kinta. But Nasiruddin suspected Siu--he remembered her face, angry with regret, when she told him of Ching Kee's aloofness, his cruelty, and her cries that night when he assaulted her.

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Since then, he had seen her only twice. He was unable to get leave from the Party when the government pushed them back, and they hurried north instead. The armed struggle broke as they retreated across the Thai border, attempting to survive while their leaders left for China and their foot soldiers were retired to live mundane lives as shopkeepers and part-time gangsters.

He saw her again during an assembly in a hotel owned by a sympathiser in Golok; they had spoken briefly before he melted back into the camps but they were different people, their lives devoid of the violence and confusion of their days in the jungles. It was a conversation without emotion and without meaning. The second time he had seen her was when she came to the camp where he had been sent to help interrogate traitors with much-needed supplies, but although they had exchanged pleasantries, they parted as strangers.

“Do you ever think of our son?” she asked him on his fourth night in Ipoh after another night of tailing Kwan/Mohan.

They had never spoken of him since the night Ching Kee had returned to Perak.

“Sometimes,” admitted Nasiruddin. “Ah Chuen told me...he is somewhere safe. He does not know about us.”

“He told me the same thing,” she said. “I wonder how he is now. He must be a man by now. Could you imagine, he might be growing up in a rich man’s bungalow in Shah Alam or as a farmer in Perlis?”

“Perhaps,” Nasiruddin shrugged. He wondered if she was going to say anything else that would breach the terrible silence that had grown between them in all that time. Perhaps then he would come clean, telling her how he had given the child away.

“Mohan was here today,” she told him.

“The bodyguard?” Nasiruddin said suspiciously. “Why?”

“He said that he needed to borrow a patch for his car’s tyre. Apparently it was punctured by some rascals.”

Nasiruddin had started to sweat; he could imagine the staunch former Sergeant marching in the shop, his clipped voice echoing off the rafters. He had not seen the car all day. It was only at night when it had re-emerged as usual to bring Kwan to the nightclub. So that was where Mohan had been all day...wandering right into the safe house.

“You need to leave,” he said urgently. “They will find you.”

She smiled wearily. “I’m prepared,” she said. “Even though my father is dead, the deeds of this house are in his name. I am still considered a missing person. I contacted Ah Chuen to let

him know that the Sergeant has been around here. I have been ordered to leave, and tomorrow I will lock up the house. They have told me it is safer to go to Thailand.”

“Songkhla?”

“Yes.”

“My camp is there.”

“Ah Chuen planned this on purpose,” she said. But she continued looking stern and weary, the life drained from her. Nasiruddin said no more. The safe house was compromised, and he would have to kill Kwan the next day. And after that it was time to leave.

\*

A goodbye.

He exited first, and then she followed, locking the shop behind her. Faked documents in her pocket as she ventured out on to the streets as a revolutionary once more. He walked with her part of the way, but then he stopped at the bridge. He still had his task to complete.

He waited as she walked down the road. She looked back once, and perhaps, just perhaps, he could see her smiling back at him. But too fast she turned away, he blinked his eyes, and she was gone.

\*

The nightclub.

Nasiruddin nudged his way through the dancing crowd, full of rich old men and younger boys, but never older women, just ones fixated in their twenties. He found the unlocked exit. Good! It was just what he needed to make an escape. He passed within a few feet of Kwan, who ignored him, methodically drinking straight from a bottle without a care in the world. All he needed was for Kwan to come a few paces closer, and then he would act, shooting him with the pistol that the underpaid bouncers had neglected to check for. Then he would run to the edge of town, where he would vanish into the jungle, up the trails that he knew so well, and back into the spine of the peninsula...

Something pierced into his back, he had to gasp aloud. “Nasiruddin,” a man spoke into his ear. “You come with me.”

Mohan.

Nasiruddin felt himself being manhandled towards the exit, all the while feeling the sharpened blade of a knife between his ribs. "Dia mabuk," the former sergeant said dryly to the barman as they both moved slowly but surely for the exit.

Outside.

Once the door had swung shut, Mohan clamped a hand over Nasiruddin's mouth. "I would have killed you already if I wanted," he whispered silkily. "So you listen to me. If you move then I will stab you right away, and you will die.

Nasiruddin tried not to gasp for air or to show weakness.

"I am part of the MCP. I have been a member for years," breathed Mohan. "They took me in at the end of the Darurat once I was fed-up with the police. I was their spy. I told them all they needed to know, all they needed to survive against the Police..."

The blade dug deeper into Nasiruddin's back.

"This man Kwan is an ally to us," Mohan went on relentlessly. "I am waiting for the opportune moment to strike. He is on the verge of losing his money, and will be ruined soon. I was sent to be there when he snaps. That is why I work for him. Once he is ruined, he will make a deal with the head of the local militia in Kuala Lumpur to save his life. In return we will learn everything--the dealings made between the Alliance and the British, the traitors who betrayed Malaya to the Japanese, everything. All this knowledge will be ours if we wait. Ah, you have something to say? Be soft, or I will kill you. Remember, I am a former policeman. I will be forgiven in court."

"The Committee...ordered me to kill him..."

Mohan laughed bitterly. "You stupid man," he said. "That woman told you that. Am I right?"

Nasiruddin stilled.

"Yes, she too is a traitor. Did you think she could forgive you for what happened all those years ago after you killed your own son? She hated working with Ah Chuen despite the fact that she was still Red at heart. When she saw the opportunity to betray you both, she took it. She joined the traitors in the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment who killed Ah Chuen this afternoon. She has been leading you to kill Kwan, because by doing so you will have advanced the aims of the 8<sup>th</sup>

Regiment to create disorder rather than to try for peace by peaceful means. What is that? You don't believe me? If you obey, I will put you on the radio to speak with comrade Chin Peng himself! He will tell you I was justified in ordering the shooting the counter-revolutionary when she was alone on the train..."

Nasiruddin did not need to know anymore, no matter how much Mohan tried to persuade him that he had been advancing the aims of the breakaway 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment...

"Now, you have something to say?" Mohan loosened his grip, and blindly, Nasiruddin struck, feeling the blade jerking into his ribs as his fist smashed into Mohan's chin. The dazed policeman, or Communist, or both, fell back, gasping, while the knife still remained embedded in Nasiruddin's side as he too fell to the floor. His gun clattered to the ground beside him. The silencer was still screwed on.

The music inside reached a crescendo and he fired. Mohan fell, twitching, trying to let out a gasp for help. Nasiruddin fired again and it was over.

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Kwan exited the nightclub nervously. Dammit! There was no sign of his bodyguard anywhere. He was regretting the choice of hiring the alcoholic former sergeant, fired from his post for gross misconduct, as bodyguard. It was night, and the city was asleep as he stumbled outside drunk, the doors closing behind him as revellers continued to live as if the rest of their lives meant nothing at all.

Meanwhile Nasiruddin, his side bandaged but aching in pain, struggled to focus as the useless painkillers in the Mercedes-Benz failed to work. The pain was intense and bleeding into him, his bloodstains seeping into the fabric of the car. The keys that he had fished from Mohan's dead pockets were stained in blood too as he stopped beside Kwan, who thrust the door open instantly and clambered in without even turning to look at his driver. "Dammit, take me back to the house," he slurred his words. "There is nothing worth doing in this town."

Nasiruddin's shaky hand held up his pistol. Three gunshots rang out.

The car stopped by the bridge. Nasiruddin clambered out and opened the passenger door. The corpse, ridden with bullets, tumbled out under the moonlight, eyes wide open. He dragged it to the side of the road, and limped back to the driver's seat.

Everything was hazy as he drove on. He needed to contact Ah Chuen. But Ah Chuen was dead. He needed to contact Siu, to apologise, to tell her that he had loved her all that while even as she slid into the grasp of the rebel faction, but she too was dead, and he was dying too...

He drove into the night and across the bridge.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Fingertips Pointing to the Sky"**

by Thomas De Angelo

I was a young boy in Saigon in June of 1963; a typical youth with no understanding of the complexities of life, but I learned quickly. I wasn't religious then, although religion was at the heart of my problems. My mother followed the teachings of the Buddha as ninety percent of my country did. When she married my father he held the same beliefs as she, but he soon converted to Catholicism. The tensions that ensued in my family reflected those of my country, Vietnam: a country never without tensions. Whether those tensions are natural or political the results are the same; life is steadily disrupted. It happens in all facets of our lives. The monsoons come unpredictably and without warning and flood the Red River. The flood waters drive us all away from our homes. Just as sudden, and just as unpredictable, were the constant invasions through the centuries by Chinese, Japanese, Europeans, and, finally, Americans. Each time we were forced from our homes. Peasants like my family are perpetually being driven south in search of farmland and we followed the pursuit until there was no farther south to go.

Something impels a man; it can be greed, love, ambition or any other preoccupation. In father's case the drive came from the search for power. We toiled as farmers for generations, but that wasn't good enough for father. That was how we came to settle in the Mekong River delta and finally in Saigon. Father entered the military and quickly sought out and cultivated important friends just as he once planted and harvested the earth. Somehow he managed to have himself transferred to a regiment that guarded Prime Minister Diem. It allowed him to be close to the men who could further his career. That was when he became a Catholic, since Diem professed to be one, and then my troubles began.

The heat that June appeared softly and hung over us like a soft mesh cover. The scent of lotus blossoms and cassava added to the tranquility. Yet it remained outside and none of it

could penetrate the tensions existing once one entered our home. Mother did not understand father's actions, but she was aware that he and our country were changing. When Emperor Bao Dai, a puppet of the French, appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister all Buddhists experienced changes. After the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, Diem recognized his chance and soon Bao Dai was gone and Diem became our leader. Father discovered his opportunity soon after that and made up his mind to become a Catholic. Mother never condoned it, and I found myself in the middle of it all.

Mother intended to entrust me to a Buddhist temple for an education. I went there for six months, until father concluded that it would serve his career well if his son studied to be a Catholic priest. He decided that I should be converted and sent to a seminary. I heard my father talk authoritatively to my mother. Through the window in my room I looked out into the countryside. I could see the mist over the South China Sea. The rainy season began along with the steadily growing downpour of opposition against the Diem government. My mother showed her opposition to her husband only in her eyes.

I knew that the only way I could escape father's plans would be to run away. My plan was to build a raft and set out for Malaysia or Singapore. First, I resolved to say my farewells to my teachers at the temple and early one morning I left home. My feet pushed through the mud while a helicopter flew overhead. We were used to the French ones, but this one displayed American markings. Nine years passed since Dien Bien Phu and the French retreat. We all believed that we were finally finished with foreigners, making the sound of whirling helicopter blades disconcerting. I trudged through the muddied streets of Saigon.

When I arrived at the temple I hid under the steps when my superior came out accompanied by a Catholic priest. At first I thought it concerned me, but I overheard their conversation and realized I was safe for the moment. They were obviously continuing a conversation they already started. I heard the soft voice of my superior.

"Have you seen God?" he asked quietly.

“No, but I believe,” the priest answered.

“Do you believe he would condone what Diem is doing?”

The priest remained silent.

I watched from under the steps. The priest walked away. I followed my superior into the temple, waiting a few moments, so he wouldn't know I overheard his conversation with the priest. I explained my problem and what my father planned for me and sought his advice.

“What do you have against Catholics?” he asked in his soft voice.

I was surprised. I thought he would immediately come to my defense. I expected indignation on his part when he heard of my father's plan to send me to a seminary and have me convert.

“I don't know,” I answered after a few moments.

“All religions are similar. We all have rituals to perform, prayers to speak, and holy days to keep,” my superior spoke leaning forward. “It is personal conduct and your relationship to God that matters,” he added tapping my chest, over my heart, with his fingertips. “Listen to your heart.”

I came for answers, heard none, and now it appeared that I really did have to run away. He must have sensed my thoughts. Where before he spoke to the potential adult in me, he now spoke solely to the young boy in front of him.

“There is to be a celebration in honor of the Roman Catholic Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc.” (I knew that the archbishop was also Diem's brother, and I heard father speak of the upcoming festivities.)

“After that comes Buddha’s birthday and there will be another celebration. You should attend them both and see who visits your heart. I will then accompany you to your parents’ home and support your decision.”

I returned home feeling slightly better. The soft Saigon night smelled sweet as dusk fell. I had been gone only a half day, so no one questioned me. I slept well that night.

The day of the celebration for the archbishop arrived. Flags of the Vatican flew around the city, even on government buildings. It seemed strange. It appeared as if the ten-percent Catholic minority reversed with the ninety per-cent Buddhist population.

I felt a stranger in my own country. The festivities passed leaving me unchanged and I wondered if that was the sign for me to remain a Buddhist. I hoped that idea would be confirmed when Buddha’s birthday would be celebrated, but that never happened. Diem issued an ordinance, after the Catholic celebration, which forbade the carrying of religious banners. When the thousands of Buddhists arrived in the city Diem’s troops, my father among them, fired into the crowd and killed nine monks. When Buddhist leaders called on Diem he refused to do anything. More demonstrations followed.

Not many can pin point the exact time or place when they became an adult, but for me it happened on a busy Saigon street on June 2, 1963. I watched as Superior Thich Quang Duc sat down on the hot pavement and assumed the lotus position. He poured gasoline on himself and calmly lit a match. It is amazing how fast a human body burns. In a gesture to the priest who stood in the crowd, he clasped his palms together with his fingertips pointing upwards as the Catholics do when they pray. The fire consumed him and still he remained silent. The last thing I saw was the flames climbing up his fingertips that were still pointing upwards in a prayer position. The priest looked away. His hands curiously folded in a Buddhist position.

I stayed through the night while Thich Quang Duc's ashes smoldered. They said the only thing that didn't burn was his heart. He left that as an answer to me.

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## **"Ma'af, Jam Berapa?"**

by Barry Rosenberg

William Shakespeare once said, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." If the same is true about morality then Michael was one of those who had morality thrust upon them.

A bit of a larrikin, the young man had no particular aims when he left school. Surfing and discos were enough for him. Waiting tables was the easiest way to pay for his indulgences. But when he kept hearing stories about the waves and the women in Bali, he decided that he also had to visit the magic isle. By hoarding his wages, he soon had enough cash to go for three months. Surfing and nightclubs were his goal. But, despite himself, the magic isle cast its spell on him.

Michael returned home with a sense of purpose. He would go to university and study Indonesian. Not wanting to be all work and no play, he studied part-time and served coffee part-time. He was lucky. Living in Nambour on the Sunshine Coast, he was a comfortable drive from the beach resorts of both Mooloolaba and Noosa. So work was easy to find. The income meant that during the summer holidays, he could return to Bali and could go even further afield to Lombok or Java.

With his travels, Michael's knowledge increased and wherever he went, the locals were delighted to be able to chat with the fair-headed foreigner, even the girls. But although they laughed with him and lightly touched his tanned skin, he never managed to acquire one as a girlfriend. It irritated him, making him angry with their religions, their inhibitions and their belief in magic. Increasingly, he pushed for rational economic reasons for why things happened and superstitious stories made him increasingly angry.

Despite these quibbles, his six years of study passed quite happily as he became fluent in Indonesian, acquiring a good knowledge both of the country's culture and its economy. At the end of that time, he decided to live in Java for a year. His idea was to

acquire a postgrad qualification in Indonesian economic rationalism. Wanting to be a little off the beaten track, Michael finally decided on Malang, an attractive city set in the hills of east Java.

Excited by his plans, Michael now pushing twenty-five, kissed his Nambour girlfriend goodbye and flew from Brisbane to his first stop, Kuta. He considered this village as a sort of halfway house since it was one third Balinese, one third Japanese, and one third zinc-nosed, surfboard-carrying Australians. There, for a few days, he indulged before he was thrust into the more traditional world of Java.

With some regrets, Michael left Kuta on an overnight bus for Malang. The journey wasn't encouraging as the driver handled the old bus that took them to the tip of Bali as if it were a fighter plane avoiding enemy attack. At the port, the vehicle boarded a rusted ferry that Michael wouldn't have trusted in a calm bath. However, the magic isle did its trick, and they arrived safely in Java.

For the rest of the trip, Michael had the mercy of sleep and didn't have to suffer the slings and arrows of the many near misses that the night time journey had to offer. He moved into a light doze when the sun rose. A couple of hours later, the bus pulled into Malang. Michael was awake but still bleary-eyed when he tumbled out of the bus and was assailed by the waiting hawkers.

"You want becak?"

"You want Rolex?"

"You want cheap hotel?"

Knowing where he wanted to go, the young man pointed at a becak, a bicycle with a small covered carriage attached to its front. "How much to Losman Jawa?" he asked.

"One thousand."

"Three hundred," Michael replied in fluent Javanese.

Quick to realise that he was dealing with no amateur tourist, the becak driver agreed and Michael climbed into the carriage with his two cases. He was taken to a long white building with a roof of sloping red tiles.

"I've booked a room," he said, handing across his passport.

The receptionist checked his computer. "Ah, yes, here we are. Room 34."

Michael picked up his cases and went in the direction indicated, passing a garden rich with tropical flowers. He entered his room, a large area with its own bathroom. The whole space was spotlessly clean. The toilet did require that he squat. But the young man was okay with that; he'd already stretched his hamstrings while in Bali.

Still somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, he went to the restaurant. Surrounded by flowering bushes, he ordered fresh pineapple juice, an egg jaffle and Javanese coffee. That came strong but too sweet because it contained condensed milk.

Stomach full yet still tired, Michael returned to his room and slept until midday. A second coffee, together with lunch, brought him more fully awake and so he decided to make his first foray into the college. His professor was in and was delighted to see him.

"Please, please you come. Sit, sit. I must practice my English."

But Michael hadn't come this far to speak English and so he replied in Indonesian. For a short while a battle of wills took place until the professor, with obvious relief, complied.

"I'm staying at a losman," Michael said. "You think I could rent a house or an apartment?"

"Yes, yes." The professor beamed. "The college has an office to help you to find accommodation."

Michael found the accommodation officer and left the college grounds with a few addresses to check out. Pleased with this, he returned to the losman. His sense of pleasure took a dive, however, when he spotted a Western couple in the restaurant.

"Hello," the man called.

Rather reluctantly, Michael approached them. "You're English?" he asked.

"Australian," the man replied, "from Canberra."

Michael's heart sank. But staying polite, he asked, "And what are you doing here?"

"We're on our way to Solo," the woman said. "There's supposed to be a great meditation teacher there."

"Meditation?" Michael frowned with displeasure. "With so much poverty in this country, don't you think it's more important to understand its economic problems?"

The man blinked. "Actually, no. I think spiritual values are more important."

"I think they've prevented development!"

“But don’t you feel the magic here?” the woman cried. “It’s in the very air.”

“Superstition!” Michael snapped. Exhaustion swept over him. The travelling, the heat and of course this silly talk had gotten to him. “Excuse me.” He yawned. “I’m really tired. I’ve got to get some sleep.”

“It’s because you’re resisting the magic,” the women called.

Michael flapped a hand and hurried away. Magic! Silly talk! His brain reeling, he dropped onto his bed and slept. The next day, he awoke refreshed and went to look at houses. By the end of the week, he had found a little cottage with rough white walls and a sloping red-tiled roof. He also bought a bike, and he wobbled through the chaotic traffic on it. Then--the cream on the cake--his professor even arranged for him to tutor in English.

With the extra money, Michael felt all set for an enjoyable, if mostly celibate, year of studying Indonesian economic development. When not studying, he learnt to bargain in the market and to tend his garden. Once or twice a week, he dropped into his old losman to yarn with travellers. But most of the time, he was quite happy speaking Indonesian and even started to learn the older Javanese languages.

Travelling by his bike or bus, Michael saw that although there was little public affection between adults, there was an incredible amount directed at the babies. Nor were the local women overtly sexual – in contrast to Australian women. He really had moved from a modern society into a traditional one. The depths of which were to provide him with a profound shock.

The whole business began on one of those steamy days when he was travelling to college by bus. Dreaming of nothing, he was vaguely aware that a young woman had sat next to him. Wearing tight slacks and shirt, plus bright red lipstick, she looked unusually modern.

As Michael absorbed this, he also noticed that she was flicking little glances at him. Not being a shy man, he resorted to a familiar line and said, “Excuse me, d’you know the time?” The girl smiled at him but also shook her head to show that she didn’t understand. Realising that he had spoken in English, Michael quickly said, “Ma’af, jam berapa?”

Surprised at his faultless accent, the girl exclaimed, “Oh, you speak Bahasa!”

Yes,” he continued, “I’m studying here.” Then to further confound her, he added in Javanese, “I’m doing research into the economic causes of change. “

“Economic?” she echoed then laughed briefly. “I think you’ll find many other causes for change here.”

“Superficially, perhaps.” Michael put on his I-know-it-all tone. “But at a deeper level...” And he launched into an exposition of his ideas. At his stop, he rose, still talking. The girl followed after him. “You’re also at the college?” he exclaimed.

“Yes, I’m doing business studies.”

Michael, thinking how nice it had been to talk with her, said, “Would you like to meet for coffee?”

After a moment’s hesitation, the girl murmured, “Yes, that would be nice. “

Very pleased with himself, Michael went to his lecture and took notes with a big smile on his face. At their agreed time, he went to the college coffee shop and the young woman arrived soon after.

Not sure whether or not to shake hands, Michael said in Bahasa, “My name is Michael. What’s yours?”

“I’m Yatri.” The young woman smiled. “I have seen pictures of kangaroos and koalas. Please tell me about Australia.”

Over coffee, they discussed their two countries. They headed for the bus together and on the walk, Michael said, “Would you like to come to my house for dinner one evening?”

Yatri walked a few steps in silence. “Okay,” she said slowly. “I would like to see how a Westerner cooks.”

Michael returned home so elated that any bookwork was beyond him. Instead, he dug in his garden until he sweated. Sleep took ages in coming and, when it did, his dreams were full of Yatri.

On the evening that she came to eat, Yatri looked slim and beautiful in a traditional costume of dark batik. “When I am not at college,” she said. “I follow the old ways.”

Michael danced about her, eager to please. The dinner went so well that they met again and again, taking moonlight walks by the temples, splashing along jungle rivers, or eating at street-side warungs.

Three weeks after their first meeting, Yatri came a second time for dinner. Michael also had other plans, hopes that had him spilling drinks and burning dishes. His

nervousness made Yatri laugh. With their after dinner drinks, Michael led Yatri to a long cane lounge chair. He sank into the cushions and put his arm around her. As she didn't resist, he gradually leant towards her until his lips touched the smooth chocolate of her cheek. It was so nice, he sought out her lips and they kissed.

It was delicious, hot chocolate with brandy. They kissed and kissed again. It wasn't long before, Michael's eager hands were tugging at the buttons of her blouse. Yatri was quite comfortable to shrug off her bodice. But she demurred when he tried to go any further. But Michael was more than satisfied. This had gone way beyond his wildest expectations.

The next week was a fantasy come true. They met nearly every day and they both glowed with intimacy. She came to his house most evenings until one night, the way was opened to the impossible. Yatri initiated it.

"Do you love me?" she murmured.

"Of course," Michael whispered, knowing that no other reply was possible.

"Truly?" Yatri gave an indescribably ineffable smile. Love justified all and the last defence came down.

Michael couldn't believe his luck. Her slim brown body was open to him. In an age-old trust, Michael, honourable in his own technological world, paused only to roll on a condom. "So that we don't make a baby," he said.

"Don't make baby?" Yatri echoed, puzzled for after all wasn't that the purpose of loving.

For the briefest of moments, Michael hesitated, aware of the social context of the act. However he was now under the influence of a force greater than social rationalism. He entered her, entering a world that was dark and smooth and honeyed.

It should have bonded them. Yet, it didn't. Michael still wanted to prove the superiority of modern rationalism over traditional superstition. This was why he was in Java. This was his role. He was given the chance to express this realisation when another young woman sat beside him on the bus one morning. As in the first meeting with Yatri, it was clear that she was interested in him.

With practised smoothness, he soon turned to her and said, "Ma'af, jam berapa?"

His fluency was as surprising to her as it had been to Yatri, and it wasn't long before he was explaining his thesis. Dewa was taken aback. "You think economics can account for our spiritual beliefs?" she exclaimed.

"It's more complicated than that." Michael frowned. "Look, what're you doing this afternoon?"

They arranged to meet and, one thing leading to another, it was only three weeks later that he found he had a decision to make. The upshot of it was that Dewa, by virtue of novelty, was more attractive to him than Yatri. The time soon came when he had to tell her.

"I've met someone else," he said.

To his relief instead of anger, Yatri only showed sadness. "And you love her?"

"Yes," he replied, also sadly, for that seemed to be appropriate.

"More than me?"

Michael hesitated, thinking only pop songs were about love. "Yes," he said eventually.

Yatri, puzzled and saddened by her entry into this aspect of the modern world, returned to a traditional role. Obeying the male, she slipped away from Michael and faded into his background. Dewa filled the vacuum. But not for long. A third young woman sat beside him and responded to his, "Ma'af, jam berapa?" within six months, and he thought himself to be in a veritable paradise. Not only sexually but also because he was demonstrating the superiority of the rational and the analytical over the irrational and the superstitious. His thesis developed in leaps and bounds.

With practise Michael grew slicker. Part of him wanted to go for an all-time record. A slighter part of him thought he should stop his shenanigans. Despite his thoughts, his actual behaviour continued. Then a strange fate intervened.

It didn't happen by chance. By now five young women had been through the grist of Michael's mill. It might not have mattered in Nambour, but it did in Malang. A communal embarrassment developed within the girls' network. Something had to be done.

Yatri convened a war council. "If this had happened in the old days, we would have been banished from our villages. As it is, it is bad enough. Michael is not an evil man, but evil is being done through him. His rationalism has emptied him of his love."

"Don't explain him away!" Dewa protested. "We can't let him go on like this."

“No,” Yatri agreed, “we must protect ourselves and we must protect him from himself. But how? Any ideas?”

“I have an aunt,” Dewa begun.

“And I a grandmother.”

“And I have a friend of a friend.”

Yatri listened, and it became clear how the women wanted to proceed. “We all have someone who knows the traditional ways,” she declared. “We will ask the old ones, and they will tell us what to do. That is appropriate.”

So on the following days, the five young women visited the wrinkled crones from whom they were descended. These tiny women cluck-clucked their gums at what the world was coming to. Then on spindly legs, they tottered into their gardens and dug amongst the darker corners where strange plants with strange limbs could be found. These they boiled into a mush. Next they added herbs and, with surprising strength, they pounded pestles into mortars to make a powerfully pungent potion. With whispered instructions, parchment hands held soft ones as incantations were added to the mix.

When the girls met again, they made a discovery which didn't really surprise them. Because the old crones were rooted in the same age-old traditions, they had come up with much the same solutions.

“In that case,” Yatri announced, “I will volunteer.”

There was a brief debate, but as the first victim, it was deemed fitting that she would be the one to recover their honor. So the next night after a day of fasting, they met again just as the sun was setting. Their meeting place was a pool at the jungle's edge, long sacred to the villages in that area. In the humid air, they stripped naked, knowing that this place was safe from prying eyes. Already clean, they first bathed themselves then the other four sprinkled water over Yatri. After that, each dressed in the traditional sarongs of their birthplace.

The women formed a circle with Yatri in the centre. At that point, their ancient relatives appeared, like shadows out of the jungle and formed a second outer circle. One of the crones began a chant. It was picked up by all of them, the girls a soft murmur, the elders a piercing wail.

Caught up in the incantation's rhythm, the women began to sway, the inner circle going one way, the outer the other. Yatri, in the centre, found herself torn, wanting to go both ways at once. At her side were the jars of potions. She took one up and smoothed some of the paste across her forehead. An elder then took the jar and spread more over Yatri before offering it to the other four.

A strange perfume drifted over the circles and the chanting changed. It became deeper and more complex as if other voices were singing through the women. The moon rose, a full yellow disc that cast a silver-golden light over the circles. Small creatures came close to investigate but slunk away into the green jungle, their fur standing up stiff.

Although they didn't eat or drink, neither hunger nor thirst came to the women. The incantation had become their food and the potion their spice. Yatri was the main receiver, the brews boiling in her blood. The circles continued to rotate in their different directions.

This time, however, Yatri didn't feel torn. She felt that she rotated with both circles. She felt strong. She glowed. Without moving, she spun. In her were united the swaying to the left and the swaying to the right. Without singing, she sang. In her, harsh voices were harmonised. Beneath the yellow moon, she was a brown, shining statue. Until the first fingers of dawn plucked the glittering stars out of the sky, she remained the center of their invoked forces. When the last star was gone, she was ready and rose. One by one, the women came forward and kissed her. Their perfumes mixed with hers. Then without saying a word, they slipped away to their homes.

Yatri was at the bus stop early that morning, waiting for the bus to bring Michael. When it came some indefinable aura about her caused people to step aside, allowing her the choice of seat beside the Westerner.

"Hello, Michael," she said, her voice low and seductive.

He turned in surprise, not recognising her at first. Saw the lacy shirt with the brown skin underneath, the short skirt, a particular hint of perfume. "Yatri!" he exclaimed, after rummaging through the attic of his mind. "Um, but you're looking lovely today."

"Thank you. I was hoping that I'd see you."

"Oh?"

"And how is your thesis?"

"It's going well."

With those two sentences, Yatri had aimed well, very well. The two subjects which Michael couldn't resist, himself and his thesis. He began to expound and Yatri, looking lovelier than he could ever remember, listened with rapt attention. He couldn't for the life of him think why he'd ever stopped seeing her. Surely not for that Dewa!

With Michael still pontificating, they alighted at the college. Boosted by his seductive successes, he finally said, "This is quite like old times. How'd you feel about coming 'round tonight?"

"You're not busy this evening?" Yatri knew that one of the other girls was supposed to be visiting him.

Michael's face darkened for a moment. But then, he waved the moment away. "It's all right, I can get out of it."

"Okay, I'll see you tonight."

Michael watched her go, thinking what a magic walk she had and feeling the excitement pound inside him. He returned home early, preparing food, picking out music, and dimming down the lights. For comfort, he changed into a sarong, his favourite – the one with an intricate pattern of brown leaves.

In contrast, Yatri came in her modern gear. A dress statement which Michael took as a tribute to his rational way of thought. As they ate, he told her of what he'd been doing or, at least, a highly edited version. Yatri listened not just uncritically but with obvious admiration. Even, he thought, with adoration. Michael's libido rose in leaps and bounds, motivating him to pull out one of his long hoarded Australian wines.

"This," he declared with pride, "has won prizes all over Europe." They touched glasses. "Cheers," he toasted.

Michael put down his glass and went to the stove to check that nothing was burning. As he did so, Yatri took the opportunity to add tiny drops of potion to his drink. She did the same when he went to change the music or to bring another dish to the table.

As the evening wore on, the flavour of seduction grew stronger and stronger. It did strange things to Michael, things he'd never have happen before. His door receded to the end of an infinite tunnel, Yatri expanded, growing misty and exuding a sweet musk odour. A strange chanting filled his ears. Yet each thing happened too briefly for him to really worry.

All the while, Yatri watched him, sensing him and checking out when her potion was acting at its maximum. When he put his arm around her and led her to his couch, she went willingly. Her one goal now was redemption through sacrifice.

Bit by bit, she let him undress her, prolonging it, prolonging the excitement. Bit by bit, he was allowed to taste the coffee of her body, the chocolate of her skin. She murmured into his ears, words in Indonesian and words in old Javanese. The sounds evaded the analytic of his mind and sank into primordial depths, carried on the twin intoxications of desire and potion.

“Sink... grow... go back... evolve.”

Suggestions beyond meaning. His senses grasped at the words from a long way away. They slipped past his conscious into the long dim past of his unconscious. As in a dream, his sarong came off and he felt the familiar smooth skin of Yatri

Entering her, swimming in the channel of her body. Swimming... Swimming... swimming. She murmured words, words taught to her by the moon, the jungle, and the old crones. The sounds released the powers in the potion. The potion accentuated the powers in the words. Michael swum, gliding along a deep, dark channel. Always swimming... swimming... swimming... He was in Yatri, his legs touching hers. His mind did a flip, under the influence of words and potion, he could feel them joining where they touched. His body no longer went up and down, up and down. Now the movement was sideways, left and right, left and right, like a wave.

It was a comfort. Michael's mind which had always strained at plans found a release. Warm and comforting, no longer having to struggle, he could curl up. Curl... warm... comfort. Yatri was a sea, a sea of sound, a sea of being. She nourished him, nourished with love and sound. The words rolled over him, words without meaning, meanings without sound.

Still, very still. Barriers down, eyes open. And Yatri murmured her sea of murmurs. The moon rose, a yellow eye in the sky, shining over the palms sending shadows reaching into the cottage. Pulling away from him, Yatri continued to pour her suggestions into his ear, into his mind. Then before the sun came up, she stole away. While he continued to sleep with eyes wide open.

At dawn, the cocks crowed, the dogs barked, and cars revved their engines. Michael rolled onto his side, smiled contentedly at his dreams and pulled the sarong over his eyes. The activity of the town increased, drawing him out of his reverie. He went to the window and watched the sky as it became a radiant blue. Then he strolled around his cottage, unsure what had been real and what had been dream. On an impulse, he flicked through his thesis. The words and equations jumped out at him, penetrated like darts. A terrible sadness started to replace his complacency. The whole of Javanese history became a finger stretching back in time accusing him, pointing at his guilt. The thesis dropped from his fingers and one by one, tears of remorse fell upon its cold logic.

Yatri came to see him that day. He was huddled, pale, and didn't object, as he normally would, when she spoke about the old ways. He listened, his mind unwilling to take in these deeper truths but his being was convinced. Feeling his sorrow, Yatri nurtured him, visiting again day after day.

Michael changed. Under Yatri's gentle guidance, he saw the violence of his way of thinking. In that painful realisation, his relationship with her blossomed. Neither intended it but the fate which had brought them together in the first place seemed intent on having its own way. It was the final understanding in Michael that there were forces greater than that of the analytical mind.

Although witnessing the changes in him, Yatri became hesitant. Once more, she conferred with the old crone whose withered loins had produced her mother. But this time, there were no potions and no incantations. She took Michael with her so that the elderly woman could look deep into their hearts. After a prolonged study, she gave them her blessing. Then Yatri agreed. They would marry.

The ceremony was a great holiday. Relatives and friends converged on Malang. Some of Michael's Aussie mates even attended. They were impressed by the large number of young single women who kissed the groom on the cheek – a sign of just how forgiving the traditional Javanese could be.

After that, they mostly lived in Australia where Yatri set up a small import/export business. Michael progressed in academia and showed a rare sensitivity. As his colleagues were wont to remark, "Professor Johns demonstrates a precise understanding of economic

and rational forces. While Professor Peters weaves a brilliant story of the irrational and the supernatural. But only Michael has that rare ability to combine them together.”

That made Michael smile. But sometimes when alone with Yatri, he looked back into his past and it also made him weep.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Modern Love"**

by Lindsay Boyd

He experienced borderline surprise when he discovered, soon after they parted in Boracay, that there was not one sign of his presence in any of the photos that Yanche uploaded on her social network site. Though she did not own a camera she took advantage of the fact that Craig carried his with him at all times when they were together. As a consequence, she snapped away voraciously, both on the island of crystalline water and white sand and also during their visit to Bantayan a week or so before.

A camera was an indispensable part of his travel paraphernalia. But he never went overboard in his use of it. A couple of portraits here, a couple there, and he was satisfied, as a rule. He would then put the little digital unit aside and resume observing not through a lens that, inevitably, distorted but purely his more trustworthy eyes.

Yanche was different. That became clear on the first walk they took together on Bantayan. "You have your camera?" she asked him, as they left their room following a brief rest.

"Yes."

He had, contrary to custom, thought of setting it aside and simply enjoying the walk with her in what was for both an unknown locale. But a contrasting pattern was established while they acquainted themselves with the environs. He photographed her. She photographed him. His photos of her, however, outnumbered those she took of him by a considerable margin.

She also took many of herself on the occasions that she ventured out alone. That became apparent to him when he looked through the batches she came back with. Not once did she ask him to join her in the frame if the idea of taking a selfie, as they were known, occurred to her when they were together. He, on the other hand, insisted on a dual self-

portrait, but only two or three times. He sensed she may have objected to the closeness too many shots of them together conceivably implied.

Even so, one of his favourite photos stemming from the time was of the pair of them on the evening they dined at a restaurant on the road passing through the village near their resort. It was a short stroll from the beach. She smiled broadly while he wound his left arm about her shoulders and bestowed a kiss on her cheek. He trimmed the shot later, which gave it the appearance that it was not a self-portrait.

But neither it nor any others featuring him made it onto the Bantayan / Boracay pages of her social profile. Many of her online contacts lauded the beauty of the surrounds, her own beauty no less, but none thought to inquire who was responsible for the shots, at least those that were obviously not selfies.

He came upon photos of his temporary mate on Boracay's powder fine sand, smiling beside the entrance signs or on the steps of resorts closed to them because they were out of his budget range, in front of shops and stalls, reclining on chairs and sun lounges, drinking smoothies and fruit shakes through straws, eating watermelon or more substantial dishes, alternately dressed in her favourite shades of blue, black or white, chest deep in the water, posing in the black bikini he bought for her the day she arrived on Boracay ... But of himself, not one; she might have holidayed alone.

Pondering the matter later, the one behind the scenes, the one without whom she would never have realised both dreams – Yanche freely admitted to him that visiting Boracay and Bantayan were dreams she had had all her life – no longer found her action so strange. But for a simple twist of fate they would never have met.

He intended to rendezvous with a woman from Mindanao when he arrived in Cebu in mid-January. Craig's friendship with Gina dated back to August of the preceding year. She was more than ten years younger than him, but he liked what he read about her on her profile. For her part, she thought him interesting and good looking and immediately accepted his contact request.

Avid world traveller though he was, years had passed since his first and only visit to her country. "I'd love to visit the Philippines again," he wrote to Gina. "Would you care to meet when I do?"

She reacted warmly to the idea and was equally enthusiastic when he followed up with the suggestion that they spend a few days together in the Visayas, the archipelago's mid-section, dotted with mountains, green hills and bright blue seascapes. He had never travelled that way on his initial trip despite having mulled over the idea.

He assured his new friend, the prospective love of his life, that he would at the very least cover the cost of her Mindanao to Cebu City return air fare, their accommodation and also the small amount necessary for Gina's daughter Lea to be placed in the care of a relative or friend during the period that her mother would be absent. Gina lived a three-hour bus ride south of Davao City and this would be her means of navigation from point a, her village, to point b, the airport in Davao City.

There was obviously a limit to how in-depth their friendship would become in the short time left to them before they met face to face. But the signs were positive. She was learning to trust again after the breakdown of her disastrous marriage to Lea's father, a philandering brute who made a forte of physical and mental abuse. The latter extended to the application of lit cigarettes to her light brown skin. She still bore the scars.

Gina confided this bitter experience to Craig but never made a big fuss of it. The more important thing was that she salvaged faith. Indeed, she firmly believed that there had to be a decent, kind, loving man out there somewhere and that she, luck being on her side, would find him. It went without saying that encountering him she would also discover the father for Lea that the girl had never had.

The closest the pair came to a 'live' chat was one afternoon in September. On that day Craig gained his first glimpse of the person behind the name, scanty biographical and other data. He could hear her clearly and listened with much enjoyment when she serenaded him with a few bars from a popular song. But owing to an insurmountable technical glitch he was unable to return the favour. The audio and video failed to work at his end. The best he could do was divert her with hurriedly typed messages.

In due course he obtained the details he required and booked her domestic return fare. He forwarded the itinerary, advising her at the same time to make a hard copy. Presenting them and some identification at the airport on the day in question would be all she would need to do after that.

Neither foresaw the typhoon that would strike the southern Philippines toward the end of the year. It put paid to their contact for several weeks. When Gina first resurfaced after the weather event, on a fickle connection, she said only that she and Lea were okay. The same, unfortunately, did not hold for her business, a general store that doubled as the mother and daughter's lodging. It had been irreparably damaged.

Craig still held out hope that their January assignation would go ahead. Not even the news of a subsequent weather disaster, a landslide in Mindanao, deterred him. But when he heard nothing further from Gina for up to two months he feared that this calamity too must have directly impacted her. Such was not the case; the landslide occurred well away from her village. It was the struggle to recover in the aftermath of the typhoon that caused the frustrating delay.

Unaware of this, unsure whether their contact would be resurrected, Craig began thinking of another Filipina who had entered his life in recent times via cyberspace, though sometime after Gina. This was none other than Yanche, from Cebu. He mentioned his impending trip to the Philippines in their chats but without going into detail. He was much more focussed on the prospect of his Mindanao friend, this being well before the lines of communication went awry.

He touched down at Clark, the former US base north of Manila that served as the capital's second international airport, on a Tuesday morning. One of the first things he did on retrieving his bags was purchase a local telephone card in the arrivals hall. He was buoyed by the fact that he could now contact Gina on a local number though another part of him cautioned that this might not make the slightest difference.

He messaged her while riding a shuttle to the bus station nearest Ninoy Aquino Airport, out of which he was due to fly to Cebu around six in the evening. He checked his phone for responses periodically but there was no sign of life from the one he was anxious to speak to. There were texts aplenty but they were all unsolicited messages from his Philippine card provider.

Sitting in a largely deserted waiting lounge at Ninoy Aquino with time to kill before he boarded his Cebu connection, he decided. Yanche's name was on his list of contacts, preserved and transferred from his home card, and after thinking for a moment he tapped out a message foretelling his arrival in her city early that evening. She responded without delay. Via the agency of further texts they agreed on a time and place to meet the next day.

Craig, all the same, was still thinking of Gina as he cast a critical eye over his upper floor room at the Cebu Guest House. All proceeding to plan she would join him for the night on Thursday. Friday morning they would set off together for Bantayan Island. He tried to look at the shoebox shaped room through what he imagined to be her eyes. Also, the communal bathroom facilities across the hallway. What would she think of the place?

If she showed up, perhaps she would be okay with the paucity, he concluded. From what she had told him, she ordinarily made do with something much more spartan at home. The question that remained was whether she would fly up on the ticket he had bought her.

Her voice was strong, clear and full-bodied. Women who sounded like that were always at an advantage with him. She also possessed a good command of English, which hinted at someone who had advanced beyond basic education, belying her abject lot in life. This much he recalled from their one-sided video chat of months before. He recognised her voice at once when she finally called on Wednesday morning.

"Are we going to meet?"

"I'm sorry. I won't be able to make it," she announced at the other end of the line.

"Oh."

He masked his disappointment well. In any case had no time to dwell on it. Gina's voice, carrying a trace of underlying hope, sounded again.

"Can you come to Mindanao?"

Craig shifted to the edge of the bed. "All my arrangements are made. Bantayan, Boracay ... It'd be hard to change everything at this late stage."

She was cut off but called back immediately. There was little else to say for the moment though she confirmed that it was the October typhoon that left her unreachable for weeks on end. When the situation was remedied in November it was for the briefest of intervals before the blackout returned.

Yanche and he settled on a meeting time of 5 pm. She suggested they get together at a fast food outlet on President Osmeña Boulevard, south of the circle that also bore the political luminary's name. Craig's guest house was a hot stroll further south on the same road, distant enough in the heat but walkable.

Ambling along the circle's eastern flank after having a bite of lunch he passed hotels, banks, restaurants and other retail outlets. He slowed and nearly stopped in his tracks the moment he laid eyes on a woman among the people milling about. A second look confirmed his initial impression: she was a creature of absolutely exquisite beauty.

She stood out as much by dint of her red and white polka dot dress as her classic Filipina beauty. No one else in the crowd out front of the Garwood Hotel was dressed so simply yet colourfully. She had positioned herself on the virtual outside edge of the narrow pavement, close to where the traffic trundled past. Obviously her aim was for prospective clients to notice her, as hard as it would have been to miss her no matter where she stood. Sensing the proximity of a western male, the lovely stranger half-turned her head, met his eyes and offered a smile replete with promise. Craig gave her a vaguely shy smile and a nod in passing.

Within half an hour he and Yanche were seated opposite one another at a Formica table in the agreed-on fast food outlet. He reiterated what he had already mentioned to her over the phone: that he had hoped to meet someone else on his trip but that this now looked unlikely to happen.

"I've booked a double room on Bantayan. If you're free would you like to join me for a couple of days?"

"When are you going?"

"The booking's from Friday."

Yanche thought for a moment. Commitments meant that she would be unable to go away for long, but the prospect of visiting somewhere in her country that she knew only by name was too good to turn down. "Okay. If I go with you Friday, I can stay till Sunday."

During their time together he gained the impression that she was serious of disposition. In that respect she seemed different to the majority of her female compatriots, renowned for their friendly, happy-go-lucky demeanours. Whether he would warm to her, and she to him, was anyone's guess. The upcoming time together would tell the tale.

On Friday morning they taxied their way from his guest house to the northern bus station, boarding a rattler for the ferry terminal at Hagnaya, three hours distant on the other side of the island. The picture taking began in earnest on the last leg of the journey, the one-hour-plus ferry trek northwest to Bantayan.

Their room at Kota Beach Resort, one of a number on the south coast around Santa Fe town, put them next to a stretch of white sand beach. It was the positive things he read about the island's beaches that prompted Craig, many weeks before, to settle on Bantayan as the ideal place for nine evenings with Gina.

A sticking point for Yanche was the fact that their room opposite the waves came with only one bed. When they were shown it, she remarked on the fact, in Tagalog, to their chaperone, the same man who met them at the ferry terminal. Craig noticed that he was silent. Perhaps there were no other rooms available, making a switch out of the question.

Their orientation walk, undertaken as the afternoon light began fading, took them north past other accommodation, fishermen, long boats and the mooring ropes that kept the vessels tethered to the hard-packed, if easily broken apart, sand. Magical light shrouded the western horizon. Streaked orange-yellow and deep purple, a cluster of small, puffy clouds sat low.

Yanche bedded down several minutes before him that night. She lay with her back turned on her side of the bed. That she was uninterested in any form of physical intimacy became clear when she shrugged off the hand he brought to her shoulder in an intended

caress. Nonetheless a sort of familiarity was forged that night, simply on account of the fact that they shared the same bed.

They rose separately the next morning, getting together for breakfast in the resort restaurant around 9.30 am. Craig then strolled south and took a swim, depositing his gear in the shade of one of the many enormous coconut trees at the back of the broad beach.

"You don't swim?" he asked when she turned down his invitation to join him.

"I never learnt." Nor had she come equipped for swimming, truth be told. The one swimsuit she owned was an ancient affair that she preferred not to show herself in when she had the choice, she added.

"We can get you one. Here, or in Boracay, if you come to Boracay."

He believed shyness played a part in it too, even before she coined the adjective 'shy' in describing herself. This was at lunch. He knew better where he stood with her after that.

"Many people are shy," he said.

Yanche let this sink in before speaking again. "The woman you were going to meet, the one from Mindanao ... "

"Gina."

"How old is she?"

"A couple of years older than you."

She drank another mouthful of fruit drink. "I've lots of friends in their late thirties or forties I could introduce you to."

"Do you?!" he asked, the hint of a smile showing on his face. "Age isn't that big a deal to me."

Yanche's propensity for photographing herself in the surrounds came to the fore that afternoon when they trekked to the Santa Fe Beach Club and then east beyond their resort to Sugar Beach. Recorded for posterity was their visit to the club and its premier claim to fame, the freshwater Ogtong Cave.

It was closed that afternoon. In lieu, Craig swam in the Santa Fe pool, as day visitors were entitled to do. Once again Yanche demurred, preferring to pass the time by herself in a

sheltered enclosure with seating and a table constructed out of bamboo. She bided her time admiring the view of the beach while he took to the water and then sunbathed for a spell.

Sugar Beach, west of the jetty where they had disembarked, was where she finally consented to enter the shallows. For the occasion she donned an alternate pair of short shorts and the top of her old swimsuit. At her instigation, he captured this on film too, as well as their visit to the Cou Cou Restaurant in the village that evening.

Freshly showered and changed, her long, raven hair damp and smelling like sweet apple, she looked more attractive than ever, he thought. She was more at ease, and for a while smiles held sway over the guarded, introspective look often to be seen on her face.

"This is my first time in this kind of situation," she told him as they awaited their meal. They were seated at a glass top table in the open air toward the front of the restaurant.

He understood what she meant. "There's a time for everything. You're looking for a guy, aren't you? This is a good time for you to start a relationship?"

"Yes. It's important to choose the right time."

"Of course."

They went on conversing afterwards, in the semi-darkness on the balcony of their little room, Craig seated on one bamboo chair, Yanche on the other. She played a popular love song on the small unit she had brought with her and sang along to some of the words, mostly the chorus. He could not help but think of Gina.

"Do all you Filipinas sing so sweetly?" She only smiled in response to the question before going on with her rendition.

Yanche was a relaxed bedmate that night, a night of fitful periods of interrupted sleep for both. For minutes on end he caressed her deeply and tenderly, bringing his right hand beneath the fabric of the top she wore and teasing the fleshy parts of her breasts and her nipples. The understated responsive movement of her bare midriff whenever the palm of his hand came to rest there encouraged him in his ministrations.

He saw her off at eleven o'clock in the morning with a request that she text him on her safe return to Cebu City. This she did. It was merely the beginning of an exchange of multiple

messages. Some of Yanche's possessed religious overtones that would have left him mystified had he not been aware that many of the population were ardent, God fearing Catholics.

Almost as an afterthought, he called Gina a couple of days later.

"I can hardly hear you," she said. The problem was not so marked at his end, and he understood well enough when she again stressed that it was impossible for her to travel right there and then.

"Have you been able to meet someone?"

He hesitated a second before answering. "Yes. She came here with me but she's gone now."

"I'm pleased for you."

The texts between him and Yanche continued until his own stay on Bantayan came to a close the following Saturday morning. He resolved the issue of her flight to Boracay by booking her to arrive and depart over a three-day period that she said she would definitely be able to take off work. He began wondering about this job of hers, one that apparently allowed her to take so much time off at such short notice, but never questioned her directly.

He returned to the port city in the early afternoon and had unpacked a couple of things at the same guest house where he stayed prior to the Bantayan trip when Yanche messaged him with the suggestion that they meet at the entrance of the Metro Colon Mall at seven that evening. He remembered roughly where it was, his wanderings about town on his first visit having taken him in the vicinity.

"Mister!" It was minutes before the hour and he was fast closing in on his destination. He looked at the short, middle-aged woman who had hailed him. "You looking for a girl?"

He was no stranger to similar approaches in foreign lands. But he was surprised that the one doing the soliciting on this occasion was a perfectly ordinary looking housewife and mother. She gestured toward someone standing in the shadows a short distance away. On cue a young girl stepped forward, hands on hips, and gave a perfectly rehearsed left to right tilt of her head. He could not say for certain in the semi-dark but to him she looked about fifteen or sixteen. He walked off without a word.

"Where are we off to?" he asked Yanche when they met and boarded a jeepney outside the mall.

He did not catch the name but she added that they would have to switch vehicles along the way. They settled in the rear. Throughout the dual rides, he kept an arm about her waist. There were numerous outdoor food stalls doing brisk trade at their destination – a park-cum-recreation facility by the ocean.

"Valentine's Day is the week after next." They had eaten and were now seated, gazing over the expanse of water at a smattering of lights in the distance. Just one of a number of couples but a couple with a difference. Hearing her statement, he wondered if what she had hinted at Bantayan – that he was out of her age range – was invalid. Had she begun thinking of him as a potential partner?

"Your birthday's coming up too, isn't it?" he asked, gently egging her on.

"My birthday's in March. The twentieth."

But there was a more pressing concern, related to the following Tuesday. She would need funds, both to travel to the airport in Cebu City from her home and also from Caticlan Airport to Boracay. Before changing jeepney on the way back to town they stopped at an ATM, and he withdrew what he calculated would be sufficient pesos and handed them to her.

Like someone vetting a place to ascertain its appropriateness for a friend or loved one intending a visit, he had forty-eight hours to himself on Boracay before she showed up at Orchids Resort, the nipa building at which he had booked a room. He had become acclimatised, having swum at White Beach and walked it from end to end no less than twice. He had also bathed among the rocks accessible along a concrete path at the northern extremity. Tiny Diniwid Beach sat round the bend.

They set out on a walk immediately after she arrived. Hand in hand for much of the time, they alternated between the sandy shore and a rudimentary path at the back. It was at one of the beachwear stalls abutting the path that Yanche unearthed a black, two-piece bikini from among the display of multi-coloured bags, head gear, dresses, shorts, tops and swimsuits of all shapes and sizes.

"When do I get to see you in it?" he asked while she dropped the purchase in her bag.

"Soon." She gave him a glance. "I'm not built like a model."

"Who's worried about that?"

They swam after nightfall though her concession to the clear element was minor, comprising immersion up to the neck and a V for victory sign and a smile for the camera. The new swimsuit was nowhere to be seen. She wore a transparent long-sleeve top open at the front over another top and a pair of shorts.

Cloud interspersed with sunshine and scattered rain was the order of the next two days. Craig followed a regime of swimming and walking. Yanche sometimes accompanied on the latter. They ate bountifully at restaurants of variable quality and service. Their hike, when the tide sat low enough, to a rocky outcrop near the northern end known as Willy's Rock, within which was enshrined a statue of the Virgin Mary, provided another ideal photo op.

He had a good eye and foregrounded his willing subject against the outcrop together with the late afternoon skyline or White Beach's languid water. She kept a see-through black dress on over the still-to-be fully unveiled black bikini. It was an apt combination.

No aspiring fashionista could have looked more fetching than she did while reclining on the concrete step below the Virgin, on the steps leading up to the statue, or standing in waist-high water, smooth, round thighs fully bared, palms upraised and touching the jagged rock. She wore black again when they took the labyrinthine sandy trail from Orchids that night and ate at one of the buffets along the path. More photos followed there, in spite of the dearth of light.

On their final full day together, a trike driver offered them a price for the journey to Puka Shell Beach, on the northernmost tip, and Mt Luho, Boracay's highest point. The beach lacked the pristine cleanliness of those to the south but offered a similar array of souvenir stalls. They each took a moment to pose at the wheel of a tiny yellow and black Bug Car, a vehicle equipped with small, fat black tyres ideal for the dunes. At Mt Luho, the easily accessed view deck offered vistas of pockets of sandy beach, islets, coves, low stands of greenery, red-roofed houses and a skyline speckled grey-blue.

Their driver finally left them at the resort at the north end of White Beach. Hand in hand they returned to where they were staying, reverting later to the pattern of beach time and

ample food. But before then, for an hour, they rested on their individual beds in their upstairs room. He read while she took five. When she shifted onto her back and looked his way near the end of the time, he met her eye.

"Can I get a hug?"

He moved to the edge of her bed before she could clarify her obscure response, briefly caressing her arm and shoulder. But the bed was too narrow for him to straddle it with any degree of comfort. In any event it was time to head out anew. She, at long last, consented to appear in her new wardrobe item in the orange-yellow light at the afternoon's end. She ogled the camera as ably as ever while he tripped the shutter.

The next morning, while he set off early on a walk, she encountered a compatriot and her husband-to-be, an Italian. This couple had alternated between Orchids and another guest house, one reason why the contact between the respective pairs had been limited to nods.

Returning from his walk, Craig found all three at the beach. The epitome of holidaymakers determined to milk every last drop from their stay, as if the photographic record would not be complete without it, they had etched their three names in the sand. The words 'love' and 'Boracay' were also visible. As he would discover when he perused the recorded images, Yanche had photographed the five words in diverse combinations. His own name? Having not been traced on the sand, it was nowhere to be seen.

"You made a friend?" They were strolling side by side on the trail.

"They're going to marry and live in Italy," she explained.

"I hope she knows what she's doing."

"Why?"

"Call it a hunch. To begin with, it's a completely different world over there." He then remembered when he first noticed the thick-set man and the strikingly thin Filipina. "I was watching them at breakfast. It must've been Monday. He was having a big laugh, and it looked like it was at her expense. She wasn't in the least bit amused."

Around nine o'clock he followed her to the reception desk. "She's leaving me!" he announced tongue in cheek to the bespectacled man on duty. "And it's not the first time!"

Not of a demonstrative nature, she was as resolute in taking her leave as she had been on departing Bantayan not quite two weeks earlier; what she had set out to accomplish had been effected and that was all there was to it. On a narrow side street leading away from the beachfront, she gave him her hand and a split second embrace before boarding the trike that would run her to the ferry terminal.

She remarked on his gratitude in one or more texts later that day. Religious overtones were evident once more. He found his name on her list of social network friends that night, but was confused when he realised the profile was one she hardly ever used. Furthermore, it contained some specious biographical information. The photos, minus him, surfaced within days, on another profile that at least provided a more accurate reflection of who she was.

He might have cared more about this had he not come down with a virus; the first indicators of something amiss were evident on the morning Yanche left. He would not return to full health for upwards of three weeks, by which time he had travelled on to Thailand. He was nearing his lowest ebb when Valentine's Day fell, an occasion he acknowledged with a message.

She began forwarding him e-mails with attachments that outlined schemes for making a living working from home. He acknowledged none of them. She had hinted, and continued hinting, at what she wished for on her birthday: an amount of money adequate to buy whatever item, or items, she would deem worth the expense when the calendar indicated the day.

Even well past March 20th, it was his intention to make her a gift; he pointed out that this would best be arranged once he returned home. But a message from her in the interim, requesting \$2,000 to bankroll a business, a retail clothing shop she hoped to establish in Cebu, brought about a change of mind. The contact between them then dropped off. That with Gina, who he had not succeeded in meeting, went on.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Kim and Seng Ly"**

by Hank Herreman

One day in 1980 there was a discussion in Sunnyside Presbyterian Church about helping Cambodians who had fled to refugee camps in Thailand in order to escape the genocide occurring in their native country. Our congregation decided to sponsor a couple who had escaped from Cambodia and wanted to settle in South Bend where they had relatives. There was no shortage of volunteers willing to donate money, clothing, dishes, furniture --- you name it.

There was just one thing more that was needed. The Cambodian couple needed somewhere to live until they could get jobs and afford a place of their own. Their relatives were living in a small, already overcrowded apartment.

When the congregation was asked who would be willing to share their home for a few months with a young Cambodian couple who spoke no English, there was dead silence. Then I volunteered our house. Everybody applauded.

Did I mention that Bonnie didn't attend church that Sunday? All the way home I was wondering how to break the news to her. "Guess who's going to be living with us for the next few months?" didn't sound quite right.

When I got home, I told Bonnie about the discussion we had at Sunnyside concerning the Cambodian refugees and how much they suffered under the Khmer Rouge. When she heard about how Kim and Seng Ly walked for three days through the jungle and swam across a river to escape to Thailand, she was very impressed.

Then I mentioned that they needed a place to live for a few months and that maybe we could volunteer our house. Bonnie thought that was a great idea, and I let out a big sigh of relief.

A few weeks after that, we went to the South Bend Airport along with a few church volunteers and every Cambodian in Michiana. When Kim and Seng Ly were introduced to us, Bonnie and I waved and said hi. They pressed their palms together, fingertips up, and moved their hands to their heart while bowing their head. I was hoping that was a good sign, and it was. It is called a *sampeah* and is common in Southeast Asia.

Everybody went to our house where we had a little "welcome to America" party. Everyone dove eagerly into the snicks and snacks then found a place to relax - everyone except Andi. She was the Sunnyside member who was in charge of the overall refugee program. As I lounged in a rocking chair eating crackers, Andi paced back and forth reminding me not to be nervous. Every few minutes she grabbed someone who looked like they might speak English and informed them that she was worried about me because I was so nervous.

Eventually, the welcome and reunion wound down. A relative made sure that Kim and Seng Ly knew how to work the toilets, all the visitors left and our new guests were shown their sleeping quarters in the basement. (Bonnie's sister, Debbie, was staying in our spare bedroom for the summer. When she went back to college in the fall, Kim and Seng Ly would take her spot).

Bonnie and I stood together enjoying the quiet after an event-filled day. After a moment, we looked at each other and said together, "Now what?"

I planned on sleeping in the next morning, but I was rudely awakened by Bonnie who was getting ready for work. "You've got to get up. I have to go to work and Debbie is already gone. Kim and Seng Ly see us leaving, and they are concerned about being left alone on their first full morning in America."

I thought I had a great reply. “They walked three days through the jungle and swam across a river to get away from the Khmer Rouge. Why would they be nervous now? Just tell them I’m upstairs and will protect them from any harm, if they will just let me sleep in.”

“How? They don’t speak English, and I don’t speak Khmer. Don’t forget Andi is going to pick them up at ten to take them to the dentist.”

My situation was hopeless. I was going to have to get up.

I came downstairs and found Kim and Seng Ly hanging around the kitchen. I made coffee, poured three bowls of cereal and three cups of orange juice. We ate breakfast in silence. At least I was silent. Seng Ly and Kim spoke to each other in Khmer. It sounded like *clip clop slock block nock*.

Despite the use of our phrase sheets, we were unable to hold a conversation. Remembering their dental appointment, I tapped my teeth then pointed to the 10 on the clock. They nodded. Hopefully, they didn’t think that I was showing off some new false teeth, or that I was informing them that the next meal would be at 10:00.

Baby noises came from upstairs. I dashed up to Becki’s room to greet our one and a half year old daughter. I changed her diapers and took her down to meet Kim and Seng Ly. They didn’t know that we had a baby since Becki was asleep when they arrived the evening before. We would have told them except the phrase list did not include “there is a baby in our house.”

Kim and Seng Ly were surprised and delighted. They loved children and were fascinated with Becki. They had never seen a chubby baby or one with curly blond hair. They helped me feed Becki, who wanted to know who these new people were. I introduced them as Kim and Seng Ly. She christened them Bim and Neng Nee.

At 10:00 the doorbell rang announcing Andi, who was there to drive them to the dentist. Kim and Seng Ly understood what was going on and left for their first visit to a dentist's office.

By the time they were finished with that plus a few more errands, Bonnie and Debbie were back. We ate dinner, watched TV and looked through an old National Geographic which featured an article on Southeast Asia. Seng Ly indicated a photograph of an ox pulling a cart. He tapped it with a finger and said with a smile, "Cambodian car."

We all had a good laugh and headed for bed. Thus ended our first full day with Kim and Seng Ly.

Days with our Cambodian refugees fell into a routine. Kim and Seng Ly got up early every morning and cooked breakfast which was always very heavy on garlic. When I came downstairs, I would be hit by a sinus opening encounter with a wall of garlic aroma. After eating breakfast, Seng Ly and Kim would be off to English lessons, the doctor, the dentist, the immigration office, the social security people, etc. At first, volunteers from Sunnyside Presbyterian drove them, but it didn't take long for them to learn the bus routes and become largely independent.

The first week they were with us, we had a severe storm in the middle of the night. This was one of several during the summer of 1980. Just two weeks before, a large tree trunk in our front yard had been snapped in two by gale force winds. When the storm started really picking up, Bonnie, Debbie, Becki and I headed for the basement. Kim and Seng Ly, who were sleeping in the basement, were startled to see us rush down the stairs. We all huddled together consulting our English - Cambodian phrase list. The best we could come up with was wind storm. They weren't alarmed but clearly didn't understand why we remained in their bedroom. Finally, I had an idea. I lead Seng Ly upstairs to the living room and pointed out one of the windows. He looked through it and saw the broken tree trunk. As if that wasn't enough, our

neighbor's lawn chairs, pushed by a strong gust of wind, suddenly tumbled through our front yard.

Seng Ly nodded, and we returned to the basement where he explained the situation to Kim.

Before long, the storm abated, and we all went back to bed. Occasionally, after all these years, someone will bring up that incident, and we will all laugh.

We expected that our Cambodian friends would eat a different diet than we did. However, it took us a while to get used to the 50-pound bags of rice leaning up against the kitchen wall.

Bonnie, Deb and I were not allowed to eat any of their food because of government laws regarding food stamps. Becki, no respecter of federal regulations, shared every meal with them. She ate six times a day - three with Kim and Seng Ly and three with Bonnie, Debbie and me. Becki learned to count in Khmer before she learned in English. She also knew how to ask for more rice in Khmer. When Kim and Seng Ly arrived, Becky was chubby. When they moved out, she was fat.

One day Kim was feeling under the weather. We volunteered to take her to a doctor. When she declined, we offered to pick up some OTC meds at a drugstore. "No, no, we have Cambodian medicine - Tiger Balm."

Bonnie and I looked at each other. What could that possibly be? They showed us a small tin with Khmer writing on it. We opened it up and found that it was a salve with a very strong menthol smell. They used it for every ailment.

Early in the fall, Kim and Seng Ly revealed a secret they had been keeping from us. Kim was pregnant. They were afraid that if it was known, they would not have been selected to come to the US. Once here, they initially feared that they might be sent back, if the secret was revealed. When Kim wasn't feeling well due to her pregnancy, they used, you guessed it, Tiger Balm.

One afternoon Seng Ly was helping me load some things into our van parked in the alley behind our house. When I motioned for him to pick up something which was sitting in a small patch of weeds, he balked. I shrugged my shoulders as a way of asking him why he wouldn't. Seng Ly moved his hand a series of S patterns signifying snakes. I told him verbally that there weren't any snakes in our alley. When he still refused, I picked up the object and put it in the van. Seng Ly was ashamed that I was forced to wade in the weeds myself. Later, when he became fluent in English, he explained that in Cambodia people avoided weedy areas because poisonous snakes often hid there. He has apologized many times over the years for making me load that box.

By November, even though Kim and Seng Ly were ready to move into their own apartment, we asked them to stay with us a little longer. Becki had surgery scheduled at a hospital in Indianapolis, requiring us to be out of town for several days. Our Cambodian friends did us a big favor by watching our house and caring for our dog, Sam, when we were gone. When we returned from Indianapolis, Kim and Seng Ly moved to their own apartment.

In July of 1980, two Cambodian refugees, who knew no English, took their first airplane ride. They lifted off a runway in Thailand and after a few stops landed in South Bend, where they moved in with Bonnie, Debbie, Becki and me. In five months, with a little help from the Sunnyside Church congregation and a lot of work of their own, they moved into their own apartment. One month later they were off food stamps.

While Kim stayed at home preparing for the birth of their first child, Seng Ly worked a variety of jobs. Among others: working on a Goodwill truck, washing cars at Gates Chevrolet, washing dishes at the Summit Club and finally settling in as the custodian of Sunnyside Presbyterian Church.

In 1981, Kim gave birth to son Paul and a few years later daughter Melody. Following the births of their two children, Kim got a job at St. Mary's Convent where she still works.

Today, Paul is a stand-up comedian who is waiting tables in Los Angeles while waiting for his big break. Melody, besides being a full-time mom, is a Lab Manager/Bioprocessing Training Associate at North Carolina State University.

After living in an apartment for a few years, Kim and Seng Ly bought their own house. By making extra payments on their mortgage, they were able to pay off their home early. They bought another house which they rented out, then another, then another, then another. Now they own five houses free and clear: one they live in and four they rent.

Using the income from their jobs and rental houses, Kim and Seng Ly put two children through college and have sent many thousands of dollars to relatives back in Cambodia.

Bonnie and I are still close to Kim and Seng Ly and see them on a regular basis. In 2013, Bonnie and I flew to Raleigh, North Carolina, to attend Melody's wedding. Over the years, Kim and Seng Ly have done Bonnie and I countless favors. The Cambodian refugees we took a chance on have repaid us over and over. Bonnie and I are fortunate to have them in our lives!

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Memories of Station One"**

by Iris Orpi

*Boracay Island, Philippines*

It was under that Jupiter sky  
that we discovered a moment  
that our souls could forever  
come to mean,  
before and after,  
and wherever else  
forever begins.

Watching those boats with  
their blue sails full  
of the Visayas breeze,  
washing ashore and  
turning around to run  
back into the arms  
of the open sea, on and on,  
ad infinitum.

Standing on that beach  
miraculously white,  
the grains of sand that  
took the sun and a billion  
years' worth of evolution to  
bleach and grind gentle coral  
down to miles of fine powder,  
like the heavy past

that we once embraced and  
only that day learned to  
solemnly shake from our palms  
and sift through our  
loose fingers for the wind  
to claim and take away.  
Holding hands and a future.  
It was there,  
it was in that place.

And there, between  
the reality of prying eyes  
in every street corner  
of the city we left behind,  
keenly watching us, watching  
for something to judge about us,  
and the make-believe  
that we were the last  
two people in the world,  
we found a sacred middle ground:  
there, we were two lovers  
on an island with ten thousand  
other lovers who were busy  
loving all the love that could  
be conjured in a single night,  
feeding off their passion and  
contributing to the pool with  
a brand of romance all our own  
as we got drunk off

coconut wine, and the gold  
splashed across our vision by  
the fire dancers and  
the near-delirious beating  
of those drums that echoed  
the pounding in our blood  
until almost, the walls marking  
the boundaries of the space  
we paid for to occupy  
in the Pearl of the Pacific  
seemed to fall down and  
our private promises joined  
that collective pulse.

Nobody counted as an intruder  
in that vibrant and vivid peace,  
neither the awake nor  
the sleeping; we were all alive  
and pieces of one puzzle.

You held me in your arms  
while the oceans of the world  
adjusted their tides.

I slept and the music of  
that beautiful chaos remained.

Later came  
the dawn, migrant clouds and  
valleys of warm light in tow,  
replacing the starry night

and breathing shadows  
and we knew we'd made it,  
we had taken our fill and  
bliss would always  
remember our names.

## **"The Crossover to Miniloc Island"**

by Iris Orpi

*El Nido, Palawan, Philippines*

Three rainmakers hung on the wall  
of different sizes,  
all of which she disturbed  
before boarding:  
first the shortest,  
then the next,  
then, finally, the one  
longer than her arm.  
The sounds knocked on her mind,  
asking to come in,  
but she only held on  
to her weekend bag  
and her boredom.  
They were in the dirt runway  
when it drizzled,  
on the boat when it rained,

and on the pier when it poured,  
in earnest. That's when  
the little boy told her,  
you shouldn't have done that.  
You should have left  
those things on the wall alone.  
The patter of drops on  
the bleached planks  
indeed sounded,  
without taxing the imagination,  
like the tiny seashells rolling  
through and against the nodes and  
inner walls of the bamboo poles  
dangling on nails driven  
into the wall of the private hangar  
whose pilot cleared their flight  
because all signs told him  
there would be nothing but sun  
that day.  
You could have put us in danger,  
the boy said,  
and already, the waves  
smashing on the pillars  
looked more monstrous now than  
when they crossed the inlet,  
wet, shivering and bewildered.  
She told him he was right,  
and thanked Mother Nature  
not for sparing their lives

but for the favor of  
impeccably timed coincidences,  
as she desperately needed  
something she could have faith in  
that she could never explain,  
to be the passport of her existence  
before she could put one  
slipper foot on that island  
of believers.

## **"Life Metaphors on the 6 a.m. Train"**

by Iris Orpi

*Epifanio Delos Santos Avenue, Pasig City, Philippines*

Wednesdays and Fridays  
this semester  
I've come to sitting  
on the left side  
of the northbound train  
so I could face the sunrise  
and look directly into the sun.  
It's unhealthy, I suppose  
exposing my eyes  
to vague dangers  
but I take my chances

because I know  
in a few minutes  
it might rain, maybe  
and in a few hours  
it would be night, for sure  
and I would miss the sight  
if I took it for granted  
and regret it.

## **"At the Corner of Maria Clara and Dimasalang"**

by Iris Orpi

*Sampaloc, Manila, Philippines*

Who am I?  
I am history in one body  
millennia in one lifetime  
conceived in sin cavorting  
on a bed of nails  
and redeemed by love,  
reliquary hanging down  
a virgin's slender white neck  
parted with in innocent tears

Who am I?  
three hundred years my heart  
a colony of circumnavigators

resistance on the port  
where blood was shed  
and the rest of my life  
looking for the real me  
in the battlefield they left behind

my senses a restless choir of impulses  
bound to my family's honor and  
the rising sun,  
singing religious passions  
and hymns of untamed beauty

I am beautiful and you have honored me  
you called me extraordinary  
you said I was not like any  
of the other seas you have sailed on  
you learned the words to the kundiman  
and you braved the nights  
of thrusting your spear on the doorstep  
like a nobleman of these lands

you have been favored and found worthy  
and they gave you my hand

so why brandish your sword now  
and betray my gentleness?  
why desecrate the meek sand  
and mock the flag that's flown  
over my vessel long before you came?

why wear different clothes now  
and exchange your ego,  
a foreign invention,  
for the peace of mind of my ancestors?

you said your heart has been slain before  
by souls that hailed from  
the spoils of modern thought  
and my chaste, mother-of-pearl spirit  
was your savior  
and that was why you came looking for me

it comes with a price  
I am who I am

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Whispers in the Mist"**

by Carl Wade Thompson

Each year to Doi Suthep,  
I arrive with the monsoons.  
Ascending the steps,  
309 of them,  
the mountain enfolds me.  
Clouds of mist embrace,  
an old lover who waits.  
The golden spire ahead,  
glistens with my prayers.  
I turn my head to see,  
the Old World looking back.  
Listening close for ghosts,  
but hear only tears,  
as the skies cry over me.

## **"Monsoon Season in Thailand"**

by Carl Wade Thompson

The rain falls daily,  
No downpour, just steady.  
Each afternoon we watch,

hypnotized on the porch,  
Lost in gentle daydreams.

## **"Temple of Dawn"**

by Carl Wade Thompson

The temple sparkles,  
reflected in Chao Praya's waters,  
a dreaming image.  
Shining bright with dawn's first light,  
I watch with serenity.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Not Defeated"**

by Clara Ray Rusinek Klein

Srey Ong stands behind the counter,  
gnarled, knotted hands moving swift,  
laying a slab of prahok ang fried in banana leaf  
beside a plate of steamed rice,  
fresh green beans, spring onions,  
chopped cucumbers, bok choy.

“When Pol Pot came,  
we buried our money.

Wearing glasses was a yellow star.  
Education meant death.

Dressed in filth,  
we pretended to be peasants,  
ate grasshoppers,  
rats, corpses even,  
anything to stay alive.

In 1979 I went home to Siem Reap.  
The wells were filled with skulls and bones.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## "A Tribute to My Own State of Collapse"

by Abigail Bautista

I have dreams about kissing the space  
between your shoulder blades  
where the skin sinks down  
and makes a dry lakebed  
along the soft spot on your neck.

i have dreams about the roots that grow  
from the timber of your toes,  
down, through the sheets, through the floor,  
into the soil. i have dreams about your fingers  
wreathed with mine, a spider web  
made of sweetness and light and poison. i wake up,

and for a moment i have forgotten  
what it feels like to wake up with my legs  
entangled with someone else's.

i spent decades wondering  
how someone could possibly long  
for something they never really had  
and now i've spent another  
theorizing about creative virtues  
and emotional responsibility

& five ways to rhyme with “ache,”

when all i really want is to crawl up in my bed  
and live inside the warmth of your organs.  
it’s strange, darling,  
that i don’t even know who you are.

just the reckless, soulless glimpses –  
the flash of a smile,  
an awkward moment in the cafe when you  
tipped the chair over. for the record,  
i’m getting along just fine.

i’ve fallen in and out of love  
with plenty of other ghosts  
since you. but these mornings,  
when the black specs of nighttime  
shatter into a million fragments;  
these mornings are when,  
for a brief, tranquil, august moment,  
i wake from a dream–

with the sunshine kissing my lips,  
flowers opening on your skin, bruises on my thighs  
and everything feels peaceful,  
*i’m not empty, but i am light, finally, finally.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Mourning"

by Gerard Sarnat

A few evenings after he passed,  
vamps managed to snatch Pops  
from his hole in the ground  
where fellas with umbrellas  
stood guard to fend off griever  
sorrow. Instead of embalming  
fluid's formaldehyde pink tint,  
we transfuse Dad with love,  
wash his feet in storm water  
cover him with rosebuds.  
Going home next morning,  
I lift an urn of flesh-burned-off  
bones into the plane's carry-on bin.  
Out of nowhere, Father repeated  
his secret wish to marry Asian  
next time. The Japanese flight  
attendant swizzling whiskey  
in my paper cup whispers,  
*Doctor Gerard Sarnat San,*  
*Sir, you remind me of him.*

Rain filled Pop's Scotch glass  
I'd left on the veranda the morning

we left the house to be at his side.

## "Hall of Mirrors"

by Gerard Sarnat

Myanmar Four Seasons fitness center  
almost empty, I imagine the man's older  
by only a few years though since he's Burmese  
it may be more than a decade.

The filled-out elder postures *tai chi* inhaling incense  
while my suffering knees that left their cartilage  
downhill running do what they can  
on a recumbent cycle.

Feeling somehow less gravity than the master,  
I consider upping organic veggies plus flexibility  
exercises while downing my bike time  
-- hopefully to reach wiser living --

until after this mute presumed mentor's done  
stretching then turning round and around,  
he finally inquires in perfect English,  
*How the hell can you get out of here?*

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Chakra Zen Warrior"**

by Gary Singh

In a Singapore business hotel, she invades my word processor. Right on schedule, she arrives just when the content marketing garbage is due for Syncrap Circuits International. Deadlines can wait. It's her time now. She's my favorite chakra-colored Zen warrior of the business travel empire, straight from that other poem I tried to write, the last time I stayed here. While housekeepers bang on the door in Chinese, I evoke her image with incense and a few secret items from the herb shop down the street. Like that Rolling Stones tune, she's a rainbow. She comes in colors, even when it's a hundred degrees in Singapore and a hundred percent humidity. Every time I stay in this hotel, I fumble through that Stones tune, and she always arrives. Unlike the garbage for Syncrap Circuits, my words come in colors, thanks to her. The incense will continue to burn, the herbs will boil, and damn the housekeeping.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Bony Carcass"

by Pauline Lacanilao

You're at a family gathering. A birthday  
or a holiday nestled in the cold months  
when the calendar is the only thing thinning.

Watch the gravy stain stiff linen shirts  
and the eggnog find its hiding place  
in the bristles of an old man's beard,

hear the carol of flatulence, the tintin-  
nabulation of silverware, and the  
hollow consonants and vowels

bouncing around the cave  
of each person's mouth. It is your job  
to pick out the truth. To find the meaning

in the language they've devoured  
*(Honey, if you lose more weight, I'll kill you  
and Sweetie, you're a fucking stick),*

its bony carcass in the middle  
of the lazy susan looking like a comfort  
woman—legs apart, spent and starved.

Embarrassed for it,  
you stare instead,  
at the flesh on your plate.

You bite in regretfully and chew.  
It is easier to find truth here than  
to look through what's been spit out

into folded paper napkins, or to dig with floss  
through the small spaces between teeth.  
You don't want the scraps anyway.

You want the meat. You want the sauce  
Inside your stomach to come  
up and show you all it's made of. So you take

the words you hear and divide them by thought,  
lay them into paragraphs, the way you'd stack  
dirty but delicate dishes in a sink: carefully.

Then you read, because this is the only way  
you've learned to understand:  
reading thoughts means reading minds.

And then when you find that this helps nothing,  
that the consonants and vowels are as muddled  
and flimsy as vomit—and so they inherently  
cannot hold truth—you run to the toilet

and read, read, read the bottom of the bowl  
where there are no more words to choke on.

## **"Asking a Gas Station Clerk for Directions"**

by Pauline Lacanilao

His fingers were  
knuckle knuckle knuckle nail  
knuckle knuckle knuckle nail  
knuckle knuck  
stump  
and thumb.

So when he pointed north,  
instead of the standard-issue six-shooter  
kid cowboys kill with in their frontier  
front porches, his hand was a snubnosed pistol.  
And when he pointed the half-phantom fingers,  
the ind-- and the midd--,  
towards the highway, I did not look  
where he was looking.  
Save for a knowing glance at the boy  
coughing down a chuckle behind me,  
I did not look anywhere  
other than the cityscape of his hand,  
the vestiges of its collapsed towers.

But I, 17, who knew nothing yet  
of loss, saw the incompleteness of that hand  
and laughed.

Without considering what ugly axe  
fated a fall at that slanted angle,  
what slam and gasp,  
what white of bone then gush of red  
was on the raw end of his leathered scars,  
I laughed. And not only then.

For years after that encounter, I'd tell the story,  
stopping at its fulcrum to snort for breath,  
throw my head back to expose my teeth  
like a bucking donkey, and heehaw  
as I curled my own fingers to recreate  
the abruptly interrupted talon, the blunt claw.  
Everyone would laugh.

But I am sorry now, I am so sorry, sir.  
Looking at my own fingers, erect like God's  
towards Adam's on the Sistine ceiling,  
but moving, even!--none of their best intentions  
have been able, the way you with your amputated  
directions were so gracefully and ably able,  
to show me the way home.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Kata Hatiku"

by James Penha

Here the seat of all emotions  
is heartless, it is *hati*: the liver,  
just as in *kanker hati*: liver cancer  
there is *hati-hati*: liver! liver! be careful!  
and *hatiku milikmu*: my liver belongs to you  
and *kata hatiku*: these words from my liver  
and *rindu hatiku tidak terkira*: in my liver  
the longing for you never ends. And so  
how do we dare to think we fall in love,  
you in your liver and me in my heart,  
except that we make of our bodies one.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Here, There and Everywhere"**

by Lana Bella

Here, there and everywhere.

Dispersed remnants of my life in flecked suspense:

here, my father's Steinway piano was gracefully pitched as the octaves' notes sailed through the half-shaded window  
there, Paco Rabanne's scented love notes from my summer paramour who went to war and never came back,  
and now was wedged hauntingly under some stockpiles of entries rashly written in loopy sketches of his name;

here, my mother's Mediterranean garnished kitchen was laden with aroma of hotly baked scones and steeped cinnamon for Sunday morning tea  
there, smokes of burned embers fluttered by from spiced frankincense my grandmother had lit to light the backyard graveled lane;

here, the timbered writing desk where my best friend sat in stupor while the pretty French teacher recited ballads of Charles Baudelaire  
there, towards the edge of the Grand Canyon's widening gulf at which point birds of broken wings tumbled in mid-flight;

here, faint traces of my brother's milk-foamed smirk as it stretched and bent like the shape of uncle Ray's curved bottom boat  
as we sailed the Lake of Geneva  
there, when my grandfather's leg buckled, speech slurred then dim eyesight

came to rest upon the white-flecked ceiling en route to a Swiss Alps'  
surgery room on a sped steel gurney;

here, sewn hand-stitched petals by the Mongoloid villagers  
of my cabbage doll's guniu dress that had curled  
and yellowed at the contoured edges,  
there, my late night cigarette smoke snaked serpentine through the pearly bed  
of a late seasoned snowflakes in Park City, Utah;

here, Shanghai's Tianshan Tea Market, where some pale timid shop girl  
was bundling up choice tea and curios for a finely dressed matron, whose wrists were  
heavy with clashing tides of jade bangles  
there, the wild-eyed fishmonger was haggling over two fillets of fresh cut salmon  
with a beggared wife in a marketplace of coastal Nha Trang, Vietnam;

here, at the corner of The Champs-Élysées and Montaigne Ave,  
where I once again, fell deeply in love  
there, a third of my life floated up to the azure sky like a pale escaped  
balloon upon the lone catamaran in Motu Piti Aau, Bora Bora.

Perhaps, once in a lifetime, I could be here, there, and everywhere.

## **"A Felled Caress"**

by Lana Bella

Her footsteps

echoed through the marbled stairs  
clattered near the wrought iron rails-  
she leaned out, laughing, hair spilling over  
like a crimson mantled ghost  
tossing down  
her caress,  
it fell through  
his embrace  
landed on the flagstone street  
spine mangled a burned ash and  
torchlight red,  
floundering on clay cracked earth.