

A n a k S a s t r a

Issue 26

Issue 26 Contents

short fiction

"Peeling Paint" by Kira Messell

"Stopping for Tea" by CA Yin

"Fabricating a Genius" by Sabah Carrim

nonfiction

"The Stranger on the Bus" by Harjinder Kaur

"The End of the City" by Brendan Chia

poems

"The Cottage" and "April Showers" by Jessica Ginting

"Unfit to Serve" by Gerard Sarnat

"Blue Sepulcher" by John C. Mannone

"Memento Mori" by Riya Sarna

"The Lift" by William C. Blome

"Remembering Wired Dreamtime: Planetary Retrograde" and "*Dear Lolo Pero: A Love Letter to De-Parted Hearts*" by Mary Alinney Villacastin

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Contributor Bios

[Kira Messell](#) is from Denmark and studied comparative literature in Copenhagen and Edinburgh. After a five-year stint in Malaysia, she now lives in Berlin, Germany.

CA Yin lives in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, with her husband and two German Shepherd-Labrador mixed-breed dogs, Dana and Scully. She celebrates life teaching and interacting with her students in the classroom and in debate and green activities. Apart from reading and writing, she enjoys Skyping with her children who are studying in Kuala Lumpur and Glasgow.

Sabah Carrim was born in Mauritius and is now based in Kuala Lumpur. Her works, both academic and of general interest, have been published in magazines and journals across the world. She has authored two novels: [Humeirah](#) and [Semi-Apes](#).

Harjinder Kaur is a young educator and aspiring writer. She enjoys travelling and reading. This is her first attempt at publishing online.

[Brendan Chia](#) is a travel writer who shares perspectives on current affairs and life in general from Southeast Asia. A geographer at heart, he was born in Singapore but enjoys exploring the world. He works with an international development agency, and in his spare time documents his observations and experiences from the Southeast Asian region.

[Jessica Ginting](#) (Twitter: [@jginting](#)) is an Indonesian writer currently studying at the University of Bristol. She writes poetry and short stories, occasionally performing spoken word poetry. She also has a growing [YouTube channel](#) where she discusses movies, television shows and other pop-culture happenings.

Gerard Sarnat MD's been nominated for a 2016 Pushcart Prize. He's authored [Homeless Chronicles](#) (2010), [Disputes](#) (2012), [17s](#) (2014) and [Melting the Ice King](#) (2016) which included work published in Gargoyle and Lowestoft. Mount Analogue selected Sarnat's *Kaddish for the Country* for distribution as a pamphlet on Inauguration Day 2017 and as part of the Washington/nationwide Women's Marches. Gerry's built/staffed clinics for the marginalized, been a CEO of healthcare organizations and Stanford Med professor.

[John C. Mannone](#) has over 550 works published in venues such as *Pedestal*, *Peacock Journal*, *The Drowning Gull*, *Gyroscope Review*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Inscape Literary Journal*, *Windhover*, *Baltimore Review*. He's been awarded a 2016 Weymouth Center for the Arts & Humanities writing residency and has two literary poetry collections, including one on disability, [Disabled Monsters](#) (The Linnet's Wings Press, Dec 2015), featured at the 28th Southern Festival of Books. He edits poetry for *Silver Blade* and *Abyss & Apex*, and he's a college professor of physics in east Tennessee. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart three times.

For **Riya Sarna**, poetry has always been an outlet for her to say all the things she never has the courage to say out loud. She is her poetry and her poetry is her.

William C. Blome writes poetry and short fiction. He is a veteran of the war in Vietnam and now lives wedged between Baltimore and Washington, DC. He holds a master's degree from the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars, and his work has previously seen the light of day in such fine little mags as *Poetry London*, *PRISM International*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Roanoke Review*, *Salted Feathers* and *The California Quarterly*.

[Mary Alinney Villacastin](#) is a Filipina-Gringita traveler decolonizing roots. A graduate of anthropology from Barnard College now pursuing an MA in Media Studies at The New School, she thumb travels and experiments with auto-ethnographic storytelling. Her writing is published online in *Local Nomad*, *Alien Mouth*, *Epigraph Magazine*, *Rambutan Literary*, *minor literature[s]*, *Four Ties Lit Review*, and *The Jet Fuel Review*.

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"Peeling Paint"

by Kira Messell

Almost no one who comes into the shop can resist sticking their fingers into my eyeballs and moving the pupils up and down, up and down. Only a few of us have movable eyes; the others just stare stupidly into the air. I can move mine sideways too. Something people only notice out of the corners of their eyes. They'll quickly turn to stare at me. I'll stare right back with an empty wooden gaze and a dumb smile on my painted mouth. They freeze in disbelief. If only they knew that my smile is for real. Inside I'm laughing the varnish off my teak skin.

This is one of only a few diversions. Restrained by strings, I've been hanging here on the balcony of the shop for years collecting dust. Tiny flakes of colour peel off me like dandruff. My joints creak, and I'm worried about woodworm. I've seen a few former colleagues being eaten from the inside out, unable to even scratch themselves. It's either that or getting sold to some eccentric tourist with a penchant for theatre who will use us only as decoration.

Somebody inserts a small greasy finger into my eye and moves it around. People are shameless! A blond boy is fiddling with my strings in between massaging my eyeballs. It reminds me of bygone days, when my audience came to admire me before and after the show. It was always my eyes that attracted them. My eyes and my jaw. I emit an airless sigh

as the boy pulls my jaw string. He synchronizes the oooohh. I blink at him once for good measure and to see if I can scare him away. He doesn't even flinch but closes and opens his eyes. Is this disbelief or is he testing me? I blink again.

“Mum,” the coward cries. Ha, so I did scare him. “I've found one. This is the puppet I want.” His mother looks at me and frowns.

“I thought you wanted the green one. The scary demon with the pointed teeth. Would you really rather have a clown?”

People often mistake me for a clown until they witness my heroic actions on stage, hardly anybody recognises my character and what I represent anymore. From my pointed chin grows a long black beard. I wear the auspicious colours of the *Nats*, the spirits that protect us all: a red hat and cloak which contrast with my white painted face. These colours, ironically, make me look like raw beef, although I can't eat meat, or even be near people who do. My character, Zawgyi, lives off flowers and roots and forsakes company and self-indulgence. My character strives to be free of desire in a quest to obtain eternal life and wisdom; as an alchemist, my character works tirelessly for the common good. A skilled Zawgyi, like myself, can make rice grow in infertile soil and impregnate childless women with the seed of other men. A true Zawgyi, like myself, makes people's lives bearable, while his own life becomes increasingly miserable. At least that is what my life has become. A misery inflicted partly by the Queen hanging above me and partly by my self-enforced inertia.

Obviously, the boy's mother has no idea about my noble character. She looks uncomfortable and out of place in the shop.

"I think he's too big and probably antique too," she says, glancing towards the door, "I'll get you one from the market tomorrow." The boy gives me a hard stare and lingers. I stare right back at him. "I want *you*," he whispers and caresses my stick and cloak. "I think you're magic." If only he knew.

I raise my eyes and glimpse white legs under a tired looking *longyi* dangling from the ceiling above me. My heart sinks. How could I ever leave my Queen? How could I endure the separation from her? But then again, how much longer can I abide here, my only pleasure the occasional glimpse of her coveted legs, or our brief eye contact when she decides to torment me with her reproachful glance.

I know what she thinks. One touch with my magic stone and her life will be transformed. One touch and her peeling paint will magically be restored to a smooth layer of rosy skin, her bleached dress will revert to its former glory, only with its glass beads substituted for real rubies, pearls and sapphires. In my dreams, I do indeed transform her according to her fancy, assured that she will surrender to my desires. But how can I, a noble altruistic Zawgyi, use my powers to satisfy an ageing woman's vanity? And how can I, a chaste and loyal Zawgyi, feel so strong and tormenting a passion towards a woman whose honour I should be defending?

Idleness gives you time to reflect, and I have long been contemplating my dilemma. All these years I've refrained from using my skills, only allowing the occasional bit of telekinesis to surprise unsuspecting customers. How can I know right from wrong without a master? Recently I learned that my last puppeteer is dead. I died long ago, but this does not make the knowledge easier to bear. I should be looking for a new puppeteer, because what is an actor without a director? What is a puppet without a puppeteer? A piece of ornamented wood attached to seventeen strings. That's what we're reduced to. We need human intervention to perform our stage magic. Although in my case, I suppose matters have become a bit more complicated.

Could I make the boy's mother change her opinion about me? Blur her thoughts and twist her mind? I watch him closely as he tries his hands on the crocodile-shaped harp. He closes his eyes and plays a tune. A firework of energy and sentiment is released. Nobody just sits down and plays the harp like that! I feel a pang of loss. Like this boy, my last puppeteer used to become one with the objects he touched. His intense passion both drove and destroyed him. Maybe this master could be different.

I could follow the boy; I could teach him a new play. Maybe I could be another Zawgyi, one who still does good, but doesn't suffer so much. We could both profit. With his passion and my magic, we could be a sensation. He picks up a flute and blows into it. A smooth tune emerges.

And what *if* the boy took me home? In a few years I would be put into a box again along with his teddy bears, building blocks and old schoolbooks. My misery would repeat itself and my precious gift would be lost with my exit. I should finally give up the dream of returning to the stage. But oh, how I miss the spotlights and the excitement before making my entrance. How I miss the immersion in a new play, the rehearsals and cooperation!

Like most actors, I used to only come alive on stage. Every night 8:30 pm, usually to a full house. Every night I would give everything I had for a few hours. Applause, curtain call, silence and rest. Those were the days. Before and after the show our audience admired our fine clothes, our meticulously painted faces and detailed carving. They were allowed to gently pull our strings, bend our legs and arms, and even raise our *longyis* to admire our wooden sexual organs. We knew we were characters in the plays put on by our experienced director and puppeteer. We knew our roles and each other inside and out. We were content in our world and never thought it could change so dramatically.

Back in our golden days we had a broad repertoire ranging from Burmese royal legends to the Ramayana. We depicted stories about Lord Rama, and the Jataka, and the many lives of the Buddha. We had a king, a queen, princes and princesses, a hermit, my character the magician and an abundance of mythological creatures: Galon the Bird, Naga the Serpent, Monkey Myauk and Belu the Ogre. Twenty-eight stiff-limbed actors made of ancient teak wood and dressed in gowns sparkling with golden thread and beads.

Monkey Myauk brought forth laughter and enthusiastic cries when he monkeyed around on stage dancing his monkey dance, nodding and shaking his head uncontrollably, as if testing whether it really was attached to his body. His long tail, sticking out from under his cloak, waved back and forth on an extra string as he grasped the bananas originally offered to the *Nat* spirits. Usually Belu, due to his vile character, kicked him around on stage in one of their famous fights, until Monkey Myauk finally swung off stage, clutching his legs to his chest in a monkey jump.

Another famous combat took place between Galon the Bird and Naga the Serpent. The sworn enemies performed an airborne fight, until interrupted by me, the alchemist, out for a little walk on Mount Popa to collect herbs, roots, and plants for my potent potions.

All the animals were colourful and irresistible to children, but this boy barely throws the creatures a glance as he steps across the threshold of the first floor. Inside glass cabinets brim with chiseled lacquerware; Buddha statues, smaller puppets and other bric-a-brac line narrow aisles throughout the shop. A thick layer of dust muffles the noise from the lane below and dulls the bright colours to a sombre brown. The many Buddhas give the room a peaceful atmosphere, some of them still with fragments of glinting stones on their pointed head dresses or around their necks. A narrow bench carries a reclining white Buddha waiting for Nirvana. I wonder how much longer he has to wait. I also wonder how much longer I should wait.

My first puppeteer was a true master of the art. He made me jump and dance, even spin on my stick. He spoke wise and poetic words through my clacking jaw, while my mouth synchronized perfectly with his rhymes. The crowd sat on low stools and benches in front of me in half darkness. A spotlight formed a moon around me while I spoke of morality, of love, of every man's duty to obey his destiny. The crowd's eyes moistened and their jaws dropped, as if they too had an invisible puppeteer manipulating their jaw strings. That was my moment, and I do tend to dwell on it while I attempt to forget the subsequent catastrophic events.

But I'm jumping ahead, and that's no good! I know how important chronology is to a story from my experience in the theatre. So...curtain close. Musicians take your seats next to the stage. Drummers tune your drums with your balls of ashes and cooked rice. Gong and cymbal players play your three beats to introduce the human medium dancing his ritual dance for our guardian spirit of the theatre. Then a short silence; curtain open and our play begins.

The creatures introduce themselves through their wild dances. Galon and Naga perform their airborne fight until I appear and chase them away. I take over the scene with an acrobatic dance displaying how I pick ripe fruit from tall trees and turn them into lovesick nymphs, a challenge for my puppeteer and a sign of his distinction. I perform such complex movements that the audience rub their eyes to witness performances I only hint at.

But look! Now our magnificent Queen, the object of my unflinching devotion, is seen walking the slopes of Mount Popa. With a single swirl of my stick the nymphs evaporate, and I hide behind a tree. Suddenly Belu, the lecherous ogre, sneaks upon her and engages her in a fatal dance of desire, reluctance and refusal. Drums accompany their dance, playing louder and faster until Belu, shame on him, throws himself over the virtuous Queen and disappears with her underneath the stage.

Change of scene. While the audience catches its breath, the backdrop is hastily changed. We're in the King's palace and Galon, that vile fowl, whispers vicious rumours about our blameless Queen while reenacting the ogre's dance with her. The King sends for her and accuses her of cuckolding him. She pleads her innocence and begs her husband to believe her. The monkey Myauk, her personal bodyguard, testifies that he was occupied with his monkey dance and saw nothing, omitting to say how Belu chased him away.

Enter I, the court alchemist, not only the King's trusted subject and house magician, but also his friend and confidante who advises him on how to rule his kingdom. "I was there," I cry. "I saw them, and our respectable Queen is innocent." Her sensual eyes send me a grateful glance, and I strive to suppress the jubilant beating of my heart. Then I remind myself of my position, bow to the King and avoid her sweet eyes.

All's well that ends well, and a happy ending is mandatory. As a result of my sound advice the evil bird is exiled from the kingdom for his vicious lies, and Belu the Ogre is spirited away through a tap of my stick to the sound of thunderous drums. The Queen and King are

united in eternal bliss and I, well, I just go on with my experiments and concoctions in my fruitless search for the Stone of Life.

This was one of the dramas we performed under the competent hands of our esteemed puppeteer. When we weren't performing, we dangled from our strings backstage, only separated from the action by a maroon velvet curtain. In the murky light behind the curtain I meditated to obtain calmness and certainty before entering the raw spotlight. Stage fright was never an issue. When I made my entrance, I always knew exactly what to say and what would happen next. My strings were safe in my master's hands.

For twenty years I took the routine, the certainty and the harmony for granted. Then, overnight, everything changed.

The boy should have seen me back then when I was a hero and defeated the lewd ogre. Oh that wicked Belu with his protruding snout and fangs! He still makes my blood freeze and teeth grit behind my smiling mouth, even though only his mahogany shell is left now.

There he is, dangling at my far right, a malicious smirk painted on his face. Ignorant customers are still attracted by his green face and sharp fangs. He always did have a way of deceiving people. Women in particular are fascinated by his dark charm and brutal passion. Something I have never understood. Everything about Belu reveals him as an evil

character: his terrible bulging red eyes and sardonic expression; his dark sequined cloak and golden dagger with hints of blood. Even his smell, a mixture of smoke, rotting meat and withered flowers, evokes a sense of danger.

The combination of our puppeteer's skills and the unmistakable presence of evil made Belu's repulsive character all the more compelling. When Belu the Ogre danced, accompanied by ominous drumbeats, a chill ran through the theatre. His stalking steps and rigid movements made the audience gasp and children hide behind their parents. When Belu the Ogre danced, not a beat of the drums came without a corresponding step from his eloquent and gold-plated claws. Without fail the hearts of the audience started beating to the same rhythm. Such were the powers of the evil Belu.

The boy is of course unaware of Belu's potency; he wasn't yet born in Belu's seductive heyday. Besides, Belu left his wooden casing like a chrysalis years ago. We can do that; we just have to let go. So exit Belu, who, without a master puppeteer, is merely a bunch of painted twigs on strings.

As if reading my mind, the boy leaves the harp to look at Belu. I concentrate hard and make the Ogre's golden dagger fall out of his stiff hand. "Oops," says the boy and laughs while he looks at me approvingly. He's perfect.

After twenty years our dear old puppeteer passed on following a short illness. A young and enthusiastic puppeteer took over and tampered with our well-rehearsed play. Everything changed. There weren't any breaks anymore. He rehearsed with us day and night, forgetting to sleep and eat. He drove us to despair with his twisted ideas and taste for misery. Much to my horror, he was particularly keen on changing my character, despite his obvious lack of experience. Not only did he pull my jaw string too hard, the awkward sentences I now spoke with his squeaky voice didn't synchronize with my clacking jaw. A disgrace to my character!

During the year he was our master, I was made to display an awkward mix of noble behaviour and indecent desires. I was ashamed of the new feelings this behaviour stirred in me. Suddenly, I was not simply devoted to the King and Queen. I felt jealousy towards my ruler and best friend, the King, while my beautiful Queen all of a sudden induced in me not only love and devotion, but fierce lust. A desire, I supposed, not unlike what Belu might have always felt.

I assumed that the disturbing changes were due to our new puppeteer's youth and inexperience. He obviously hadn't mastered the art of controlling the channelling taking place between man and puppet.

At least these were my thoughts before the catastrophe occurred. I have since had oceans of time to reflect on the events leading to our current sad existence. What else do I have to

do? My acting days are over. I will never return to the stage. An antique, as the lady said.
Does that make me a lesser magician?

From my elevated position on the balcony, I have a fine view of the narrow dirt road outside. When I turn my head slightly, I can peek through the gaps of the balustrade and watch the people in the narrow lane below for hours. Luckily, I don't have to worry about a stiff neck.

I watch vendors carrying baskets; bicycles packed with goods from the market and lean trishaw drivers transporting their human cargo. Occasionally, tourists drift through craning their necks to get a glimpse of our loaded balcony. Down on the corner an old lady sells greasy fried bananas while shouting at the youngsters who whiz by on their cheap Chinese motorcycles and swirl up dirt and dust that lands in her hot oil. In between the shouting, she gossips with the fat Indian lady from across the lane, who spends the day cooking fluffy naan and spicy dhal in her little restaurant. Her customers sit on the balcony facing mine, while her husband has a money changing business downstairs. I see him counting crisp new dollar bills and exchanging them for thousands of greasy, crumbled kyat. He's the brother of our shop owner and often comes over to chat. Their grandfather originally came to Burma from India to help the British run the country, but the brothers consider themselves Burmese and wear checkered *longyis* folded on either side in front and held

together at the waist. Downstairs, they have a *Nat* shrine where they offer coconuts and sticky rice. If I bend my head slightly I can see it at the bottom of the creaking staircase.

The owner often follows the customers around, much to their annoyance. "Real antiques," he says and pats one of us. The tourists usually nod and smile before they quickly leave again. "I can ship everything overseas. No problem," he likes to inform them as they take flight down the sagging stairs.

The other day we had a rather loud and talkative American lady visiting. She engaged the owner in a little chat about the fate of our former theatre. I turned my head to be able to hear them as they meandered through the first floor. That's how I learned about the fate of the young puppeteer, or rather, that's when I realized the complexity of my own fate.

He had known the father of our young puppeteer, the owner told her. In fact, it was the father who had sold us to him after the theatre closed down.

"What happened to the puppeteer?" the American lady asked. "Was he imprisoned? House arrest? Did he perform subversive plays? A victim of the regime? Did he have to flee the country?"

The owner laughed. "No, no. The young man was rather unstable and succumbed to a nervous breakdown after his last show. He spent a year in an asylum before the poor soul killed himself. The theatre was left empty until a few years ago, when a modern troupe took over and restored it. They perform black light theatre these days."

So exit young puppeteer. But what were the consequences for us? Were we still stuck in the roles he had ascribed us?

Because back when he took over our strings, our well-established personalities changed dramatically. Belu and Galon were still unmistakably evil characters, though now a bit too charming for my liking. The formerly just King became unyielding and hard. He was tormented by suspicions and anger towards his Queen. He accused her of flirting and of having an affair with the ogre, charges she denied. Upon her return from Mount Popa, her torn clothes were the catalyst for a torrent of endless reproaches: how she tried to poison him; how she only married him to overthrow him; how she continually betrayed him and went behind his back with slanderous gossip, and worst of all; how she had never loved him. Suddenly the monkey was no longer allowed to leave her side. He was no longer her bodyguard, but a spy.

All the creatures danced grotesque dances and plotted against both King and Queen. Only I, the alchemist, remained a hero. I was given a more prominent part with my own backdrop and a solo scene in the laboratory. I turned lead into silver and brass into gold. I danced and experimented among jars and glasses filled with unidentifiable substances. I threw metals mixed with herbs and roots from the mountain into a big, black cauldron following the recipe from an old book of parchment. Every now and then artificial smoke in various colours emerged, sometimes followed by small explosions or surprising flashes of lightning. Oh what a spectacle! I strove to discover the key to eternal youth and find the Stone of Life.

Smoke and drums mingled to create magic and suspense. A big lump arose out of the smoke (what the audience didn't see was that the lump, too, was controlled by strings). I inspected the stone and performed a dance of despair demonstrating that all my endeavours were wasted and my belief that I would never find the mystical stone. I threw the metallic lump into the latrine and broke down, forlorn, until I slowly lifted my head and...Eureka! The lump unexpectedly glowed and shone. The acidic urine was the only component missing from my experiment. Finally, my diligence was rewarded and the audience was noticeably awed.

The lump was stored in a clock to give it the ability to reverse time, make the old young and undo what had once gone wrong. Behind the curtain our new puppeteer was in tears, something the old one had never allowed himself.

Sometimes, after the play, when the puppets were stowed away, and he had swept under the rows of benches and stools, the young puppeteer fetched me and talked to me. He told me things not suitable for a doll's ears. About his disturbing dreams; about the girl Htut who never loved him back; about his fear of the future. He was worried, he said, for his country. He was disappointed by mankind, he complained and poured himself another glass of rum. Man destroyed everything and had lost his dignity. The old virtues were only to be found in puppets. And righteousness and heroism only existed in my character. He wished more people, real people, would be like me. Then he cried and cried until he fell asleep in his chair, whining and moaning about Htut.

How could he lecture about dignity while losing his own in drink? And how much longer would my heroic scene in the laboratory remain heroic when, in all his excitement, the puppeteer had almost forgotten the rest of the play?

Despite the delay, the backdrop was changed back from my laboratory to the King's chambers. The puppeteer used his sleeve to wipe his wet cheeks and readied himself for the Queen's monologue. He closed his eyes while his hands conducted the puppets like a piece of music. His voice changed back and forth between the King's booming baritone and the Queen's sensual mezzo-soprano. The shift was smooth and seemed natural. Behind the curtain I watched how it wasn't only his voice that changed. His entire body and facial expression transformed according to the character whose strings he was holding. He was able to erase himself and *become* the puppet, if only for the duration of a sentence or two. A scene behind the scene that left me with an eerie feeling that lay somewhere between admiration and dread.

On stage the Queen fell on her knees in front of the King and begged for her life.

"Forgive me," she cried. "I was a silly girl seduced by gold, silk and power. How could I not be tempted to take it all? You made me into what I am." She then turned towards the audience and recounted the story of how she had once been a simple fisher-girl from a poor village. One day, while catching fish with her bare hands, a black crow had picked up her clothes and flown away, leaving her naked and exposed. The crow dumped the bundle in the King's palace and soldiers were sent out to find the owner. They found a naked girl crying on the riverbank, took her to the palace and presented her to the King.

Unsurprisingly, he instantly fell in love and married her. Personally though, I think he only saw her nakedness and disregarded her personality. Ironically, he smothered her body in fabulous robes woven with gold thread and stiff with sequins. Her shining dress mirrored her golden cheeks, yellow from *thaneka* extracted from tree bark to protect her royal white skin against the sun. She wore a seven-tiered headdress studded with precious stones to weigh down any frivolous thoughts. Proud and fierce to look at but still with a wiry heart. Under her fantastic robe she wore a *longyi* adorned with mother-of-pearl, maybe to remind her of her past or to symbolize that hard shells have soft cores.

She looked magnificent, and I was always admiring and forgiving towards her. Or at least I used to be in the earlier plays. In this new version, though, I began to dislike her pathetic monologue. It was as if her magnificence had crumbled and our new puppeteer left her with nothing but her fine garments. Not even her life was spared. Where she used to be reconciled with her husband the King, she was now brutally murdered every night by that same man. A cruel scene, though quite ingeniously performed by our novice puppeteer. An extra Queen was ordered, the spitting image of our existing Queen with just one altered detail: her head and body were two separate parts.

Every night the King took out his sword and slew his spouse in a moment of jealous rage. Then, as if by magic, she disappeared and was replaced by the new Queen – her head and body lying in the same spot where, just a moment before, the living Queen had begged for her life. The audience were mesmerized and cried out in horror as if blood was gushing

down from the stage. Then the King went mad with remorse. “What have I done, what have I done?” he screamed.

That was my cue to appear on stage again. Puff, and I materialized in a cloud of green smoke, a colour I had always associated with Belu. Oh how the audience loved a bit of breath-taking magic! I carried a jar of my special ointment from the musty laboratory and gave him an option: did he love her enough to give her back her life, even if that meant losing her? Because I would not let all my hard work and suffering go without reward. If I woke her from death, she would be mine.

As with all his predecessors in the history of tragic plays, he agreed while secretly plotting to trick me and reclaim her. I smeared her with my magic ointment, the panacea to cure all illnesses and trick death, and she slowly rose.

Her head danced above her body on an extra string which completed the illusion of her parts being magically reunited. Her gratitude towards me was boundless and she performed an intricately choreographed dance to rediscover her complete body. The scene required incredible skill and two stable hands. Something I was surprised to observe in our young puppeteer.

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Maybe I have been judging our young master too harshly. As I watch the boy glide through the shop touching everything, I consider that youth, despite its capriciousness, does have its advantages. This boy's curiosity and spontaneous reactions to the objects around him intrigue me. I recognize the gamut of emotions, readable in his face, from our young puppeteer. The manic obsession with an object or an idea. Then I'm reminded of the crying, the distress and despair. What made him want us to go through so much suffering?

Due to our changed personalities before the audience, the atmosphere backstage got increasingly tense. The King, who was used to living happily ever after with his Queen, turned into a bitter old man. He hated me for stealing not only his wife, but also the show. From being a noble King he was now reduced to an abusive husband, a tragic figure who went mad. Even worse was the relationship between the two Queens. Our old Queen, who despised the label old, made a point of stretching her neck and holding her head high to show off her intact body. She claimed she was the original and accused her double of being a mere imposter. During the few weeks we performed the new play, the two Queens quarrelled endlessly about who suffered more.

Before and after the show the severed Queen sometimes hung limply outside the theatre, red stains on her robe, to attract visitors puzzled by the violent sight. The cut off head dangled from its own strings with an unnatural gap separating it from the body beneath. She was a palpable image of dualism gone wrong and I, with a weak spot for mistreated queens, felt first pity, then affection for her. While the old Queen grew increasingly poisonous and lost the sweetness I used to adore in her, the incompleteness of the

mutilated Queen gave her a certain air of maturity and pain that I found strangely attractive. I tried to mediate between the two, but the old Queen sensed my fading interest in her and my growing feelings for her twin, and scorned me.

Later on, as I was stowed away, I desperately tried to remember what I used to feel and think in the old play. I assumed my former emotions had been erased by my new master to make room for his own twisted thoughts. But then why was I always questioning his actions? Was something of the old puppeteer still left in me, or had I developed thoughts of my own? I'm still wrestling with the question. With both my masters long gone and nobody to channel their emotions through me, why am I still tormented by passion for the stern Queen?

During the new play our little ensemble began to break down with conflicting emotions and internal wars. This had to stop. I tried to communicate my concerns to the others and suggested we stop cooperating with the puppeteer. *We need to hold on to our original personalities*, I told them. The severed head looked even more hurt, thinking I didn't want her, while the others only shrugged. Still, as the hero of the ensemble, I thought I ought to do something.

The next night: curtain, drums, cymbals. The usual magic performed by a few musicians and a puppeteer, the usual suspension of disbelief performed by our esteemed audience.

Well into the play I danced around in my laboratory, yet again inventing the Stone of Life while wondering how to manifest my protest. Tonight the puppeteer's excitement knew no limits. He made me run up the walls and do somersaults in the air; he made me spin on my head and jump up and down behind the cauldron. The musicians gave up following his moves, one after the other. In the end only his falsetto voice was heard through my mouth. He made me skip to the King to tell him about my discovery. All my joints ached.

Enough, I thought. He pulled at my jaw string and spoke with his squeaky voice; my mouth stayed shut. He lifted my arm string to pull out the infamous stone; I decided to leave it where it was and bowed for the King. The audience went wild whistling, applauding and laughing at the incongruity between words and acts. The puppeteer must have sensed something was wrong. The drummers and the cymbal players whispered.

The King and Queen began their usual scene of mutual reproaches and rage. I was abandoned on stage in the growing confusion. This was the first time I witnessed their cruel fight. This was also the first time I understood how this daily nightmare had changed them. The puppeteer was poisoning them with his own emotions. Everything we felt, he must have felt before us. The hatred between them was his. The jealousy eating the King was his; even the subsequent madness was his. When the King was seized by despair and murdered his Queen, the puppeteer felt every bit of the betrayal too. When the King broke down and cried: "What have I done?," his monologue of remorse was as real for the puppeteer, who, behind the scene, expressed his loneliness, his grief at Htut's rejection, and not least his cowardice, since he hid behind a curtain and his ensemble of wooden dolls.

Enough, I thought again, and raised my hands towards the fighting couple. The King had his sword raised and was about to slay the Queen. He stopped in mid-air and leaned to one side to look at me. I shook my head and stepped towards them. The Queen turned around and looked at me in horror. What was I doing there? This was not part of the script and marionettes are not trained to improvise. Enter the mutilated Queen in post-decapitated position. The old Queen turned again and stared at her. The King collapsed, or maybe the puppeteer simply let go of his strings to control the two Queens. Maybe he was the one who collapsed. Were we all fundamentally autonomous?

The usual disappearance of the pre-decapitated Queen hadn't happened. Still on stage, she was staring at her own dead body in two pieces at her feet. It must have shocked her. Despite the daily recurrence of her murder, she had never actually been on stage at the same time as her double. Now the former magnificent Queen looked colourless and common, as if watching her murdered self had shaken all the beauty out of her.

With the King unconscious, I was left alone with two damsels in distress and nobody to speak wise and comforting words through me. I had forsaken my master and was not used to speaking for myself. As usual I knelt next to the dead Queen, took her stiff body in an awkward embrace and let out a sob. How could I awaken her with her living look-alike standing next to her? The shocked old Queen looked at us in contempt. I felt the angry air puffing out of her nostrils. The headless body of my mutilated Queen hung limply in my arms. The two hinged sticks of her arms loosely scraped the floor with a scratching sound

as I lifted her lifeless torso to mine. Silence enveloped the theatre. My cloak spread out on the floor like a sea of blood around her body.

I reached for her head. Her eyes stared at the ceiling, black irises on mahogany brown. I noticed that the white was cracked and peeling. A toll is taken when a head is decapitated every night. With my stiff teak fingers, I massaged the last bit of greasy ointment onto her neck, as I'd done night after night. It was glinting and had a rancid smell. The puppeteer had told me to use it sparsely. He only had that one jar, he had said, when that was gone, we would not be able to wake the Queen anymore.

As always, the moment was laden with expectations. The audience held their breath. Then the dead Queen blinked with her lidless, painted eyes, smiled and jumped up to thank me. She laughed and danced around, throwing her hands in the air. It took me a while to realize her strings were lacking. Oh wonder! Today my ointment had not only woken the dead but also breathed life into a piece of wood. The power of alchemy.

Ever since I heard about the young puppeteer's death, I've been pondering what the consequences are for me. Earlier, when I worked in my laboratory, I smelled every substance thrown into the cauldron. Some scents were foul and some were sweet. Some of the herbs I tasted I found too bitter. When I bent down and took the murdered Queen in my arms I felt her body heat slowly leaving her. Or at least that's what I assumed. In the back of my mind, I was aware of my master channelling the sensations to me. But why then do I

still smell the naan from across the lane, the wet soil after rain and the fumes from the motorcycles?

After the catastrophic ending, we were again hanging on our hooks, waiting for our puppeteer to make us come alive. Except for me of course, and the beheaded Queen who still danced around, clutching her head under one arm, unstoppable and free. She did a somersault, blew me a finger kiss and leapt out of the theatre. The other puppets sighed and silently begged me to rub them with my magic ointment. I looked around and noticed how their half-open mouths formed the yearning letter O. To be stringless, O; to sing and dance of your own volition, O; to be freed of manipulation, O. But how could I? Off stage I didn't feel and think like the Zawgyi in the play. I was merely confused without the puppeteer's strong feelings and thoughts pouring into me.

The old Queen was equally confused. Hanging opposite, she stared at my shoes and silently communicated with me. She was confused about her past, she said. She remembered bits and pieces, but it was all getting muddled and she felt unsure of her own motives. With the old puppeteer our past had been a single string of actions imbedded in our memories; our motives and feelings had been clear and comprehensible. In the new play though, she said, she felt excitement instead of repulsion towards the lecherous Galon. She had vague memories of feeling true devotion towards the King. Now she only felt contempt and even hatred. What was happening to her?

I've been asking myself the same question lately. All these years I've assumed that I suffered the puppeteer's agonies, confusion and desires. Why else would I feel such vile emotions? As soon as he arrived in our theatre, I sensed the change taking place inside myself. I wanted to break free and play another part. Why couldn't I be the King and marry my Queen? Or an ogre who doesn't care about courteous behaviour and can pursue his lust?

The next morning, after our catastrophic play, we were taken down from our hooks and put into wooden boxes. The theatre was closed down and our puppeteer simply disappeared out of our lives. I don't know what happened to him then, but he must have known what he was doing when he put the magical stone in my pocket and a mixture of metal compounds in my mouth. He must have known, despite his incomprehensible babbling and crying, that this action was the final stage for me to become a full grown Zawgyi.

Seemingly dead and buried in a coffin, the successful alchemist will awaken with superhuman powers after seven days, break out of his coffin, and fly away. The result was as strong as it would have been, had I been a human alchemist. Even so, I never broke out of the coffin although, believe me, I could have. Unlike a human alchemist I do not need to fill my lungs with fresh air.

Most of the other puppets from the ensemble were sold to this shop. We were initially relieved to be let out of our confined boxes. Some of the others have been sold and are gone, some have chosen to exit, but most of us are still here.

The King used to hang next to his Queen. I don't know how they could bear it. Imagine being forced to spend every day together after a history like theirs. She never forgave him for his recurring murder, and he never stopped suspecting her of adultery. Eventually, some kind soul took pity and bought him leaving the Queen to suffer on her own. Now, when night falls and noises from the lane below fade, I hear her heartstrings play Funeral March of a Marionette in E flat minor. The agony of puppet fate.

Still, my devotion to her has returned tenfold during the years spent below her feet. Despite her little flaws and the peeling paint, I still find her as dazzling as ever. I gaze at her and her bare legs. She stares back disapprovingly. She will never forgive me for bestowing eternal life on her dead counterpart and rival. I can only assume she has never heard the rumours about the destiny of her resurrected double. None too flattering for a former Queen.

The boy runs his hands over my magical body. A shudder runs through me. He raises his eyebrows. The two of us could have worked wonders on stage. He's a natural. Just the way he played that harp and flute! The tunes were homemade and peculiarly original. He uses

objects to express ideas, and does so to perfection. I wonder what he could achieve with a little help.

He turns around to walk away as his mother begins calling him from downstairs. With a mute sigh I close my eyes and project all my consciousness into removing the stone in my pocket. The effort almost makes my hard body explode. My stone burns and shivers until it finally dissolves, only to reappear in the boy's left trouser pocket. He doesn't feel a thing as he moves towards the stairs. Just before he starts to descend, he frowns, touches the outside of his pocket and looks straight at me. I blink and move my head, gesturing for him to leave. He blinks back as he slowly descends the stairs.

Nirvana is waiting for me. It is time to go on in my alchemistic quest. Without my precious stone, I shall only leave behind the hollow case of an old puppet with his paint peeling.

* * * * *

"Stopping for Tea"

by CA Yin

Little Brother is tired, so Mother decides it's a good time to stop for some tea. There are hawker stalls at the end of the open air market, and Big Sister spots one with *ais kacang*, Little Brother's favourite pick-me-up. "It's the sugar rush that energises him and perks him up," Father had explained to her. Father is a biologist, so he gives good explanations for people's behaviour, though sometimes it makes her feel like one of his research animals. Big Sister knows he tries not to do that, though. Father knows they are his family first and human specimens second.

Mother pulls up a chair and stacks a second one on it for Little Brother. She lifts him up onto the stacked chairs. Big Sister helps Mother arrange the shopping bags carefully onto the chair next to hers just as the drinks girl comes over. Mother orders her usual iced lemon tea with no sugar and Big Sister's fresh sugar cane juice.

After a nod from Mother, Big Sister skips off to the specialty drinks stall to order Little Brother's *ais kacang*. When she comes back to the table, three white foreigners have asked Mother if they can share the table. Every other table is occupied, so Mother agrees.

Big Sister scoots her chair closer to Little Brother's, but it is hard to ignore the foreigners. They're not happy and speak loudly as if no one can understand English. That's a bit silly, Big Sister thinks. We live in a former British colony, after all.

The man has long, blonde hair tied in a ponytail, and he is arguing with the two women. All of them have huge backpacks that are nearly as tall as Big Sister is when sitting down.

"We should take the bus to Bako National Park." The man's ponytail jiggles as he speaks, and he sounds like the reality TV chef on Astro.

"No, no." The first woman speaks English with a strange accent. "Guidebook says we take boat from village. Too late when bus reaches there."

"We stay Kuching tonight," the second woman nods vigorously.

"Aw, come on. Let's head on up to Bako tonight. It's a waste of time staying in the city. There's nothing to do here."

"No. Too late, we stay here. Guidebook says good hotels here."

"Nah!"

"I like see Kuching. Cultural Village, museum, India Street."

The two women start speaking to each other in Russian. The man sighs and wonders why he agreed to travel with them. He can't wait to meet up with his mates in Kota Kinabalu the next week. They're going to climb the mountain. They've been training. They

couldn't make it for the Sarawakian stretch, but he planned to visit Bako, Gunung Gading and even head to Mulu Caves. He can't miss the largest cave system in the world! Then these Russian girls turned up in Singapore. They wanted to hang out with him. They'd been conned in Thailand and thought that if they stuck with an Aussie guy, the local people would give them more respect. So he'd agreed. After all, they'd also wanted to see the rainforest and the wildlife. Hell, it's Borneo! How could you stay exclusively in the cities? He wanted to see the longhouses and parks and waterfalls and the famed Rafflesia flower. Anything in the museums he could just view online.

The drinks girl comes around and gives Mother her change. As the drinks girl is waiting to take the foreigners' order, she looks at them like they are aliens. Those Russian girls are out of this world all right. The man says the name of a drink he knows she would recognise: "Coke". The two women look at Little Brother's drink and ask for the same. The man hopes they know what they're getting into, but the Russian girls are grinning at Little Brother who is smiling back. The heat and his excess sweating makes him even grumpier than before.

Mother and Big Sister look at each other over Little Brother's head as the argument stars again. It is nearly four o'clock; the foreigners could still make it to Bako National Park for as long as the tide is still low. At high tide, the boatmen would not take anyone across. That guidebook seems to have informed the women of a lot, but Mr. Ponytail doesn't seem interested. Big Sister thinks he is one of those tourists who prefers animals to people. She doesn't blame him. Father says animals are more predictable than people, which some people think is a strange thing to say, considering the number of people killed by wild

animals every year. But Father says that's because people intrude on animals' territory, abuse them and destroy their homes. What would you expect the animals to do? Would you just sit and let people walk all over you in your own backyard? Father makes the animals seem very reasonable.

Mother asks Big Sister if she wants to finish Little Brother's *ais kacang*, but all the ice has melted and the jellies and beans are mixed together like mush. It's no longer cooling in the heat of the afternoon. Big Sister finishes her sugar cane juice, and Mother starts picking up her shopping bags.

"Have you been to Bako National Park?"

Mother looks up. Mr. Ponytail has given up arguing with them because his travelling companions are back to talking in their native tongue. He has turned towards Mother and raises his eyebrows as he takes another gulp of his Coke. Both his face and the Coke are perspiring.

"Yes, we've been there. It is beautiful. But Kuching has lots of nice sights, too. It's getting late; your friends are tired. You look like you could do with a quiet evening, too. Maybe it is better for all of you to rest so you can all be fresh tomorrow or the next day to take the bus and boat to Bako. You won't be disappointed with the Cultural Village or the Museum or India Street."

Mr. Ponytail's mouth has fallen open and, for a second, it looks like he's going to get angry at Mother. But suddenly, he laughs. He looks a lot nicer laughing than he does arguing. His eyes light up, and his nose doesn't scrunch into an angry-looking shape.

“Hell, maybe you’re right. Thanks ma’am!”

With that, he turns to the two women and smiles. “Sure, we can stay in Kuching tonight or for a couple of nights if you like. This lady here says there’s plenty to see, and we should be rested before we hit the National Park and all the trails and wildlife.”

The two ladies look relieved. Later, Mother tells Big Sister that they must have met Mr. Ponytail somewhere along their journey and had decided to travel together for fun, to save money or for safety reasons. Lots of foreigners like to backpack around the world, but it could be dangerous, so sometimes they join up with other backpackers. Safety in numbers – like herds, Father would say.

Little Brother jumps off his stacked chairs, energised again. He’s ready for our last stops at the dumpling stall and then the pet store for dog food. The two foreign women wave, and Big Sister and Little Brother wave back. Mr. Ponytail raises his can of Coke to them. Big Sister is glad that they’re going to get their rest tonight in Kuching. They look really worn out. But she’s also glad Mr. Ponytail will get his trip to Bako as well. She thinks he will enjoy the trails, birds, macaques and wild boars. And the beaches, too. All three of them will enjoy their stay there. As for Big Sister, she we will go home and tell Father about the three tourists and the herd instinct. Sometimes, people don’t get along, but she had just seen how a simple thing like Mother’s calm and reasonable answer could make things right again. She’d have to ask Father about that. Does that happen with animals, too? She would have to watch the dogs carefully, and next time they visited Semenggoh, she would study the orang-utans.

* * * * *

"Fabricating a Genius"

by Sabah Carrim

Chandra stretched her feet.

Wiggling chubby manicured toes, she raised her legs into an upside down V. The white plastic chair beneath let out a squeak and then another. She looked around; there was no one. A paperback version of the latest bestseller, *Go Set a Watchman*, rested on the side table. She wondered whether it deserved another try.

"Maybe I need to start with *To Kill a Mockingbird*?" She mumbled to herself.

The maid walked up to her and stood a few steps away, blocking the sun.

"Ma'am, I order red ve-vet cake awl-ray-dee," she said. "The lady say cake ready for pickup tomorrow pive pee-emmm, Ma'am."

Nothing like a Filipina maid, thought Chandra.

"Thank you, Yana. I wish you could keep standing there. The sun's hurting my eyes."

"I bring your other sunglasses, Ma'am. More dark, more beyy-ter for you, Ma'am."

"Yana, bring me a glass of ice water also," said Chandra.

"Sure, Ma'am. Ma'am want banana smoo-tee now or lay-ter? Now awl-ray-dee twelve o'clock, Ma'am."

Yana had her answer and moved away, swaying a big bottom concealed by a long white T-shirt and a pair of black nylon leggings.

Chandra shifted her attention to the young boy who waddled in the L-shaped swimming pool.

He hasn't had breakfast, she thought. But he's putting on *so much* weight! I must ask Dr. Rajesh to talk to him. I should ask Kamala how Kumaran lost twenty kilos so quickly. But then, I wonder if... She's so arrogant... Why is he diving again? I've told him it scares the hell out of me.

"Ram!" She shouted, sitting up while removing her sunglasses. "Don't do that! How many times m..."

"I know, Ma. I know. Relax lah!"

She reclined into her seat somewhat uneasily, resuming her interior monologue: He never listens to me. I can't believe he's eighteen. I shouldn't be telling him what to do. It's his father. He's the one who has spoiled him.

Her husband, Sanjay, had made certain decisions about Ram's education that had irreversible consequences.

Ram climbed out of the pool, gave his thick curly hair a quick rub and squeeze, and plodded wearily to his mother.

"Ma, I got headache."

"You've been in the sun too long and haven't had breakfast. That's why."

"No, Ma. I got headache even before I went to swim. I had high fever when I woke up."

"Nonsense. You look fine. You're always complaining. You can't see the doctor for every small thing."

"But you do. You're always seeing the gynaecologist."

"That's different."

"Ma, my headache very bad. Touch my forehead. It's hot. I'll go see Dr. Rajesh, Ma."

Chandra paused briefly. "Come, let me see," she said. She pressed the back of her hand on his small forehead.

"Nonsense. Nothing wrong with you. Drama all the time. But yes, go see him. Ask him how to lose weight. In just one semester of being in England, you've grown double your size. What will happen in three more semesters when you finish your masters?"

"I'm not fat. You're fat, Ma."

"Shut up! Don't speak to me like that. I'm not fat. I'm bloated. It's those baked beans I had this morn..."

"Ma, pass me your credit card."

"Didn't I give you 500 dollars yesterday?"

"I need to pay for Taylor Swift concert tickets."

"Why do you need a credit card? Use your debit card."

"Eight of us are going. I want to buy for them."

"What? Why? You're always wasting money."

"Please, Ma. Don't embarrass me in front of my friends."

"This is the last time, okay! No more of this nonsense after this," said Chandra, as she reached out for her handbag.

Yana walked up to Chandra with a large banana smoothie decorated with a slice of skinned pineapple and a glazed cherry.

"Dr. Shakuntala jus called, Ma'am," she said. "She say she coming at 2 pee-emmm for Ram's assign-maynt. I told her maybe he not in at that time. She said okay no pro-blayyym, jus dropping off assign-maynt only."

"Why? Where is he going?" Chandra asked.

"Friends, Ma," said Ram, typing something on his phone.

Chandra glared at her son, then sat up, picked up her phone and dialled a number.

"Sanjay, Dr. Shakuntala just called. Did you ask her to do Ram's assignment? (...) But didn't you agree the last time that you wouldn't interfere (...) No! This time I won't listen to you. He is eighteen and already doing his masters. If he doesn't do it on his own, when will he learn? Will you be there for him all his life? What sort of a child prodigy is that? People will laugh at us. (...) No buts. Wait, didn't you say he was coming back here to do his assignment only because he couldn't tolerate the cold there? (...) You can't keep asking other people (...) No. I know. But (...) Okay, fine. Let's talk later."

Chandra pressed a button and put the phone down.

"Ma'am, today I pack Ram's suitcase, Ma'am?" asked Yana.

"Too soon, Yana. He's only leaving in three days."

"Okay, Ma'am. I just thought since he stays long time in Eng-land..."

"Nonsense. That boy will be back again soon. Wait and see. He will get his father to find someone here to do the next..."

"Ma, you're being unfair," protested Ram.

"You shut up now! By the way, Yana, let me know when Dr. Shakuntala drops by later. I want to have a word with her."

Shakuntala got out of her car and looked around nervously. Unlike where she lived and worked, here it was different. Taxis rarely came because it was hard to find clients.

Subconsciously, she reached out for the thick gold chain around her neck and fiddled with it. There were more and more reports of ladies being robbed by men on motorbikes. That morning she had decided to wear the gold chain after a lengthy period of not wearing it. Raju, the receptionist, had told her off the day before: "Acca, not good you married and not wear gold chain. Our tradition says married woman cannot have bare neck. Bad luck for Indian women."

Shakuntala pressed the button outside the gate. A while later, the automated gate gave in, revealing a manicured path.

What a long walk, she thought, as she ambled up towards the front door. But the money is good. Makes all the pain of doing the assignment, spending money on petrol and walking so far seem worthwhile.

What a beautiful place! Wish I had more money.

She let out a sigh.

I don't belong to this place. With my double masters and two PhDs, I should be working in a proper public university, exposed to more research, earning a better pay—I hear they pay ten, twenty, in some cases, even forty thousand for every article published. But this is Malaysia. What can I do? I can't change the system. Then again, maybe I wouldn't have got a job in such a university, because I don't have any publications to my name. But then, most lecturers in local universities don't either.

A maid opened the door and led her into a grand lounge where Chandra was already seated.

"Dr. Shakuntala, how are you? Please have a seat. I want to speak to you about something important."

Shakuntala started to panic.

"Did you do my son's assignment from scratch?" Chandra asked.

"Uh...yes."

"But how will he tackle the questions when he has to defend his thesis?"

"Don't worry. I have prepared everything," said Shakuntala, slipping a USB stick into Chandra's hand. "It has the PowerPoint presentation," she added. "I'll go through the slides with him before the viva voce."

Chandra heaved a big sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Dr. Shakuntala. So kind of you. I don't know what to do with this boy. He doesn't listen."

Shakuntala stepped out of the house and walked towards the gate. Through the bushes that lined the path, she noticed alternating shapes of greens and blues—they were the leaves, and the bright blue swimming pool just behind.

Same pool Harnesh told us about, she thought.

Ram must have been thirteen, preparing for his Cambridge A-level exams. Apparently, it was a real pain to teach him. At that age, what else to expect? He even made Harnesh promise that for every chapter he studied, and every Q&A he completed, he would get into the pool with him for one hour and play a ball game.

Spoilt brat.

Ram even called him from Universal Studios in Singapore to tell him to do his assignment. Too busy, apparently. Not difficult to imagine why he was so frustrated with that boy. Wonder who helped him for his Bachelor's degree? Must be Melvin. Yes, Melvin.

Can't believe I spent the whole weekend doing an assignment for that kid. Those Malaysian newspapers. They should have known better. Two Ds and one C for his A-level exams. *Two Ds and one C for God's sake. And they call him a child prodigy?!*

"Shakuntala, how are you?"

She looked up and seemed startled for a few seconds.

"Mr. Sanjay," she said. "I..."

He was entering the gate of his house.

Thank god, she thought, that thoughts were not audible.

They exchanged a few words before Sanjay went into the house. Later he and Chandra would go to Kinokuniya to buy a new digital marketing book.

Sanjay was intent on applying what he had read that morning to the business model he had created a few years ago. He had set up a college at a time when the government was encouraging entrepreneurs to undertake education-related ventures. There was no doubt that he had made it.

"Even Modi," people whispered, referring to the Indian Prime Minister, "wants to meet him in person."

His success, he thought, lay in the books he read. They taught him the secrets of the world.

There was a particular secret he learnt while reading one of Malcolm Gladwell's books. The concept of the genius, it said, was unduly romanticised.

Gladwell demystified it. He said the concept of genius was a myth. It was all about publicity—the cheap sentimental publicity that went into newspapers.

Yes, geniuses and child prodigies were not Nature's gifts, those random once-in-a-while occurrences—solid and unbreakable, resulting from the pressures of time and knowledge, or those syntheses resulting from battles between theses and anti-theses. Geniuses were man-made, fabricated, manufactured—merely because of anomalies and leakages in systems.

That was how Sanjay had the idea of creating a genius—it would be his son, Ram.

When Chandra learnt about his plan, she wasn't pleased. For days, they quarrelled. Ram sat before them, bored, wondering why his name was mentioned so many times in his parents' shouting matches.

Then one day, after work, Sanjay led Chandra into the bedroom and closed the door.

"Chandra, *sayang*," he said putting an arm around her. "I know it's hard. But we have to accept the truth that our son won't change. We are his parents. We don't want him to suffer, do we?"

A tearful Chandra shook her head.

"Exactly," continued Sanjay. "And in business, when a product or a service is not of quality, there's only one solution: to rebrand it. Rebranding will make it look different and appealing, and if it's different and appealing enough, it can turn into a marketable product that everyone will admire and desire.

"I know it's hard, *sayang*, but what can we do? We'll have to rebrand our son."

That's how Ram, a lazy thirteen-year-old boy, was rebranded into a genius. Sanjay alleged that his son found school boring, the pace too slow, the teachers mediocre—signs he claimed, indicating without a doubt, the gift of a beautiful mind.

Some time later, Ram was pulled out of school.

A few months prior to the Cambridge A-level exam, Sanjay paid a few of his employees to have him homeschooled.

Then the results were published: Ram had scored two Ds and one C. But Sanjay didn't give up. He knew how the press worked. He knew he didn't have to tell them everything. He knew they wouldn't ask.

That day he convened a meeting with his public relations officers. He told them what to tell the press; he told them how to advertise the discovery of a child prodigy, made in Malaysia.

* * * * *

"The Stranger on the Bus"

by Harjinder Kaur

Lugging my oversized luggage while balancing my knapsack to board a local bus was a feat in itself. As I breathed a sigh of relief, a middle-aged man who was seated on a seat at the end of the bus moved to sit on the seat adjacent to me. He could have chosen any seat but he chose the one closest to me. It terribly annoyed me.

I was exhausted and did not want to talk to anyone but he looked very eager to start a conversation. Though his appearance resembled a protective dad, I was wary of him. Being a young female travelling solo and a stranger to the city, it was only wise of me to be wary of strangers. I avoided his gaze, secretly wishing that he would get off at the next stop. However, my wish wasn't granted. Instead, he began the dreaded conversation with me.

"Hello, young lady! That's a huge bag. Where are you going?" I was reluctant to speak, but I did not want to seem rude so I answered with monosyllables. He realised my guarded demeanour and asked me, "Do I look scary? I don't know why whenever I strike a conversation with people on the bus, they always seem to ignore me! Maybe it's my appearance, maybe it's my friendliness. I really don't know." I was speechless but I felt a pang of guilt and sorry for him at the same time.

I was approximately 10 minutes from my stop and thought it wouldn't do any harm having a conversation with him. I started talking to him, and he was delighted to speak to me. He shared his routine with me and told me about his daily commute on the bus. He was a cheerful and happy man. He sensed my newness to the metropolitan and willingly dished out interesting spots to visit and great places to whet my palate with the local food. When my stop approached, he even helped me lug my luggage off the bus and bid me farewell with some safety advice. I thanked him and smiled to myself while walking to my new apartment. I thought it to be a positive start to a new life in a new city.

Several days later, I boarded the bus again. I happened to meet this cheerful man again. He was delighted to see me and invited me to have a seat beside him. I obliged and enjoyed my conversation with him. Our bus encounters happened several times over the next few months. Those encounters were always filled with laughter and interesting anecdotes that I had started to appreciate.

Then, a day before I left for a long vacation, I met him on the bus again. He told me to pray for him as he was going for a heart surgery in a few days' time. He smiled while telling me about his condition, but he wasn't his usual self. I wished him good health and a speedy recovery while he wished me a good and safe trip. We bid adieu that evening with the thought of meeting on the bus again in the months to come.

It's been two months since I returned from my vacation. I still board the bus from time to time hoping to catch a glimpse of the friendly smile and wave. However, I have neither seen the smile nor the wave. It's funny how the dreaded conversation transformed into one I started to enjoy. As I reflect back now, all I can say to my dear bus friend is thank you for making me smile, and I sincerely hope that you are doing great wherever you are.

* * * * *

"The End of the City"

by Brendan Chia

A white ferry waits at Yangon's Pansodan pier as you fumble for your \$2 "Tourist" ticket -- ten times what a local would pay for the same ride. As the ferry -- "Proudly donated by the Government of Japan" -- eases away from the pier and chugs across the coffee-colored Yangon River, the neat crisscross of downtown Yangon's streets and its collection of stately colonial buildings -- creepers and vines fast taking over their facades for lack of upkeep -- fade into the distance. On the opposite shore, you spot men in conical hats squatting on wooden fishing boats against a backdrop of flimsy-looking villages -- rattan houses on stilts, perched precariously over the water's edge. The ferry halts, and there is a momentary buzz of activity as everyone -- noodle-sellers, tea-ladies, men clutching their wares, children carrying baskets and even stray dogs -- rush to disembark. As you step off the ferry, it dawns on you that you have come to the end of the city. You are entering another world.

Downtown Yangon sits on the north bank of the Yangon River. On the other bank lies the village of Dala, branded in tourist guidebooks as an "escape from the city" where visitors "experience real village life." And real village life it seems to be. Just five minutes by ferry from the clusters of international hotel chains is a place that time (and development) most surely forgot. Here, the feet of the children are bare and caked in dried mud. Boatmen, their skin sunken and shriveled under an endless sun, squat on small boats that bob sleepily on the waves. Stray dogs colonize the muddy dirt roads, scavenging for food atop heaps of empty plastic bottles and wrappers. A young boy who claims he is fifteen but looks no more than ten rushes eagerly up to you, grinning as he loosens and rewraps his *longyi* to keep it from slipping off his slim waist, "I am tour guide. How much you pay?"

Yangon is an oddity. In most Asian cities, it is difficult to identify precisely where a city ends and the countryside begins. Manila and Jakarta, for instance, never seem to end. They attract large numbers of people from rural areas of the country who come in search of a better life but instead find only the occasional day's work, a makeshift zinc roof to sleep under and lights from a distant skyscraper illuminating a pipe dream. For local governments, the impact of this is a sprawling suburban zone -- slums, mostly, that stretch as far as the eye can see. The countryside loses its bucolic charm. It becomes the never-ending city, enmeshing rural, suburban and urban; mixing rich and poor.

Not everyone appreciates the mix, unfortunately. In many cases, deep social divides emerge between the haves and the have-nots. Wealthier city-dwellers may start to see the slums and squatters not as settlements awash with the aspirations of a less-privileged people, but rather as what urban planners term "landscapes of fear." These areas often become associated with poverty and disease, drugs and crime. They become wounds in the city's otherwise modern, urban landscape and are typically spaces excluded from urban planning decisions because, legally, no one lives there. In extreme cases, city residents hole themselves within gated communities -- "safe zones" surrounded by walls, barriers, round-the-clock security -- anything to keep the perceived poverty and danger out.

It is tempting for local governments to simply ignore the problems that may be posed by communities of people living in these peripheral spaces of their cities. Their problems, after all, are often related to the provision (or lack) of infrastructure and basic social services: street lighting, clean running water, accessible healthcare. These require slow and expensive improvements to the built environment and at times to local institutional structures. They are not the latest upmarket districts that will glaze property brochures, generating sky-high rentals and therefore large tax revenues. Investing in the less "glamorous" urban fringe yields neither immediate benefit nor reputational returns for the government and private investors. Yet they represent some of the most dire and critical areas that cities must attend to if they are to ensure that their poorest do not get left behind.

The Yangon River may be the physical barrier between the relatively wealthier downtown and fishing village of Dala. It could very well also be the boundary between the "safe zone" and danger. Your landlady expresses her shock at your visit. "Why do you go to Dala? It is a very bad place." When probed on why that might be, she was clear. "Many poor people. A very bad place. Thieves." Local colleagues likewise shake their heads in disbelief, dishing out similar statements. Their warnings go unheeded, though. Stepping off the ferry, you take a short ride around Dala in a little trishaw, past a lonely pagoda and to the muddy fishing village. The trishaw bumps along dirt roads lined by open wooden huts that allow you to peer directly into people's lives.

Evening has started to set in as your trishaw driver cycles you back to the port following your whirlwind tour of Dala along bumpy dirt-roads. You climb off the battered trishaw and as you bid him farewell --

"Give me tip," he suddenly demands, putting out an arm to stop you in your stride.

Your heart races, thoughts of unsafe places and crime muddling with the darkening sky and adding dramatic effect to an otherwise innocuous scene.

You manage to slide past him and move along the road, and want to start quickening your steps.

"Please, small tip. I work hard, earn money, it is for my mother," he whispers.

And at that you stop and open your wallet and push a big kyat note into his hands. Yes, soft heartstrings, but -- village or city, places safe or unsafe -- perhaps everyone is just trying their best at the game of making a living. Where you can help, you do.

* * * * *

"The Cottage"

by Jessica Ginting

Such a small cottage for such a small person
sits in the corner of a wooden table, smokes up lavender dreams.
Hand crafted, hand painted with love and the intent to sell.
There were others like it, with yellow painted bricks instead of green
cathedral shaped, sliced hexagon roofs instead of the gently curved planks that touch
over this square-shaped domain, like fingers ready for prayer
but palms not-quite ready to commit.

The burning lamb sits quietly inside. There are windows lined with a bouquet
of tiny flowers, bright yellow and red blobs popping out of the thick green shrubbery.
A small heart painted on the wooden door—
 someone must have misread the Exodus?
Perhaps it would do for now. Perhaps all of the world's troubles will pass
once the smoke clears. The woods are contained between bookends
just beyond the cottage, if only
our world can always be this small.

Wisps of dreams floating in the air coming from this cottage
nothing stays still everything just fades
like the ashy scent
 of burnt lavender and sacrifice.

"April Showers"

by Jessica Ginting

April showers bring out the worst in me.
Bright yellow daffodils, ripped from the ground
as if they never belonged there.

My hands are covered in fresh dirt—
we were all built from the Earth, after all.
Palms rubbing together, raindrops mixed in to mold
my very own clayish figure.

Perhaps I am getting ahead of myself.
The figure, as it stands, is still just a head.
I secure flower petals in its eyes
with a divine finger, twisting hard.

Turning it into something.
Is that what God decided to do when he made us?
The excess of soil, the depth of the rain,
those goddamn bright flowers, all that goddamn potential.

None of this is new. April to May,
year long, ongoing, relentless displacement.
The daffodils were here first. But tell that to all the sprouting
heads, with flower petals in their eyes.

* * * * *

"Unfit to Serve"

by Gerard Sarnat

Dad's best friend came back from France a changed man.
I'm told post Dunkirk he is no longer the life of the party.
Rather a loner, even from his wife, and they had no kids.

So when I get born after the war, everyone seemed relieved
my godfather got attached to me like the son he never had.
But it worked out swell because Father wasn't home much.

At the age I would be Bar Mitzvahed if Momma and Poppa
were so inclined which they certainly weren't, without words
Fred gave me a worn leather holster holding the German luger.

Now when Vietnam happened during our delayed adolescence
-- draft cards burning plus civil disobedience till landing in jail
became the norm – I felt compelled to return that vintage pistol

along with a sanctimonious lecture about how we must choose
conscience over commerce, resist military-industrial complexes.
The astute vet said nothing then died before I could apologize.

* * * * *

"Blue Sepulcher"

by John C. Mannone

*After 'Artifact Still Life'
By William Morris, 1990*

Blown and hot-formed glass, twenty-nine pieces carefully configured, glints in the quiet glare of museum lights. I examine the remains as if they were laid on sand-blown shores of a glassy ocean with pieces of pearled shells painted azure as the sky, yet bluer than the sea.

I imagine busted urchins, the rattling of their little bones tossed as ivory dice in rare rogues of chance. There are whispers hidden in a whelk; its spiral chambers echo a different kind of sea that takes its young, yet leaves the vestige of an egg sac on an Indonesian shore. Such a strange-looking necklace cast in glass with all the other surreal reflections: the waves, frozen in silica of time before they crashed and splintered; the shards of shattered dreams once held in all the little glass hearts; and the skulls and crystal vertebrae, all of them now, are simply vitrified artifacts of a violent sea.

In remembrance of the December 2004 Indonesian tsunami. The ekphrasis is based on this museum [image](#).

* * * * *

"Memento Mori"

by Riya Sarna

Amor verus numquam moritur.

True love never dies,

That it's kept alive with the sound of her cries,

Blooms with the little things he buys,

Like her favourite perfume

Which secretly she loves because it drives him insane,

The look in his eyes, dark with lust from the chemicals in his brains.

Amor verus numquam moritur,

A saying that will live forever on,

Just like true love.

But that's all it is.

A saying.

Nothing but a string of words

That may or may not be comforting.

Amor verus numquam moritur.

True love never dies.

Kept alive by the sound of his lies,

Blooms with the cries of her wailing goodbyes.

Fertilised with the look of her getting high,

Bottle of vodka in one hand and a smokey blunt in the other.

Amor verus numquam moritur,

Nothing but a bunch of lies.

'Cause baby,
Take it from me.
True love doesn't exist.
It's all just a fairytale,
Something for people to twist and glorify.

Amor verus numquam moritur.
True love never dies.
Baby,
you have to realise that death isn't something to glorify
and neither is love.

* * * * *

"The Lift"

by William C. Blome

One day I gave you and your overlapping flesh
a lift home in a jeep from the motor-pool,
and that's how I got to meet your dad,
the King of Vietnam. But no sooner had we been
introduced than he fell into a headlong rush
to tell me all about your triplet brothers,
the sweet princes of a nearby kingdom,
and how they were at peace with one another
and the world, and that so long as you were getting set
to marry each of them in turn and then pop out
no less than three swell well-hung sons,
His Highness went on, "there cannot be a chamber here
for you, GI, so get the fuck back in your dark green
vehicle and return to your bright green base-camp,
lest all the night and stars and moon
come out— and stay out— against you."

* * * * *

"Remembering Wired Dreamtime: Planetary Retrograde"

by Mary Alinney Villacastin

"But what was it *like*?" I asked my mother.

After months traveling on the other side of the globe, I finally returned to Florida to see my parents. One day later, the strongest typhoon in human history hit fourth landfall on their hometown island. Waiting for news, my mother swept away her anxieties by telling me stories.

"Growing up in the '60s and '70s on a small tropical island in the central Philippine-Visayan Sea, I could not yet imagine beyond ocean currents offshore, except through programmed channels. I buried my isolated mind between the walls built by mass media's mapped architecture. Through the wired worlds, I already re-routed roots from home.

Wearing hand-me-down designs of one-size-fits-all-girls dresses from the growing global fashion market's factory labor, I slipped myself in a far society called America. I listened to ABBA on repeat, tried to imagine distant white snow in Sweden. I listened to Barry Manilow, tried to imagine Copacabana, Cuba and a missile crisis on the same island at the same time. I street boogied the jive on fresh pavement, tried to imagine golden night lives in electric cities across the globe. I adored Nora Aunor, tried to absorb televisual romanticization of modern love. I watched *The Sound of Music* and wanted to mimic sing freedom songs on mountaintops called the Alps. I witnessed news reports through limited audio-visual signals of three channels, tried to imagine war in a land called the Middle East, composed of countries like Egypt and Israel and Saudi Arabia. I didn't know about South America or Africa except from stories of Christian missionaries.

My infinitely wise but illiterate mother and my father, a soldier for MacArthur's army in World War II—they spoke of different worlds, wars and worries: the gory glory of Uncle Sam's troops, the boom of business in postwar peace, the never-ending inevitable event of Japanese invasion looming horror on memory's horizon. I ate canned squid, Vienna sausages, Spam, condensed milk—leftover consumer products introduced into islander diets after American occupation. Sweet remakes of coconut-flavored desserts replaced ancient recipes with tastes of metal poison on tongues. And this is the food I served to you, too, when we settled on the continental bedrock of our colonizers.

Me and my classmates, we lived inside a web of showed wonders. Our elders as educators, they displayed us cartographic projections in school; they taught us of histories in terms of victories; they told us of good and bad; they tried to teach ethics in an evolving scenery of global empire's machinery, in which we were enraptured, like the cinema. I heard of communism, socialism, democracy, martial law, aliens on other planets and Miss Universe. I listened, sure, but these concepts flashed so fast, they felt like colored phantoms shadowed on screen.

To know all that and to live like this, I felt so small. And later the Berlin Wall fell. And my sister moved to Oman, where she worked as a doctor for a decade, but she doesn't talk to me anymore. And my friend who also became a doctor, in California, she earned enough money to vacation in Europe and Egypt; she sent me pictures. And then I married your father and after we had your sister, you and your brother, we moved to America and I learned what this lonely world was really all about. Later, your sister moved with her husband to Switzerland for four years, in the foothills of my dreams, but I could never afford to visit her, except once, but then your Lolo died and I changed my flight and wore black for a year. And now you've seen Sweden summers twice, with lovers. And I've seen Barry Manilow twice, too, in concert."

"Dear Lolo Pero: A Love Letter to De-Parted Hearts"

by Mary Alinney Villacastin

You died right before we reunited,
blood lifeline running parallel, final
expiration & exile's steadfast return
never to intersect in corporal curves,
path of past to present tense upturned,
until truth ripped page off text-time

Lost in all those light years away,
in the shadow of your physical absence,
in the trace of your perfect penmanship,
you scripted letters of love & longing
to my lonely mother, your youngest
daughter of seven worldly women,
swimming off distant continents,
blue oceans, harboring desires
of home, bedrock deep
depression's syndrome;
Your investment in print virtual verse
interval verged our divided universe,
drifting dreams out of darkness

Grasping mother's memory of your glory---
the boats you built, the houses you architected,
the students you educated, the lives you saved,
the empire of family you inhabited inside
your brilliant mind, your resilient heart,

you carpenter, fisherman, teacher, father,
figure of future harvester--- as I aged,
I compassed my direction towards you,
as dementia disoriented your attention;
still, on long-distance telephone line,
you sung my nickname, stringing my
skin within your slinking limbs' lips

During university, using months of surplus funds,
I finally purchased a flying ticket to
the first revisit of 'home,'
feeling circular completion bridge
edge of wired currents as depleted
resources impressed force of immense wait
weighted over time, like doomsday's end,
like a piece of past's puzzle, fossilized
because you died two months before I arrived,
because before we reunited mind's eye-to-eye,
you already decomposed like seashells on sand

All summer, alone in your house, I cried
(a hyperbole of heartbreak)
'We' were never together,
'we' were never no more,
for only in my mother's folklore
did you exist as bridge of body
between island worlds offshore

Two years later, while writing my senior anthropology thesis
on art-as-fact of dead performative practice by listless lovers
from Visayan Islands (the balitaw, or 'dance of the people'),

withering winter solo on Manhattan island, New York City,
I found your name inside a book lodged deep in stacks
of Columbia University's Butler Library, describing how
your nautical inventions transformed nation's generation

Stunned silent,

again,

I cried,

as finally,

we reunited,

again,

in the curvature of characters

in the center of letters,

in the intersection of lifelines,

in the pulse of our art;

You and I, we returned to the source

Love always,

xoLittle Crabox