

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

## Issue 22

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## Contributor Bios

**Kenneth Levine** is an attorney who writes short stories. His short stories have been published in online and print venues, including *New Plains Review*, *Imaginaire*, *Thuglit* and *Jerry Jazz Musician*, and he is the winner of the *Jerry Jazz Musician* short story contest.

**Foo Sek Han** is a legal professional from Kelantan residing in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Both his legal and creative writings have appeared in local newspapers, magazines, anthologies and legal guides. He was most recently published in *Cyberpunk: Malaysia*.

**William C. Crawford** is a writer and photographer living in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He was a combat photojournalist in Vietnam. He later enjoyed a long career in social work. Crawdaddy also taught at UNC Chapel Hill. He photographs the trite, trivial, and the mundane. Crawford developed the forensic foraging technique of photography with his colleague, Sydney lensman, Jim Provencher. He writes a daily "reverse blog" by email of writing, photographs and interesting shares. Sign up by clicking [here](#).

**Khor Hui Min** (Twitter: [@MinKhor](#)) works as a book editor in educational publishing. She believes in a healthy, balanced lifestyle and loves yoga and fitness in general. In her free time, she likes to write, bake, cook and volunteer with NGOs, especially those that champion environmental causes such as the Malaysian Nature Society. She maintains the [Project Prose](#) writing blog.

**John McMahon** is a writer, part time educator and sometimes antiques exporter who lives on the banks of the River Kwai in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. His first novel, [The Black Gentlemen of Trong Suan](#), just went into a second edition. He also writes at [Hot Season](#).

**Eric Dirker** (Twitter: [@epdirker](#)) currently resides in the United States after living and traveling in Asia for almost a decade.

**Peggy McCaulley** lived and raised a family in the Far East during the 1950s and 1960s. Mother of six, grandmother of twelve, she lives with her husband in the small town of Buena Vista, Virginia, at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

**Amanda Noble** has a Ph.D. in sociology and has researched and published numerous academic articles, book chapters and reports. Frustrated by the constraints of scientific writing, she turned her attention to creative nonfiction writing, especially personal essay and memoir. Her work has appeared in *Seven Hills Review* and in *Indiana Voice*. She lives in Davis, California, with her cat, Lucy, where she is revising a memoir of her Peace Corps experience in the Philippines during the tumultuous 1970s.

**John C. Mannone** has works in *Inscape Literary Journal*, *Windhover*, *Artemis*, *2016 Texas Poetry Calendar*, *Southern Poetry Anthology* (NC), *Still, Town Creek Poetry*, *Tupelo Press*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pedestal* and others. Author of two literary poetry collections—[Apocalypse](#) (Alban Lake Publishing) and [Disabled Monsters](#) (The Linnet's Wings Press)—he's the poetry editor for *Silver Blade* and *Abyss & Apex*. He won the 2015 Joy Margrave award for creative nonfiction and has been nominated three times for the Pushcart. He is a professor of physics in eastern Tennessee. He blogs at [The Art of Poetry](#).

[Gonzalinho da Costa](#) is the pen name of Joseph I.B. Gonzales, Ph.D. He teaches at the Ateneo Graduate School of Business, Makati City, Philippines, and is a management research and communication consultant. A lover of world literature, he has completed three humanities degrees and writes poetry as a hobby.

**Lillian Kwok** (Twitter: [@lillian\\_kwok](#)) is originally from Philadelphia, and now lives and studies in Sweden. She has a chapbook published by Awst Press, and her work has been published in the *Cortland Review*, *Paper Darts*, *Salt Hill* and other journals. She holds an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts.

**Scott M. Reel**, previously a combat correspondent, served as a sergeant in the United States Marine Corps. He studied English and philosophy at the University of Illinois Chicago and currently works as a public affairs assistant for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Scott travels frequently. Having lived in both China and Australia, he seeks to create cosmopolitan works of poetry and fiction that comment on the human condition and challenge the boundaries of Western thinking.

**David Andre Davison** is an American expat residing in the Philippines. He is a retired teacher and police officer. David is married to Amy, a Filipina chef. He has published children's stories in China. He blogs [here](#).

**Carl Wade Thompson** is a poet and graduate programs writing tutor at Texas Wesleyan University. His work has appeared in the *Concho River Review*, the *Enigmatist*, the *Mayo Review*, the *Blue Collar Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, and *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*. He lives in Fort Worth with his wife and twin sons.

**January 2016 featured author interview with Kenneth Levine**

**Q) What motivates you to write? What do you hope to convey through your fiction?**

Reading motivates me to write. I enjoy giving life to, and inhabiting, the characters in my stories. I also like to “play” with experiences in my own life by fictionalizing them.

I hope the reader has some emotional reaction to my fiction.

**Q) Describe your writing process. Do you have any unusual writing habits?**

I have an idea for a story, and then the story writes itself. The characters find their voices and make their choices, and the plot moves toward its climax.

I mostly use a laptop to write, but I need the printed page to proofread my work.

**Q) In your work as an attorney, do specific cases influence your writing?**

No.

**Q) Do you approach your creative writing in the same meticulous manner that you would while preparing a case or are the processes completely dissimilar?**

Counseling clients requires extensive research of the applicable law. Research is also necessary to create the setting and characters in a story.

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

I have never lived or traveled in Southeast Asia, but I would like to travel there. My story is the product of my imagination and research.

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## "Natalie, Natalee"

by Kenneth Levine

I walk toward several bikini clad women who stand in front of the entrance to Lioness. At the door the tallest one touches my elbow. Our eyes lock, and she says in too deep a voice, "You want good time, mistah?"

"No, thank you," I say, while I glance downward at her Adam's apple and the slight bulge in her bikini bottom before looking at the others. She is one of two Kathoey, men dressed as women, and all of them, the real women too, are prostitutes.

As I enter the bar, I realize the moral implications of the scene are no longer important to me. This is simply nightlife in Chaweng, Koh Samui, Thailand. After six weeks of living here, I'm immune to it. It probably helps that I've been drinking since I arrived; I'm inebriated now, and soon I'll be wasted.

Inside there are tables and chairs that face a stage on which a dozen Thai women gyrate to techno music wearing only numbered heart-shaped gold pasties and thongs almost as thin as dental floss. I stagger through groups of patrons, the men mostly young, not middle-aged like me, and the women hookers, like those outside, wearing bikinis or skin-tight dresses or slit skirts.

I sit beside a table and search unsuccessfully for him in the many faces that eye the stage. I wait for him to walk through the door, like I've waited at the other bars on the sois along Beach Road every night since I arrived here from Connecticut. It's like looking for a four leaf clover, and I've begun to doubt my plan. Perhaps he's frequenting the entertainment district in Lamai or he has left Koh Samui for the much bigger entertainment districts in Soi Cowboy, Nana Plaza, and Patpong in Bangkok, where he was before he came to Koh Samui? I decide if I don't find him during the next week, I'll look for him in Bangkok.

The waitress asks for my order and returns with my eighth Chang Beer. I give her 150 baht for the beer and 3 baht as a tip, and she wiggles her ass to thank me. I part my

lips, and waves of beer wash against the inlet of my cheeks. It's ice cold and, like the other seven, perfect for another humid night.

I've been drinking since my daughter, Natalie, passed away. Then I lost my job and my house, and Helen, my high school sweetheart and wife, left me. But none of that really mattered because I had already lost everything when Natalie died. On her last day, she took my hand and said, "I'm ready now," and her lips carved a smile big enough to swallow her illness.

I said, "No, not yet." I pleaded, "Please don't go. Stay." I closed my eyes and willed her to live, but when I squeezed her boney hand, it was as lifeless as a crustacean washed up on shore. When I left her bedside that final time, a single tear hung suspended beneath her right eye: Natalie's last teardrop, now everywhere, in the rain, the shower, the sink, the water that borders Chaweng Beach. It never falls; it never stops falling. Now that the rainy season has ended, I spend my days drinking on a blanket on the powdery white sand, while I watch people walk to the uninhabited island that's four hundred yards away through the emerald-blue water that's never higher than chest level. I've never gone there and never will; a father can't wade through the tear drop of his daughter.

A man who sits at my table raises the fingers of his right hand and three fingers of his left and spreads them like a fan. A dancer who has "8" printed on her pasties steps from the stage and joins him. He hands her a bar fine of 500 to 600 baht to compensate her for not working the remainder of the night, and they leave together. The price of anything they do outside the walls of Lioness will be negotiated between them.

I know these things about life in Koh Samui, not because I've been a participant, a John, but because I've lived here long enough to be schooled in the ways of the island. Even if I were a man inclined to such behavior--which I'm not--the young women remind me too much of my Natalie.

From stage right a dancer appears and gyrates to the music. She's so indistinguishable from the woman she replaced, I think the first one is back and expect the man will soon return to my table, but then I see her number is 22. When she smiles at me, I turn toward the door and study the men as they enter the bar.

I worry I won't recognize him. I've seen him only in two dimensional depictions on television and on the pages of magazines and newspapers where the cameras add weight

and height can only be guessed in relation to other persons or things in the frame. I tell myself I will know him when I see him. Impatiently I contemplate waiting for him elsewhere along the Soi Green Mango, perhaps at the Sweet Soul Café or the GB Lounge or Dream Girls.

The waitress brings me another Chang, which I thirstily imbibe while I remember I first saw him during the summer of 2005 when he was on the evening news because he--a seventeen-year-old Dutch student living in Aruba--and two Surinamese brothers were arrested on suspicion of involvement in Natalee Holloway's disappearance during her high school graduation trip with her classmates to Aruba. She was last seen in a car with him and the two brothers outside Carlos 'n Charlie's, a Caribbean chain restaurant and nightclub in Oranjestad. When questioned, the three men said they left Natalee at her hotel and denied knowing what became of her. Later they said she was dropped off with him at the beach, and he stated that he left her there unharmed. In a third account, he said he was dropped off at home, and she was driven away by the two brothers.

My Natalie wasn't sick when Natalee Holloway disappeared, or perhaps her illness was already lurking unknown in her blood. She had just completed her first year of high school and boys had started to flutter around her, as Helen said, "Like butterflies," and I said, "Bees." That summer and fall, even years afterward, the talking heads were abuzz with the Natalee Holloway story, and I remember sometime after she started her sophomore year I sat her down and said, "I worry you're too trusting. You're a good person, but that doesn't mean all people are good."

"I know," she said defensively.

"I don't want you to ever be in a position where people take advantage of you. It's the boys. They're always around you. You have to be careful. Don't believe everything boys say. Some will say or do anything to get what they want. Never drink anything they give you. They put things in drinks. They..."

Natalie hugged me. "You don't have to worry. I'm a Capricorn."

I said, "A parent should never have to suffer what Natalee Holloway's parents are suffering."

I identified with Natalee's family and felt sorry for them. It wasn't just the similar names of our children. There's something special about being a father, about the blood tie,

the bond between a father and a daughter that all fathers feel. I think it unites us so we become the fathers of all our daughters. Consequently I, a twelfth-grade English teacher, convinced Helen, a sixth-grade Social Studies teacher, that we should go with Natalie to Saint Martin instead of Aruba during February vacation to respect the Holloway family's call for a boycott. I'm glad I did; when I lie on my little spot of sand on Chaweng Beach and watch the people crossing the water, sometimes I remember Natalie parasailing over the clear blue water of Orient Beach, flying like her favorite bird, a hummingbird, with arms extended like wings and a big grin on her face.

Numbers 9 and 2 step from the stage and leave with customers, and their places are taken by numbers 17 and 25.

I saw him again in March when Greta Van Susteren interviewed him over three nights on *On the Record* on Fox News. He told her Natalee wanted to stay on the beach and have sex with him, but he didn't because he didn't have a condom and he had to go to school in the morning. He said he left her sitting on the beach, but the attorney of the person who supposedly drove him away said his client had been asleep at the time. When the case was closed in December, 2007 without any charges sought against him and the two brothers, I didn't know whether they were guilty, but I was sad because it seemed that there would be no justice for the Holloways.

But soon my thoughts of their Natalee were dwarfed by concerns about my Natalie. For several months Natalie had been fatigued, and between Christmas and New Year's Day she complained about pain in her bones and joints. During the second week in January, Helen noticed a huge bruise on the back of her left leg and took her to a doctor. She was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia and in February began a course of chemotherapy. I wish I could erase the image of her on her knees in the bathroom, head bent through the rim of the toilet, retching, like a human earthquake turned volcano, then on her feet, wobbly, monsoon tears falling.

I drink my beer, grimacing as acid reflux becomes as corrosive as the bar's stale stench of sex, sweat, smoke and beer. A Thai woman wearing a skin-tight skirt slit from her thighs to her crotch puts her arm around my shoulders and says, "How you like buy me drink?"

"No thanks," I say.



"You no want company?"

"No. No company."

"But you alone."

"I'm waiting for somebody," I say.

"I think you too sad and lonely." Her eyes are wide with concern.

"No, I'm okay," I say, and Natalie's teardrop swells from my right eye.

"You want, I give blow job. No money. Yes?"

"No thanks, but thanks for offering." I try to be grateful and respectful. No one has cared about me for a long time. She kisses my forehead and walks away. The room tilts and sways but I follow her with my eyes to another table where she throws her arm around another man who isn't him.

The waitress brings me another beer, and as I chug it to wash away the reflux, I remember he was back in the news in February, 2008 when the existence of video footage secretly shot of him was made public. In it he claimed Natalie died in his arms on the beach in Aruba, and he recruited a close friend to dump her into the ocean. He mimicked the unconscious Natalee as she shook and convulsed, and said, "I tried everything man. I tried to shake her. I was shaking the bitch. I was like, 'What's wrong with you man?' I almost wanted to cry. Why does this shit happen to me?" When asked whether he really knew if Natalee was dead, as she could have still been alive, he nodded his head in agreement and said, "Yeah, that's possible." After the video's release, he said he didn't remember making those statements because he had been stoned, and then said he made them up to impress the videographer who was apparently pretending to be a covert drug dealer.

Natalie died that July 16th. My Natalie was dead, and their Natalee was dead, and he was still running his mouth off, saying I did this and then saying I didn't do that. In November, 2008, in a Dutch broadcast of a video secretly filmed of him in Bangkok, he told a reporter and another man, both posing as Dutch sex industry entrepreneurs, he could get Thai girls to work for them in the sex trade in the Netherlands on false documents, but when confronted with these claims on the phone at the end of the show, he dismissed them, saying, "I have done nothing. You initiated everything." After that broadcast, he was questioned by Thai authorities in Koh Samui regarding the trafficking of women. Then in a Greta Van Susteren interview on *On the Record*, he stated that he sold Natalee into slavery,

receiving money when she was taken and later to keep quiet, and he paid the two brothers for their assistance, and his father paid off two police officers who had learned that she was taken to Venezuela. Later he retracted those statements.

And so in December, as a father on behalf of the fathers of all of our daughters, I came to Koh Samui in hopes of finding him. I swallow the last drop of beer. I've grown tired of waiting. I wish he could be someone, anyone who's here. I wish he would just show himself.

The room spins, and when it stops it seems as if I'm looking at the faces of those around me through a fun house mirror. The face of the man to my right widens, his scalp and jaw moving together as if his ears are wads of gum pulled in different directions, while the face of another man at my table elongates, his scalp stretching toward the ceiling and his jaw line toward the floor, and other faces twist and bend, all of them in motion, in the process of becoming something different, something nonhuman, something ugly. I blink three times, then tightly shut my eyes and count to three, and when I open them, their faces have resumed their original features, but I don't know if they're real; perhaps I saw them unmasked.

I decide to give up for the evening and return to my beach rental bungalow to sleep it off, but after staggering a few steps toward the door, I see him briskly walk into the bar as if he owns the place. I return to my seat and stare at him intently to make sure it's him.

He sits two tables to my left and immediately orders a drink. The waitress returns with it, and he slaps her bottom as she walks away. He drinks until he's at the bottom of the mug and licks his lips as he stares at the dancers.

It's him! He's not older than twenty-five and has a medium build. There's the broad forehead, the thick eyebrows and lips, the blunt nose, all the Neanderthal features I saw on television and in the magazines. I collect myself. I psyche myself. I've had too much to drink, but I can with concentration be sober enough to confront him. I stand and approach his table, at first wobbling from side to side, like a turkey, and then straightening my gait.

I sit on the empty chair beside him, and when the waitress approaches, say, "I'll have a Chang beer. Let's have a round for everybody at the table." He and three others nod and thank me. When the waitress returns with the beer and I pay her, I'm tempted to slap her on the ass to bond with him, but I refrain.

I say, "Bottoms up," and chug until the beer's half empty.

He says, "Awfully nice of you old chap," and chugs too.

I expected him to talk like a Dutchman, but I don't know what that sounds like. He speaks like an Englishman, but I think perhaps Dutchmen and Englishmen have the same accent.

I say, "They chill the mug. It's ice cold. Perfect for a humid night."

He smiles. "Yes, quite nice indeed."

"I'm Robert Clark," I say, extending my right hand.

He shakes it firmly. "I'm Stephen Baxter."

He's lying, but I understand why. His name isn't Stephen Baxter any more than mine's Robert Clark. People, at least smart ones, don't give their real names in places like this.

"Nice to meet you," I say. He nods. "Where are you from?"

"Crawley."

"Where's that?" I say.

"England, a small town in the County of Sussex. How about yourself?"

"Cleveland."

"So you're a Yank."

"Yes. What brings you to Koh Samui?" I say.

"Business in Bangkok, now pleasure here without the wife and kids."

"What do you do?" I say.

"Textiles. I'm a buyer. You?"

"I'm retired. Made money in real estate, divorced my wife so I'm free to do as I please. I've been living here for a few weeks, enjoying the beach and getting to know some of the locals." I laugh.

"Yes, I've been enjoying them too." He winks. "I've got a three year old and two year old at home so my wife is usually too tired. So I'm making up for it here."

"You're in the right place," I say. "You can get anything you want on this island."

"I know. I fucked one so hard last night, I made her quim bleed."

Our conversation continues for another thirty minutes. He tells me he has had threesomes and foursomes and engaged in orgies, which I presume are more than

foursomes. He says his wife is a stay-at-home mom for his boy and girl. He describes his sexual conquests and says he wishes he never married, though he acts as if he were still single by cheating on his wife every chance he gets. But of course everything he utters is as fabricated as the tales I tell about my sexual exploits when I've never been with anyone except Helen, and I'm not with her anymore.

He stops talking and focuses on number 10, who is smiling and waving at a man at the next table. The man waves back, smiles and nods. She shapes her lips into an "O" and the fingers of her right hand into a second "O" that she places in front of her mouth. Then she slides her left index finger in and out of her right hand. The man touches his index finger and thumb together and writes a wavy line in the air; then he shrugs his shoulders. Number 10 smiles, shakes her head, and mouths, "Nothing." She comes off the stage, grabs the man's hand, and says, "Hello. What's your name?"

"Frank."

"Where you from?"

"Australia."

She giggles. "You come with me," she says as she takes his hand and leads him to a dark, secluded area in the back.

The so-called Stephen Baxter and I, as well as dozens of other patrons, swivel our heads and then our bodies to watch them, but I look only because he looks. We see her sit him on a chair and give him a lap dance. Then she drops to her knees, pulls his pants down to his ankles, and buries her head in his crotch. Afterward the man returns to his table with a big grin on his face to a standing ovation from about seventy percent of the patrons. I stand with them because Baxter stands.

The free blow job proves to be an excellent marketing tool. Numbers 28, 4, 14, and 9 leave the stage in rapid succession and then the bar with customers, and are replaced with numbers 25, 23, 33, and 37. Also it has had an effect on the so-called Stephen Baxter. He's antsy. You can see it in the way he shifts from side to side and the drum roll tapping of his fingers on the table.

But then I realize I'm the one who's shifting, and there are three of him, and none looks like the Dutchman anymore. Suddenly his face is too saggy and creased and old. So I slap him on the back to steady myself and tactilely find the source of his triplication, while I

say, "That was something." The striking of flesh conjoins him into one again, and through the haze of alcohol I know it's him; the Neanderthal man is beside me.

He says, "I'll say. I'll bet she gave him quite the gobble. And it was free too. That was one lucky bloke."

I say, "Well perhaps you can also get lucky tonight. I rent a beach bungalow. By making an appropriate gift, I've arranged to have a couple of very beautiful young ladies live with me. I've had too much to drink to enjoy both of them so you're welcome to choose one if you like."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Chaweng Reef Resotel on White Shore by the beach."

"That's a rather generous offer. Sounds like a splendid idea."

"Shall we go then?"

"Absolutely," he says.

I stand, and he rises beside me. I walk toward the door, and he follows behind. He's eager to have what waits for him at my bungalow. I'm so impatient to give it to him, my right calf muscle flexes with excitement, and I shudder as the blade of the knife stiffens against my ankle.

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## "Tudung Girl"

by Foo Sek Han

***Mom:** What time will you be home? Make sure not so late. We ordered fish head curry*

***Mom:** Remember to invite Louis*

***Mom:** Putrajaya very far so come back early, otherwise traffic jam, difficult*

***Mom:** After food we need to talk ya, about your future...*

***Mom:** Your father and I think you need a wife soon..... dont marry too late!*

***Mom:** We can help you find one from back in Kelantan no need 2 b shy*

***Mom:** Time ticking fast!! ticktock ticktock ticktock*

***Mom:** ;)*

***Mom:** If Louis wants to drink beer tell him youre bz*

Iqbal squirmed at the messages flooding the screen, then restrained himself from screaming when the phone, upon finally receiving a signal, auto-updated some app and froze up. He rubbed his head, and then wiped his hand on his football jersey, creating sweat stains. Telling his mother about Putri was a mistake. He did not even want to imagine the number of aunts she had contacted to assist with matchmaking duties.

He sat down on the steps near the pink domes of the Putra Mosque. Louis was still bouncing about in a schoolboyish gait, eagerly aiming his DSLR camera at anything manmade. Didn't they have nicer buildings in Brooklyn? Louis had claimed that nobody he knew would drive him there 'just for a day trip', and Iqbal was beginning to appreciate the wisdom of those people.

It suddenly occurred to him he had never thought about the purpose of Dataran Putra, a roundabout with a few poles and lampposts stuck in the island. And why was there no shade? He was going to get sunburnt. And then heat stroke. And after that, skin cancer. Was melanoma a better alternative to his mother's post-dinner talks? His phone screen was

still white, and she was probably sending him more messages. Oh God, he had made many mistakes in his life but teaching her how to use a smartphone stood above them all as the gravest. At least she had stopped sending him Upworthy links on Facebook.

“Hey.” Iqbal looked up. Louis was pointing at the entrance of the mosque. “Is this place open to visitors on weekdays?”

Iqbal grimaced. “I’m not sure lah. Maybe you shouldn’t?”

“It’s not open ah?” Louis asked. His family had moved to the States in his teens, but when he spoke in Malaysia he was still able to affect the local lingo, albeit with a curious white-guy-on-TV twang.

“I think you can if you were in Kelantan, but there was some controversy a few years back in KL when this MP visited some mosque, and I don’t know if that extends to here, so...”

“I can’t enter because I’m not Muslim?” Louis laughed. “I got into the Sheikh Zayed in Abu Dhabi fine. Man, our country is so *dumb*.”

Iqbal slumped back. “It’s dumb,” he agreed. “Everything’s dumb. It’s like this city.”

Louis scrunched up his face. “When did you go all emo?” He walked over and sat beside Iqbal. “Have you been listening to Taiwanese pop? It does that to people. You don’t even have to know the words.”

“Maybe I’m the dumb one. I dunno.”

Louis cocked his head and twitched his nose. “Is this about Putri?”

“No,” Iqbal said. “Kinda. Maybe.”

Of course it was about Putri. He remembered the day they first met. She wore maroon streaks in her hair and painted on each of her fingernails a different colour. Her laugh had been so magical when she told him off for watching only football and Astro Gempak shows. They had had a beautiful fourteen months, where she had introduced him to David Lynch, the Sex Pistols and Haruki Murakami. She had been the one who told him he should be exposed to a world larger than tiny Peninsular Malaysia and convinced him to study abroad.

The night before, he’d been working at a yuppie-hipster bar in Publika, wrapping up production for an indie film crew. Someone had called his name, and he’d turned around.

“Putri?” It had been his first time meeting her in a year. “Hi! You...” He’d choked back saliva. “You look good!”

Her head had been covered in a thick red headscarf. He could not see if she still had her hair dyed. She’d giggled, her hands covering her mouth. He had not recalled her doing that before. “You too!” she’d said. “You surprised to see me ke?”

“Well, yeah!” he’d said. Each of the rhinestones lining the seams of her headscarf had a different colour. “You’re into ... jewellery now?”

“My new pastime,” she’d said, showing off the rings on her hand, each with a different stone. “It’s been a while, ya?”

“I thought you went to Moscow to study?”

She’d shrugged. Her *baju kurung* was so loose it had made her body formless. “I’m still here lah. You never go on Facebook, ke? I’m engaged!”

“You are what?” Iqbal had nearly dropped his boom mic. “And you closed your account!”

“I did, then I added you back with my new one, Sotong. I’m sharing accounts with my abang Yusuf. You never accepted. So bad you. You jealous of him?”

He’d had a vague recollection of seeing a request by some random guy with a photo doing the Hajj in Mecca. He had clicked ‘ignore’. “I don’t care about him, lah,” he’d said, trying to sound casual. “So, uh, your medical degree?”

“I... I never went,” she said, quieter. “It’s a wife’s duty to stay at her husband’s side under Al-Quran. So I’ll just let Yusuf support me. And I need to focus on more important things.”

“Important things?”

“Like starting a family.” She’d blushed.

Everything had suddenly become very real. When he had not been looking, the girl who’d made him watch *Fight Club* with her had transformed into a demure somebody else’s wife.

She’d laughed suddenly. What was once magical had turned eerie, false. “Ay, it’s great to see you again,” she said. “I gotta go, nanti my abang jealous, ha ha!”

“Yeah.” Iqbal’s teeth had been grinding. “I’ll see you, ha ha.”



“Add me back, ya? Then I can send you the wedding invitation.” Putri had given him a big smile. “I’ll fren you again when I get home!”

He’d watched her departing figure as she’d walked towards the lifts to the parking lot. The whole time during their conversation, he’d noticed her keeping her distance, actively avoiding touching him. Because he was not her husband.

“By the way, I need a band for the wedding, so you better be available to play guitar!” She’d said before walking into the lift. “If you forget that slap bass I taught you, you are dead to me!”

She’d waved timid fingers at him as the lift doors closed - each of her nails had been in a different colour.

“You were going to be clever,” he’d said helplessly after she was gone.

Iqbal rubbed his head, trying to avoid Louis’s gaze.

“Dude, it’s just a girl,” Louis said. “And it’s her choice anyway. It’s not like you can do anything about it, right? And maybe her husband’s good to her. Or maybe he’s hot?”

“It’s not just any girl, okay?” Iqbal said. “Before her, I listened to only Siti and Awie. Okay, maybe some Scorpions, but that’s beside the point. If I never met Putri, I would be ... well, what she is now. And I keep thinking, if we didn’t break up, I wouldn’t have lost her, you know? Made a nice clean cog in the great Malaysian conservative machine.”

Louis made a face. “It’s not your fault if she wants to settle down. Some people want to lie back and be complacent after running against the flow for too long,” he said. “Just be happy you dodged a bullet?”

“I guess,” Iqbal said. He looked out to Putrajaya. Each slab and rock of the pavements was well-maintained, every building was designed by award-winning foreigners and anything which could be polished or pruned was tended to meticulously around the clock. A dystopian sci-fi city on 24/7 mani-pedi. He was reminded of how shiny the rhinestones in Putri’s headscarf were.

There had been a time she would not have minded getting her hands dirty.

“Well, chin up, cheer up!” Louis said. Iqbal winced. It was probably too much to expect Louis - who had been away so long he might as well be a foreigner - to understand him. “Let’s get back to me being a tourist!” He pointed at a wide building in the distance with a green dome. “That looks important. What is it, pray tell?”

Iqbal looked at his phone, still stuck on a loading screen. "I can't check Google Maps. Maybe it's another mosque?"

Louis bit his bottom lip. "Great, you have gone cray-cray sad, and as a tour guide you should burn in a fire. Can we go to a bridge? Take me to one so I can catch some sweet architecture, instead of watching you turn into a general *malaise-ian*. Did you hear the pun I just made? I think it was hilarious. You can laugh now, thanks."

Iqbal drove him the long way, and they passed by the Palace of Justice. Louis watched a stream of lawyers and clerks walking to and fro the courts. "That's the biggest crowd I have seen so far," he said. "Does anybody actually live here? It's either people who work here or those who travel to work here."

"I don't think this city of broken bureaucracy is built for people," Iqbal mumbled.

Louis rolled his eyes. "Please stop trying to be poetic, forever," he said. "Do you know tour guides usually say nice things about their cities? The good ones, at least. Have I mentioned you are awful at this?"

At the Seri Wawasan Bridge, Louis marvelled at the schooner mast-like pylons suspending its cables and ran around taking pictures of the fishbone structure from several angles. Iqbal sat on the pavement near the car and played Flappy Bird on his phone. Louis's photos had appeared in magazines. Iqbal's phone game high score was stuck at 3.

"This is incredible," Louis said. "And so many of them here, too. Where do you think they drew inspiration from?"

"You know all the lakes here are man-made," Iqbal grumbled. "It's so that they can build these bridges over some water to fascinate people like you."

"Dude, don't - Woah. Wow!" Louis waved him over and pointed at the direction of the river bank in the distance. Iqbal had to squint under the blazing sunlight, but he could see an older Malay gentleman seated on a bench, looking out at the lake. He wore a little black *songkok* and was dressed in a plain, traditional *baju* with a *kain sampung*. Beside him was a thin girl their age reading what appeared to be a brochure. "That's my first sighting of real people!" Louis said. "She looks pretty good. Kinda cute, too. You should go say hi."

She did look kind of cute. The girl wore a tight blue long-sleeved t-shirt and fitting jeans, which accentuated her slender frame. When she spoke her hands were animated and

expressive, and when the older gentleman coughed the touch she placed on his shoulder was gentle. But Iqbal was not convinced. “She wears a *tudung*,” he complained.

“She covers her head. So?” Louis asked, hardly disguising the bewilderment in his voice. “Wait. Like Putri? Is this about her again?”

“Like Putri! Exactly!” Iqbal exclaimed. “She’s one of those *tudung* girls! Those who have to cover their *aurat* with layers and layers of cloth in case, I dunno, someone ravishes them with their eyes. She’ll be like that shampoo ad; all, ‘*I only let my hair down for my husband.*’”

“Tudung girl,” Louis repeated, rolling the phrase in his tongue, deciding if it were a slur or a compliment. “Is that even a real term? You’re saying it like it’s some subculture.”

“I don’t even want to imagine us together. Our conversation topics will be solely about the light of Islam blessing our lives. Every night she’ll sit me down and ask whether I’m ready to *beristiqamah* so we can be closer to Allah. So boring, you know? Do you think I can even talk to her about real things? Like football? Or even music?”

At the lake, the older man stood up and took a walking stick offered by the girl. The girl adjusted her cream-coloured *tudung* and held him by the arm to assist him down some steps. “She seems nice,” Louis said.

“They are always nice! And nice is boring!”

“Have you ever considered not being a terrible person?” Louis asked. “I heard it’s a thing people do, sometimes not even for money. Hold on.”

He pulled out his beeping phone and his face lit up into a smile. “Aw,” he said, and then showed it to Iqbal. On the phone was a 3-second video of an attractive girl in a loose t-shirt and a cool smile, hugging a yapping Pembroke Corgi. The video looped, and it appeared as if she were repeating, “Love you,” and then with a wink, “*Ja-gi-yaah.*”

“Is that your girlfriend,” Iqbal asked, flatly.

“Yeah, that’s Hyeon-Seo.” Louis beamed with a pride that demanded Iqbal’s fist in his face. “And Gamju - it’s Korean for potato. Man, I can’t wait to see her next week!”

“I bet the dog misses you too.”

Louis stared at him. “That was the first joke you told today,” he said. “Also, our dog is male, but I agree. We should strive to recognise peoples’ preferred associations rather than their birth genders.”

“You see that?” Iqbal said. “You can actually tell jokes like that in the States! Do you know people are so conservative here, I have to pretend to be homophobic and transphobic in order to talk to girls?”

“As if people don’t have to do that too in the US. I don’t know why this is about you and your inability to just create an online dating profile again, lah,” Louis ended the last word of his sentence with a deep sigh. “Maybe you should try hanging out with better friends.”

“I tried,” Iqbal said, getting quieter. “Putri was - she wasn’t the one, but she was close. And now I can’t talk to her. I don’t have anyone to talk to.” He paused. “I don’t have any girls to talk to anymore. Definitely not someone like your Hyeon-Seo. And my mom wants me to marry a tudung girl.”

They looked around each other, trying not to meet either in the eye. Louis scratched his head. “Let’s look for a place to eat and talk, okay?” he said finally.

Louis checked his phone as they drove. “This Bangsar chick’s blog tells me the best restaurant here serves seafood. Isn’t this city inland?” He scanned for prices. “Yeah, not going there. What’s supposed to be the local specialty?”

Iqbal snorted. “The local specialty here is *kosong*. Nada. This manufactured city...”

“Oh no. Stop! Now forget I asked please thank you. Second best restaurant.” He flicked through his phone. “Italian-Malaysian fusion. Great. Is there a local chap fan place? Or anything with *sambal* that’s spicy and not watered down.”

They went for coffee instead.

Louis let his Asian dolce latte cool while Norah Jones played in the background. “I don’t know if there’s a story to tell of drinking Starbucks in Putrajaya,” he said. “Maybe it’s novel to talk about *Xing Ba Ke* in the Forbidden City in 2010, but now? We aren’t even in China.”

“I am a lost soul stuck in a city pretending to be civilised,” Iqbal said.

Louis made a grand, extended gesture of burying his face in his hands. “So Putrajaya is Thunderdome, then,” he said. “The truth is, you just want your own Amazonian goddess, your own Tina Turner.”

Iqbal responded by lowering himself and letting his chin drop on the table. “I do want a Tina Turner.” His voice came out as a whine.

"I'm clearly not cut out for psychotherapy. But can you be more cock of the walk and less a feather duster?" Louis said. "Let's start with coffee! Please drink your coffee."

The doors swung open behind Louis, and Iqbal saw the older man and the young girl from the lake earlier enter. Under her *tudung*, the girl - who could be his granddaughter - had a few too many freckles, her nose was a little flat, but when she smiled it lit up the cafe.

Oh God, why must she be a tudung girl? Iqbal returned to being "cray-cray sad," trying to ignore the two as they placed their orders.

"One tall hot chai for my Atuk, please," she said. Even her voice was pretty. Iqbal stared at his own mocha, willing the drink to have a volcanic eruption of caffeine and pipe dreams.

Louis placed an elbow on the table and rested his face on his hand. "Maybe we can get the simple stuff out of the way," he said. "So, where else can we go here?"

"Why would you care?" Iqbal said. "There isn't anything interesting here."

"Actually, I do care. I still don't know what that other green dome building is at the Dataran."

"This city is completely lifeless," Iqbal said, his voice raising. "You can't do anything at all!"

Louis's face was stiff. "Dude, indoor voice. There are people."

Iqbal ignored him. "This whole place is a movie set. It's a facade of justice and democracy while the country gets more backwards and medieval! We build new bridges and fatwa everything that doesn't fit in old fat men's ideas of a clean Islamic society! Nothing good comes out of Putrajaya!"

"Traffic here's amazing, you gotta give it that," Louis said, smiling with his teeth, his eyes darting around. "Let's talk about girls now. That sounds like a safer topic. I think."

"Excuse me."

Iqbal turned around. The older gentleman with the walking stick stood before them with a gentle smile.

"I'm Pak Hamzah," he said, his voice slow and warm. "I could not help but overhear your conversation."

Louis whispered, "Be calm now, Death awaits me by its door," and sank into his chair.

“What do you want?” Iqbal said, standing up.

“I would like to say I disagree,” said Pak Hamzah. “It isn’t fair to call this city names, when you know so little of it. Perhaps you should explore it more?”

“There’s nothing to explore,” Iqbal scoffed. “Why should I? This place has no soul.”

Pak Hamzah stroked his beard, still smiling. “Perhaps it is, but is a city not defined by its people, rather than its buildings? If you do not give it a chance, how then would it present its life to you, insha’Allah?”

Iqbal was incredulous. “People? How can people help this city when our country has failed them? We’re living in a country where I can’t give a straight answer when my friend asks if he can enter a mosque!” Iqbal yelled.

“The Putra Mosque? Did you read the notice?”

“The what?” He staggered backwards. He did not remember having attempted to look for a signboard.

“There is one, right at the entrance. It tells you the prayer times, and non-Muslim visitors may enter outside of those hours. If you go now with your friend, you have just under two hours to explore.”

Louis looked up from inches above the table. “You are the worst tour guide, Iqbal,” he said grimly.

“Iqbal, ya?” said Pak Hamzah. “You’re showing your friend around? That’s good of you, but perhaps you need to familiarise yourself with Putrajaya first.”

“Why would I want to familiarise myself with this ... this Malaysian Disneyland!”

“Be grateful, my boy. *Bersyukurlah*. It is what our faith humbly asks of us. You should be thankful for what the government has provided us, and just take it as it is. When I was your age, we would never have dreamed of, or even have bequeathed, something so magnificent.”

“*Bersyukur*? Take it as it is?” Iqbal cried. “I never asked for this! They should have used the money elsewhere!”

“Atuk,” said the girl, to Iqbal’s surprise. He did not realise she was there all the while, standing beside her grandfather with two cups of steaming beverages. She handed him his drink. “Was it not the Prophet Mohammed’s own son-in-law, Ali Bin Abi Taleb, who

said thusly, *'Do not raise your children the way parents raised you; they were born for a different time.'*"

"Hmm," he said. "That is true."

"Our values are different now. People change with the times - their needs and wants have evolved. And when a man sees something he considers unjust, should he not speak up? He can't just sit back, accept it and proclaim, *'I am satisfied.'*"

Iqbal glanced at Louis, whose mouth was also wide open. "I'll see you later, Atuk," she said and walked towards the courtyard, but not before giving Iqbal a quick grin.

"It appears my Nurul sees something in you, Iqbal," Pak Hamzah said. "I will accept your position, although perhaps you have some growing up to do."

Iqbal was readying another retort, when Louis interrupted him. "Hey," he said. "You seem to know a lot about this place."

Pak Hamzah smiled widely. "I became a tour guide here after retiring," he said. "Putrajaya is beautiful. Nobody visits as often as I wish."

Louis bit his lip. "Can I hire you?" he asked, to Iqbal's shock.

The older man laughed. "I'm purely a volunteer," he said. "But I can show you around, yes."

Before Iqbal could react, Louis grabbed the keys off the table and hopped over to Pak Hamzah. "We can start at that other green dome building at Dataran Putra," he said. "Why don't you head out first? I'll catch up."

"Most certainly," Pak Hamzah said, pacing out with his walking stick. "This city is one of the thirteen administrative capitals of the world. More people should know that."

The doors swung shut when Iqbal finally spoke. "You aren't abandoning me!" he cried. "And you said you don't drive manual!"

"I lied to you because I was lazy." Louis took Iqbal's coffee from the table, put it in his hands, and turned him towards the courtyard. Nurul was sitting outside sipping tea. "Look at the female-shaped thing and attempt communication, you massive manchild."

Then Louis was gone, leaving Iqbal standing in the middle of the Starbucks holding his coffee. He looked out, and Nurul caught his eye. She curled a finger.

The courtyard overlooked one of the many man-made lakes of the city, and there were orchid plants in pots hanging from the roof. The sky was a brilliant blue, and the lake

reflected white, serene clouds. Nurul held her frappe in both hands, and when he took the seat before her, she smiled with a devilish wink.

“I thought he’s your boyfriend, and you were on a date,” she said. “Thought I could watch some cute gay bickering here. What a shame!”

He had never heard anyone in a headscarf use the word ‘gay’ in anything other than derision before. “I’m straight,” he blurted.

She laughed. It lacked that same magical quality of Putri’s, but it was light and charming and pleasing to the ear. “It was so sweet of your friend to take my grandfather out. He gets bored, so I try to keep him company,” she said. “But it’s nice to relax a little. He’s the sweetest man, but oh my God! His views are so old-fashioned and ancient lah!”

Nurul reached into her handbag and, to Iqbal’s complete surprise, took out a pack of Marlboros. With a deft flick of her wrist, she pulled out one, stuck it in between her lips and lit it. She took a long drag off it for a few seconds before puffing out a cloud of smoke. Holding the cigarette between her fingers, she closed her eyes and let it linger before flicking the ash into a little dish. Iqbal realised, too late, that he had been staring at her agape the whole time.

“What’s up with you?” She laughed again. “Do I now look liberal and suddenly attractive to you? You’re so shallow.”

“It’s just,” he stumbled through his words. “I mean. Uhm.”

“Tudung girl cannot smoke, ke?” she said. “So sheltered lah, you. Maybe you should try hanging out with better friends. Besides, do you know how much damage the stupid sun does to my hair?” She looked at him. “Aren’t you drinking your coffee? The ice is melting.”

Iqbal drank a large gulp and then shuddered after getting brain freeze. Nurul laughed.

“I like how you’ve got passion,” she said after another drag.

“What do you mean?”

“People are usually like, whatever lah. Sit back, accept and just complain. So apathetic. But whoa! You were so mean to my Atuk!” She pointed a finger at him. “Just because everyone has different beliefs, you think you can lump them together and call them bad people? It’s easy to call yourself open-minded, but when your actions don’t match what



you say, then how? What I'm saying is," she leaned close to him, "you're not wrong, Iqbal. You're just an asshole."

Iqbal took a deep breath. "That's from *The Big Lebowski*," he said.

"Someone's obviously been around!" she said, crossing her arms. "So why don't you tell this tudung girl what you do for fun? Ever heard of The Strokes?"

Why was it necessary to compare her to Putri? He crossed his arms and started talking. Slowly, everything became beautiful.

As for Putrajaya: that was for a different time.

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## **"I Hear You Lima Charlie--How Me?: A Radio Transmission from the Jungle War"**

by William C. Crawford

The electric crescendo overhead went strangely silent as the thunder and lightning gave way to the drumbeat of rain on the rusty tin roof. The Hawk feverishly spun the dials on his old field radio trying to escape the crackling static. This storm was seriously interrupting his obsessive nightly ritual.

"Break!—Break!—Break! Any aircraft this net! I have air warning data. Out of Lima Zulu West on a direction of 240 degrees, max ord 3600, impacting grid 926324. How's your copy?"

The Hawk was a forward artillery observer in August, 1969. The whole fucking North Vietnamese Army Second Division had secretly bunkered into the Que Son and HiepDuc Valleys south of Danang. It was an unholy 120 degrees and the stench of death was everywhere. U.S. infantry units were getting chewed up by disciplined communist forces that had gone undetected for months. The ferocious combat and relentless heat combined to produce hell.

The Hawk was desperately trying to save Bravo Company from being overrun. The dinks had them caught in a blistering crossfire near the Old French Hooch. Air strikes were on the way, but he had to drop some arty in there ASAP to buy time until the jet jockeys could drop their shit. Bravo already had 6 KIA's and 9 more badly wounded. What he did in the next three minutes would decide how many grunts would be left alive after the F-4s unloaded their ordinance.

He was feverishly puffing on a Winston as sweat boiled under his jungle fatigues. AK-47 rounds buzzed around the makeshift Company CP. 82 mm mortar rounds were chopping up the earth as the NVA walked their fire into the perimeter. An RPG crashed into the already badly pocked wall of the Old French Hooch. Bravo was about to be

overwhelmed by well-trained NVA regulars who were now chattering just inside their sagging company perimeter.

The Hawk's voice was shaky as he called in the coordinates: "Red Leg 3-0, this is Red Leg 1-0. I have an urgent fire mission. Unit in heavy contact about to be overrun," he bellowed into the hand set. "Grid 926324. Fire for effect. "

That done, he tried to think of things he might have overlooked. Moments later four white phosphorous artillery rounds pounded into the valley floor near the Old French Hooch.

The problem was, without a defined perimeter for Bravo Company, the rounds found an unintended mark—the chaotic Bravo Company CP. Molten chemicals spewed over the Hawk and the other GI's. Several grunts ran screaming in agony toward the advancing enemy as their sweat-soaked fatigues melted along with their flesh. The Hawk was knocked senseless by the blast, but he was spared a deadly chemical bath by the shelter of a large pile of old bricks left from the dilapidated Hooch. Cries of flaming human anguish blended in with the cacophonous sounds of the fire fight.

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The Hawk never recovered from that ghastly incident which defined his tour in the Nam. He was exonerated for the misfire by his Company Commander and the Battalion CO. Battery C shot white phosphorous rounds reflexively because they were already locked and loaded.

Back in the world the Hawk—a previously free spirit from California—became a heavy smoker, drinker, and druggy. He drifted from job to job, never quite fully taking hold, before eventually settling in the ancient Uwharrie Mountains of central North Carolina. There he lived in solitude on an isolated 22 acre farm surrounded by the National Forest. A three-mile, pot-holed dirt road kept visitors to a minimum. The Hawk thrived on isolation.

He lived on V.A. payments. He was 30 percent disabled due to earlier exposure to Agent Orange and his near death at the French Hooch. Heart and lung problems sapped some of his strength, but nightmares from the errant Willie Pete rounds consumed him. He eventually journeyed east to enroll in the gunsmithing program at a tiny community college.

As much as the Hawk was haunted by the jungle war, he was surprisingly fascinated by its artifacts. He hoarded combat memorabilia—helmets, dud grenades, jungle boots, c-rations—anything the grunts used in the jungle. His old farmhouse was clogged with stacks of U.S. Army surplus equipment. Sprinkled amid this clutter were scores of empty beer cans and ashtrays overflowing with piles of rancid cigarette butts.

In an odd way, this chaos provided a psychological crutch for the emotionally shaky Hawk, who was always just a thin thread away from unravelling.

During the burning summer of 2014, he was ferreting out surplus gear in one of his favorite local haunts—the Uwharrie General Store. Nestled hard by NC 109 in the National Forest, the store was crammed with hunting and fishing gear, groceries and beer.

The proprietor was retired First Sergeant Hoss Gonzalez, who relocated his family from Texas so he too could enroll in the gunsmithing program. Hoss sold refurbished fire arms in a back corner of the store, and he was the Hawk's only real friend. Gonzalez was plump and jovial. He served in the same battalion in the Nam but at a different time. When things got especially rough with the Hawk, Gonzalez periodically performed impromptu suicide interventions.

Hoss was a procurement genius! He plied the Internet to locate and buy old combat gear from the Nam—most of which he sold to his friend for a song. That helped to keep the Hawk fixated on something other than the grim events of 1969. That summer Hoss performed a coup de grace. He located an old PRC-25 field radio. It even had two barely functioning batteries which still held a modest charge.

The Hawk was elated! He placed the relic radio smack in the center of his living room, clearing out piles of musty jungle fatigues in the process. He used an old pickup truck battery with frayed red wires to recharge the radio cells. It was a jack-legged setup. Sometimes sparks flew and acrid smoke hung in the humid air. Damned if that sketchy old radio didn't work after all!

He spent countless hours clutching the battered handset, and he was mesmerized and maybe a bit haunted by the hissing sound produced by the empty radio freq. One late drunken night, amid much static, some military chatter crackled out of the speaker. The Hawk instantly surmised that the transmission was coming from Ft. Bragg troops on

maneuvers in the National Forest. They came every summer, and he had just seen G.I.'s in desert fatigues in the general store loading up on beer and cigs.

The Hawk became an enthralled if silent participant in their radio transmissions. He hung on every word as he spent hours keeping the PRC-25 charged. That August produced searing heat, often reaching 100 degrees. The ancient Uwharries were not totally unlike the Central Highlands surrounding the Que Son and Hiep Duc Valleys. No lush rice paddies in the vals but steep enough to be a bitch for G.I.'s to hump up carrying a full rucksack.

The intense summer heat was suddenly punctuated by daily afternoon thunderstorms with intense electrical ferocity. At the Hawk's isolated farmhouse, his favorite nocturnal pastime of fondling and listening to the 45-year-old PRC-25 was disrupted by explosive lightning bolts, which in turn produced unbearable static.

The Hawk tried to compensate for these interruptions by chain smoking more Winstons, drinking extra beer and puffing a fat joint here and there for diversion. He proudly rolled his own reefers with Uwharrie Gold, the local cash crop. The federal land surrounding his old farmhouse was sprinkled with marijuana patches carefully tended by gun-toting local entrepreneurs riding powerful ATV's. Forest Rangers burned some of the tall green stashes, but there were too many to eradicate completely. The local grapevine also hinted that there were protective payoffs to the underpaid Feds.

As August wound down the Hawk spiraled into one of his periodic depressions. The anniversary of his Bravo Company disaster loomed, and it took a sinister grip on his psyche. One night a near tornado ripped through the Uwharries. Torrential rains and soaring winds threatened to rip the rusty tin roof off the old farmhouse.

The Hawk sprawled on his living room couch drunkedly clutching his cherished handset. The empty push crackled with static from the electrical barrage overhead. The Hawk should have been terrified by this meteorological maelstrom, but he was totally numb with eternal, overpowering guilt.

A lightning bolt found his old brick chimney. Loose bricks and mortar clattered down on the tin roof. Suddenly there was a lull in the tempest not unlike the coming of a hurricane's eye. Then the Hawk heard the unimaginable! The raggedy speaker of his PRC-25 crackled to faint but unmistakable life.

“Red Leg 1-0, this is Parker Pen 1-0, over.” Hawk’s long dormant call sign once again echoed out over a military freq.

“Red Leg 1-0, this is Parker Pen 1-0, unit in contact! Gooks in our perimeter. Emergency fire mission!”

The Hawk’s body went rigid. His bloodshot blue eyes popped out of his head like laser darts. The old handset snapped up to his mouth as he barked, “Parker Pen 1-0, this is Red Leg 1-0. I have you Lima Charlie, how me, over?”

The bedraggled jungle vet trembled with fear as the pace of the radio chatter escalated to a frantic tempo. “Red Leg 1-0, request an urgent fire mission, saturation on grid 926324. No markers! Fire for effect now. The gooks are so close I can hear them whispering to each other and their safeties are clicking off right in my ear!”

Nearly fifty years of torment ebbed in the Hawk’s mind. He sat up tall on his patchwork sofa and instantly tuned back into the Jungle War. Decades of PTSD and guilt gave way to a soldier’s duty and training.

“Red Leg 3-0, this is Red Leg 1-0. I have a fire mission. Unit over run at grid 926324. Fire for effect! In another minute they will be wiped out!” The Hawk was operating on pure adrenaline as he relayed a repeat fire mission to LZ West and the 155 mm howitzers of Battery C. The big guns boomed. Their incoming rounds sounded like a fast arriving train on the Chicago El.

It seemed like an eternity before Hawk heard Capt. Gayler’s sharp Texas twang spit out from his old speaker. “Red-Leg 1-0, Parker Pen1-0. Your shit came in on the dime! The gooks are pulling back. You got some G.I.’s out here that want to hug your neck when we get back up on the hill. Tell the boys at Red Leg 3-0, good shooting!”

Dawn seeped into the Uwharries like a foggy stream of cold mercury. The day promised more summer heat. The Hawk struggled out of his front door into the weed-choked yard. The PRC-25 now stood stone cold silent in his living room, the battery long since exhausted. George Hawkins was completely spent, but for the first time in forty-five years he felt no responsibility for anything. His long neglected body and mind felt strangely cleansed. Had it been a drunken dream? Or had a long lost radio transmission from the Nam finally arrived bringing redemption?

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Late September found the Hawk pedaling west up the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge. He was riding a shiny Schwinn Paramount outfitted with bulging pannier bags. He was bicycling home to California where he would join an old buddy to open an arcade on the funky Santa Cruz Pier. On weekends they planned to enjoy a 1950 Packard Super 88 Victoria. His buddy got it for a cool 38 grand on eBay. Strangers along his homeward route often asked about the medal with a multicolored ribbon carefully pinned to his pannier. It was the Bronze Star, an honor secured for him by a grateful infantry captain, William Gayler, from Mineral Wells, Texas. They would speak often by telephone over the years ahead.

The Hawk was finally free. He often lay awake in his sleeping bag gazing up at the comforting stars. Sometimes sleep would finally creep in like a blackened gook sapper. Then he would suddenly snap awake to the sound of his own strained but calm voice: "This is Red Leg 1-0, I hear you Lima Charlie. How me?" Tears would be streaming down his weathered cheeks.

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## "The Shadow under the Rain Tree"

by Khor Hui Min

C.K. awoke to the sound of purring and a warm ball of white fluff. *Wait a minute. When did I ever have a cat?* He opened his eyes and sat up in bed. Indeed there was a snowy white cat lounging on the bed, regarding him quizzically with her large unusual yellow and green eyes. Green around the pupils, ringed by yellow--interesting combination. Realisation flooded his consciousness. He was not home. He was visiting his aunt in Taiping.

The white cat jumped down onto the floor gracefully and proceeded to walk through a narrow open doorway onto the little balcony overlooking the Lake Gardens. C.K. put the soles of his feet one by one onto the cold floor. It had been raining every evening in Taiping since he had arrived two weeks ago, and he enjoyed the cool weather as a result, although sometimes too chilly in the mornings. He stood up and stretched, then walked to the balcony. The cat was waiting for him, looking at him intently. It then turned around and climbed between the grilles of the balcony railings and the decorative pots of periwinkles in full bloom and jumped onto the nearest old rain tree branch with effortless feline dexterity. It turned around to look at him again, with those big eyes, before making its way down gingerly from the first floor to the ground. *Cat, oh cat. Am I supposed to be your new human?*

He walked back into the room. Another three weeks to go. Three weeks to the start of Form 2. He was not looking forward to it. He spent his days walking and cycling around Lake Gardens and now Taiping town. He missed his buddies back home in Kuala Lumpur and hanging out at the mamak shop near his house, watching football games with his team. He missed his Playstation games that he played with Simon and watching movies at Siew's house.

"Chee Kuang, come down for breakfast now!" His mum's shrill voice could be heard from the bottom of the mahogany staircase. *Great. All the guests know my name now.*



“I’ll be down in a second,” he hollered back down, and started to freshen up and get dressed for another day of hanging out by himself.

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The standard breakfast at the white colonial guest house was toast with homemade strawberry jam and unsalted butter, half-boiled eggs and a choice of tea or coffee. C.K. was not complaining. It was much better fare than the usual *kaya* sandwich or cornflakes which he had for breakfast at home in KL. His mum was not really interested in spending too much time on daily food preparation. He could hear little snatches of conversation between his mum and her sister in the kitchen. The last time he came here was around five years ago, and that was because his mum wanted something – a part of the inheritance. Now, he was guessing there was a similar reason for their extended trip to Taiping. His mum only gave priority to things that benefited her, and they had come all the way to the colonial house that her aunt had inherited from C.K.’s grandma a few years ago for five weeks. That was a long time to be away from the bustling city.

After breakfast, he washed up the dishes and cups. Then, he went for a walk along the quiet route which took him past the frangipani trees and fragrant magnolias. As he passed a particularly large rain tree that stretched its branches until they touched the lake water’s surface, he saw the white cat again. It was the same cat with the snowy white fur and yellow-green eyes. It was sitting under the tree. As he approached, it got up and came to greet him, rubbing its body against his legs, purring. Next, it ran back towards the tree, but this time there was a little girl there, not more than 10 years old. She was wearing a pink and white polka dot dress with matching shoes. A red hairband with a butterfly motif held her long hair back neatly. The white cat rubbed itself against her legs. She bent down to pet it on the head.

“Is that your cat?” C.K. asked the girl.

“Yes, it is,” she replied with a smile.

“It was in my room this morning,” C.K. said.

The girl said nothing, but C.K. noticed that a shadow flickered over her face briefly.

“Oh. I’m C.K.” He was feeling sociable.

“You can call me Linda,” she replied.

At that moment, a cyclist in a neon green outfit hurtled past him carelessly, and he turned around to glare at him with a frown. When C.K. shifted his gaze back to the spot where the girl and cat were, they were already gone. *That was fast.*

Over the next few days, he passed the spot again, and he chatted with the girl a few more times. He started to wonder why she always looked the same – same pink and white polka dot dress, same shoes, and same hairband. She could not have run away. *Runaways do not look neat and tidy all the time, even though they are wearing the same clothes, and they will not be staying in the same place in a public park. They should be hiding. The next time I see her, I will try to ask different questions to find out more.*

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“Hi, Linda. Where’s Meko?” C.K. said.

“Hi, C.K. I don’t know where she is, but she’ll be back in a while,” Linda replied.

“Where are your parents? Do you want me to walk you home?”

“I ... I don’t know where my parents are ... and I don’t know how to get home,” she replied. An air of melancholy surrounded her.

“Well, don’t worry. I will do my best to help you,” C.K. said sincerely. “Where was the last place you saw your parents?”

“The last place I could remember being with them was here. It was my birthday. They took me to the zoo and treated me to some delicious mango ice cream. Then we came here. It was the happiest day of my life.”

“Which school do you go to, Linda?” C.K. asked.

“S.K. Convent Kota,” she said.

“Okay, I will try to help you find your way home.”

“Thank you, C.K. You are a good friend,” she replied, looking hopeful.

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“Hi, Aunt Helen,” C.K. greeted his aunt as he entered the guest house and passed the reception counter where she was sitting, occupied with the accounts and guest list.

“Hi there, C.K. Went for a morning walk again?” she asked, her eyes looking up briefly from her paperwork.

“Yes, I like taking morning walks.”

“Good ... good ... You would have made grandma excellent company. She liked to take morning walks too.” Aunt Helen smiled; she had a faraway look in her eyes.

“Can I help you with anything today?” C.K. realised sheepishly that he had not been very helpful in the past few weeks here.

“Wow ... How nice of my nephew to volunteer his services today. Sure, you can help me in the kitchen from about 11a.m. to 1p.m. Just some chopping and dicing.”

C.K. grinned. “It’s a date then. By the way, have any children gone missing in the Lake Gardens area recently?”

“What kind of children?”

“Maybe a girl around 10 years old. SK Convent Kota pupil.”

“That’s very specific. I might have heard something about that. I’ll check with my friends in the area and get back to you about it.” Her eyes softened, and she gave him a kindly smile. “I see you’re trying to do some kind of community service. That’s good. Keep it up.”

“Thanks, Auntie Helen.”

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C.K. was not skilled at tasks in the kitchen, owing to the fact that his mum was not the cooking type. There was rarely anything exciting going on around the stove at home. If he felt like cooking something for himself while his mum was out seeing her clients, it had to be something instant that was easy to prepare, like instant noodles, baked beans or tuna sandwiches using tuna spread from a can.

“You’re getting a crash course in cooking today,” his aunt beamed at him. “Your mum will be so proud of you.”

“Right ...” Aunt Helen had demonstrated how she wanted him to chop the garlic, dice the onions and slice the celery, mushrooms, capsicum, carrots and potatoes.

“We are making a light minestrone soup. Later I will show you how to boil pasta. Then we will add the pasta to the soup before serving it.”

“Thanks Auntie. That sounds delicious. I will try to remember how to make it.” C.K. had to admit that he found the experience interesting.

“I will give you a photocopy of the recipe. Then you can make it at home when you get back to KL. It’s one of your grandma’s favourite soup recipes. You know, I’ve been

helping her here at the guest house for most of my life. She taught me everything I know. That's why she put me in charge of it – because I love this old house as much as she did. Your mum preferred a more exciting life in the city.”

“I wish I could have known her.”

“I'll tell you more about her every day when you help me prepare lunch. Deal?”

“Deal!”

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“Today, we are making sesame chicken,” Aunt Helen announced as her protégé entered the kitchen the next day. “We will serve it with rice, stir-fried greens and a fried egg.”

“Cool. That sounds great! My friends are going to be so surprised when I cook something for the next movie night.” C.K. grinned from ear to ear.

“By the way, I asked around. You were right. A Standard 4 girl from Convent Kota had disappeared in the area last week. Search parties had come back empty-handed. Her parents had taken her to Lake Gardens for a day out on her birthday. They were perplexed how she could have gone missing. So far, the authorities have not found her body in the water yet, so there's still hope that she's just lost somewhere.”

“Do you know where her parents are?”

“My neighbour, Puan Faridah, said the father is away on a business trip, but the mother is at her wits' end. Her sister has come to stay with her to keep her company and provide much needed support. Their house is in Kamunting.”

“Thanks for the info. You are really fast,” C.K. quipped.

“Don't mention it. I have my connections through the local grapevine.”

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“Hi, Linda! I found out where your parents live.” C.K. screeched to a halt. He had borrowed a bicycle.

“Really? Where?”

“A housing area in Kamunting. Can I bring them here?” C.K. said. He was talking fast.

“But I'm not here.”

“Where are you?” C.K. was rushing her, even though he knew it was unproductive.

"I'm not sure." She stopped. Her young eyebrows knit together intently. "Wait a minute. You can follow Meko. She knows where I am. She was with me when I got lost." She beckoned to her pet cat. "Meko, please take C.K. to where I am. Quickly!"

Meko's eyes shone brightly. She meowed in agreement. She looked at C.K., turned and started to walk up the jogging path. Then she stopped, flicked her tail, turned her head and looked at C.K. *She wants me to follow her.* He looked back at Linda.

"Go ..." she said, waving him off.

He set off on the bike, taking care not to lose sight of the cat.

They passed the frangipani trees, then the magnolias. After that they veered off onto a dirt path overgrown with weeds and creepers. C.K. hid the bike behind some bushes and undergrowth. He continued to follow Meko, who had slowed down to wait for him. *Are we on a nature pat? A jungle trail?*

He picked his way cautiously through the increasingly thick undergrowth for about 10 minutes, which eventually opened up into a clearing. A small two-storey bungalow half-covered with creepers was in the clearing. Large sections of the tiled roof had collapsed long ago. The wooden doors and window panes had all rotted away. Parts of the walls had collapsed. Meko stood in the doorway of the main entrance, framed by morning glory vines and blooms. C.K. walked up the driveway to the house and they continued on together into the interior. He made his way through what was left of the living area, then to the middle of the house. Most of the furniture had disintegrated long ago, leaving only bits and pieces of rusted metal frames, ghostly reminders of the house's past colonial splendor.

Meko brought him to the staircase and went under it. C.K. turned on the flashlight app on his phone and followed. It was dark under the stairs. The space had been some sort of enclosed walk-in storage area lined with cabinets from end to end. In the middle, the wooden floor had caved in. C.K. bent down and shone his flashlight down into the hole. It looked like a cellar and shadows of racks and wine bottles were visible in the far corners, the glass bottles faintly reflecting the light. Lying in the middle of the floor directly below the hole was a little girl in a pink and white polka dress. She was very still and very pale. Meko jumped down into the hole and licked the girl's fingers and rubbed against her face. *Linda!*

The hairs on the back of C.K.'s neck stood on end, and he broke out into a cold sweat in the rising heat of the humid morning. It's her. Is she dead? Is she still alive? He fumbled with his smartphone and called 112, the international emergency number for mobile phones.

In minutes, help had arrived. C.K. did not care if the medical personnel and policemen thought that he was a lunatic. He insisted that the girl was named Linda, she went to SK Convent Kota, and she had been missing for at least a week. He further added that her parents lived in Kamunting. It was remarkable that she was still alive, although just barely. Meko stood beside him stoically in support, happily purring and rubbing her body against his legs.

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## **"Look at My Shit"**

by John McMahon

The ride across Thailand and into Laos went smoothly and except for a couple of short necessary runs on the big North-South expressways where motorcycles are treated like vermin. The roads I took ranged from quaint to glorious. The road from Phitsanulok to Loei was 245 kilometers of stunning hill riding with vistas of rolling forests stretching from horizon to horizon of such dense green that they made me believe the earth wasn't doomed to a near future of boiling seas and poisonous air. The road along the mighty Mekong was a little roller coaster that passed through old river towns where wooden shop-houses have been recently restored and converted into cafes to satisfy the seemingly unquenchable thirst tourists have for coffee. Four days spent getting re-acquainted with Vientiane went by quickly. I walked the streets of the revitalized capital that now seemed a little less like a small town, enjoyed international foods that would put the most expensive restaurants in Bangkok to shame and had one terrible, drunken night that laid me low for an entire day while I licked my wounds by the hotel's small pool.

When it was time to leave I followed the directions once given to a New York artist who had been searching for cannibals in the Amazon: "keep the river to your left." The road leaving the city was fine: a newly laid double-wide stretch of hot black asphalt that passed out of the fresh suburban fringe of concrete box houses and Beeline telecom signs. Traffic thinned out quickly, houses went from brick and concrete to bamboo and dirt and soon the black top ended. It had been such a nice road and then just dirt, red dirt and gravel sending wrist aching vibrations up through the handlebars. My Honda CBR 250 wasn't made for going off-road; it was designed for racing around cities, for cornering, for quick starts and hard stops, but this was all rock and ruts and the poor thing was being shaken to its chassis.

I couldn't react to what I was seeing immediately. Three hours of squinting woefully at the band of dirt that stretched to the horizon had finally led to a tiny village, so it took some time for the visual message to reach and get decrypted in my brain before it fully

computed that the woman limping down the dirt road with a stick yoked across her shoulders, toting five gallon jugs of water at each end, was wearing a shirt that read "Porn Star." It took another couple of seconds to stop and turn around on the loose road. I had to see her, had to make sure. I wanted to understand what factors might have come into play that allowed this piece of post-modern, ironic trend attire to travel through time and space to end up here as a purely functional torso covering. How this happened. How that shirt was sewn up in the dank of a Chinese sweat shop, shipped across the world and purchased on a whim by some privileged teen with daddy problems before being discarded in a donation bin, baled up and returned nearly to its place of origin, parceled out and finally sold at some traveling market to this woman here in a village with no apparent name on the banks of the Mekong. In the seconds it took me to turn around, though, she was gone. Disappeared into one of the homes hashed together from bamboo and assorted scavenged materials discarded by the modern world, which squatted in a group at the side of the road.

I wanted a picture of her. I know it was pure objectification for my and maybe a couple of friends' amusement, but I didn't care. That kind of cultural faux pas is one of the true reasons we travel, to see the goofy shit people do in far off places and take a picture in order to make Facebook friends giggle. I stopped my bike and scanned the few people toiling in the mid-day sun. I then saw a kid looping towards me. He was pretty well dressed, clean looking, but also obviously high as a god-damned kite on something--gasoline or paint fumes, possibly jungle meth. He was pointing at me and talking loud at no one in particular. Again I had to turn the bike around on the rutted dirt road. The kid was closing in but before he got near enough to make his finger into a gun and blow me away in his chemical addled mind, I had accelerated.

This road went on and on, never more than a dirt trail, often degrading into a deep, mud-sodden path of tractor tire tracks where the bike squirmed and bogged up to its swing arm and stuck fast to the point where I could walk away and it stayed upright. Or at least it did three out of four times that I was stuck, but the last time as I went to forage for stones and branches to stuff under the wheels in order to get some traction, she listed and fell heavily into the mud trap. I was already wearing a coating of the ocher colored filth to my knees, but this time it was necessary to wallow right into the muck in order to right her, slippery and stinking with the rich mix of dirt and buffalo shit reaching up to my eyes.



After I got back along my way, the road became a concrete path that ended after a hundred meters or so at the river. An old man who had been sitting in the shade slowly got to his feet at my approach. He nodded to me and walked down the ramp toward the water and his means of living: two smallish long-tail boats connected with a six-by-six wooden platform and powered by a trolling motor. I eyed the contraption and asked him if I could cross there. He nodded and pulled his boarding plank from the boat. He and I hefted the bike aboard, and I stood holding it as we crossed the legendary river--back to Thailand I thought with some remote sense of disappointment. The Laos roads were harsh, but the landscape beautiful, clean and traffic free. Plus nobody was shouting "YOU YOU YOU" at me.

As we neared the far bank, it was clear that this was no immigration point. I called out my misgivings about landing here to the captain, but he continued to ignore me and landed at a matching concrete slab where two naked boys swam among the mooring cables of an actual ferry and shouted us in. We got the bike off, I paid the fare and he returned just as slowly across the river.

My misgivings quickly vanished and so did that melancholy twinge of disappointment I had had about leaving Laos because I was still there. I forgot that north of Chan Khan, the Mighty Mekong hooks back into Laos and no longer defines the border between the countries. More dirt roads, more mud and the feeling of being lost or, at least, of moving aimlessly returned and grew on this new, even more seemingly remote trail.

I arrived at Laos immigration just ten minutes before they closed for the day. The officer had my passport in his hand with an inked stamp ready to process me out. "Wait! Are they going to allow me into Thailand? They close at 6 as well," I asked.

"Don't worry, don't worry," the officer told me, stamped me out and handed back my passport. It was a kilometer to the Thai border across a small bridge. Along the way, two young soldiers came out of their checkpoint booth to look at my passport. I whipped it out and showed them my exit stamp without ever completely stopping.

I could see that the gates at the Thai border were shut already. There was a man in a blue uniform walking away; I knew it was too late. Even if it was five to six, I knew it was too late. None of this stopped me from pulling up to the gate and rattling the chain and padlock, shouting and waving my passport in the air. The uniform turned and came back nodding. When he got close enough, he held up the face of his watch and tapped his finger

against the digits--6:02--then turned and walked away calling "sorry, sorry," in English over his shoulder.

"God damn it! You're not sorry, you fuck," I yelled after him while clutching my helmet but resisting the urge to hurl it at the fence. Doing so would have felt good but only succeed in breaking the visor. I rode back to the Laos side of the bridge, wondering what was going to happen, thinking that they might stamp me back in and charge me another 1,500 baht to get into the country. I was already fuming about that, but when I got there, I saw that the checkpoint was empty and the gates were locked shut as well.

There was no one around. All the immigration booths were empty, and there were no cars, no motorbikes. The place was empty, and I was alone on the bridge in the gloaming of the day. I had that chicken with its head cut off moment, strutting a few steps one way, turning and then strutting in the other in disbelief. *What am I going to do now? What am I going to do now?* I repeated it aloud, fully aware that I was doing Jack Nicholson in *Easy Rider*.

I got on my bike and road back across the bridge to the Thai side where I peered through the gates at their equally empty immigration check point. I could have scaled the fence easily of course. But then what? There was nowhere to walk to, no town for about 20 kilometers--just a dot on the map that I knew nothing about. I looked at my bike and the bags hanging from the sides and strapped to the pillion seat.

I had a lot of stuff with me, lots of gear. I had done some camping in national parks in Thailand on the way to Laos. I unzipped the panniers and started sifting things around, dumping it on the road. First there was the digital camouflage camping hammock, travel pillow, silk cover and fly sheet. I had 200 feet of climbing rope and a bunch of carabiners to attach the whole thing between the gates and the guard rail on the bridge. I had my Flameco camping stove, a U.S. Army-issue mess kit and four packs of Oishi instant gourmet ramen noodles as well as four Tesco-brand tea bags and a pint of 100 Pipers whiskey for emergencies. This, I counted as an emergency. I put all this aside and dug out even more. I had a cat's eye head lamp, a Gerber spring assisted four inch knife, my camel back hydration system holding 1.5 liters of drinking water and a full Red Cross emergency first aid kit. I had a copy of Jorge Amado's *The Sea of Death*, my LG Android phone, my Acer One

laptop, Sony noise reducing headphones, a chargeable Aesimom Bluetooth-ready travel speaker and my Nikon AW 110 shock resistant water proof digital camera.

I laid it all out while I made up my camp, hung the cat's eye lamp from the fly sheet above my hammock, connected the gas canister to the travel stove and set up the kitchen by unpacking the mess kit, laying out utensils, cups and bowls. I found the speaker on my phone's Bluetooth connection and got some music going, toggling the volume up until the bass was echoing off the otherwise empty span of concrete that was my own private camp ground for the night.

I hopped the guard rail and slid down the bank to the Hueang River with a pair of clean shorts held aloft where I stripped off my mud-caked clothing and bathed in the silty current of the rain-swollen river. Along the bank I collected some wild greens that would enhance my noodle meal. Back on the bridge it was nearly dark; the sky had gone Prussian blue and the light of the closest stars was already pricking through. My encampment illuminated from beneath the fly sheet in high white light, the lonely bivouac of a digital nomad.

After eating my noodles boiled up with the leeks or onions or whatever the greens were, I sealed myself into the mosquito net of my hammock and began to read but it wasn't right. The book was overwritten, pedantic drivel; another South American writing like some tragic *fin de siècle* European. What happened to these people? Hemingway, Fitzgerald, De Passos--didn't those guys kick the shit out of that old sappy, existential crap for a reason? Reading; what am I, some sort of fundamentalist Luddite?

Hunter Thompson wrote in a letter sometime in the mid-sixties that novels were dead after he had visited the video lab at UCLA and was introduced to the first beta max recorder. If the ability to instantly record and playback a story on some kind of grainy, soundless, low-res video tape with what I imagine was a piece of equipment the size and weight of a fat child tethered to a trolley of ancillary equipment what would he make of my gear? I could shoot crystal clear video with my phone and upload it to the Internet and have people in Uganda watching my cat parade or ice bucket challenge or whatever half-wit antics netizens swooned over in a matter of minutes.

How? I don't know. I don't understand how any of it works. What does Bluetooth mean? How does the ultra powerful battery the size of a baby aspirin in my lamp come to

be? How is the gas pressurized into the canister that makes my stove work? What is this miracle fabric my shorts are made of? If some hunter-gatherer wandered off from a Bronze Age tribe came up and over the guardrail demanding an explanation of how any of these wonders functioned, I would be at a total loss to explain even the most basic concept on which electricity is generated, and he would bludgeon me with his club for having commerce with demons and bad spirits.

I tossed the novel aside and grabbed my laptop and found that the Wi-Fi signal from the Thai immigration office was still strong even if the place was deserted. After trying three times, I guessed their password: Eight 5's. Typical. After checking my email and searching a little porn, I signed into my friend's Netflix account using the Hola proxy server and was streaming the most culturally bereft movie I could think of--*Springbreakers*--in only five clicks of the mouse. I found my Sony noise-reducing headphones and clamped them on and triggered the tiny switch which muted the din of jungle noise around me. I let it play.

The abundance of hot young flesh, drug excess and comic book violence was the perfect antidote to swinging alone in no-man's land. When the scene came up where James Franco demanded that the girls appreciate his collection of gee gaws--his knives, guns, money and drugs--when he challenged them to "look at all my shit," I felt a connection. "Look at all my shit," I yelled back, sweeping my hand around the confines of the mosquito net and solitary camp beyond. "Look at my shit," I challenged both Laos and Thailand.

In hindsight, of course, I was disappointed with myself. I was in no-man's land where anything goes. All laws--man's, gods', possibly those of physics--were suspended, but instead of orchestrating a primate machete fight or developing a chemical compound that would homogenize the people of the world's skin pigmentation or even something as simple as officially declaring the Amish as the enemy of my state, I fell asleep exhausted.

The next morning I was up at six and at the gates of Thai immigration at eight when the officers came to open up. When they processed me out, the officer took note of my stamps. "You were stamped out of Laos yesterday?" He asked, pointing to the stamp in my passport.

"Yes, but you were closed already."

"Did you go back to Laos?"

"No, I was locked on the bridge."

"The bridge? Where did you sleep?"

"On the bridge," I told him.

He pointed to the bridge. "There?"

"Yes, on the bridge."

He made the eating motion with his hands. "What did you eat?"

"Nothing, not since yesterday morning." I knew this would strike a deep chord with him, the regularity of eating being so essential to the Thai mind. He stamped me out and told me there was a restaurant about 3 kilometers away. I was out of immigration in two minutes.

Back in Thailand, the roads were smooth and signs were everywhere directing me to destinations near and far. Food was once again abundant: noodle carts marking every road, coffee shops at every junction. I had an equally beautiful ride home but with little excitement. I could complain about the remote Honda shop that charged me 5 times the retail price for a new battery just because they could or go into the weird sight of watching giant fresh water suck fish from inside a massive Plexiglas arch. I suppose being stopped and dismantling all my luggage and a good portion of my bike at a military check point as they searched for drugs is good fodder for writing, but it remains shadowed by having been a country of one--jammed between Laos and Thailand, master of all I could touch, if only for a night.

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## "Visions of Vietnam"

by Eric Dirker

Fourth floor balcony, the noise of children in flip-flops scampering hard down the pavement floats up. A steady stream of puffs and cracks and whirls as scooters sputter down the same street. The two-wheelers avoid kids, pedestrians, each other. Strange guttural voices discussing something I probably wouldn't care about even if I understood. Saigon has been my home for the past month; I'm not sure I'm gonna miss it. Usually we sit downstairs drinking fruit shakes in cramped plastic chairs. I, strawberry. My love, mango or avocado, sometimes only orange juice.

Tonight I have gotten away from the mad bustle and just look down from four stories up. I'm sure the Vietnamese have a name for these little side streets. In Thailand they call it a *soi*. The street dead ends ... I think. It either dead ends or the motorcycles disappear into some ethereal land that, by now, would be chock-full of motorbikes. On both sides of the street, tall, narrow buildings rise up 5, 6, 7 levels. They loom like perfectly straight teeth packed too tightly into the city's beastly mouth. At night, shadowy figures appear high up on balconies. They smoke cigarettes as the people on the street grow fewer and fewer. In the deep night--still light from the city's peripheral glow--I see rats scurry, twisting down the empty street, chasing each other, maybe territorial disputes or maybe just for fun.

Closer to the quiet end, a couple of thinly packed buildings away from mine, there sits a motorcycle rental shop. In the evening the shop converts into a meeting place and a throng of lanky, pasty skinned foreigners drink beer, smoke weed and talk as noisily as possible. I'm not too sure I'd join them even if I were ever invited to. They talk of backpacker quests and imagine that they are the first to discover this place or that. Barely a few locals linger. Nearer midnight, after all the shops have closed, a man in green jungle khakis stands in the lamplight guarding the mysterious entrance to motorcycle purgatory.

Across from the shake shop that occupies the front of the house in which we stay, there's a lady who grills pork on long metal skewers. The sweet smell of marinated meat wafts around the neighborhood at lunch and dinner times. She doesn't speak English, but she laughs like she knows how to have a good time. For \$1 she'll sell you a bowl of dry noodles with pork sliced and mixed in with shredded carrot and a peculiar, watery, sweet MSG sauce. At the shake shop, Koreans congregate and say little to each other. They mostly just finger their electronics and cast shifty, self-conscious gazes.

A couple buildings down, that's where the real Vietnam begins. Signs start to protrude from facades. Strange words printed and illuminated. The letters are familiar but when you try to read, it feels like mild dyslexia or maybe you're stuck in some strange dream where the truth tickles the tip of your tongue. Don Phom Toy. Vien Com Lay. Bun Bo Ba Ba. Your mind tries to make sense of the words but finally succumbs to numbing exhaustion.

The fronts of buildings are door-less restaurants. That unsettling yet distinctly East Asian smell creeps out and mixes with a thin undertone of motorcycle exhaust. The food smells like boiled meats and some kind of fermented vegetable served to your nose on a bed of fragrant jasmine rice. It is pungent and alluring. If you stroll the street early enough, before the restaurants open, you'll see a makeshift meat stall. A man on a short plastic stool hacks up hunks of meat upon a round wooden cutting board. The wood is just a cross section from an especially hard tree. Once flat, it now curves inward like a shallow bowl where he's cleaved away on bones and joints until the pressure and micro-chips have worn it concave. Still morning, old ladies set up hangers of cheap clothes. Dresses and blouses of the thinnest cotton are sold for a buck or two. Later in the day, when the sun intensifies, men and women sit in store-front shadows as ladies in iconic, cone-shaped straw hats wander around hawking lottery tickets or some concoction of hot soy milk and tapioca.

Down in this part of the street is a temple of some offshoot Buddhist sect. It is just as tightly packed in as the rest of the buildings. The door is almost three stories high and topped with a swastika. Capping the building are four levels of a Chinese pagoda. The roof is accented by square tops with tapered, curved, jutting corners. Up here the traffic is a bit heavier, mostly small engine motorbikes. Girls wearing surgical masks to protect from exhaust fumes buzz by in short skirts, their hair tucked into their collars. Wiry men of

brown skin and lean muscle, like sinewy pretzels, rev the throttle and honk the horns of their scooters. Up here, gnarled old men with white eyebrows and wearing loose pajama-like garbing smoke cigarettes and watch passersby. There's a cafe called Tin-Tin Coffee. The prices are irregular, but the service is pretty good. Across from the coffee shop is The Pasta Box. It took a week or two for us to discover this eatery, but when we did...boy, did we indulge. Almost every day my wife craves their seafood spaghetti. After the Vietnamese dentist ripped my wisdom tooth out, the spaghetti bolognese was my primary form of sustenance.

The side street runs perpendicular to Nguyen Thi Minh Kai Street and the rest of the world. On one corner is a Dairy Queen, on the other a third world convenience store. The store sells goods like water, cooking oil, cigarettes and raw cashews. I only ever bought a single lighter from there, but it had no shortage of customers. Turning left on the larger street will take you to the zoo and a museum and finally to the slowly creeping waters of the Saigon River. Turn right to go to the big, red brick Cathedral or Central Post Office, passing the French Consulate with its bright green-uniformed guards holding well-oiled, grim-black, compact machine guns. I've walked both ways many a time and, though the paths grew familiar, they never lost their exotic mystique. This was my world for one month and, though I will soon leave, I doubt it will ever leave me.



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## **"The Best Bangkok Christmas"**

by Peggy McCaulley

In 1962 my husband and I moved to Bangkok, Thailand, with our four young children. I knew I would experience culture shock, but the most difficult adjustment of all turned out to be Christmas. I had grown up in the North, where Christmas and cold weather went hand in hand with snowfall, sledding and hot chocolate. December temperatures in Bangkok rarely dipped below the mid-sixties at night, while on the endless sunny days, it crept into the high eighties.

I soon learned that Thailand was a predominantly Buddhist country with only a small Christian community. There were no public displays of nativity scenes or jolly Santas, no bell-ringers with red kettles on street corners and no Christmas carols in the air. I had to find my own way to make Christmas a special time for my family. Five years later as we prepared for our final Christmas in Thailand, I had long-since customized our celebration to suit our circumstances.

The only evergreen trees we could find were bushy pines with long needles and drooping branches. They weren't ideal, but I was grateful to find any tree at all. On our first Christmas in Bangkok, we bought one of these unconventional trees, set it in a stand filled with water and stood back to assess its decorating possibilities.

I brought out the carefully packed decorations from home. The children excitedly began to unwrap them, spreading them about so each could choose which ones they would hang. First the lights went on. Their father carefully unwound the long strands of colored lights, plugging one set into the next until they measured nearly thirty feet. He went in search of a small transformer that was used to adapt our 60 AC appliances and fixtures to the local 50 AC. With all in readiness before an eagerly watching audience of four small children, he began to wind the strand around the tree. He didn't get very far before realizing that there was no way to clip each light in place. After half an hour of watching the

lights disappear into the thick branches--or slide off the ends of the long, slippery needles onto the floor--growing more and more irritated by the children's gales of laughter, he stuffed the entire now-tangled mess back into the box from where it came and announced that we would have to make do without a lighted tree. It was obvious that our shiny baubles would fare no better than the lights, and there was no tree-top spike on which to place the angel. I put the lids back on the boxes, stacked them up to go back into storage and assured the disappointed children that we would come up with something the next day.

And so began our own tradition of homemade decorations: old fashioned chains made of brightly colored construction paper; strings of carefully threaded popcorn; snowflakes and other assorted strange shapes, painstakingly cut from multi-folded white paper. The children had great fun dabbing each other with paste, occasionally holding up a needle-pricked finger to be kissed and out-doing each other with imaginative creations. When it was finished, we all agreed that our Christmas tree was the best. In this Buddhist country, perhaps it was.

In December of 1966 it was time to prepare for our final Christmas in Bangkok. As the years passed our family had grown from four to six children. By that time, even the two year old was eager to help with the annual tree trimming. I had once more collected the colored paper, scissors, glue, thread and needles that they would need; then we waited for their father to bring home the tree.

The children ran excitedly out the door when they heard the horn honking, signaling the gardener to open the gate. Following on their heels, I could see that there was a tree in the back of the truck--and what a tree. It was an honest-to-goodness white pine. I could smell it as I walked around the truck, the fragrance conjuring up old memories.

"Where in the world did you get it?" I exclaimed.

"The Embassy," he replied. "They got a big shipment of them. Doled them out first come, first serve. I think this is the last one."

We stood it up in the carport in a bucket of water and cut the thin ropes holding the branches together so it could shake out from its long journey. The children drew back in surprise as they pricked their fingers on the sharp, pointed needles.

"What the heck kind of a tree is this?" asked Mike.

"It's a real Christmas tree, just like we used to have in the States," said Jeff, who had been six years old on his last Christmas back home.

"We'll let it stand here all night," I told them, "and tomorrow we'll get out the old lights and ornaments from storage, and we'll have a real Christmas tree this year."

The children awoke with the sun, shunning breakfast and running straight to the carport. The thirsty tree had soaked up most of the water. Its branches had unfolded, displaying its perfection to our admiring eyes.

It was the twenty-third of December, leaving us no time to waste. We got the boxes from the storage room, wiped off the dust from years of neglect and passed them from hand to hand. The little ones helped where they could, while the older boys brought the tree inside and secured it in the water-filled tree stand. Jeff assumed the role of lighter-in-chief, testing each strand and replacing burned out bulbs. I thought it a wonder that any of them worked, but soon enough they were all in place. The switch was thrown, and we all gasped in delight as the tree bloomed with multi-colored lights. It was magnificent.

Following a round of applause for Jeff, a hasty conference determined who would place what where. It was agreed by all that Sarah, the youngest, with a boost from Jeff, would set the aging angel on the top. The afternoon went by in a whirl of "oohs" and "aahs" and "I remember this one," as the boxes were emptied of their long-held treasures and the tree grew ever more beautiful.

No happier band of children ever gathered around a dinner table as their father praised the results of their efforts. During the meal, he told us of a young couple, recently arrived from the States, who were living in temporary quarters, still waiting for their household effects. "The young wife," he said, "is depressed and homesick. This is her first Christmas away from her family. Maybe you and the kids can take her some home-baked cookies to cheer her up."

Later as I knelt with the children for bed-time prayers, eight-year-old Sue said, "Maybe that lady who's so homesick would like to come and see our tree?"

Six-year-old Danny piped up with, "Maybe we should just give her our tree--as a Christmas present." This last remark was followed by silence as they all absorbed the idea. I could see the wheels turning.

"That's a lovely idea, but you all talk it over and let me know what you decide. It's your choice." I left them alone to consider it while I went to gather their laundry and tuck the mosquito netting around their beds.

"What 's the verdict?" I asked when I returned a short while later. "Do we make a gift of our beautiful tree?" They exchanged looks all around and then, solemnly, six blonde heads nodded in unison. "Well, that's that then," I said, blinking back tears as I hustled them off to bed. I had never felt so proud.

The next morning the older boys helped their father stand the tree--lights and decorations in place--in the back of his truck. The boys climbed aboard to hold it in place as he drove it through the congested streets of Bangkok amid honking horns and laughing, pointing pedestrians. Sue and Danny were out the door the minute they heard the horn honk signaling their return. I was right behind them with Sarah on my hip and Paul by the hand.

"Well, did you get it there in one piece? What did she say," I quizzed the boys as they climbed down. "Was she surprised? Was she happy?"

They shook their heads disgustedly. Jeff said, "She didn't say anything--all she did was cry."

"And then she hugged us both, really hard. She nearly cracked my ribs," groaned Mike.

Over their heads, their father gave me a wink and a thumbs-up. Then he got back in the truck and drove off to find a replacement tree, while I hurried inside to set the popcorn popping and pull out my store of colored paper, glue and scissors. The afternoon passed in a flurry of activity, and at last it was Christmas Eve.

That night we once again draped paper chains and popcorn strands on a long-needed, drooping pine tree. The children took turns reading the story of the birth of Christ, and then we stood around our special Christmas tree and sang a few carols. They were tired and happy children as they headed off to bed to await Santa's visit.

We all agreed that this was our best Christmas in Bangkok.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Feeding the Governor"

by Amanda Noble

Pam unlocked our kitchen door, slipping into the house. It was early; Di and I were still sleeping, or, at least, unwilling to face the day. Her *tsinelas*, flip-flops, snapped loudly on the linoleum; she was not a small woman. There was only one person it could be, the only person we agreed to provide with a copy of the key. She waited for us at our indoor picnic table, where we ate, drank, smoked, read and gossiped. I finally dragged myself from beneath my net.

"Hi Pam," I said. She mumbled something I didn't catch in response.

I heated a pot of water for Nescafé, made two cups and joined her at the table.

"So, what's going on?" I asked. "Where have you been so early this morning?"

"I'll tell you when Diane gets up."

Even though we were practically whispering, Diane appeared at her bedroom door. "I'm up," she announced, trying to stifle a yawn. She made herself a cup of coffee and joined us.

"Well?" Diane asked.

Pam announced that she had made a lunch date with the governor for the three of us.

"What? Why?" I asked.

"We're going to feed him some rabbit," Pam said, grinning.

Pam had taken to raising rabbits in search for more food sources for poor families. The moment after slitting the throat of her first charge, she took a jeepney to the governor's office and scheduled a lunch date, committing the three of us. Her plan was to promote animal husbandry by feeding the governor a lunch of rabbit salad sandwiches. She was so optimistic, staring at us with great reservoirs of hope in her large brown eyes.

Diane, usually outspoken, was very quiet. It worried me. Anxiously, I jumped up to reheat the water for more coffee.

"Anyone else for more coffee?" I asked.

Holding up their empty cups, they both signaled they wanted more. Resettled at the table, I rolled my eyes at Pam, not exactly in favor of the plan.

“Oh, come on,” Pam said. “It will be fun.”

“I don’t know, Pam. I can’t imagine the governor eating a sandwich of any kind,” I said.

“Don’t be a spoil sport, Amanda. How often do you get to provide a meal for the governor?” Indeed.

Diane roused herself enough to sneer. “This whole experience is surrealistic anyway. Why not take the guy a sandwich?”

“Okay, okay.” I said, agreeing to the foolish plan. It was not as if lunch with the governor would interrupt important work. Things hadn’t been going well with our main project, the Nutri Hut. The Lutheran minister we worked with had constructed a building with a roof; under it were long, family-style picnic tables. We had a structure, a place to provide meals for poor women and their likely malnourished children. We also planned to weigh and chart the children over time and teach their mothers about nutrition. Exactly the kind of project the Peace Corps had in mind for us.

We managed to raise funds from the small US air force base nearby, which surprised us, and helped with building costs. We hounded the officers in charge of public relations for weeks, and they not only provided the funds, but called the press to photograph the project, showing off their good will. I was worried about the project, though, because those funds were spent on building the structure and not for the food budget. How would the malnourished become nourished?

The minister agreed to pay for a weekly lunch, but one weekly meal wouldn’t stave the starvation so many of the poor families suffered, and all the education in the world couldn’t take the place of food. The minister was firm that this design would work. Having had so much trouble in the past designing projects without local input, we didn’t want to make that mistake again. I often wondered if offering food once a week meant that the minister could count those he fed as converts. Almost everyone practiced Catholicism in the Philippines; it would be a feat to draw Catholics to a new place of worship.

The culture in the Philippines was complex and multilayered. Our work often seemed hopeless. It began to dawn on us that because Imelda Marcos had asked for

nutrition education volunteers in our region, her husband's region, perhaps the locals were opposed to our presence. It was the First Lady's project and local governments had not been consulted. It was, of course, a poor community development design. Eventually, many of us had to work outside the boundaries of local governments, inventing different ways that we could help.

Into our second year without successful projects, Diane and I had reached a zenith of cynicism, one that made me increasingly uncomfortable. The skepticism began as a way to shield ourselves from the disappointments, the many things and personalities that had stood in our way, but now had a life of its own. It was hard to find my way out of it because I loved Di and didn't want to make her mad. Still, I began to argue with her negative take on things. I didn't want to return to the States discounting the country and its people. I didn't want to be bitter. Besides, I loved Irene like a mother, and she had done so much for us. Negativity about the culture seemed to disregard her love for us and her help with our seemingly endless needs.

Pam brought the rabbit over and we cooked it in the oven, scenting the house with a rich aroma and increasing the heat index. We took turns sitting in front of the electric fan, drying our sweat. I often daydreamed about purchasing a second fan for my bedroom, they were costly and beer usually won as a priority. We cooked on this very hot night because Pam and the governor had agreed that the lunch would take place tomorrow. We'd feast on rabbit tonight as well, roasted rabbit, rice and some fruit.

In the morning, a light rain danced across our metal roof. I woke up in a pool of sweat and forced myself out of bed for a cup of coffee. Diane was already up; her hair wet, signaling she'd taken a bucket bath. Mug of Nescafé in hand, I joined Diane at the picnic table.

"We skipping exercise this morning?" I asked.

When we finally broke our mutual denial about weight gain - too much beer, rice and ice cream - we started to follow the Royal Canadian Air Force exercises. I had tucked that slim book in a suitcase and was hooked on the exercises, especially because Diane and I did them together, on towels parallel to the picnic table.



“I don’t know. I was just so hot and sweaty; I had to take a bath. I can’t take much more of this, Amanda.” She vigorously shook her head, trying to emphasize her unhappiness, sending her gleaming blond hair flying across her face.

I sighed deeply. “Of what?” I knew I was cracking open the door to her complaints about life in the Philippines, allowing the negativity to take up residence in our home.

“Well, the weather, for one thing. I’ve turned green with mold. Seriously, I’ve got a bad heat rash from my underwear. And you get that thing on your arm.” Three times now, a two-inch long angry red line on my arm morphed into a staph infection within a matter of hours, painfully swollen and full of pus. I’d learned to treat them immediately with topical antibiotics.

Living in the tropics during rainy season was hell on the body; you never knew what might show up where. Most common was heat rash, hard to avoid if you had any nylon in panties or bras. Cotton was better, but cotton took a long time to dry. Once you were drenched in sweat, cotton underwear was wet for hours. Rainfall on the island of Luzon varied from 78 inches to 180 inches per year, ensuring opportunities for heat rash and other unpleasant conditions.

Insects seemed to enlarge as if the rain was a growth elixir. Huge metallic beetles flew into the house every time we even cracked a door. Beautiful, with luminous pale green bodies, their massive size intimidated us. We poked at them so that they rolled onto their backs, where they were helpless, and we set them free. Mosquitoes were a bother year round, and we all slept under nets, but they loved the rainy season. Our population of house geckos, living on mosquitoes, increased too. These small lizards lived on our walls, and we slowly learned to welcome their undulating forms and small screams.

“What else, Diane?” I asked, hoping this would end sooner rather than later.

“Well, the work sucks. We’re never going to get the Nutri Hut off the ground.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Oh, come on. The whole thing’s absurd. What are we doing here? When we go out with our counterparts, I just feel like I’m in their way. The Peace Corps doesn’t care about us and neither do the Filipinos.” That was Diane’s constant whine: what were we doing here when nobody cared? It was, frankly, boring. Boring and intense. Hard to hear day after day.

“But we’ve made such good Filipino friends here. Think about Irene and her family, not to mention Bembo and his *barkada*. They’re some of the best friends I’ve ever made,” I said. Diane said nothing. Irene owned a local bar that we frequented; Bembo, a wild journalist, lived up the hill in Baguio.

I stood, eager to change the mood.

“I’m making oatmeal, and then we’ll do our exercises. You always feel better after that.”

After exercising, I took a bucket bath, lingering, giving myself multiple cool rinses. I dressed carefully in a skirt and nice but faded blouse. Diane, instead of getting dressed, lounged across the tangerine and lime green vinyl couch, the fan blowing directly on her. She held an old *Newsweek* in front of her face. She only pretended to read. Instead, she chain-smoked and sighed noisily every other minute. I thought of her as a live bomb that might just explode at any minute.

I was tired of it, but I couldn’t think of how to change my situation. I didn’t have an alternative placement and I’d really ache for Irene if I had to move far away. Irene was my lifeline here; my surrogate mother and cultural tutor. Besides, wasn’t I too far along in my tour to start completely over? Baguio, only an hour and a half bus ride away, always beckoned. Baguio was a beautiful twinkling small city, about a mile high and cloaked in fog in the mornings and evenings. I fantasized constantly about living there, and visited as often as possible to escape the heat. There were rumors that some of the Baguio volunteers in our group planned to go home early. I resolved to visit them and ask whether the rumors were true. It was a small step in what might become a change.

After Pam arrived, Diane finally dragged herself up to get dressed. Pam wore her only pair of dress pants and a button down shirt, veering from her usual garb of jeans and t-shirts. Her dark brown hair hung limply on her shoulders, as if it needed washing. Pam and I began the sandwich preparations. Pam brought *pan*, Filipino bread, a residue of Spanish colonial times. They were small rolls made of bleached flour, and these were fresh, still warm. The rolls were so tiny we would have to make a lot of sandwiches, a point that added to the absurdity of the plan. Surely the governor would not want to eat more than one. We sliced the rolls, spread mayonnaise on both slices, added chopped cabbage and filled them

with rabbit salad, a mixture of meat, mayonnaise and sweet onion. Goopy American food. I worked hard on controlling my tongue.

The rain continued to drizzle and I dreaded going into town with this load. It felt like a good day to hole up in my room, read, write letters, think about my life. Pam packed the sandwiches carefully in three baskets, covering them with freshly laundered dish towels. Rain ponchos and umbrellas in tow, we stood on the road outside our house while waiting for a jeepney. I couldn't believe our luck when a nearly empty one appeared immediately. The Bee Gees "Night Fever" blared from the driver's stereo; it only took two years from the end of the Vietnam War for American music to degenerate into disco.

The capitol building was a short walk from the jeepney stop. We hurried through the rain to find the governor's office, each carrying a basket of sandwiches under our rain ponchos. At the office, Nevy, the governor's secretary, smiled broadly at us. About 30, she wore a navy blue suit with a short skirt and navy heels to match. Her straight black hair fell to her chin, parted down the middle. She wore very little make-up except for startling bright red lipstick. "You are here for lunch?"

We removed our ponchos, and Pam told Nevy, "We have brought lunch," uncovering the little sandwiches resting in her basket. Nevy looked puzzled, staring at the fattened *pans* nestled in the basket. I felt the heat of embarrassment color my face.

"The governor is expecting you. Please sit."

And so we sat. And sat. And sat. Nearly an hour passed before our province's governor came through his office door with a flourish and a grin. He was not a tall man but had a big presence. He wore a beautiful stark white *barong* and dressy black pants. His graying hair was pomaded back from his handsome face, which always seemed to be smiling. "Come in, come in!" he urged us. The first thing I noticed was the tablecloth-covered dining table set for four, loaded with bowls and plates of food. We stared, speechless, wondering how this could have happened. What mistake did we make this time?

"Governor," Pam said. "We were planning to feed you. We've brought these sandwiches for you. We didn't think you would feed us."

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked.

"Well, yes, but this has been a lot of trouble for you."

“No, no trouble at all. Let’s eat!”

We moved to the table to see what was offered. There was green mango with *bagoong*, fermented fish paste, wildly popular among Filipinos, especially Ilocanos, the ethnic region where we lived. There was *pancit*, Filipino chow mein, this version made with pork. The small white plates at each place had something on them that seemed to be moving. We took our seats.

“Let’s start with this special salad,” the governor suggested. The plates were topped with a light helping of chopped cabbage. Six or seven small shrimp wiggled atop the cabbage, waving their antennae.

“They’re alive!” I blurted out. I’d never seen anything like it.

“Yes, it’s called jumping salad,” the governor said. “You squeeze the calamansi on the shrimp, they get dazed and begin to die. It’s delicious!” Calamansi was a tiny citrus fruit that tasted like lemon-lime. I loved calamansi juice, especially if chilled and without the addition of a lot of sugar. I took as much calamansi as I could hold in my hand and squeezed for dear life. We began to eat the jumping salad, peeling the dead or dying shrimp and dousing them with more calamansi juice. Diane mostly pushed hers around on her plate. Within minutes, she shoved the salad plate aside and said, “Please pass the *pancit*.” I managed to finish most of my salad and began eating *pancit* when I remembered the sandwiches. With Pam’s focus locked on the jumping salad, I had to kick her gently to get her attention. When she looked up, I mouthed “sandwiches.”

“Oh, governor, excuse me. I’m enjoying this food so much I forgot about the sandwiches. Let me serve you one.”

“Well, okay. I will try.” He sounded resigned, losing his charisma for just a few seconds.

Pam reached inside one of the baskets and placed a sandwich on the governor’s plate. She’d been waiting for this moment since she started her rabbit raising project. We all stopped eating and watched the governor. He took a very small bite, a nibble really, and held it in his mouth. Instead of his usual beaming expression, his lips were fastened in a tight line, so tight that they were turning pale. He wouldn’t meet our eyes, staring down at the offending sandwich. I was afraid he might spit the food into his napkin, but instead he managed to swallow, taking several gulps of juice and pasting a smile back on his face. I

smiled inside, knowing my face had resembled the governor's the first and only time I tried *bagoong* on unripe mango.

The juice seemed to help him recover. He said, "I am so pleased you made this food for me. I wish you the very best with your rabbit project. I am happy to feed you this Filipino meal because we are so grateful for the Peace Corps who live and work here."

I glanced at Pam. Disappointment etched her plain and normally serene face. Her big moment had come and gone. I felt so bad for her. Her enthusiasm seemed unflinching, and she was by nature a very patient woman, but this had to hurt. Diane, on the other hand, was practically sneering, as if this event had proved, again and once again, the futility of the Peace Corps. I distracted myself by wondering what we could possibly do with all the sandwiches.

I reached for what was good in that moment, sitting there with the governor of our province, surrounded by exotic food. I had met so many notables while in the Peace Corps. And the lunch was a new experience, special. I had dined with a governor, something unlikely to do again. I was also on friendly, or, at least, speaking terms with two mayors. Until then, I had not heard of jumping salad, and it made a good story to tell to family and friends when I returned. So what if the rabbit salad hadn't worked?

We boarded a jeepney, traveling in silence. The jeepney driver dropped us off across the road from our home; they all knew where we lived. I lingered outdoors while my friends entered the house. The mosquitoes were not too bothersome yet, waiting for the dusk before they began their hunt. The rain had left that cleansed earth scent, the air sparkled, free of the almost constant smoke of burning trash. The clouds gathering in the sky were dark and dramatic, foretelling more rain. I wondered what the Philippine Islands were like a hundred years ago or more, before they became so jam-packed with people. I narrowed my eyes and imagined it: nipa huts, no electrical wires, more rainforest than planted crops, birdsong, even monkeys. The birds and monkeys were mostly gone now, their habitats destroyed.

I sighed, reverie over, ready to enter our home. I pondered cooking rabbit *adobo* at some point, maybe for the mayor instead. But at that moment, I just wanted a beer.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Night Drama"

by John C. Mannone

The Pacific sun sinks below purple horizon, quenches the watery  
black hiding sand-white coral cliffs, hiding the violence  
of abrasion, the gnashing teeth of midnight blue parrotfish that crush

the corrugated stone, excavate century-old skeletal remains,  
sift debris for morsels of soft polyps. When the gnawing  
fish are done, they rest in their seabeds, in night-cradled crevices,

their fins laid down, the fish wrap themselves in blankets spun clear  
as cotton, and they sleep with their lid-less eyes staring into dreams  
free from predation. But while they sleep,

the blunt spire of a mollusk rises like a temple from the quiet sands.  
This cone shell glides in stealth on its magic carpet-mantle. Its secrets  
imprinted on its limestone walls as if sacred text— cuneiform code

wedged in and tintured brown on its porcelain-smooth conical scroll.  
Its destiny, written with letters of biochemistry; its genes, cursed  
with war. Sometimes the innocent are impaled. Harpoon barbs

soaked in polypeptide poison hammer the sleeping fish. It preys.  
The Pacific sun sinks below the purple horizon, quenches the watery  
black with its light. And the suffering is no more.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Breakfast"

by Gonzalinho da Costa

Dark-headed coffee is a keen companion  
Of depth and wit,  
Finely calibrated scientific instrument.

Swinging his censer just below my nostrils,  
He slays my logic with perfume.  
"What crow has stolen your words?"

He asks. "Has your eloquence  
Turned into baubles in his nest?"  
I pay no attention to the ribbing.

He is too valuable a vizier.  
I mine gold every morning.  
I take my breakfast like a king—

To my right salted fish,  
To my left steaming rice,  
Fresh egg is the jester.

Butter, a bird, is eyeing the bread.  
Milk dives smoothly into coffee.  
Sugar disappears, memory of a dream.

A cock crosses swords with the day.

Things to do arrange themselves,  
Tallest to shortest.

Digesting a bolus,  
I rise ready to run the next marathon,  
Wakeful as a bat, electric as a hawk.



\* \* \* \* \*

## **"MongNgoni"**

by Lillian Kwok

There is so little in MongNgoni. Only a river  
and in the mornings—the boats. No roads,  
no cars, no electrical wires. We lay

in two hammocks all day watching the river  
and sometimes you reached across

to take my hand. At night, guitars, fire. One  
candle on our dinner table. Pumpkin curry,  
fish from the river. In that darkness

how close we lay together in the bamboo hut  
through those long, unlit nights.

## **"Four Thousand Islands (Si Phan Don)"**

by Lillian Kwok

We came to the islands on the long thin tourist boat.

It was hot and still, the river stirred to mud

after months of the monsoon. We rode bikes  
through the dusty streets in the blazing afternoon, the world

a fevered dream. I slipped beneath the brown water  
at sunset, when the light was dying into the waves. You

watched me from the shore as I swam farther away  
until I became a natural part of the landscape, became

a Lao girl swimming past a shore of thick palms  
under the dimming light. A simple girl who had lived

her whole life by the Mekong and every evening rose  
from the water, holding a pink sarong around her body.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Cambodian Princess"**

by Scott Reel

The twine string on the back of her neck  
burned in the midday sun.

The bullet holes punched in war  
hid behind the shadow of noon,  
cast by the Cambodian sun  
burning the necks of the three faces.

The days were bleak and famous,  
faceless, the personality of white.

One of the Americans must have  
dropped it: the cat-faced bag,  
the pumpkin-shaped void  
with whiskers and ears  
that bent sideways into a handle.

She'd read about Halloween in school.

Who dropped it?

No one turned to look, no one saw  
her. Perhaps the ruins saw.

The straw whiskers of the cat-faced bag  
reminded her of the twine.

Her neck throbbed at the beige strands.

Kitty must hurt too. But  
there was work to be done,  
memories to sell.

Postcards sat, leaned against her ears;  
she paid her mother the dollar herself.

Now they were the same,  
Kitty and the girl.  
In her room that night,  
she spoke to kitty.  
“The kitten of Angkor!”  
she exclaimed.  
Laughing full-bellied  
and empty-stomached;  
the small of her back was wet  
like her neck, stinging again.  
Maybe she and kitty could run  
to some far away pleasure.  
She looked at a postcard  
in kitty’s open skull.  
Never. America.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Filipinos Have It Hard"**

by David Andrew Davison

Filipinos have it hard,  
So many people and high unemployment.  
It's hard to support a family,  
And offer them a life of enjoyment.

Come dawn in the overcrowded city,  
Thousands rush about.  
The sound of Jeepneys, vans and buses,  
Begin their pick-up route.

People hurry to the subway,  
To the train, and by car.  
For in Metropolitan Manila,  
Even close by, is far.

There are millions of people,  
Residing in this tropical city.  
Heavy traffic is a bit overwhelming,  
But they don't want your pity.

They labor many hours,  
Many more than the West.  
Filipino's give it their all,  
Their dedication makes them the best.

Some go overseas to work,  
Leaving friends and family behind.  
They rely on foreign employers,  
To be compassionate and kind.

They are chefs, and bakers, and servers,  
Then there are also nannies and nurses.  
Some work as laborers,  
Making everything from cars to purses.

Families are separated,  
By miles of oceans and lands.  
Some are gone for years,  
Living a life with stringent demands.

Maybe they end up in Europe,  
In London or Rome.  
Either way you look at it,  
It's a half a world from home.

Filipinos leave their families,  
To go abroad and sacrifice.  
They'd rather stay home,  
But would starve without fish and rice.

So next time you see,  
A Filipino worker around.  
Remember that they left their family,  
So a job could be found.

This is my observation,

I'm an expat from the States.

I watch them work hard,

As they battle the Fates.

They don't ask for your pity,

All they expect.

Is to be treated with kindness,

And a little fairness and respect.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Mae Sue"**

by Carl Thompson

She watches them, kind,  
phantom specter in the wind.  
Children play, unknowing,  
a ghost protects them all.  
Silent sentinel enfold.

## **"Rice Field"**

by Carl Thompson

Row after row stands,  
green seedlings in terraced fields.  
I stare unblinking, moved,  
by the farmers at their work.  
Lifetimes spent in sweaty labor.



## "Small Town Muay Thai Gym"

by Carl Thompson

The gym is small,  
only poor people come.  
Sand bags hang from chains,  
stitched and re-stitched,  
scarred beyond their years.  
Kids come here,  
young teens with hopes,  
dreams of money, belts, fame.  
Lumpinee calls, beckons,  
But only a few are worthy.  
Prepared to sacrifice,  
Sweat, tears, blood, sit-ups,  
To punch, kick, knee and elbow,  
all the way to Bangkok.  
Let them be children now,  
to be young for once.  
Heartache is still far away.  
But the path has started,  
their journey's begun.