

A n a k S a s t r a

Issue 24

Issue 24 Contents

short fiction

"Modern Love with Variation" by Lindsay Boyd

"The Hanoi Luxury" by Elaine Barnard

"The Director" by Ho Soon Hoe

nonfiction

"Saving Life the Five-Foot Way" by Marc de Faoite

poems

"Riding Scooters in Bo Rai, Thailand" by Carl Wade Thompson

"The Tattooed Rebel," "Reincarnation (1): Remembering Chulia St.," and
"Reincarnation (2): Remembering Cathay" by Edward Ong

"The Fractured Fairy Tale: Version 2" by Amar Shobha Sarna

"We Are Not Driftwood" by Clare Mercado

* * * * *

Contributor Bios

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

[Elaine Barnard](#)'s stories have won awards and been published in numerous literary journals such as *Anak Sastra*, *carte blanche*, *Mandala*, *Apple Valley*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Emerge* and others. She has been a finalist for Glimmer Train and Best of the Net. In 2014 she was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Ho Soon Hoe hails from Singapore and he loves to read. He mainly reads nonfiction but is actively trying to expand his repertoire of fiction works read. Currently, his favourite stories are *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Home and The World* by Rabindranath Tagore, and *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka.

Marc de Faquite was born in Dublin and lives in Malaysia. His short stories and articles have been published both in print and online in Malaysia, Singapore, France, India, and Ireland. [Tropical Madness](#), a collection of his short stories, was longlisted for the 2014 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Prize.

Carl Wade Thompson is a poet and graduate programs writing tutor at Texas Wesleyan University. His work has appeared in *The Mayo Review*, *The Concho River Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Elegant Rage*, and *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*. He is also contributing editor and serial creative nonfiction writer for GFT Press's journal *One in Four*.

[Edward Ong](#) was born and raised in Penang until the age 18. After that, he moved to the Netherlands to study English literature. Now 43 years old, he resides in Kuala Lumpur, where he writes and teaches poetry.

Amar Shobha Sarna is a teacher trainer with a teachers training institute in Kuala Lumpur and is enamoured with literature.

Clare Mercado is a seventeen-year-old student from Manila. Her work has previously appeared in *Eastlit*.

* * * * *

"Modern Love with Variation"

by Lindsay Boyd

Their relationship was a short, intense affair. Eng had much going on in her busy life and, until Hayden encroached on her world out of the blue, she was afraid she might have to resign herself to a state of enforced celibacy for the remainder of her days. She was in her late forties – hardly a spring chicken – after all.

The New Zealander's unforeseen contact came as a delightful surprise to her. It commenced in the month of March with an email of a few paragraphs. His words were nicely chosen, and she appreciated his easily understandable English. Perhaps he intuited that her knowledge of it lagged far behind that of her mother tongue.

He lived on Waiheke Island, a forty-minute ferry ride from the city of Auckland, and managed and owned a restaurant that specialised in no particular cuisine as such but offered instead an eclectic mix. A little bit of this, a little bit of that. Or rather Hayden *had* managed and owned a restaurant. He had recently sold the business, he told Eng.

Now in his early fifties he sought another mode of life. Whatever it entailed it would not bind him hand and foot in the way the decade as a restaurateur had done. For eleven out of every twelve months he hardly set foot outside the premises. He forced himself to take an annual month-long complete break for the sake of his sanity. He generally shut up shop for that month or left everything in the hands of his employees, if they were a trustworthy group.

He spoke of his readiness for a relationship in his first missive to Eng. The Thai native was elated to hear this and replied that she was seeking an anchor in her life. *I like the look of you*, Hayden wrote after she sent him half a dozen photos of herself. They were an assortment and included photos of her at work (she taught at a school inland of Pattaya) and elsewhere. The one he appreciated the most was a photoshopped effort in which her

face was superimposed on a large advertising billboard, a helmeted cyclist riding past in the foreground.

Hayden studied it at length. Her face was a perfect oval. She had long brown hair, a broad nose not atypical of her race and a fetching smile. He could imagine himself being happy with a woman so solid in appearance. Eng was equally complimentary about the couple of photos he sent her. Taken at a sunny Asian beach, they were somewhat risqué owing to the skiminess of his choice of swimwear. Not that she minded. *You look so sexy*, she wrote.

He had roamed Asia extensively over the previous eight years. His sabbaticals from the restaurant trade were habitually taken in one or more of the countries in the perennially warm region. In being divergent to the climate he was accustomed to on Waiheke, the heat was paramount to his feeling of getting away from it all.

Enamoured as he was of his island abode, damp and relatively chill weather could prevail there even at the height of the so-called summer months. He needed a respite from that and so by the time Eng walked on the stage of his life he was a veteran of visits to Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

He made the departure destined to bring him to Eng on a blustery mid-autumn morning in late April, travelling to the ferry wharf in Matiatia from his home in Surfdale by bus. Persistent drizzle blurred the coastline and the island's vineyards and olive groves. At the equivalent time in recent years he had been too exhausted to know left from right and reached his destinations, Bali or the Gili Islands, the Visayas, Nha Trang, Sihanoukville, the Perhentian Islands or Phuket, utterly spent. In that state all he could think to do was flop like a seal in the hot sun on the closest reasonable beach.

He had a gut feeling everything would be different this time. It owed to his newly discovered freedom and, of course, Eng. Their correspondence came thick and fast after the first exchange. They were messages of love, or anticipated love, though both stopped short of explicitly detailing the enjoyment they longed to share on the physical plane.

Can't wait to meet you, Eng dearest, wrote Hayden, the night before he flew out of Auckland. *Warmest kisses to you. And more, if you so desire.* Awaiting his connection in

Melbourne, Australia, he booted up his laptop computer and found a short reply from her. In the space of a few words she made it abundantly clear she looked forward to the kisses ... *and more* ... as much as he did.

That was the extent of their erotic protestations, as if both were perfectly content with subtle overtones. It paid in any case, Hayden believed, not to be too graphic in a portal open to the world, with the potential to reach legions of 'eavesdroppers'. What he wrote Eng was meant for Eng and no one else.

He preferred to 'whisper' less rather than more, and she was the same. She may in fact have surprised him in that regard, but her unfamiliarity with the English language restricted her. At the same time they conversed freely, trusting that they were chatting in their own private bubble and that nothing that passed between them strayed off course.

Hayden's flight from Melbourne took him direct to Vietnam, a favourite country of his and one he had not visited for four years. From there he aimed to continue to Thailand via Cambodia. Through the three to four week bridging period, they would prove scrupulous in keeping up the contact established.

He welcomed it when she inquired about previous women in his life. He didn't ask the same of her. Not considering it so important, he didn't seek a listing of Eng's former male flames, such as they may or may not have been. But understanding this might be critical for a woman – in allowing her to gain the pulse of one she was about to become involved with – he satisfied her curiosity.

Not that there was a lot to tell. Like her, he had never been married and had no children. The most significant relationship in his life to date had lasted twenty years. But it was marked by long periods of stasis or suspended animation. Now, years had passed since he had seen or heard from the woman, a Christchurch native.

More recently he had been keen on Phuong, a Vietnamese who took a long working holiday in New Zealand late the previous decade. She helped him at his restaurant for a spell and resided at his house as a guest. But shy about serving customers when her English was little advanced, she gave up the job and arranged work on a vineyard in lieu.

She apologised to him before she left to return to her country for any distance she kept between them. She was aware of his feelings. But she had a boyfriend in Ho Chi Minh

City, a young man who wanted to marry her. Hayden thanked her for being upfront with him and wished her well in the future.

On the spur of the moment he decided to try and reconnect with his old flame after touching down at Tan Son Nhat Airport. He sorted out a room at a guest house in the Pham Ngu Lao area of district 1, obtained a local telephone card and put through a text message to Phuong, hoping the number she had sent him years ago would still be valid. It was. Her response reached him within an hour. Work and life as a wife and young mother kept her on her toes, she wrote, but she was content. They arranged to meet for lunch two days hence.

"You look wonderful," Hayden told her, breaking their warm embrace and relishing her trim figure and black hair, longer by inches than when she lived in New Zealand. They were outside the glass frontage of the office block in which she worked.

"How's your daughter?" he asked once they were seated at a table in a café on the ground floor of the building.

"She's fine."

"How old?"

"Three."

"Are you planning on having another kid?" Phuong nodded. "Maybe a boy next time? That'd be a nice balance, wouldn't it?"

She agreed but added that a second daughter would be okay too. They conversed against a backdrop of whirring drink machines, clinking cutlery and chatter as customers arrived, ate and/or drank and departed. When their individual bowls of noodles were served, Phuong sat hunched over hers, fully concentrated on him. Hayden recognised the trait from the past: her ability to be truly with him whenever they were together. When she inquired how things stood with him in terms of matters of the heart he made mention of Eng.

"I suppose she's well past child bearing age, but if things worked out I'd be open to marriage." He gave her an ironical grin. "Then again, maybe an old bachelor ought to stay an old bachelor. What do you think?"

Phuong begged to differ. She had long hoped her former beau would find a good woman to love and care for him. Returning to the adjacent foyer at the end of an hour, Hayden draped an arm about her shoulder. She made a remark about the New Zealand period of her life he wasn't certain he heard correctly in the hubbub.

"We had our time, didn't we?" he said, second-guessing the gist of her statement. They embraced once more. Holding her, he let fall a kiss on the strands of black hair framing her left ear. "I'm sure it won't be another four years till we meet again."

He had just set foot outside his guest house early that evening and turned on to Bui Vien when the solicitations began, generally in the form of proffered leaflets. It was one aspect of life in this part of district 1 he remembered from his stay of a few short years back. That bargain price massages were obtainable all over South-East Asia was a reality he ascertained at an early juncture of his regional wanderings.

But a factor he grew to understand less quickly was that a sizeable percentage of the venues, particularly in Thailand and Indonesia, offered more than a standard rubdown. The singsong cries of the beckoning masseuses never varied much. However, the story could be gleaned from their state of dress. If they were dressed down, even slightly, passers-by could take it as a given that an 'extra' service was available within.

Ho Chi Minh City nights were so balmy this personal litmus test of his could not be categorically relied upon. Many of the women ranged out front of the massage parlours, spas and bars were wearing short shorts and revealing tops. Not entirely sure of the place he entered, halfway down the street, he scanned the price list handed him and allowed a woman to shepherd him inside.

Other signals soon clarified the situation. Anh, his comely, clad in black escort, preceded him up the stairs and into a narrow enclosure. She stood by impassive as he undressed, until the moment he peeled off his T-shirt. This was the signal for her to utter a truncated but dramatic intake of breath, as if never in her life had she laid eyes on such riveting bare-chested manhood.

Lying face down, exulting in the touch of her hands as she kneaded his back, buttocks and legs, Hayden barely refrained from laughing out loud. Not once over the years had he succumbed to the gallant ones who transmitted their willingness in diverse ways,

the closeness of their ministrations to his loins while he lay face up, for instance, or via the proximity of a hip or a thigh, or the strategic guiding of his hand to a bare midriff or another succulent expanse of silken skin.

He had best the temptation and turned down the lot of them. Wanting to save himself for Eng he had no intention of giving in to Anh either, lovely though she was. But she refused to give in without a fight. Unversed in English, she made a cradling motion with her arms. He read the gesture correctly. She was a young mother who would make worthwhile use of any tip he presented her for her 'special service'.

Losing hope with the hour-long session nearing an end, Anh raised his left hand with her right hand and helped him to her left breast. She wasn't to know she might have stood a better chance of winning him over had she lathered his chest with the coconut oil she had anointed him with elsewhere and caressed his pectorals.

"Okay," Hayden said, seeing the pout on her face and offended posture as he put his clothes back on. "No hard feelings now."

Anh didn't understand but the five 100,000 dong bills he handed her bridged the divide and brought a smile to her face.

"Hello, Eng," Hayden said, shifting into the front passenger seat of her little Hyundai. She had brought the vehicle to a stop, the engine purring, out front of the Jomtien Beach guest house he had checked into the afternoon before. Touching her left hand, then propped on the handle of the vehicle's automatic control, he leaned across the space between them and kissed her on the lips.

"How are you?"

She was well, she said. It was two o'clock in the afternoon on Saturday and she had come straight from work. "Where shall we go?"

Hayden suggested the beach, a short distance away. Eng turned the car around on soi 7 and manoeuvred into a parking space on Beach Road. The section of Jomtien Beach they strolled to was beribboned with multicoloured deck chairs. They pulled up two and lowered themselves on to the canvas.

Yards in front of them, just back from the waterline, a young woman was lying on a towel sunbathing. A far from unusual vista in itself on the busy, popular beach, what drew

Eng's surprised attention was her daring bikini. She was prone on her left side, head cushioned against a gold coloured beach bag, naked from the middle of her back down except for the thinnest of T-back white threads. Her top was a more conservative black, halter-like number.

"She could go like that all day at Naklua."

"Hmm, she's a sight for sore eyes," Hayden said, giving the sunbather a protracted look. "Wherever Naklua is she doesn't need to go there. Just down from here you'll see people wearing that kind of swimwear. Girls and guys."

But Eng was unsure of the propriety of anyone disporting themselves similarly on the stretch of beach where they sat, a part of the foreshore mostly frequented by locals, among them family groups. "You wear something like that?" she asked, turning to him.

"Sure. I have." He smiled when she reminded him how sexy she thought he looked in the photos he'd sent her. "I sent you those because I thought you might like them."

"Thanks," she said, touching his hand.

They remained by the water for two hours, enjoying the afternoon breeze. Eng was wearing a black, sleeveless top and multicoloured skirt. Her outfit and free-flowing hair lent her a youthful appearance. Both were rapt in close proximity, the abbreviated knocking of knees and lower legs, the brushing of arms and hands. They paid for the deck chairs and abandoned the beach when the skies blackened and rain began falling.

"This car's new?" Hayden remarked as they drove out of Jomtien, toward Satahip. Eng turned inland when she could go no further south. High-rise apartment block and hotel construction was ongoing in large blocks back from the beach. They stopped for petrol and a meal on the way to her place. The Hyundai was new, she explained. She was paying it off in instalments, a large monthly expense leaving her little in the way of funds with which to feed and clothe herself.

"Once it's paid off I'm okay. Till then ... " They were in her tiny apartment, a hemmed in space with scant room for adornments or furniture as such. Eng bedded down of a night in a nook adjacent to the television stand, a corner overflowing with resplendently white bed linen.

"I'm sorry it's not easy for you at the moment," Hayden said.

He presented her a gift brought from home, a puka shell necklace he affixed round her neck while keeping at bay multiple strands of her soft, brown hair. She kissed him warmly for his thoughtfulness.

An hour later they began the drive back to Jomtien. She decided against overnighing with him at his guest house near the end of soi 7, with its preponderance of bars, the barrage of music and voices. A stronger, aesthetic objection concerned the large double bed in the room, specifically the sheets. In her eyes any other colour but white for bed linen was tacky and the sheets in this room were brown. They bid each other goodnight with some long, deep kisses.

They met for the second time the following Wednesday, keeping up the contact in the interim with messages. Hayden, with Eng in mind, switched to more pleasant accommodation on soi 4. He noticed that she kept referring to finances and the question of how they would make ends meet in a hypothetical future together.

I'll look for work here, he wrote her. He explained that he would either buy into a restaurant business or start his own. If that took time to pan out he would arrange work as an English language teacher. But Eng sounded unconvinced. Furthermore, she chided him for not offering to defray her petrol costs on the weekend. Hayden messaged her back with an apology. But, he hastened to point out, he had been overjoyed to be with her, so overjoyed that other considerations were the furthest thing from his mind. Could she not understand?

She was pleased with his new guest house and, in his sequestered room, there they shared loving kisses, massaged each other with lotus oil, bathed together in the shower and cried out in unison when their pleasure climaxed. Hayden repeatedly ran his fingertips over her fragrant brown skin and insisted she return the favour, guiding her hands to his chest, his legs, his buttocks, kissing and sucking her moist fingers and entangling them with his own.

She was happy to offer herself as he wished. "What would you like me to do?" she inquired at the beginning of a session on their second evening. He modelled his skimpiest swimsuit and made love to her with the garment on, appropriately adjusted at the front. Eng's touch profoundly aroused him when she teased the thread at the back. Without overt

premeditation, he enhanced the state in his mind by flashing back to the almost naked fair-haired foreigner encountered on the Jomtien sands the previous weekend.

Eng intended to stay with him a third and a fourth night but a visit from a Bangkok friend combined with work commitments early on Saturday waylaid her plans. She reappeared in Jomtien late Saturday morning. After a visit to Pattaya's Floating Market they returned to his room and canoodled tenderly before she went on her way once more. She had a function to attend.

"Will I see you tonight?" Hayden asked, watching her gather her things.

"I'm not sure. If not I'll come by early to drive you to the bus."

She kissed him and left. She called around seven o'clock the next morning to say she'd arrived downstairs. Hayden was ready. On the short drive to the terminal he sensed in his marrow that he would not see her again. She had been oddly reticent the day before and was so again now. The intimation led him to see in an altered light their chitchat of earlier in the week about the things they would share as a couple. He had wanted them to enjoy their first block of time together but other concerns intervened.

When she pulled up by the terminal ticket office he reached for the quantity of *baht* he had set aside for this moment. "This should cover your petrol costs through the week. Sorry I can't help you with your debts. Once I've established something I should be able to."

Eng protested about the money, but he insisted.

"Goodbye, honey," he said, leaning over and kissing her. "It was a pleasure to meet you."

He began his journey home with a week on the Malaysian South China Sea island of Pulau Kapas. He swam like a dolphin in the clear water and within forty-eight hours had become as brown as a berry. Eng's letdown, when it came, was as mellow as the woman herself. She had made passing reference that second weekend to another man who responded to her original solicitation and now pinned her hopes on him.

On leaving Kapas Hayden began a ten-day meditation retreat in Kuantan, further down the Malaysian peninsular coast. He had scheduled this ending to his trip before leaving Waiheke Isle. He quickly emerged into a peace he had not thought attainable in this world. He would've called it 'love', but he deemed the word, at least in its modern-day

usage, inadequate. It lasted the duration and far beyond, carrying him home as if on the crest of a wave.

Afterwards, on the rare occasions he dwelt upon the period with his short-term Thai lover his most resilient memory derived not from anything to do with her as such – the subtle aroma of her skin or the oval of her face, for instance – but rather from an image of a practically naked woman lying sunbathing on a beach, a picture that could easily have stemmed from the brush of an old European master painter.

* * * * *

"The Hanoi Luxury"

by Elaine Barnard

1. THE RECEPTIONIST

Why it was called Hanoi Luxury I'll never know. Nothing about this hotel was luxurious. It was on Chou Long, a dark street littered with garbage from the shops surrounding it. The roar of motorcycles deafened me. Even in my sleep I heard them.

I went there searching for a job as their receptionist because I liked the name, Hanoi Luxury. It was the promise of luxury that entranced me, the dream that some day luxury would be mine. I would wake in the morning to the smell of coffee brewing, omelets frying in sweet butter, and fresh squeezed orange juice like on the television that blinked in the lobby. I'd slip into a diaphanous silk and read my newspaper on the love seat or write thank-you notes for the wedding gifts that kept arriving. But the truth was far different.

I walked into the lobby of the Hanoi Luxury that morning and stood trembling at the desk. The lobby was stark, with hardwood benches and full-length mirrors that only reflected the lopsided buildings opposite, the peddlers selling coconuts and bananas, the hungry dogs foraging for scraps. Nevertheless, it smelled new as if the hotel had very few visitors. Maybe that was why they'd advertised for a receptionist, because of their newness. Most other hotels in Hanoi were not so new, the jobs were inherited, passed on to members of the family. To find a position in Hanoi was difficult. I was excited when I saw their ad in the newspaper, "Receptionist Wanted—Computer Skills Necessary--Pay Negotiable."

There was no one in the lobby. It seemed deserted, almost as if it wasn't a real hotel but a set for some arcane movie. I leaned on the water-stained counter for support, listening to the drips from the ceiling. New buildings often leaked in Hanoi. They'd been hastily erected with shoddy materials and only passed inspection with bribes. We'd had heavy rains these last few days. The streets were flooded. I was very tired, as I'd walked

here from the other side of Hanoi taking a bus as far as it would go, then wading the remainder of the way down the narrow streets that a bus could not penetrate. My white patent shoes were soaked. They were my best shoes, delicate, with straps around the ankle. I'd worn them to impress my interviewer, make him think I had a sense of style important to an upscale hotel, that I could truly represent the luxury of Hanoi Luxury. I hoped my interviewer would understand my dilemma, be compassionate, not reprimand me for my damp blue skirt and white blouse soiled from the mud dripping from rain gutters.

I tried to brush my hair back from my forehead. My bangs had strayed from the band that held them. I thought it important to keep my bangs off my face. With my hair pulled back in a pony tail I looked older, more sophisticated, like the photos of flight attendants on Southern China Airlines that brought foreigners to Vietnam. I would like to be one of those pale attendants, wear that mini skirt, and tie a bright scarf around my neck. I'd even used the whitening powder on the dark face I'd inherited from my Indian mother. With difficulty I had tried to whiten it so as not to look like a hill peasant, but to no avail. My skin was still the color of cashews roasted in the sun.

The lobby of the Hanoi Luxury was air-conditioned. I shivered in my school blouse. I hated air-conditioning, much preferring the warm breezes outside that calmed me, soothed my nerves, raw from the rain, the long journey here and the impending interview. It was important for me to secure this job, as I had not had work since I finished computer school. I loved the computer, particularly its silence as it traveled the globe. I could go anywhere on my computer. It was my best friend. I loved its sound when I switched it on, the friendly voice telling me I had mail, the endless possibilities as I searched for a friend, a companion, a possible husband. Yes, I wished to marry someday but men were scarce in Hanoi. So many had been killed in the old war, leaving women of child bearing age with no sons or grandsons to propagate the earth. Maybe I will marry my computer, live online for the rest of my life.

I stared at the computer behind the desk, its soft light beckoning me. I had the urge to touch it, settle myself beside its comforting drone, allow myself to bask in its radiance. Slowly I found myself moving behind the desk as if willed me to be there. The metal chair seemed comfortable after my long walk. I felt myself relax, adjusted my blouse and skirt, removed my shoes to dry them and was about to take off my wet stockings as

well when I heard a shrill voice, like the slap across my cheek my father administered when I failed to find work.

Startled, I jumped from the computer, my stockings around my ankles, my skirt askew as if I'd never bothered to get dressed properly. I staggered as I tried to extricate myself from my computer daze.

"Who gave you permission to touch that computer?" he said in an imperious tone as if warden of a prison.

"I-I couldn't help it. It seemed to need me. No one was here to comfort it so I-I...."

"Are you mental? Comfort a computer? Don't you have any real friends?"

"I-well-I-I guess not. I...."

He looked at me as if I were a computer chip that could be discarded at will. "What are you doing here anyway? You should be in school."

"I was in computer school. I graduated at the top of my class."

"What's that you're wearing then? Looks like a uniform to me. All school girls wear blue and white."

I could not contest his observation. Indeed, it was my school uniform that I was wearing. I'd lowered the neckline and raised the skirt, hoping that with my dress shoes I could fool my interviewer. I had nothing else to wear since I'd graduated. I had two uniforms; one dried while I washed the other.

"Come here," he snapped his fingers as if I were a puppy. And indeed I felt like one, my hair wet and shaggy as a mane.

I slipped my wet shoes back on, rolled up my stockings and slithered from the desk, wishing I were invisible, that I had never come, that I could leave without notice and never return.

He stood there, his legs planted like rods of steel, a red baseball cap low on his forehead as if he were outside on a field hot with sun. His black eyes glittered. Could he see right through me into the nakedness beneath my clothes? I hung my head trying to avoid his gaze, hoping he couldn't see into my brain as well.

"What brings you here?" he asked, not taking his eyes off my body.

"You advertised for a receptionist with computer skills."

"You are much too young for the job. You should be at home helping your mother."

"I have no mother."

"If you are an orphan, I will send you back to the orphanage."

"I live with my father. My mother is with the angels."

"You mean she's dead?"

"She's always with me."

"You mean she's not dead?"

"You might say that."

"You confuse me, girl." He unbuttoned his black blazer and pulled on his tie. It was saffron, the color of spice that my mother sometimes used in her cooking. She was beautiful. Father had bartered for her as a bride because she was exotic, he said, like her spices, and came from far away, a fairy tale princess. He only became cruel to me after she passed.

"You have a name?"

"Tien," I murmured

"Speak up. If you wish to be a receptionist you must speak up and smile."

I tried to smile. My mouth twitched with the effort.

"Yes, that's better. And do something with your hair. It hangs in your face like a dog's." He yanked my hair back so that my neck strained with the effort to keep my head from detaching.

"And use some of that whitening powder they sell in the market."

"I already have."

"Then the rain must have washed it off." His manicured nails brushed my blouse, ran down my skirt. "You are more grown up than you appear. Perhaps you will do after all."

"Thank you," I whispered.

"You will report every morning at eight. You will leave when I tell you to. Sometimes guests arrive late at night. I expect you to be here to greet them."

"Your advertisement said pay was negotiable."

"Yes, I will see how effective you are before I make that decision. Let's say, you are on trial."

I nodded agreement.

“Since you were at the top of your class I assume you need no instructions. I’m leaving for my breakfast. You may start now.”

“Thank you.”

His tight jeans clung to his legs above his high heeled boots. He was a small man with skin smooth from moisturizers and streaked hair greased with pomade. I hoped he would leave quickly so I could retreat behind the desk, relax in the glow of the computer.

“There are no reservations so there should be no one to trouble you. If a room request should arrive refer to the rate chart. If they complain offer a discount, offer anything within reason. But don’t let them get away.”

He slammed the door so hard the mirrors reverberated. Through the window I watched him descend the concrete steps onto the wet pavement. His narrow hips swayed slightly, his legs agile as an acrobat’s. The roar of his motorcycle was a relief. But then it wasn’t. If the phone rang what should I say? It rang. I let it ring five times before I picked it up. My hands were sweating, my voice caught in my throat. “H-Hanoi Luxury,” I stuttered.

“Is Duc there?” A woman’s voice trilled.

“Duc?”

“Yes, my husband. Is he there?”

“He’s gone for his breakfast. May I take a message?”

“Just tell him his wife called again. And he better answer this time.” She clicked off before I could respond.

The morning wore on and still Duc did not return. There were no other phone calls, no future reservations. I was afraid he would be angry with me, blame me for the lack of reservations. But I could not invent what was not there, so I diverted myself with soap operas hoping I would also live happily in the end.

Finally, in early afternoon I heard his motorcycle. It had a strange whine, like a caged beast. His face was flushed, his clothes awry. He smelled of alcohol. I recognized the smell because my father often smelled of it, particularly after a night spent at the many bars in Hanoi that featured women who could be bought for a few drinks.

“Well,” he simpered glancing at me sideways as if his eyes had lost focus. “Are we flooded with requests?”

“Not so far. But it’s early yet. I’m sure we’ll have many reservations later on.”

“Could be--could be you’ll bring me luck. I haven’t had much thus far.”

“Your wife called.”

“Another bit of bad fortune. Did she leave her usual threat?”

“She said you’d better answer this time.”

“I’ll think about it after I take a nap.”

He looked at me again, his sleepy eyes running over my body like a searchlight.

“I’ll be in that little room in back. I won’t lock the door in case you’d like to keep me company. The pay is negotiable.” He grinned stupidly.

I wanted to run. But where would I go? My father had turned me out this morning when he brought home one of his women. Said it was too crowded with me around. Where would I stay while I sought another position even if one were available, which was doubtful? I felt my body shake with revulsion. Maybe he’ll be asleep by now. Maybe he’ll lose desire when he sees my body, still undeveloped at the age of eighteen. Maybe he’ll allow me to stay on just to answer the calls on the phone, the e-mails on the computer. Maybe....

I felt myself walk towards that room in back, my heart aching, my head throbbing like the rain beating the roof. But I walked anyway. Where else would I go?

2. THE DOORMAN

I am proud of my new black uniform. “Black will stay clean longer,” my brother, Duc, said when he gave me the job as doorman. “What else can I do with you? What else are you good for with that limp? Just try to stand up straight, Cong, so no one notices.”

I try to hide my leg, but that only throws me off balance. Once I fell into the glass door and nearly shattered it. “You’re useless,” Duc said as he helped me up from the floor.

Duc owns this hotel, the Hanoi Luxury. It is not very luxurious. Duc gave it that name so tourists would come thinking they made a bargain, a luxury hotel for a small price. “Tourists love a bargain,” Duc says. “They come from far away so they will be too tired to cancel their reservation. ‘Look how cheap,’ I will say to them. ‘Where can you find a better deal?’”

Duc must be clever to own so many properties in Hanoi. I don't know how he got so rich while I stayed poor. Even as a child Duc had an eye for money. He searched for lost bills as we walked to school. If I found some between cracks in the pavement, I had to give them to him or he'd punch my face until it looked like a squashed persimmon.

As we grew older, Duc abandoned me to hang with the kids who had more. That wasn't difficult as our family scratched a living from the fish in Trúc Bạch Lake, selling them to the many restaurants surrounding the water. We played the restaurant game, competing for the best restaurant by spelling its name correctly. Duc always won.

This uniform has bright metal buttons which Duc instructed me to polish every morning. He even gave me a cap. It says, HANOI LUXURY, in big shiny letters that glow in the dark.

Duc expects a big group of students to arrive this evening. They are American, he tells me, so I must be alert, stand at full attention when I open the door. Make certain no one opens it themselves. "We must set an example of courtesy to impress these Americans with the high culture of Vietnam."

Night has fallen. We're still waiting for the Americans. I am standing erect at the door to welcome them. Duc says I must practice standing erect so he will not let me sit even though I've been standing here for hours. "Your leg muscles will not develop if you sit down," he says. So I stand, wishing they would arrive, so I could finally open and shut this door.

Duc is sporting a checked jacket and black tie tonight. He looks especially keen. Tien, his delicate new hire, sits at the computer as if she's afraid to leave it. I have tried to speak to her but she will not answer. It's almost as if she cannot speak. She begins to tremble when I approach, like a puppy who has lost its mother.

"Tien is very shy," Duc says when I ask about her. Duc does not like me to ask about Tien. It's as if there's some secret he does not wish to share.

At last a bus rumbles to a stop in front of our hotel. It must be the Americans. Several of the girls are tall and blonde. The boys are as giant as tree stumps. They yell as they leap from the bus, backpacks crunching their shoulders. They do not help the girls

from the bus or carry their luggage as I would do if I did not have to open and close this door.

The girls wear sundresses and short shorts like they were heading for our beaches rather than the center of Hanoi. Their skin is silky white without the use of the whitening powder they sell in our markets. I can tell this because their arms and legs are white as well as their faces. Only on television have I seen such purity.

Their professor has headphones in his ears. He looks tired, as if this group of unruly students has aged him. He might have been a handsome man if these students had not taken away his youth.

Carefully, I open the door for each one. Some thank me, others do not. It does not matter. I am happy to be opening and closing.

After the professor has checked in his students, I ask Duc if I might retire to my room. It's in the bottom of the hotel next to the kitchen. The smell of fried rice and chicken makes me hungry at night. In the morning the aroma of sour soup makes my stomach grumble for more than the tea and toast Duc prescribes for my portion. I have often asked him if I may be moved upstairs where it's cool and quieter. It's difficult to sleep next to the hot kitchen. And the noise from the streets never stops. I often feel I've never slept at all. Standing at the door, I sometimes sway backwards. "Are you drunk again?" Duc asks. He knows I never drink. On my non-existent salary I can't even afford one beer.

"When we have more guests," Duc says, "I will pay you something. Until then you must be grateful for a place to sleep."

Of course, he's right. Without my brother's generosity I would be out on the street, living with the dogs at night, delivering food to the brothels. I was a delivery boy for years until my bicycle careened into a truck in the early hours of the morning when the fog was just lifting off the lake. My leg was broken in many places. It never healed properly so that now it is difficult to stand at the door. "You are lucky to have such an easy position," Duc tells me. "If you weren't my brother you would be nowhere. Even the dogs despise you."

Of course Duc is right. "I'm always right," he says each morning when I murmur a complaint because it is raining. My leg always hurts more in the dampness. But I will try never to complain again so my brother will be happy with me.

I have been in my room for several hours now trying to sleep when I hear a great disturbance. Hurriedly, I slip into my uniform and rush upstairs. Several of the boy students are sprawled in the lobby, empty beer cans and liquor bottles cradled in their arms. The girls sit on their laps, kissing them in a shameful manner. I felt myself blush at the sight. I have never had a girlfriend. Perhaps it is my bad leg or my face, which Duc says is a bit like those mongrels that sleep at our door.

Their professor is nowhere in sight. Perhaps he has decided to sleep through this tour whenever possible.

“Cong,” the students call, “why weren’t you there to open the door for us?”

I rush to the door and stand at attention in case they wish to go out again.

“We’re just kidding,” they laugh. “We don’t want you to open the door for us.”

“You don’t?”

“No, it’s stupid. We can open our own doors. Take a look at our muscle.” The boys flex their biceps which indeed are impressive.

“But I wish to open your door. It is my pleasure. It is my job. Duc will be angry. What will he find for me to do if I do not open your door? There is nothing else.”

“You must be kidding.”

“No, there is nothing for someone like me. My brother is kind enough to give me this job, to allow me to open your door. Please do not tell him that you wish me not to open it.”

The students are silent. Such a thing they cannot understand.

3. THE CHEF

I went to the lake at sunrise to buy fresh fish for the special lunch that I will prepare for the students. I also bought eggs for their breakfast. I love to visit Truc Bach Lake at this hour. It shimmers in the half light that is lost by noon when tourists propel paddle boats around its perimeter and fish stop jumping into the nets. I love also the silence of the fishermen along the shore, their concentration on the task at hand. It is this that will bring them the money, the necessary dong to purchase their needs, their sticky rice and tea to greet the dawn. The air smells fresh after the night’s rain, fish seem eager to jump into the nets. No one is coughing from the pollution that builds later in the day.

Fishermen smile, the silent smile of those who have made a catch, never boisterous as such behavior could turn their luck. Some evil could befall them on their way home, a flat tire on their bicycle as they dodge the traffic, their fish rotting in the sun as they repair it. Such ill can easily befall one in Hanoi. It is a city of strangers now who do not care if they cause injury.

Returning from the lake to the Hanoi Luxury, I avoid the traffic and trod the alleyways hoping no illness befalls me. Men often repair their bicycles in the alleyways so there is constant danger of slipping on oil or falling over rotting tires or rusty bicycle parts. Duc has cautioned me to be especially careful because of the American students who arrived last night after a long journey. I did not hear the students as I was asleep in the kitchen, guarding my stove from intruders who might steal my fry pans, my colanders and chopping blocks to use in their street kitchens where I could never reclaim them. They would be lost in the confusion of vendors, sold before I could nab the thief and punish him for taking my kitchenware. Duc would surely penalize me. Make me repay him for the stolen goods, dock my salary for months to come. "If you please the students," Duc says, "then your salary will begin."

I will try to please them, make the American egg breakfast that Duc has ordered. Such a breakfast seems strange to me, the weight of the eggs and toast, sausage and bacon are overwhelming, the odors unpleasant. But I will prepare it anyway because it is necessary that I please these students, necessary that I retain my sleeping spot by the stove as the night can bring rain and cold winds off the lake that chill my old bones.

I only have this position because of Duc's generosity. "Uncle," he said, "you are too feeble for this work, but you are my uncle so I must care for you. You have no one else. But do not tax my patience; it is limited. Your last days could find you sleeping in the gutter rather than next to the warmth of my stove."

So I am careful not to disturb Duc, but step quietly in his kitchen as if I am invisible. As if the breakfast were produced by magic, a miracle breakfast for the students.

I hear them now on the stairs. Their step is heavy, voices loud, like radio at full volume. I do not understand what they are saying. Their English is different from that I learned in school. It has lost the resonance that I prefer, the musical sound of the syllables.

I am wearing my white chef's hat and coat to impress them. Tien washed and starched it for me yesterday. Duc would not pay the laundry. "Tien will take care of it," he said. Tien is the hotel's receptionist. She is skilled at the computer, but Duc has her performing many other tasks as well. If anything goes wrong in the hotel, he screams at Tien. She shudders like a palm frond before the storm, tries to hide her face in the computer, but Duc lashes out until she pleads for him to stop.

Last night Tien said Duc accused her of stealing dong from a student's wallet. How could she have done such a thing when she had been with Duc through the night in the little room in back that I had hoped would be a prayer room with an altar where we could pay homage to our ancestors, light candles, leave sweet meats and fruit. But Duc said that was foolish. "Your ancestors do not remember you, so why waste time remembering them?"

When I woke this morning Tien was standing by my stove shivering. I tried to comfort her. She is such a sweet child. I am pleased she confides in me. I wish I could protect her from Duc. But no one can be protected from his wrath. We are his servants and must do his bidding.

I am standing at attention now awaiting orders. The kitchen and dining room are spotless. Tien and I have washed the floors. Cong, the doorman, has set the table with clean linens. I have set out pans of sausage, grilled tomatoes, fried potatoes and onion. Also, I have prepared the false orange juice from Tang, brewed coffee and Lipton tea in the little bags.

The students stumble into the dining room still half asleep from the journey, hair uncombed, faces unwashed, shorts and t-shirts torn as if they are street people. Tien has told me such attire is common in America. She has seen it on her computer.

I smile at them, my best smile, try to hide my broken molar and rotting incisors. When my salary begins I will see the dentist. I would like to have a new, shiny set of teeth that I could take out at night, brush carefully in the morning and replace them to smile at the sunrise on my way to the lake. Perhaps then some vendors might smile back and I would not feel so lonely on my journey.

I stand with my eggs now awaiting the students' requests. Palm oil sizzles in the pan. However, I do not understand their orders. The line gets longer. The students start laughing among themselves, shuffling feet, making strange signs to each other. Breaking

some eggs into the fragrant oil, I show them to the students hoping they will tell me what to do. But it is no use. They do not want my broken eggs. They do not want my bacon or sausage, my grilled tomatoes. “Cereal,” they call. “Don’t you have any Frosted Flakes or Cheerios?” Such foods I am not familiar with. In my chef training no mention was made of Cheerio or Frosty Flake.

Suddenly Duc is standing before me, his face like boiled lobster, his fists clenched. He is wearing a snappy red sports coat, red trousers and black shirt. His hair is slicked back with the grease they sell in the market. His skin smells of lavender oil. “Uncle,” he fumes, “why did you not buy the cereal on your way from the lake? I told you the students need their Cheerio and Frosty Flake.”

“You—you did not tell—” but I think it better not to contradict Duc, so I say it was too early. The market was not yet open. But that does not calm his anger. He grabs the pan of eggs dumping them on the floor.

“Are you too old to understand anything?” he screams.

I hang my head, slump my shoulders trying to grow smaller as I sink to my sleeping spot beside the stove. I hunch down like a dog hoping to avoid the blow from his raised fists. But I need not have been concerned. The students rally. Surrounding Duc they force him to retreat. His fists unclench. A twitch of fear tightens his lips as he stares at the students in bewilderment, at the objection of the Americans to his behavior. Turning, he slips on the stairs which are still slick from Tien’s washing. “Tien,” he yells, but stops as the students move in closer, their faces grim. Muttering to himself like the crazies who wander our streets, Duc clings to the railing and hobbles his way from the kitchen, slamming the door behind him.

I kneel to clean up the mess. “Here, Uncle,” several of the students volunteer, “let us help you.”

I am hoping the students will stay at Hanoi Luxury a very long time.

* * * * *

"The Director"

by Ho Soon Hoe

The director had his first overseas assignment in the city of ----, as part of his company's policy of rotating key employees around its worldwide network of operations. He was recently promoted to the position of director and immediately posted to ---- to manage that overseas subsidiary for a year. Despite the excitement of an overseas posting, however, and despite the fact that he was rising rapidly within the company's ranks, the newly promoted director was not feeling too happy about the situation at all.

Our director was from Singapore, and the moment he stepped out of the airplane when it landed in his new city, he felt homesick already. The first thing that greeted him when the plane's door opened was the chilly air that wafted into the cabin, and although he had put on his thick winter jacket, he still felt uncomfortably cold. To make matters worse, just when he had stepped outside the airport it began to snow heavily, and our director started to miss his hometown's warm sunny climate dearly.

The posting was to last for only a year and his company had thoughtfully attended to his every need in a foreign land, including renting a fully furnished house for him to stay in the outskirts of the city; a personal car for transport; generous medical insurance; extra days off; increased pay; and an overseas allowance. Yet for all his material abundance, the new director could not help feeling a little despondent.

Our director was not the adventurous sort of person, and given a choice, would have very much preferred to stay and work his whole life in his own country where everything was familiar. Socially, he was awkward and had few friends, although he could count a handful of close contacts that had remained with him since secondary school. His life revolved around home and work — waking up every morning to head to the office, and returning home straight from work late in the evening — no parties, no excursions, no appointments. On weekends, he would stay at home to watch his favourite dramas on the

television, or head to the local library to read and borrow books. At forty five years of age he was still single; had no partner; and, despite the constant pestering of his aged parents, did not think it was necessary to get married any time soon. He was reserved and introspective by nature. He did not interact well with strangers, was content with dwelling in his own thoughts, and was thoroughly satisfied with life just the way it was. He performed well at work, managing to satisfy his company's key performance indices ahead of his peers, which was the main reason for his rapid promotion.

Hence the reader will understand why our director did not feel too enthusiastic about his overseas posting. He did travel overseas for holidays on several occasions in the past, but those were to nearby destinations and always with friends and family, unlike his present assignment. Indeed, the citizens of that city to which he was posted did not speak a language he knew. Although his company had sent him for language classes and he could communicate in simple terms using that new language, there was still plenty of room for improvement. Even so, he need not worry about communication at work, for his company had specially arranged an in-house translator for him.

His accommodation was a spacious house in a new neighbourhood, and his first impression upon seeing it was its large size. Its floor area was twice that of his flat in Singapore, with a front lawn and a back garden. The rent did not come cheap and he marvelled at the considerable amount of money his company was willing to spend on him. The house was comfortable and fully furnished. It had central heating, a laundrette, two bedrooms and a huge garage. There was even a treadmill in one of the bedrooms for his exercises. It was very large for one person to live in, but our director was not complaining. His car was an Audi of the latest model, which his company felt was in accord with his high position within its hierarchy. He could even claim compensation for petrol. The neighbourhood was tastefully designed, and there was a convenience store just down the road with a supermarket further down. All in all, our director was more than adequately provided for in his new surroundings, and virtually anyone in his shoes should have felt amply satisfied with the material provisions and the upward trajectory his career was taking.

Our director, however, was of a different breed. Alone in a foreign city, he felt out of place, like a fish out of water. The people were different, the language strange, the food

unusual, the lifestyle dissimilar. Even the programmes on television were not to his liking — he could not understand most of them. He missed the food back home, his family, friends, and general familiarity. But in his heart our director rebuked himself for feeling this way. Coming from a cosmopolitan city like Singapore, he felt that he should have been at ease in a foreign land. *After all, isn't Singapore one of the great trading nations of the world, drawing people from all corners of the globe to its shores? Aren't Singaporeans a well-travelled lot, able to make a home anywhere on earth?*

The employees of that overseas branch were very friendly and threw a welcome party on his first day there, but that only added to his embarrassment. He could not speak their language fluently and relied heavily on the translator, but people everywhere are the same — they express the same gestures, have the same feelings, respond in similar ways, and understand that the needs of a foreigner are slightly different from that of locals.

The work was familiar enough, and our director managed to settle himself into a daily routine quickly. Away from work, he surprised himself by adjusting rapidly to the new surroundings and daily regimen: dinner every night at the cafeteria a few streets from home, weekend grocery shopping at the supermarket, Sunday exercises on the treadmill. Sometimes he would even try his hand at cooking dinner, although he was not particularly good at it. Soon winter was over, and the warmer temperatures enticed him to spend more time out in the open. He started by sitting in the back garden every night, staring at the myriad stars above. Because of the bright lights in Singapore, he had never observed so many stars in the sky before. He soon became an expert at identifying different stars in their constellations, and astronomy became a hobby.

He did not venture out of his house much, except to go to work and, in his free time at home, would sit on his deck chair composing stories. One of his childhood dreams was to become a famous novelist, but he did not consider that a viable occupation back home — and the rat race soon strangled his muse. Now, during free times in the quiet of his new surroundings, ideas for stories flowed easily into his mind, and he jotted them down onto his notepad as soon as they arrived.

The neighbourhood was extremely quiet at night, so different from his neighbourhood in Singapore. Back home, he was accustomed to hearing children's laughter coming from the playground downstairs; the roar of vehicles on the expressway beside his

HDB block; voices of neighbours walking along common corridors — occasional loud arguments unfortunately; and the constant whirr of the ceiling fan which had to be switched on 24/7. It was so quiet in his new place that he could hear the clock loudly ticking the seconds away as he sat in front of the computer composing his latest mystery thriller.

The neighbours living next door were also very quiet and kept very much to themselves. In the six months since he started living there, not once did he meet them face-to-face. He wondered who they were and what lives they led. Would they recognise him, a foreigner who appeared all of a sudden in their midst? Probably not. On particularly lonely nights he would wonder and yearn to make contact with them.

One evening as he was driving home from dinner, he decided on the spur of the moment to go over to that neighbouring house and introduce himself. After parking his car in the garage, he walked over to their front door, took a few deep breaths to calm his nerves before pressing the doorbell firmly. The exterior of that house was similar to his. In fact every house along the street looked like carbon copies of each other. However, the front garden of this particular house was overgrown with long grasses, giving it an unkempt appearance. The floor-to-ceiling windows facing the road were covered tightly with blinds so nobody could look inside.

For a while he could not hear any sound coming from within and had begun to turn around and return home when the door creaked open slowly. Surprised, he stopped and turned to see a woman standing at the door. She was of about the same age as him. The first wrinkles of middle age had begun to show, and there were prominent grey streaks in her hair. Even so, they did not diminish the overall attractiveness of the face. She looked at him quizzically, and our director began to feel quite embarrassed about the situation. He trained his eyes on the rug beneath the door as he fumbled through the foreign words, “Hello, very sorry to bother you... I am your neighbour living next door... I have decided to come and introduce myself this evening since we haven’t met before.”

The puzzled frown on the woman’s face disappeared and lightened up a bit. After a momentary pause, she replied slowly and deliberately, in the childish manner of people everywhere whenever they speak with someone not fluent in their language.

“Hello! Yes, we haven’t met before, but I do notice you driving off to work every morning. It is very nice of you to visit us tonight. Please come inside,” she said as she stepped back and opened the door wide for him to enter.

Our director did not expect to discover that the house was sparsely furnished. The doorway led straight into the living room, with the kitchen on the right past a short walkway and, at the far end, two bedrooms with their doors shut. In the centre of the living room was a maroon-coloured sofa facing a squat black coffee table on a carpet, while a small old-fashioned television sat atop a low cabinet filled with all sorts of miniature toys, trophies and commemorative plaques. The walls were plain and did not have the usual decorations of photographs or paintings. Its light blue paint had begun to peel in some areas, revealing a layer of rough plaster underneath. He was still taking in the sights when one of the room doors opened to reveal a young boy of about seven years old wearing his school uniform, staring back at him.

He smiled wanly and waved to the boy as he asked the woman, “Is that your son?”

“Yes,” she replied, nodding her head and motioning him to sit on the sofa. She asked if he wanted anything to drink, and he replied by requesting for a cup of coffee. The boy shut his door as quickly as he had opened it and remained inside the room while his mother walked briskly into the kitchen, leaving our director alone for a while. As he walked towards the sofa to sit down, he noticed that it was quite worn. One of the cushions was missing, while a couple of the rest had holes on them, revealing the yellow sponge fillings inside. Overall, our director had the impression that this was a family living in quite straitened circumstances.

The woman returned with a cup of hot coffee, placed it on the squat coffee table in front of him, and sat down carefully on the other end of the sofa. He could tell immediately that she was the reticent type — uncomfortable with strangers, not keen to talk. Nevertheless, she tried her best to hide her unease with a smile and put on an air of cheerfulness — quite similar to him, in fact.

He decided to break the silence first by introducing himself, his job at the multinational company, and his country of origin. She appeared interested and mentioned on the fly that she had always wanted to visit Singapore but did not have the opportunity to do so yet, to which he responded by outlining in greater detail its history, geography, and

people, seizing the chance to boast a little about his homeland as so many would do in front of foreigners. She showed her appreciation by nodding her head every now and then.

Then it was her turn to speak. She began by mentioning that she had never travelled out of her country before, that she always had an interest in foreign countries and once dreamed of a career in the tourism industry. But circumstances intervened, and she was forced to take over the running of a small cafeteria from her father after he fell ill and died several years ago. Her mother had passed away even earlier. The business had never been fantastic, and she was tempted many times to close it but, knowing that he would be very disappointed to see it shut, always held back because the cafeteria was her father's life work. She admitted, though, that life had begun to take a brighter turn after she got married.

Then there was an awkward pause, and our director could tell that she was reluctant to continue talking about what happened subsequently. There was something after her marriage that she was uncomfortable to share. In the long silence which followed he began to regret his decision to visit, but after an interval of butt-shifting, throat-clearing, avoidance of eye contact, knuckle-cracking, and a few gulps of coffee on his part, she opened up and began to share a bit about the more recent events in her life. Thus, he learned that her husband was a kind and generous person and that she had always heard good reports about him from others. But before their marriage she had no clue about his battle with depression, which worsened upon the arrival of their son. She mentioned that they had never been well-off financially and that after losing his job at the height of the last recession, he decided to escape and took his own life.

When our director left his neighbour's house that evening, his thoughts were jumbled. After learning about the woman's struggles, he laboured to find something suitable to say in reply. He wanted to comfort her but had never been good at expressing empathy with strangers. In his struggle to find something to say in that foreign language, he blurted about the impermanence of life and philosophised about death, unconsciously stringing a few sentences in his native tongue in the process. Eventually he stopped when he saw that she had turned red in the face and seemed to be feeling terribly awkward and uncomfortable, which in turn caused him to lose his train of thought. In his embarrassment

his hands trembled, and he lost his grip of the coffee cup, causing it to tumble down onto the floor and making a huge mess on the carpet.

In the confusion that followed, he did not register much of anything else she said. All he knew was that he was rocking to-and-fro in his seat apologising profusely for his carelessness. She had sprung up immediately and rushed into the kitchen before returning and dropping onto her knees near his feet frantically wiping the spill with several paper towels and picking up the broken pieces. This was followed by the customary back-and-forth as he tried to offer her some cash for the broken cup, to which she repeatedly refused firmly but politely, shaking both head and hands simultaneously, with a wide smile on her lips saying that it was easily replaceable from the convenience store down the road. Then he felt that it was time to leave, and he was up on his feet making his way hurriedly towards the front door. There was a short exchange of goodbyes, one last apology, and one last back-and-forth as he tried again to offer her the cash unsuccessfully before our director found himself marching back towards his house hoping that he had not embarrassed the Singaporean people in front of her.

Similarly his neighbour had mixed feelings about him. His job title sounded impressive on paper, yet in person he appeared mild and unremarkable. Nevertheless, she sensed a formidable intellect through his philosophical ramblings. She was fascinated by his international background, which made her experiences and worldview seem parochial by comparison. She was also flattered by his desire to establish some sort of neighbourly friendship between them. On the other hand, she worried about having revealed too much about her own situation, especially on a first encounter. Throughout the evening she debated the appropriateness of paying him a return visit in the near future, but ultimately decided against it for fear of reminding him about the broken cup and the mess he created that evening, which had caused him to feel so embarrassed.

“He will come again if he wants to,” she thought. Every evening for the next few weeks she anticipated his knock on the door, but the weeks turned into months without that ever happening.

Hence she had a huge surprise one evening when he strolled into her cafeteria for dinner. She, of course, could not have known that from the moment our director returned home after that first visit, he rushed into the study room, switched on his computer, logged

onto the internet and searched the location of her cafeteria, thereby discovering that it was a boutique eatery situated on the second floor of a shopping centre a few streets away from home. Despite his curiosity, however, he deliberated for a few months before summoning the courage to have a meal there, arriving straight after work one autumn evening.

Physically, the cafeteria was small and nondescript, banished at a quiet corner of the shopping centre beside the restrooms and cargo elevators. Its façade was plain and simple. The shop's name was printed clearly in bold letters on top, and there was a coin-operated kiddie ride beside the entrance. Inside were a few rows of red-coloured, plastic-topped rectangular tables with wooden stools underneath and a self-service drink machine near the reception counter. Hung on the walls were portraits of several actors, singers, and entertainers, some of whom were quite well-known internationally, and a couple of framed certificates from local food critics attesting to the quality of the food on offer. The only customer dining inside was an elderly man, seated next to the windows facing the toilets.

In strode our director with a nonchalant air, eyes on the floor, looking up only when he reached the reception counter and feigning surprise on seeing his neighbour standing there.

"Hello! And very nice to see you here! What would you like to have?" she asked excitedly when their eyes met, raising her hand and pointing at the menu on the large billboard behind her.

He smiled genially but did not return her greeting, spending a few seconds scrutinising the billboard before leaning forward and mumbling softly, "Number three."

"Number three, okay," she nodded and replied in a cheerful manner, entering his order into the cash register.

"And do you want that with chicken or beef?" she asked, looking directly at him.

"Chicken."

"With chilli or tomato sauce?"

"Tomato."

"Excellent! That will be six dollars and fifty cents, and please take a seat. It will be ready in five minutes."

After paying the money, he went to sit at a table near the entrance and observed the elderly customer. He looked to be about seventy years old with a round, bespectacled face

and had a blue umbrella on his lap. His meal was some kind of noodle with thick gravy. He did not seem to notice our director watching him as he finished his dinner and returned the plate to the collection tray before leaving the cafeteria. This left our director as the sole customer.

He thanked his neighbour when she served him his food at the table but said nothing else. He ate quickly, and upon finishing his dinner, followed the previous customer by returning the plate to the collection tray and shuffling out through the front door. All the while he studiously avoided eye-contact with his neighbour standing behind the reception counter, training his eyes on the floor and pretending to be oblivious to her inquisitive glances.

“What a strange person!” his neighbour thought as she stared at his disappearing figure. All the excitement that his arrival generated had fizzled out by then as she felt snubbed by his aloof and standoffish behaviour. “Does he remember the mess he created in my house that day?”

To her surprise, the scene played itself out again the next evening. Our director strode into her cafeteria with that same casual air, ordered number three with chicken and tomato sauce, sat at the same spot near the entrance, gobbled up his dinner in the same hurried manner, and left without saying goodbye. Incredibly, it would occur on a daily basis henceforth, causing her first to wonder whether he was trying to convey a cryptic message, and secondly what was so special about number three with chicken and tomato sauce since it was neither the cheapest nor the most expensive dish on offer.

He, on his part, was content with ordering that same dish every evening, since habits, once formed, die hard. He was drawn to her cafeteria and could not bear to break with the tradition of ordering number three with chicken and tomato sauce, not when she had begun to expect it. And in her bid to please, since he so obviously enjoyed that dish but did not bother to tell what was so good about it, number three with chicken and tomato sauce began to improve perceptibly. First, the piece of chicken grew larger. Then there were two pieces. Then each became coated with a layer of fine herbs and spices. Then it was accompanied by a larger serving of vegetables and fruits. Soon a small ice-cream dessert came along with it — just for him, and all at the same price. Eventually, he did not even have to order dinner at the reception, for number three with chicken and tomato

sauce with ice-cream would be there sitting on the table, waiting for him the moment he stepped into the cafeteria at his usual time. A silent conversation had become established between our director and his neighbour — communicated through actions rather than words — as each began to understand that the other person derived a sense of pleasure from the predictability.

Our director became increasingly settled into his new lifestyle, and as autumn turned to winter, it was finally time to return home. On his last day at work his colleagues threw a grand farewell party, and everyone was feeling rather unhappy at his imminent departure. His position was to be filled by another fellow from the company as well as the rented house and car that came with the position. His flight was prearranged, and very soon it was time to leave.

Now, as our director packed his belongings, he could not help feeling a little unwilling to go. He was looking forward to seeing his family and friends again, but after a year in that city he had grown accustomed to its people, its culture, and found their charm and lifestyle attractive, surprising himself with his change of heart. He realised that, stripped of all externalities, people everywhere are all the same — we have the same dreams and aspirations, the same likes and dislikes, the same thoughts and feelings, the same worries and fears. We all receive our fair share of joys and disappointments, try to live our lives to the fullest, and we all will die eventually.

On the day of his departure as he sat in the taxi on the way to the airport reflecting on the experiences gained during that year, he suddenly realised that he had forgotten to say goodbye to his neighbour. He checked his wristwatch and realised that there was enough time to turn back. In haste he urged the driver to reverse. When he reached her house, he jumped out of the taxi, rushed towards it and knocked impatiently on the door. But nobody answered. Then it dawned on him that it was mid-afternoon, and she must be at the cafeteria while her son was in school.

He fiddled around in his pockets and discovered that the only paper he had was his electronic flight ticket. In haste he tore off an empty portion and scribbled a short goodbye message and some words of encouragement. He was about to slip it underneath the door when he realised that he had not left a contact detail. After a slight pause as he reflected on the merits and demerits of writing it down, he decided to scribble his email address below

the message and pushed the scrap under the door. He rushed back into the waiting taxi and eventually made his way to the airport on time. And as he sat in the airplane flying through the clouds, his thoughts were still with her as he wondered whether she would ever contact him in the future.

* * * * *

"Saving Life the Five-Foot Way"

by Marc de Faoite

A car pulls up drain-side, exhaust snarling too loudly, belching smoke that is too dark. Grey-green metallic Proton Saga. Dried mud splatters decorate the doors. Windows wound down. Air-con probably shot, or exhaust fumes gassing the occupants: five young Malay men--two up front, three in the back--late teens, early twenties, sweat-shiny faces.

Driver cuts the ignition. Sleepy one-street-town falls quiet again. Cicadas whining from the forest. Sunlight bleaching the colour out of everything. Humid air swallowed in thick, cloying clumps. Car-door creaks open. Driver steps over the drain. Into the shade of the five-foot-way. Squints at me as he walks past. I nod. He pretends to ignore. Heads inside the cave-like darkness of the fishing tackle shop.

The boys in the car do a double take at me sitting in the shade.

"d'orang putih." There's a white guy.

A backseat boy cracks open the rear door. Pours out of the car 30 kg overweight. Pours over the drain and into the shade. Pours right up to me. I stand, plastic chair echo-scraping on dark, age-polished cement.

"Welcome to Malaysia, sir," he says.

Meaty paw thrust out to shake. Friendly grin made comical by a missing left incisor. Homemade haircut, sweat-stained T-shirt, same mud from the car door on his yellow rubber boots. Blushes as I shake his hand. Nods his head, scuffs his feet. Looks over his shoulder to his pals oozing out of the car, liquefied by the tropical heat. Backseat boy lets my hand go at last. Shuffles on inside the shop. Three more country-boy-shy smiles. Not every day they see orang putih in the boondocks. Might even be the first time.

My brother-in-law comes out of the shop, first two boys in tow. A backseat-boy pops the trunk. Holds it open, compensating for a dead Proton piston-arm. All five crowd around my

brother-in-law. He looks in the trunk. They look at him. He shakes his head. One of the boys says something to him. He shakes his head again. Turns. Walks back to the shop.

“You look,” he says. Chin-jerks the car.

“What is it?” I ask.

“You look,” he says again, fading back into the darkness of the shop.

I step out of the shade, over the drain. Five country-boy smiles. Less shy now. I look in the trunk.

It takes me a moment to figure it out. Hard to tell all tied up in a net like that. Claws coming through the gaps in the net tell me it's alive. One boy lifts the net, carries it into the shade. We all follow. After a moment an ugly mud-coloured head comes out. It's a tortoise. As big as the round of my arms.

“Besar,” I say. Big.

The usual surprise. White guy speaking Malay.

“Ya, besar. Dan berat.”

I test the net. It tests my arm.

“Berapa kilo?”

“12kg. You buy?”

“Untuk apa?” What for?

“Eat him.”

Flash back five years. A beach in India. Muslim fishing village. Net-cut turtle bleeding to death on the sand. Muslims can't eat reptiles. The crows take its eyes. Turtle dies blind.

“I also cannot eat,” I say. “How much?”

“250 ringgit.”

“Aiyolah, very 'spensive.”

“Orang putih ada duit.”

I laugh. Common assumption. White skin makes you rich.

“You say best price.”

Turtle chopped, gutted and cooked. My stomach turns. I have blood on my hands from the past.

“100 boleh, tak?” I ask.

5 big smiles. Driver nods. Five man chorus.

“Boleeeeeeh!”

I hand over the money. Five shaken hands. Proton Saga growls to life. Waved hands. Exhaust sound distance-fades.

Net lug the tortoise into the shop.

My wife watching over her ailing father. Hong Kong game-show. Sound turned down. House geckos playing in coloured shadows on a TV-painted wall.

Quaked Cantonese. Her brother hands my wife a big black pen. Indelible waterproof ink.

She stretches the net. Writes on the belly shell. Tortoise lucky charm. I turn it over. She writes on its rounded back. Chinese characters tell this turtle has been set free. The power of words and symbols. No one will risk bad karma. No one will buy or eat it now.

I net-lug the tortoise to the riverside. Malay children follow me. Gather round. Sound of rushing water. Tortoise won't let go the net. Snaps tiny teeth at me. Children squirm and squeal. The tortoise tries to crawl towards the river. Tied up it will drown. We net fight. I use gravity. Gravity wins. The tortoise lets go. Heavy splash. I fall back a step. Tortoise lost beneath the brown water. Anti-climax. The children shuffle away. I also turn to go. Twenty metres downstream a mud-coloured head rises up. Looks straight at me. Then is gone.

* * * * *

"Riding Scooters in Bo Rai, Thailand"

by Carl Wade Thompson

I don't have a license,
the scooter can't go fast.
I fly by at 30,
humid breeze on my face.
Go to 7-11 for a Coke,
to a store for a bag of ice.
Locals see me and smile,
big *farang* on a motor bike.

* * * * *

"The Tattooed Rebel"

by Edward Ong

The living ink on your body breathes
Faraway myths my imagination cannot reach.
The merman way you flex yourself
- in the dying amber light of the day -
Gives the black swirls a meaning
Only my intuitive eyes can comprehend.
On your neck stand the Three Crosses,
Holy in their uprightness and yet
Condemned by your liberal peers.
The defiance of your existence starts here,
Almost at eye level, and I am (I must admit)
Aroused by its forthrightness,
The suffering of the saint and sinners you have
Committed to carrying until you are ash.
The grinning skull on your bicep is
A reminder of everlasting death;
The sparkling diamond in its mouth
Is the preciousness of here and now.
So smile! and I trace with my fingers
The cluster of bright stars
Across your mountainous shoulders.
From these stars we came,
Ancient dust sprinkled through time to settle

On the planet of Love and Hate.
Heart riven, my sight drops
To your chest where a blue winged serpent
Coils its awful beauty around a maze
Of thorny vines - spewing hellfire over
Private wars fought in the fevered jungles
Of the Far East once upon a Johnson time.
Blood teardrops fall pearl by pearl down
Your midriff, the crevasses of humanity,
Flowing steady into the volcanic heat of your loins,
Engendering wildlife (birds of paradise)
Under the canopy of the Original Tree.
I have gone through a lifetime of soul torment
To reach this sanctum to meditate away
- with the swastika turning on my sinful palm -
My fruitless prison love for you.

10.2.16 Phuket, Thailand

"Reincarnation (1): Remembering Chulia St."

by Edward Ong

The rusty tram clanged through the dusky heart
Of the town steadying itself for
Another night of swift forgetfulness.
It had transported me out of the bamboo groves

And the endless cabbage farms -
The slumber of green nothingness -
And deposited me in the midst of
Throbbing life.
The rickshaw rebels tipped their straw hats
And nodded half shadows at me while
Children I would never have raced against time
With colourful kites of innocence on their backs.
The vapours of the coolies' dinner
Tickled my desire, but Auntie Ling was waiting
With the curling iron and the hairdryer -
Wondrous inventions that would give me back
My femininity on this night of nights.
Auntie Ling's chatter and the vendors' calls
Merged into an ageless incantation,
And my vision and consciousness drooped.
(Tick-tock-tick)
I opened my eyes again to see a new
Presence - me but not quite, the Other
That hid from daylight.
The rouge on my cheeks gave me
The blood of life: renewal in the hue of
Seduction.
I was ready for the Swallow across.
Auntie Ling accompanied me there herself.
('Trust no one,' words trailing from her wartime experience).
The crowd outside Odeon was restless,
Oblivious to small women like us.
We crossed the street, arm in arm,
Under the neon-lit gaze of the spirits.
Once inside the belly of the Swallow,

We made for the darkened first floor,
The long, musty corridor leading to the heart,
Where I had a room of my own.
Aunty Ling gone, the room conversed with me
Through the remnants of opiate ecstasy
From the nights before.

He came in a rickshaw phantom sudden.
Then he was at the door, blue eyes deep ocean.
Then he was in the room with me,
Tattooed arms around my waist.
No speech necessary except -
He chose to sing in my ear:
'I'll close my eyes and
See you with my heart.'
I said: 'If I close my eyes now,
I'll see you everywhere - at the port of Nagasaki,
Of Hong Kong, of Singapore, and of Malacca -
Everywhere but here.
If I close my eyes, you will no longer be real.'
He pinched my nose and smiled
(Everlasting imprint of here and now).
'Soon I will return to the sea,
But for now these moments are still yours and mine.
Once at the misty peak of Inasayama
(There was precious little left below),
I learnt the ultimate truth of reality:
That though Time will not remain still,
There is permanence in all times elapsed.

The many nights we have seen through together,
Within these silent four walls of witness,
Will be preserved whole in eternity -
Even if the world may turn colder
Or crueller - and
Mankind should become more heartless
Than they have been.
These sweet hours on Chulia
(Do you hear echoes of Old India?)
Will outlast the street vendors,
The trolley car riders and the pawnbrokers,
The gold merchants and the ironmongers,
The imperialists and their haughty ways.
When the waves come and claim back the Isle,
You and I will still be here,
Locked in unchanging embrace,
In this old motel of tropical dreams.'

2.4.16. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Lyrics taken from "I'll Close My Eyes" (1957) by Dinah Washington. Songwriters: Billy Reid and Buddy Kaye

"Reincarnation (2): Remembering Cathay"

by Edward Ong

Note: Cathay was an old-school, single-screen cinema on Penang Road that operated for some 35 years. I did my 'schooling' in Hollywood movies there throughout the 80s. Today's cineplexes mean little to me.

As children of the next generation,
We flocked to the imagined world of Hollywood
After sunset,
Just when the town was recovering from
The cruel heat of another blank page day.
We waited beneath the familiar marquee,
Knowing it would light up our dim imagination
When the magic yellow bulbs flashed bright,
Announcing the dream of the evening.
Our collective memory stretched far back -
To Bastian riding the dog-dragon over Fantasia,
To Damien grinning at his daddy's funeral,
To the Jedi losing faith in himself.
We had lost ourselves in the glowing dark
(Like thousands of other island dreamers),
Many times over through the faceless years,
Forgetting there was another kind of dark
Outside the four eternal walls of wonderment.
The screen, anything but silver, was a kaleidoscope
Of all possible worlds in impossible ways.
We travelled on the sirocco and the northern lights
To the glittering heart of each fantasy nightmare,
Battling the alien queen with cinema's greatest heroine,
Spinning through NYC as ghostbusting tomfools,
Waking up in Freddy's vision of his shredded kids -
And how we cheered when Bruce Willis saved mankind again!
We learnt of the many faces of Love
- from honesty to treachery -
And fell hard for leading men and femme fatales.
We got back up on our feet every time,

Ready for another round of tragicomedy.
We bonded with our brave fathers
Over badass Eastwood and cowboy flicks.
We found the rare fountain of youth
With the help of old veterans in the Florida Keys;
Understood then why we all wanted to live forever
In a world where all that's born must die.
We were together, under the colourful canvases
Of movie ads declaring to all brothers:
'Stand by me!' And we did stand strong till
The lonely digital age came stealing in,
Whispering individualism in our ears,
And cold, cold multiplexes with personality disorders
Paved the way for an era of
Disconnection.
The marquee lost its shine, was
Dismantled in our absence.
But sometimes when the night is long,
We see the children at the box office again,
Fanning themselves in the heat of illusion,
Dreaming foreign myths with one beating island heart.

7.5.16 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

* * * * *

"The Fractured Fairy Tale: Version 2"

by Amar Shobha Sarna

It was a fine and windy day
Red Riding Hood was strolling along,
When all at once, she saw in her way,
A minstrel with naught in his voice a song.

She strode up to him oh, so daintily,
And beseeched him to lend his voice to the air,
And in a tone whispered so pitifully,
"I have lost every single inch of my flair."

Little Reddie lost all sense of what to do,
What to say, how to lend a hand,
Then inspiration struck out of the blue,
Her joy was a full blown marching band.

From 'neath her frock, she whipped it out,
White and shiny, in her hand it lay,
"Hey Cindy, " she said with a melodious shout,
"I need you here and that too right away!"

Cindy used her pumpkin wheels,
Picked up Snow White along the way,
The seven dwarfs too dug in their heels,
And soon, they too were all on their way.

Prince Charming heard on the rich grapevine
The calamity that Reddie had on her hands,
Galopped to the scene on a horse so fine,
Over streams, hedges and dusty lands.

The minstrel was unfazed by Cindy's beauty,
Untouched by Snow White's feminine charm,
Then burst into song when he saw a cutie,
Like a storm after the proverbial calm.

Who did he see but the big hairy wolf?
"Ah! There you are, my bosom buddy.
Where were you? You just went pouf!
And now, you will see your darling baby!"

The minstrel ripped off his fantastical disguise,
And voila! A lovely female wolf in splendour,
They danced a jig, not once, not twice but thrice,
And ambled into the sunset with wonder.

* * * * *

"We Are Not Driftwood"

by Clare Mercado

Aimless, they say
Our eyes graze the zenith
Mountains looming
Threatening to swallow us whole

Under the star apple tree we sat
Palms cracked and empty
Waiting for the June rain
It never came

We looked for the skyline
A view of lumped skyscrapers
Sitting proudly atop shanties
The stench of Death rots

Mouths gagged, wrists tied
We light a match
Our narra hands afire
Painting dawn with blood

The Pacific lashes out
Sending twenty-foot waves
But no, we are not driftwood
And for the first time in three centuries

We will swim against the tide