

Anak Sastra

Issue 46

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“An Election Elegy”

by John Paul Lama

CHAPTER ONE – REYNALDO’S GHOST

Reynaldo Jason Valdez died of a heart attack six years ago, the week before the presidential election of that year. Many people knew of his demise, but only a few attended the funeral. His family was there, of course, and Gerald Irinaeus Bautista – “Gerald” to Reynaldo, a grumpy old man to most.

The two were business partners who owned and ran a moderately successful restaurant in the city before the pandemic. On the records and the sign in front, it was known as “Luntian”, but people called it “Reynaldo and Gerald’s.” After Reynaldo died, it became simply known as “Gerald’s.” Even with the death of one of the owners, and with the onset of the covid pandemic, it remained successful, as much from the remaining owner’s business savvy as his employees’ hard and barely compensated work.

Juan Santos was one such employee. He was one of the first cooks in the restaurant, and he learned directly from Wendy, Mr. Bautista’s wife and the former head chef. When she and the boss’s son died from a car accident two years ago, Juan stayed out of loyalty to her memory. It was out of this loyalty and the necessity of having a head chef that Mr. Bautista promoted him to head chef. The promotion was a rare reward; in fact, it was the only reward Juan remembered from his boss.

Eight o’ clock in the evening. In reality, Juan’s shift had been over for two hours. *Gotta go home to my family*, he thought as he approached his boss.

“Sir, I’m leaving,” he said.

“As long as you’ve done today’s work, then I don’t care,” Mr. Bautista said.

“I’ll be taking morning off tomorrow, sir,” Juan said. “It’s election day and I have to vote.”

“You better vote for BBM,” Mr. Bautista said with a slight menacing tone.

“I’ll vote who I think is best fit to serve the country,” Juan said, trying to avoid any arguments.

“You defying me now?”

“It is a democracy, sir,” Juan said pointedly.

“*Ah basta!*” Mr. Bautista said. It was what he said when he wanted to end a conversation, usually because he had no arguments. “If you don’t vote for BBM, I’ll-”

At that moment, his smartphone rang. While he brought it out and checked on who is calling, Juan quietly excused himself. He didn’t want to eavesdrop on Mr. Bautista’s private conversation and he certainly didn’t want to receive Mr. Bautista’s anger when the conversation ended. He learned that from experience.

Mr. Bautista saw that the caller was Patricia, his daughter and only living child now. “What is it, Patricia?” he asked, his tone somewhat softening.

“Hi, dad,” she said a bit loudly. A baby was playing in the background and she had to speak up to be heard. “I just wanted to know if you wanted to visit Joseph later.”

“Why? Is he sick?” Mr. Bautista asked, suddenly concerned over his grandson.

“Not Joseph Henry,” she clarified. “Joseph Andrew.” The former was her son, the latter was her late brother.

“No,” he said, his tone regaining its harshness. “Why would I do that?”

“Dad,” she said, her tone also becoming harsh. “Do I really need to remind you? It’s been two years since-“

“You don’t need to remind me. And I’m not going. I have other more important things to do.”

“Right,” she said with a sarcastic edge. *Boasting about your candidate and slandering his rivals online...*

“Did you say something?” Mr. Bautista said, picking up on her tone.

“No. If you have far more important things to do, then I won’t bother you further. Good night, dad.” With that, she ended the call. Mr. Bautista grumbled something in response then put away the phone. He was about to continue his conversation with Juan but saw that his employee had already left. Mr. Bautista grumbled a curse again then proceeded to locking up his restaurant.

About an hour later, he returned to his house, and went to his room. After washing up a bit, he then turned on his laptop, went online, and logged into his social media accounts. Once logged in, he proceeded to do what he had been doing for the past six years since the candidate he voted for, Rodrigo Duterte, won the presidency: going on a rave about how he was the best president ever, and rants about how any critic was an enemy of the state. He also carried on a practice he had picked up ever since it became clear that Duterte wouldn't be running for any government position in the elections: spreading fake news that supports BBM and tears down his rivals, particularly Leni Robredo. It was a practice he didn't just randomly pick up; with profits from the restaurant down in the pandemic, he had to seek out an alternative source of income, and this one proved most lucrative. It was all thanks to Reynaldo, who had the good sense to refer him to a government official who paid off people to do such things.

Tonight, he began with one of his long rants against the critics of Duterte:

These liberals and delawans are just a bunch of NPA and CPP in disguise. Anyone who opposes Duterte is! Why are they even allowed to hold office? They just want to steal from the people and fatten themselves up. Same with those protesters from UP! Don't they know who funded their education? They are wasting Duterte's money by protesting him! They talk about human rights, but the NPA and CPP are not human! They should be wiped out like the parasites that they are! World's overpopulated anyway, we'll be doing it a favor!

Once he posted it, he waited for a few minutes for anyone to respond. When nobody did, he posted again, this time, in praise of Duterte.

Duterte is the best president of the Philippines ever! It was divine intervention that he came into power! Who cares how foul mouthed he is anyway, that's just the way he is! We have a lot of debt, but now we see where it is going! Build build build! So what if there are poor and starving people? Those are just lazy goodfornothings anyway! World's overpopulated anyway, we'll be doing it a favor by letting them die! At least he gets things done more than anyone else! We now have planes, ships, and guns that make us a military

power to be respected! Corruption? You complain about corruption now, why weren't you complaining back then?! Besides, you'll never fully eliminate corruption anyway. Better to have a corrupt leader who builds than an honest leader who just talks!

He had been online for more than an hour when he unexpectedly received a message from someone. The name on the profile said "rjv58" but that didn't mean anything to him.

I need to talk to you, Gerald.

I don't know who you are, but I don't like strangers who know my name talking to me, Gerald thought. However, his reply was: Get lost.

That's no way to talk to an old friend.

I have no friends. Leave me alone.

I can't do that. I have something to tell you. If we can't talk here, we'll talk there.

Where?

In your home.

Stay the hell out.

Knock, knock, Gerald.

At that moment, the old grandfather clock struck ten. When the tenth bell chime ended, the door to his room was unlocked then flung open. In walked a figure, ghostly and decaying, yet very familiar.

"Reynaldo?"

"It's been a while, Gerald," Reynaldo said. He walked in, but with great effort. Several long chains – made of the same ghostly substance as him yet very heavy, based on his effort in moving them – dragged him down. They were attached to what appeared to be a chest. "What's the matter? Don't you recognize your business partner?"

"You're not Reynaldo," Gerald said. "You're just a figment of my imagination brought about by a rotten piece of food in Juan's soup! I really should tell him to get fresher food-"

The ghost interrupted by unleashing an inhuman roar, one loud enough to make the furniture in his room shake and him fall to the floor on his behind. The smartphone Gerald had in his person fell out but thankfully didn't crack.

“You deal with a lot of fake things, Gerald,” the ghost said in a more human yet still ghostly voice. “Tell me, am I fake?”

“What do you want from me?!” Gerald asked rather than answering the question.

“I’m here to warn you,” the ghost said. “So you can avoid my fate.”

“What fate?”

“Look at me, Gerald. Do you think I’m dragging these chains and this chest behind me because I want to?”

“But why...?”

“I forged these chains in my life, made every link, every inch. The same with what’s inside the chest.”

“What’s in it?”

Instead of answering, Reynaldo opened it. An unholy stench emanated from it, smelling much like fecal matter.

“Only what I spewed out for the majority of my life,” Reynaldo said with regret.

“How could it be? How could you miss that weight? That stench?”

“You are so repulsed. But you have no idea the chains and chest that you have behind you! It was like this a year ago, and it’s grown ever since! You’re afraid of what I have, but you’d be horrified of what you have!”

“Why did this happen to you? You were a good businessman!”

“Business?! Mankind should have been my business! Compassion! Decency! Honesty! Integrity! Reason!” He calmed down a bit, then spoke much more safely. “Listen, my time’s almost up. Tomorrow you will be visited by three spirits.”

“What, like the ghosts of-“

“Not quite. These are the ghosts of election past, present, and future. Only by seeing what they have to show you can you hope to change your ways and avoid the fate that awaits me. Expect the first one at one in the morning.”

“Can’t I just meet them all at once and get it over with?”

“Expect the second one at eight in the morning. And expect the last one at noon. Don’t expect to see me again, and for your sake, I hope you don’t.”

“Wait. Since you are a ghost, and you are aware of other ghosts’ presence, can you tell me anything about my wife and son?”

“No. But you will learn for yourself.”

* * *

CHAPTER TWO – THE GHOST OF ELECTION PAST

Gerald didn't know what to do after the encounter with Reynaldo. He couldn't go back online after the warning he got from Reynaldo, yet for some reason, he knew that just not posting wasn't enough to stop the three ghosts from visiting him. And he certainly couldn't sleep anymore. All he could do was shift uncomfortably in his bed and listen to the ticking of the grandfather clock.

At some point he felt an unusual chill in his room. Even before the grandfather clock started its hourly chime, he knew the spirit was making its presence felt. What he didn't know was the form it would take.

Once the bell struck one, a hand – small like a child's, yet ghostly and cold like Reynaldo's – rested on his shoulder. He sat straight up on bed from the shock, and came face to face with a pale little ghost girl.

“You're up,” she said. “Good.”

“You're the ghost?” he asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

“The ghost of election past.”

“How far into the past?”

“All the way to the beginning of democracy. But for your journey, we only can go as far back as you were alive.”

“Which point in my past are we going to visit?”

“I can tell you, but I'd rather show you.” She then grabbed his hand with her left and snapped her fingers with her right. As soon as she did, his body became as insubstantial as hers, and a portal appeared before them. With surprising strength, she pulled him through the portal, and when the two emerged at the other side, they found themselves at the backyard of a house in a rural province.

“This place-!” he said.

“Home sweet home,” the ghost girl said.

Gerald's face darkened at once. "It wasn't that sweet all."

"I know. But it had its moments. This is one of them."

She took him to a room in the house – his room. The two of them saw him when he wasn't even a teenager. He was in his room, reading the Bible. He remembered why, or rather, how he found time to read the Bible then. It was elections back then and his parents were away to vote.

"Seeing you earlier, I never would have thought that you read the Bible back then," the ghost girl remarked.

"I needed something to hold on to, something to get me through the difficult times," he said. "My dad was a drunk and my mom was a gambler. Obviously they weren't going to do it for me."

"What made you stop?"

"I woke up," he said with as much cynicism as conviction. "Besides, it's not like I stopped completely. I still read and post Bible quotes online—"

"Only those that fit your agenda," the ghost girl said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You don't follow the Bible," she said. "You only use parts of it to justify your own wrong behavior. The rest you just ignore or just hypocritically preach."

"After everything I went through, can you blame me?"

"Yes, because when you came of age, you already had a choice. You could have chosen a higher path. You could have chosen to rise above your difficult past. You could have chosen to act differently from what is expected of someone with your upbringing. You could have chosen lots of things."

"Oh really?" he asked sarcastically. "When did I ever have a choice in anything?"

"Funny you should ask," the ghost girl said. She grabbed his hand and snapped her fingers again. This time, they were transported to a wedding – his wedding.

"Wendy,"

"You have a beautiful wife," the ghost girl said. "Or should I say had."

There was a bittersweet expression on his face that quickly turned to sadness as he watched his younger self kiss his bride. "Why did you take me here?"

“To show you that you have made right decisions and right actions in the past, and you can still do so in your present,” the ghost girl said. “Remember that this was also a few days before the election of that year. You voted for Cory Aquino.”

“Plenty of good that did us,” he scoffed. “The Aquino administration went on a vindictive campaign to drive out all the allies of Marcos, and mismanaged a lot of agencies.”

“But you voted for Cory Aquino without resorting to lies and slander,” the ghost girl countered. “And you were sincerely critical of that administration later on.”

“Huh? I thought you were implying that voting for Cory was the right decision.”

“What you did get right was that you voted for who you honestly thought was the better candidate, and you treated your candidate as a public servant, not as some aristocrat or demigod.”

“So I’m not going to be punished for my candidate’s wrongdoing?”

“Let me put it this way. Personal responsibility means being accountable for your actions alone. But turning a blind eye and remaining silent to the wrong acts of public servants in a democracy – especially the ones you voted for – is already an action.”

“*Ah basta*,” he said dismissively. “That was a lousy administration.”

“Really?” she said. “Then why were you able to do this?”

Again, she transported them through a portal, but this time, to a much more familiar setting, but at an earlier time.

“This is...”

“The opening of your restaurant with your business partner,” the ghost girl said.

He smiled as he watched the younger versions of himself, Reynaldo, and Wendy welcome customers in their restaurant. As he did, the ghost girl spoke.

“The great thing about initiative – another word for personal responsibility – is it can get you far. You proved that with how successful you’ve become. But if your environment isn’t conducive to allowing you to grow as a person, you will only be wasting your energy.”

He looked angrily at the ghost girl. “Cory Aquino does not get credit for what Reynaldo and I built.”

“But she gets credit for the business climate that allowed you to open that restaurant and succeed,” she retorted. “Or think of it this way. What good is building a

successful business if you're only going to vote a bunch of corrupt officials who will steal your hard earned money?"

"Look," he said. "if you're implying that Duterte is corrupt, so what? At least we got paid good money to support him online."

"Reynaldo got paid too, you know," she said. "And not one cent stopped him from dying, nor did it save him from the chains and chest he drags now. You should know this, you've read it before in the Bible. 'What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life?' Matthew 16:26."

"Hey, we need money, you know. I needed money. I had a family to take care of."

"It wasn't a need, and it wasn't just a family you were taking care of."

"What are you saying?" he asked defensively.

"There's a difference between needing money to provide for your family, and wanting money so you can indulge your mistress."

"How dare you-" he started to say angrily, only to be transported again through the portal. This time, they ended up in an event that brought him a brief moment of ecstasy and passion, and many years of shame and regret. It was a tryst with a woman he had been seeing and trying to hide from his family. He initiated the tryst a few days after he voted for Duterte.

"That was the real reason why your daughter Patricia left, and why Wendy moved to Patricia's room, you know," the ghost girl said. "You convinced yourself that Patricia eloped with Karl, but in truth, she found out about your infidelity and couldn't live with you anymore while you were making a fool out of her mother. And because she found out about it, you didn't look for her to try to convince her to come back. As for Wendy...she knew about your affair, but kept quiet about it for your son's sake. But there was no way she was going to share a bedroom with you after what you did to her."

"I cheated," he admitted sadly. "But I'm not the only one. Besides, that money was also put into good use. My son was in one of the top tier schools of the country. The tuition there is no joke."

"Just because everyone does it, doesn't make it right," she said. "And about your son's education...you say you care about it?"

"That goes without saying."

“Then why did you get angry at him when he started thinking for himself, using the education you spent so much on?”

Before he could answer, she transported him again, this time, to an event that brought him only misery and regret. He and Wendy had just voted in the mid term elections and he was driving his family back home. They were talking about the candidates they voted for, when he asked his seventeen year-old son who he would have voted for if he had been old enough to do so. His son said he would have voted for the opposition. In his anger, Gerald lost control of the car and ended up crashing. Only he survived.

“I don’t...didn’t want him ending up like one of those protestors from UP who only whine and complain. I was angry at him but I didn’t want him dead.”

“Those UP students are using the education they’re getting – which was funded by the state long before Duterte came into power – to point out the flaws in the system. There’s nothing wrong with that. What’s wrong is to know that there are flaws and to pretend that they don’t exist.” She allowed herself a smile. “Or think of it this way. In a meritocracy, critical thinking and free speech are valued. In a dictatorship, loyalty and silence are valued.”

“Why should I listen to a bunch of atheists? Those students read more Marx than they do the Bible.”

“Open your mouth in behalf of the dumb, and for the rights of the destitute; Open your mouth, decree what is just, defend the needy and the poor.’ Proverbs 31:8-9.”

“Don’t make them out to be heroes! They’re just communists and NPAs, parasites and leeches to society who should be wiped out-“

“No, you convinced yourself that they are. It’s so much easier to hate them when you demonize them in your mind. But that only makes your soul unclean.”

“How?”

“It is not what enters the mouth that defiles a person but what comes out of the mouth is what defiles a person. Matthew 15:11 The things that comes out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, unchastity, theft, false witness, blasphemy. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile. Matthew 15:19-20.” The ghost girl grinned but

there was nothing funny about her expression. "Murder...adultery...false witness...you're very familiar with those, aren't you?"

"Okay, maybe I crossed the line somewhere, but they're killers and murderers who kill women and children! All of them! They deserved to be killed! Anyone who kills women and children are inhuman and should be treated and killed as such!"

"Do you even know what makes a human being human?" she asked rhetorically. "It's language, or to be more specific, reason. It's what sets humans apart from the animals. To say what you mean and mean what you say, to say what you do and do what you say, are the epitome of human acts. And when you degrade reason by making light of promises, slandering someone, joking about rape, calling for murder, bragging about adultery, or tolerate those who do so, you degrade your humanity."

"Tell that to those violent terrorists!"

"Not everyone who criticizes the government is violent terrorist. In the same way, not everyone who disagrees with his wife is a wife murderer. Wouldn't you agree?"

"That was an accident!" he said defensively. "I didn't murder my wife and son! Don't lump me in with them!"

"Anyone who kills women and children are inhuman and should be killed and treated as such!" she said in his voice.

A tear ran down his cheek. "*Ah basta!* I can't take this anymore! Take me home!"

"Not yet. There's one more event we have to visit." Once more, they went through a portal, but this time, arrived at an event he didn't see himself, but wished he had. Patricia and her husband, Karl, were gazing lovingly at their newborn son, Joseph Henry.

"Your grandson's birth."

"Why here?"

"To show you that there is still hope."

"What hope?" he asked cynically. "The children are hope of the future? Is that it?"

"That," she said. "And reconciliation."

"What do you mean?"

"She never truly turned her back on the family, you know," the ghost girl said. "That's why she calls you during election week and that's why she partly named her son after her late brother."

“I thought she did it to make me aware of my guilt.”

“No. She did it so you could reconcile with her...and with her brother.” Then, taking on a more somber tone, the ghost girl said: “Don’t waste the chance you have at setting things right. You have no idea how little time you have left to act on it.”

“Chance? What chance?”

“I can’t talk anymore, my time is almost up. Besides, a chance can only be used in the present and can only affect the future. That is not my jurisdiction.”

“Wait. Reynaldo said I can learn for myself about my wife and son. Can’t you tell me anything about them?”

“I already did.”

“But you only showed me how they were in the past.”

“And I am the ghost of election past. You want to learn about where they are now, take it up with the ghost of election present. She will be the one to visit you next.”

* * *

CHAPTER THREE – THE GHOST OF ELECTION PRESENT

When Gerald returned to his room, the first thing he did was go to the bathroom and wash his face to make sure he was already corporeal. The water was cold and clear, assuring him he was embodied once more. The next thing he did was reach for his smartphone so he could call Patricia. However, upon seeing that it was still three in the morning, he decided against it.

Her family must still be asleep, he thought. I wouldn’t want to disturb her...

Unable to go back to sleep, yet dreading to just sit there and wait for the next ghost, he turned on the computer and went online. He checked on his posts from different years from today and saw them with new eyes.

Duterte didn’t say he ordered police to shoot addicts on sight!

If he said it, he didn’t mean it/it was a joke!

If he meant it, he didn’t do it!

*If he did it, his victims deserved it! Even that Kian brat must have been a drug addict!
If his victims didn't deserve it, so what? Other politicians have done worse! Yolanda!
Even if he's the worst of them all, 16 million people support him!
Enough with the facts! Those are just biased anyway! Look at the alternative facts!
Like those that boast of his accomplishments!
I'm proud of my president no matter what!
And if you disagree with me, I WILL KILL YOU! I HOPE YOU AND YOUR FAMILY GET
RAPED TORTURED AND KILLED YOU COMMUNIST!*

Soon enough, the dark sky out his window turned grey, then blue as sunrise finally came. Disturbed by his own posts, he welcomed the distraction of having to go through his morning routine. His breakfast and morning shower seemed colder that morning, though, and he knew why.

As luck would have it, he finished dressing up just as eight o' clock came. He expected another ghost girl to rest its cold hand on him on the eight chime, but instead, two cold hands covered his eyes, and a jovial woman's voice said: "Peek a boo!"

He screamed, bolting up. When he calmed down a bit and turned around, he saw a middle-aged woman, maybe a few years older than Patricia, standing there.

"You're..." he stammered, unable to complete his sentence.

"The ghost," she said. "Not expecting one in the form of an adult, huh?"

"No. I was expecting another ghost child."

"Well, it doesn't really matter anyway. Only you can see me right now."

"When are you taking me?"

"When? Gerald, I'm the ghost of election present. As in, right now, at the moment. The right question is where am I taking you?"

"So where are you taking me?" he asked impatiently.

"Where the future will be decided," she said. Like the ghost girl, the ghost woman took him by the hand and pulled him through a portal. They emerged at the election venue near his home. People were already lining up even though the voting hadn't started yet.

"Have you decided who you are going to vote for?" the ghost woman said.

"You're a spirit, you can read my mind. Why ask me?"

“Because I want to hear you say it.”

“I’m still voting for BBM.”

“Why?” she asked, feigning surprise.

“Hey, the previous ghost said all I had to do was be an honest voter, right? As long as I criticize him when he slips up, don’t spread fake news, don’t attack his critics, and don’t treat him like an aristocrat or demigod, then I can still vote for him, right?”

“You can vote for anyone you want,” the ghost woman conceded. “But you are not considering the repercussions of your vote nor the actions of your candidate.”

“And you’re going to show me those?” he asked mockingly.

“Not the repercussions. Those only unfold in the future, and it’s not my jurisdiction. But the actions of your candidate...I can show those to you easily. Even those you can’t see, or don’t want to see.”

“I don’t understand.”

Instead of continuing to speak, the ghost woman transported him to what looked like a warehouse where people were lined up, but not to vote. They were receiving money – ironically, five hundred peso bills – from a man clearly supporting BBM.

“What’s going on?”

“These voters are getting paid. BBM has been paying off voters.”

“No way.”

“No way? You’ve been paid to spread fake news, you think others won’t be paid to vote for him?” she asked rhetorically. “But you know what, there is some truth to what you said. Some will be paid and will vote for BBM, and some will not but still vote for BBM.”

“You say that last bit like it’s a bad thing,” he said.

“Oh, it is a very bad thing,” she said. “Selling your vote so you won’t starve to death, I can understand. But voting for him in spite of all that his family did...all he’s doing...Your conscience would have to be warped or dead for you to be able to vote for someone like that willingly.”

“What about what that other ghost said about personal responsibility? The sins of the father are not the sins of the son, so we can’t blame him for that.”

“Using the same line of reasoning, the accomplishments of the father are not the accomplishments of the son, so we can’t praise him for that.”

“It’s still not his fault! He didn’t steal all that money!”

“But he did keep a huge chunk of the money, and he didn’t return it. Or consider this: if one of your employees stole from you then ran away, and then his son applied for the same position as his father, would you accept him, knowing that they still have your stolen goods?”

He shook his head. “He still has a plan, a vision for the country.”

“He’s going to revise the history books and try to whitewash the crimes of his family. Beyond that, his family committed a lot of crimes when they were in power, there’s no reason to think they won’t do it again once they’re back in power.”

“Who cares what’s written on the history books anyway? They’re just written by the biased media anyway. Nothing bad ever happened to me during the Marcos years! We should just look at alternative facts!”

“Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it,” she quoted. “And if you’re going to brag about nothing bad ever happening to you during the Marcos years, it means you have that privilege of being shielded from the abuses, and your privilege made you apathetic to those who suffered.” She paused and spoke in a calmer tone. “Or think of it this way. The truth is like putting together a large puzzle. You only have one piece of the puzzle – your experience. Those who write these books have more pieces of the puzzle – the experiences of those who suffered.”

“It’s okay as long as we see the infrastructure where they’re putting the money!!” he snapped, more out of desperation than anger.

“Build, build, build, eh? Herod had the Second Temple renovated, but he also ordered the massacre of infants. Pharaoh had pyramids built, and killed and enslaved Israelites to do it. What has more weight? What are they more notorious for?”

“So? Politics is not a popularity contest anyway.”

“Yeah, it’s a public service, a public servant who lies, cheats, and steals from the public he is supposed to serve is hurting them.”

“He’s a politician! They all lie, cheat, and steal anyway! Why are you picking on him?”

“Because some public servants lie, cheat, and steal more than others.”

“And why aren’t we talking about those others?”

“Because no other politician who lies, cheats, and steals as much as him is running for president, and he’s the one you’re going to vote for. But, just to humor you, here are some of the politicians who lie, cheat, and steal almost as much as him. Erap, Bong Revilla Jr., Gloria Macapagal Arroyo...you know, people who support him and expect to be remunerated for their support. People that you’ve criticized before. Now, because they’re supporting your candidate, you can turn a blind eye to their crimes.”

He cringed in frustration. Suddenly, he got a bright idea.

“Wait. You said he should return the money his money allegedly stole. Isn’t he already doing that by paying for their votes?”

“He’s not returning it freely if he’s demanding their votes in exchange.”

“What’s wrong with a little quid pro quo?”

“It’s not just a little quid pro quo,” she countered. “They’re not just selling their vote. They’re selling six years. Billions...trillions of taxpayer money could be stolen in those six years. And they’re going to countenance it for a fee.”

“Can you really blame them?” he retorted. “They’re just human. Many of them are poor and underpaid. Nobody can say no to a little extra money under those circumstances.”

“Juan did,” she said, taking on a solemn tone.

“Huh?”

She suddenly teleported him again, this time, to the small kitchen of a humble house where a woman was setting the table. “What is this place?”

“The home of Juan Santos,” the ghost woman said. “You know, your head chef. The one you undercompensate for all his hard work.”

True enough, Juan Santos walked in, followed by his older daughter and his younger son. The latter was coughing a lot.

“Who’s that?”

“Leo. Juan’s son.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Tuberculosis. They’re trying to scrounge up money so they can pay for treatments, but they can barely make ends meet as is.”

For once, Gerald's face turned sad. He watched as Leo put down the book he was reading before joining his parents and sister at the table. While the family said their prayers, Gerald looked at the book on the table.

"The Bible?"

"Yeah. He can't move around much, so he took up reading the Bible as his way of escape. What's strange, though, is he is more compassionate to others while you wish violence upon them. Why is that the case, when both of you read the same book?"

He felt a tinge of guilt but decided to steer the conversation elsewhere. "Is he going to make it?"

"Given the way things are, it's very likely he won't be around anymore in a few years. But why should you care? World's overpopulated, right?"

"I didn't mean--"

"Next time, try thinking about who is already dying before wishing them dead."

"If Juan is so hard pressed, why doesn't he just take up a sideline troll job so he can pay for the treatments--"

"Because he won't sell his son's future for his son's health."

"That's stupid. There's no point in worrying about the future if you can't survive today."

"If you weren't so stingy and miserly, they wouldn't have to worry about surviving today. Besides, have you forgotten, 'What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' Matthew 25:45"

"It's not my fault! It's his fault for choosing his ideals over his family! What good is all those high ideals if they can't feed your family?"

"Oh, *you're* going to preach about family?" the ghost woman asked mockingly.

"How dare you!" he cried, raising his fist even though he knew the act to be futile. "I love my family, you hear me!"

"You cheated on your wife, you don't want to talk with your daughter, you got your wife and son killed in an accident, and you refused to visit your wife and son on their death anniversary--"

"Enough!" he said, pressing his hands against his temples and breaking to tears.

“All the money you have and you lost your family,” the ghost woman said. “All the money he doesn’t have and he still has his.”

Suddenly, he remembered something.

“Patricia! Where is she now?”

“See for yourself.” The ghost woman then teleported them both to an election venue where Patricia was already lined up.

“She’s still open for reconciliation, you know,” the ghost woman said. “But you don’t want any. You don’t want to spend any time with her or your grandson. You just want to praise Duterte and BBM.”

“Patricia...Joseph,” he said, breaking to tears. “I’m sorry.”

“You love them?” the ghost woman asked in a softer tone.

“They’re my children. Of course I love them.”

“You know, I actually agree with you. You do love your children. Have a look at how well they are.”

The ghost woman pointed behind him. Much to his surprise, he saw, for the first time, his own chain and chest. Seated on the chest were two conjoined children, a boy and a girl. Although humanoid, their faces were very demonic, with red eyes and sharp teeth. They were both very strong yet at the same time very emaciated.

“These aren’t my children!”

“These are children of Man, including you. Behold: Fanaticism and Neutrality.”

“Why are they so strong yet so starved?!”

“Everytime someone feeds them, the stronger yet hungrier they get.”

“Why are they conjoined?!”

“Because Fanaticism thrives where Neutrality abounds,” the ghost woman explained. “Those who take no sides in times of moral crisis only help fanatics like you.”

“When have I ever been a fanatic?!” he demanded.

Like the ghost girl, the ghost woman answered him in his voice, directly quoting his posts.

Duterte didn’t say he ordered police to shoot addicts on sight! (Denial)

If he said it, he didn’t mean it/it was a joke! (Defusion)

If he meant it, he didn't do it! (Denial)

If he did it, his victims deserved it! Even that Kian brat must have been a drug addict!

(Rational lies)

If his victims didn't deserve it, so what? Other politicians have done worse! Yolanda!

(Distraction)

Even if he's the worst of them all, 16 million people support him! (Appeal to popularity)

Enough with the facts! Those are just biased anyway! Look at the alternative facts! Like those that boast of his accomplishments! (Revisionism)

I'm proud of my president no matter what! (Blind worship)

And if you disagree with me, I WILL KILL YOU! I HOPE YOU AND YOUR FAMILY GET RAPED TORTURED AND KILLED YOU COMMUNIST! (Threat and slander)

"No!" Gerald said, breaking down. "Surely I must have done something to help someone other than these two demonic children?! Isn't there any decent person who is better off because of what I've done?!"

"Okay, okay," the ghost woman said, teleporting the two of them again. This time, they arrived at a place in the blue sky with clouds for floor and pearly gates. It was exactly what he thought it would look, yet he still couldn't believe it.

"Is this heaven?"

"Just the gate," said the ghost woman, who had strangely transformed to a much older lady.

"Those demonic children..."

"Can't follow you here," she assured him. "But you aren't supposed to be here either."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not dead...yet."

"Then why am I here?"

"You wanted to see someone who is better off because of what you've done. And you said to the ghost girl that you wanted to see them where they are now, in the present, so here we are."

“See who?”

“Your wife and son,” she said. “And to be honest, they want to see you too.”

She gestured at the pearly gates, and the ghosts of his wife and son appeared a short distance behind the bars. He tried reaching for them, but he was held back. His wife was restored to how she appeared on the day that they got married, and his son looked the way he did before the accident.

“Wendy? Joseph?”

“It’s been a while, James,” Wendy said.

“Hi, dad,” Joseph greeted.

“How are you two?”

“It’s been paradise,” Wendy admitted. “The only drawback is we had to watch you make your chain and your chest these past two years. And we’re still waiting to see if you would join us here.”

“You mean...you haven’t given up on me? I still can get in there?”

“It’s possible,” she said. “But considering all your actions so far, most likely you’ll end up in the other place.”

“In that case, I’ll vote for Leni! Surely that’s enough to guarantee my spot here, right?!” he asked.

She sighed exasperatedly. “You think it’s that simple? You think one vote is enough to break that chain and empty that chest? You think one act can overturn a lot of wrongdoing? You think forgiveness is that easily attained? You think real change is accomplished with just a check on a ballot? You made that mistake when you voted for Duterte, and even if you change who you’re voting for, as long as you have the same mentality, you’ll still be making the same mistake. Real change takes a lot more than that.”

“What must I do?” he begged.

“That’s enough,” the ghost woman said. “We’re out of time.”

“Wait-“ he started to say, but before he did, the ghost woman teleported him back to his house.

“She didn’t get to answer my question. What must I do to avoid going to the other place?”

“It’s not up to me to show you,” the ghost woman said. “That’s for the next ghost to show you. It will be your next visitor. And the last.”

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR – THE GHOST OF ELECTION FUTURE

Unlike during the wait between the ghost of election past and the ghost of election present, in the lull between the ghost woman and the next, Mr. Bautista felt strangely tired. He felt an uncomfortable tightness in his chest. He decided to rest until the arrival of the ghost. While he rested, he thought about what he should do so he could avoid the other place. Voting the right person was not enough, so what else could he do?

He was still pondering the question when he felt a familiar cold in the room, an oddity in the noontime heat. Suddenly, from the shadow of a dark corner in the room emerged a pale, ghost lady in white gown whose long, unkempt hair covered most of her face.

“Are you the ghost of election future?” he asked.

The ghost lady didn’t say anything, but someone behind her did.

“She is, although she won’t say it,” an old man’s voice said. “She doesn’t speak much.”

Gerald watched in horror as a decrepit and diseased old man emerged from behind the ghost lady.

“Who are you?” Mr. Bautista asked. “Another ghost like Reynaldo?”

“Not quite,” he said. “I am like those two children you’ve met, a manifestation of something you deal in. But they embody Fanaticism and Neutrality, whereas I embody Democracy.”

“Why are you here? I thought the ghost was going to show *me* the future.”

“This *is* how I look like in the future as long as the present remains unchanged,” the old man said. “But we have a common destination, that’s why we share the same trip.”

“Why are you so sickly?”

“I am only healthy when Decency and Education are healthy, when everyone is willing to listen to everyone else and speak only truth and informed opinions. When people let Fanaticism kill Decency with slander and Education with lies, I get sick.”

“I thought corruption is what kills you.”

“A different symptom of the same disease,” Democracy said. “Corrupt politicians deal in lies and deception. They hide their ill-gotten wealth, object to accountability, pay people to slander their critics, break their promises.”

“Surely, those alone couldn’t have made you so wretched.”

“You’re right. It was a slow but relentless disease,” the old man said. “We’ll show you how this happened...or should I say, what *may* happen because of your actions.”

The ghost lady grabbed Gerald with her cold, clammy hand and teleported him to a dirty yet familiar-looking restaurant where a lot of people were lined up, but not by choice.

“What happened to my restaurant?!” Gerald demanded.

“It’s not your restaurant anymore. It’s the government’s restaurant,” the old man said.

“Why would they take over a little restaurant?!”

“BBM took a page from Duterte’s book. He waged a war on the so-called oligarchs, swore that government would do a better job in providing services usually run by private corporations, and promised to give a chunk of the profit to the people. But of course he didn’t. He had debts to pay to his pals – Erap, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Bong Revilla Junior, and mommy dearest to name a few – and when the money he got from big companies wasn’t enough to pay those debts, he had to start taking over small to medium enterprises to pay off his campaign contributors and keep them at a certain level of luxury. When small companies realized that the government would just take their profits, they stopped running businesses, because they saw it as a pointless endeavor. The international companies continued to make money, but they made it elsewhere.”

“The government is supposed to protect and serve the people!”

“You treat government officials like they’re demigods, they start thinking they are demigods above the law. Besides, haven’t you heard? ‘Absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ The first thing BBM did when he came to power was to remove all checks and balances to it.”

The ghost lady then teleported them all to a place with an even longer line. This time, the people were carrying large bags of cash.

“What is this? The line for covid vaccination?”

“No. This is the line for basic groceries.”

“Can’t people buy food on their own?”

“The government controls everything now. Even what food people will get, how much, and at what time. As the fanatics say, it’s much more efficient this way.”

“Why do they have so many bags of cash?”

“Hyperinflation. The government got too deeply indebted to foreign nations with all the infrastructure projects, most of which BBM left in the charge of inept but loyal cronies. To pay off the debt, the government just decided to print more money, but that only makes each peso worth even less than before. Now you need hundreds of thousands of pesos just to pay for one meal. But hey, everyone’s a millionaire now. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

Before Gerald could reply, he spotted a barely-familiar figure in line.

“Juan?!” He then looked around for the rest of his family, but did not see them. “Where is Leo?”

“He died of tuberculosis a long time ago,” the old man said. “It might actually have been an easier way to go, considering how more people have died of much more horrible ways since then.”

“Like what?”

“Starvation. New diseases. Crime. Pick your poison.”

“There’s still crime now?!”

“There’s even more crime now. What has changed is that the government also blatantly commits crime. They will kill anyone who steals to have something to eat, anyone who criticizes the government, or anyone they don’t like.”

“Why isn’t anyone outside doing anything?!”

“Like who, human rights watchdogs? Fanatics told them to stay out of the country, and the fanatics got what they wanted. Besides, other countries hardly know anything about what’s going on in this country, ever since the government took over the media networks and turned them into propaganda machines.”

“The government did that?!”

“ABS-CBN was just the first. It’s like a line of domino tiles. When a government closes down a network, it’s easier for him to intimidate the others. And once the government has seized control of the media, there is nothing to stop it from spewing whatever story it wants to anyone, from the foreign countries, all the way down to the citizen.”

“Oh my god,” Gerald said, remembering something very important. “Patricia and Joseph! Show me where they are!”

The ghost lady teleported them to an unfamiliar house. The flag outside quickly revealed to Gerald that they were in the United States. When they made their way in, he found his daughter and grandson inside, although they were much older now. Patricia looked to be in her forties and Joseph Henry looked to be in his early teens.

“Whew,” Gerald said with a sigh of relief. “They’re alive.”

“They were lucky,” the old man explained. “Karl was able to migrate to the US with his entire family before things went downhill in the Philippines. A lot of other families...weren’t so lucky.”

“Mom. When can we visit the Philippines?” Joseph Henry asked.

“I’m sorry, Joseph, but we can’t visit the Philippines until the mess over there is fixed,” Patricia said, her voice heavy with regret.

“But the news said that it’s a great place to live in there now,” he said.

“Don’t believe everything you see on tv, son,” she warned. “Especially when it’s a bunch of politicians saying it in their propaganda network.”

“Did I...will I ever get to see them?” Gerald asked.

“There is one time you will all see each other,” the old man said. “That is where my journey ends.”

The ghost lady teleported them again, this time, to a cemetery where an urn was being interred into a niche. Gerald noticed his daughter and grandson – about five or six years older than they were when Patricia called earlier – as the only people in attendance and made a hasty conclusion.

“Oh no,” he thought sadly. “It’s Karl...my son-in-law.” He shook his head. “When I get back, I’ll make sure to call Patricia, tell her to-“

Before he could finish, he saw Karl slowly join his family after having parked their car. Gerald's momentary relief was instantly replaced by a creeping dread. "Who is in there?"

He waited for the old man to answer him, but realized he was gone. The ghost lady was still there but didn't say anything; she only pointed forward.

"What are you saying?! That I died?! Then what's the point?! Why show me all this if I'm just going to die, I can't fix anything when I'm dead!"

For the first time, the ghost lady spoke. Her voice came out mildly distorted, like there were two voices – a distinctly female one, and an inhuman one. "You can't change your death. You can change only what you do before it."

"I'll do it! I'll live by the lessons that the ghosts have taught me! Anything to escape this worst of punishments!"

"This isn't the worst of punishments, Gerald."

The ghost lady dragged Gerald – alone, since the old man Democracy was gone – to the niche. Before hitting it, he had just enough time to see that his name was on it, and the date of death was two years after the death of Wendy and Joseph Andrew.

Instead of making Gerald hit the grave, the ghost lady teleported him to an unfamiliar place. The stench of ammonia was everywhere and so were screams of agonizing pain. Flames illuminated the ghostly forms of numerous people being tortured in different ways.

Already horrified beyond reason, he felt a new chill when he heard and saw a vicious black dog emerge from a pit. Upon seeing him, it growled, barked, and finally pounced on him. He could only imagine the pain those sharp teeth and jaws could inflict; a pain that not even death could end. When they sank in, he knew...

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE – THE END

Gerald woke up in a cold sweat. He knew at once that he was awake, yet he still felt a pain in his chest. Then he recalled his journey with the ghost lady and understood what was happening to his body, and more importantly, what he had to do.

I have to vote today, he thought as he got off the bed to switch. *I have to delete all my posts. I have to pay Juan what he's earned. I have to...*

Suddenly, his smartphone rang. At first he thought it was his alarm, but then he realized how late in the day it was. He looked and saw that his daughter was calling him.

"Patricia?" he asked, a slight tone of fear still in his voice.

"Dad," she said. "I just wanted to ask if you really don't want to-"

"I'll go visit your mom and your brother today," he said before she could finish.

"Huh?" she asked, confused. "But you said-"

"I changed my mind," he said. "But first I'll just have to vote."

"Okay, you're starting to creep me out," she said.

"Patricia," he said, trying to sound as calm as possible. He took a deep breath before speaking his next sentence. "For whatever it's worth, you were right and I was wrong."

A long pause followed as Patricia took time to absorb what she had just said. "Dad..."

"Gotta go. But I'd like to talk to you later. You and Karl."

"About what?" she asked as she felt a tear roll down her cheek.

"Oh...the past. The present. The future."

"I'd like that, dad," she said. "I'd like that a lot."

He winced in pain.

"Dad...are you all right?" she asked, picking up his discomfort.

"Yeah. Just a little pain in my chest. Talk to you later," he said as he dropped the call.

I have to hurry up. When this day is over, so am I...

Gerald never did make it to the cemetery where his wife and son were buried. At first Patricia thought he was just held up, so she called him at his smartphone. To her puzzlement, an unknown person who introduced himself as a paramedic answered her call. Her bewilderment quickly turned to shock and grief when the paramedic broke to her the bad news: her father had come back to their restaurant shortly after voting. Apparently, he was talking to one of his employees, Juan, and had just given him a raise when he had a

heart attack. Juan called the paramedics and they rushed him to the hospital. They had just given up trying to resuscitate him when they heard his smartphone go off. The rest was history.

Karl drove Patricia to the hospital, where the doctors gave her some papers to sign. She was too grief-stricken to do it, so they left her alone for a while. While she spent some time alone with her father, Karl took Joseph Henry away. The morgue was not a place for toddlers.

Dad, Patricia thought between sobs. I hope you're in a better place now...

Much later, while she was filling out forms, a nurse introduced them to a guest who wanted to see them. "I'm here to see Mr. Bautista's family. Can I see them please?"

"Who are you? Why do you want to see Mr. Bautista's family?" Karl asked.

"He's Juan. My dad's employee." Patricia said, recognizing him. "You're the one he was talking to earlier."

"Yeah. I didn't follow you immediately because I had to close the restaurant first."

"Why do you want to see us?" Patricia asked.

"He had a message for you. Gave it to me in a piece of paper, told me to give it to you before the end of the day in case something happened to him."

"Something...?" she asked.

He knew he was dying? she wanted to ask, but all she blurted out was: "Something?" Then she remembered her dad mentioning a pain in his chest before he ended their phone call.

He shrugged, then handed her the message. Figuring that he wasn't privy to the message, he let the family have their privacy.

"The future is not written in stone. I did what I did so I can change the future." Patricia read out loud, enough for Karl to hear but not enough for Juan to hear.

"That's very cryptic," Karl said, having no clue what his father-in-law could have meant.

"What future was he trying to change?" Patricia wondered. "Did he succeed in changing it?"

* * * * *

“Stories Grandchildren Hear”

by Ken Tay

Bedrock broken, *deja vu* spewed, and it made me put down my *Crazy Rich Asians*. It wasn't the earthy scent from the leather sofa circulating or the air conditioner blowing. It was my bored, four-year-old grandson, Roslan, watching cartoons while I was supposed to be babysitting. It wasn't my son's cosmopolitan apartment, nor the neighboring TPC Kuala Lumpur where today no one was golfing. It was the raining. It was *the* time to lure him into a story.

I floated an idea, “What's your other grandfather like?” Roslan took the bait. I switched off the TV. We engaged in a pleasant interview.

“What is *your* grandfather like,” he asked finally.

An astute, acerbic at times but also amicable anthropologist who could put Hesiod's storytelling skills to shame. The most memorable times were when he was supposed to read to me. He would flip into the book of fables I handed him, concentrating so hard his eyebrows met, and half the story could be told from the dance of his eye movements. Inevitably, a devious smile would escape and a new world opened to the imagination.

“Tell me a story.”

One day, I declared boredom. My grandfather looked up from a book he was reading. We were both sitting on the bamboo slats of the floor in his sparse *kampung* house. He had insisted on keeping that house, his grandfather's house in the middle of the paddy fields. I think he mostly lived in a nicer house near the university, but the *kampung* house was

special to him. He wanted to know why a five-year-old would be bored. The battery had run out on my Nintendo. It was raining. "Does that sound familiar?"

It was just like today. Zeus, god of the sky, had turned angry. His voice rumbled. Coconut fronds trembled in fear, stalks of paddy tried running away, even the crows that are usually everywhere hid. His fury scared the other gods into crying so hard, tears fell in large, heavy clumps from the sky. Tears were so eager to get away, they roughly pushed aside leaves in the trees, and vigorously flicked away sand on the ground. Other tears banged on our door to get in, then thumped on our roof. The smell of fear came from the trees and paddy that wet themselves.

"My grandfather asked if I wanted to hear the story of the *nepenthes*."

"*Nenek?*"

"No, not *nenek*. *Nepenthes*."

Roslan nodded.

I described how I scurried across the floor and snuggled up into the cocoon formed by my grandfather's lap, chest, and voice.

"In the beginning, there was Chaos," I began, but my memory failed, so it zoomed forward. The god Zeus had a daughter, Helen. Helen was kidnapped by Paris. But later Helen married Paris, and they had three sons.

"Paris, where *nenek's* handbags are made?"

"No, not that Paris. This Paris is the name of a man. Anyway, Bunomus, the oldest son, was particularly energetic."

“He had ADHD?”

“Sort of.” Helen gave him a low dose of an experimental sedative called *nepenthe*. The dose was so low that it did not immediately enter the nervous system, and so Bunomus continued playing outside and eventually ran onto a ship. There, he fell asleep. A deep sleep. Because no one knew he was on board, the ship set sail for the Spice Islands. Along the way, the crew found the boy asleep but didn’t know who he was nor did they want to feed another person on the long voyage. They dropped him off on an island. This island is now named after him: Borneo.

“Brutal.”

“Borneo. Not brutal.”

Bunomus was asleep for a million years and finally woke up in the middle of the rainforest on Borneo. When he awoke, he met a beautiful woman named Keenabalae, daughter of Aphrodite.

“Marmite?”

“No, not Marmite. Aphrodite. She’s a goddess.”

They became best buddies, but Bunomus was still homesick. One day Bunomus declared he needed to leave in search of home. Keenabalae implored him to stay. She warned that there would be no one to protect her if he left. So Bunomus waved an arm to summon the power of the gods in the heavens to protect Keenabalae while he was gone. Hermes, god of the air and winds, responded by gathering the winds and clouds to drench the whole island. Demeter, goddess of agriculture, dispatched a bolt of lightning to carry the seeds of a special plant, the *nepenthes*. It’s a carnivorous plant that would eat anything that even tried to harm Keenabalae. They spread out and formed a shield all around her.

“What is a carnival plant?”

“Carnivorous means meat-eating.”

“How about pizza?”

“Sure, pizza too.”

As Bunomus swam away looking for home, Keenabalae grew taller and taller in order to keep an eye on him. Meanwhile, Poseidon, god of the sea, saw that Bunomus was alone and took the opportunity to drown him.

“Why?”

“Poseidon had worked for Bunomus’ grandfather, King Laomedan of Troy. He built a grand wall that was perfect, but Laomedan did not pay for the work.”

Keenabalae stopped growing as soon as Bunomus drowned. She had grown to 4000 meters tall by then. Today, the *nepenthes* still protect her, although she is now called Kinabalu.

“*That is the story of the Nepenthes.*”

Energized, eyes bulging, Roslan sensed the end of the story. He leaped into the air and marched around the living room like leading a procession chanting. “*Nenek has a penis. Nenek has a penis.*”

I could not stop him but it’s now his story to tell.

* * * * *

“I Am Me, You Are You”

by Iris Dang

1. Pictures created the only memories I have left of Vietnam. Moving to the U.S meant I lost all the people that I care about, the beginning of a story full of drama with me as the main character.
2. The first thing I learned in school is that if I pretend like I don't understand, I can avoid a lot of things. For example, going to the library during Language Arts would mean less stress for the teacher as they don't know how to deal with me, and I can avoid people staring at me for being the new girl.
3. It's sad to see my mom's hatred toward the LGBTQ+ community. Unintentionally, she keeps me in this dark closet afraid to take a step outside.
4. Every time someone asks where I'm from, they never really give me a chance to tell them before guessing Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. I honestly want to know what they accomplish from making a fool out of themselves like that.
5. Why do people sexualize traditional clothing knowing that they are meant to express a person's culture? Learning to respect one another is one of the human basic skills.
6. Note to self, never let others try your food even if they say please. I was speechless as one of my classmates spit out the piece of dried seaweed I gave them, claiming they smell like fish? Sir, I'm sorry to break this to you but ...
7. Time does change people and yes, I'm talking about me. Duh. I grew distant from the people I once knew so well from my childhood as we are all living our own lives now and childhood friends are all we are.
8. Living here for years teaches me that they hate your skin color but are eager to pose in the Asian snacks aisle because it's so “aesthetic.” Huh, interesting.

9. I went blonde once and all of sudden I got called an ABG* (Asian Baby Girl). Please for the sake of humanity, the Internet is free and will only take you a second to do the research on the term.
10. I find it funny how people would say "I don't mean to be racist" and then proceed to make a racist remark anyway.
 - a. So you know what you are saying is racist then?
11. I remember eating lunch on campus with a few other people. Someone stared real hard at the way I hold my chopsticks then said: "This is the first time I see someone hold their chopsticks like that, you're supposed to hold it like this."
12. My aunties often tell me: "You should marry a white man and become a housewife." Uhhhhhh...Thank you for the suggestion, but I will pass.
13. I once told a worker that my mom doesn't speak English so she can't understand them. They then started speaking to her as if she was a child and that would suddenly make her understand English.
14. It's uncomfortable when someone tells me that I don't look Vietnamese because frankly, how do you look like one? That's a bit problematic don't you think?
15. I wonder how Asian I am because I'm having an identity crisis right now so someone please make a test and send the link over to me. Thank you!

* * *

Being Asian in the U.S Bingo

“You're probably really good at math, huh.”	“You're Asian, but aren't you Chinese?”	People misspelled your birth name all the time.	Friendly reminder, Asian snack aisle isn't an aesthetic.	“I don't mean to be offensive but [stereotype insert]”
“What are you eating? It kind of smells.”	Asked if you know an actor/actress because they're Asian.	“You're like really pretty for an Asian girl.”	“Go back to your country, you don't belong here.”	Don't worry, Asian glows after a few drinks are normal.
I'm not submissive, you're just a misogynist.	“You're Vietnamese? I love pho.”	NO SHOES IN THE HOUSE, EVER.	Stay away from Koreaboo and weebos.	Mocking your accent when you speak.
“Your parents aren't telling you to be a doctor?”	“Why don't you go say hi to___, she's Viet too.”	Forced to play an instrument during your childhood.	You're sensitive if you get offended over a racist joke.	“How do you say my name in Vietnamese?”
How does yelling at a non English speaker make them understand you?	Accidentally speaking Vietnamese to your friends out of habit.	Your parents' personal translator in all situations.	People get shocked over the fact that I never watch Hannah Montana.	People sexualized Asian traditional clothing for likes.

Bingo explaining:

As you can tell from the form I used for this piece, I wanted to showcase my personal struggle being a woman of color living in the U.S. It's something I think we don't talk enough about although Asian Hate has gotten more media coverage because of the increase in hate crime increasing over the time, which is extremely sad and heartbroken for me to see as a member of the Asian community. I will explain a little bit about some of the

things I put in the bingo game to help people have a more general idea of what I wrote about.

- There is absolutely nothing wrong with giving people compliments, but it doesn't hurt to say it in a respectful way. What does it mean when you compliment someone's looks but add their race into it because "pretty for an Asian girl" is pretty much a backhanded compliment implying that "normal" Asian features are unattractive so although you are Asian, your looks are more appealing.
- There is a common stereotype about Asian women being submissive and many people truly believe in that which is why there are many cases where foreign (mostly white men) would travel to Asia in order to pick up girls, because they believe that the women over there are easy and will do anything you want them to. This is in fact wrong, and harmful information because they put the Asian community at risk with these untrue stereotypes if they people don't educate themselves properly.
- Koreaboo is a term describing someone with an obsession over Korean people, mainly started from K-pop. They fetishized over the culture, the language without realizing that their actions are harmful because they disrespect actual people and make them uncomfortable as an overall. This is also for people who dress in traditional ao dai in a sexualized way mainly for attention and likes really show your lack of knowledge and common sense toward someone else's culture for hundreds of years.
- When a non English speaker is unable to understand you, speaking in a louder voice with slower speed will not change anything when they already tell you they DO NOT understand. Because I've been in this situation quite a few times now, I personally think that it's really weird because it's as if what I said to them goes from one ear to the other one.
- Many Asians are familiar with the terms Koreaboo and weeaboo as the words to describe people who fetishized a culture, specifically Korea and Japan. Usually, they are K-pop or Anime fans who often get obsessed over what they see and claim themselves to be Asian even though they aren't.

* * * * *

“The Call of Water”

by Stephanie Shi

The sea to me doesn't so much roar as it rattles or hisses. I'm reminded of the noise I hear when I unfold my blanket, tuck myself into bed and shift about, wrinkling the sheets. Nevertheless, as I watch the water curl into itself then sprawl across the sand, I can't help finding the sea daunting. The water that laps before me is the same water that has capsized vessels and drowned many.

I was born in the Philippines and have lived here all 21 years of my life. But I've never been to the beach until yesterday. Although I know what it's like to drown, fear of drowning didn't keep me from the beach. I simply had no reason to go; images of a summer paradise never piqued my interest or curiosity, and my parents preferred to take me and my brother to bustling cities for vacations. But one day, R and I wanted to go out of town for a few days, and the beaches in Nasugbu, Batangas, were the most accessible.

I first encountered the open water last night. All I saw was blackness so vast that I felt enveloped by it. Without seeing anything divide sky and sea, I was reminded of my smallness as I faced the large void of the world. I realized my insignificance, even if the person I loved stood beside me and held my hand. The beach will remain, the water will flow the same way it always has ever since the world began. Meanwhile, I was just visiting. And not long after I'm shown out the door, any trace of my presence will be washed away.

R and I plodded through the dark shore. I would turn around to see how long our footprints would stay in the sand, only to find the water flowing back into the sea, just leaving behind ripples. R was often a few paces ahead of me, easily avoiding treading on seaweed, crushed shells, and twigs. As I tried to follow in his steps, he told me about his mom who would, on their beach vacations, go out to the sea on her own for a night swim. It was just something she liked to do, he explained. Picturing her alone at sea, a white speck in all that darkness and unknown that could swallow her, disconcerted me. What if she drowned?

Days before heading to the beach, my mom instructed me to not swim in the open water. It's not that she doubted my ability to swim, she said, but that something, some spirit, lurked underwater and could pull me down and drown me. "May nanghihila doon," she warned. She began to tell me stories of her employees whose son or daughter drowned, also in Batangas, for having been pulled into the depths by these spirits. Doubting the truthfulness of her claims and not wanting to entertain the possibility of spirits, I didn't ask after the kids.

My dad, on the other hand, told me I could swim, but I mustn't go too far from the shore. He was worried I'd slip down the continental slope and drown. I wondered if the sort of spirit my mom thought pulled people into the water was simply an explanation for people losing their footing. In any case, to give my parents peace of mind, I promised I wouldn't swim in Batangas.

The first time I swam with fins, I fancied that I was meant to be in the water. This happened in a hotel in Manila, where I had swimming lessons. The fins were a gift from my dad for me

and my brother for being some of the fastest swimmers in our class. When swimming lessons were over, I would slip my feet into the fins and bolt from one end of the pool to another. Pulling my arms and kicking my legs were effortless. I could easily plunge deeper into the pool and pretend I was a mermaid, and I could try paddling in different ways and see what would happen while staying afloat.

In two years, I outgrew my fins. For a while, I used my brother's pair, and I didn't swim without it, whether that's to do laps or just play water games with my cousins. As opposed to being an extension of my legs, the fins became necessary. Without them, I felt my body sink no matter how much and how hard I kicked. I couldn't feel my legs. By the time I outgrew those fins, I no longer spent my summers swimming, and perhaps my body had forgotten how to float and swim. Because not long after, at a wave pool in a waterpark, I would drown. My floaty tipped over and threw me into the water. I flailed my arms, trying to launch myself to the surface and reach for the floaty, but the waves were too strong as they beat down on my head. I cried, "Help, help!" knowing my mom was lounging within earshot, but I was already out of breath, and my voice was so soft only I could hear it.

Before I endured getting teased for drowning, I faced my parents' disappointment expressed as anger. How could I not have swum back to the floaty? Huge waves were no excuse. My brother, who had pulled me up, said I could've taken a deep breath and paddled back to the floaty. Because I did nothing but thrash about in the water, my parents enrolled me in swimming lessons again. At 12, I had the same instructor from when I was seven: Coach Bobby.

Coach Bobby's face scrunched up when he learned I was back for lessons. He had me swim across the pool to see what I had forgotten, and I sank right after I kicked off from the

edge. He made me do kicking exercises with a kickboard, and I slowly began to feel my legs power through the water, heard the rhythmic splashing my feet made. In the next sessions, I worked on pulling my arms, while still clutching a kickboard. Although I felt far from graceful, eventually, I was able to swim again. Coach Bobby then drilled me to do laps. "Swim back! Go!" he would command. Sometimes, I'd ask him to wait so I could catch my breath. "Go!" he persisted.

I haven't forgotten how to swim since. By the time I polished my form, I swam as much as I could. I swam when I was filled with resentment about my family, when I was pining for an absentee then-boyfriend, then the boyfriend after that. Swimming narrowed my focus to the other end of the pool, made me think of my body and my breathing. I swam so my scoliosis wouldn't worsen. I swam since swimming was the only sport that made me feel good afterward.

When I was 11 and looking for hobbies that could make up my identity, I considered training for badminton. I used to enjoy friendly matches with my brother and my cousins, and I thought I did well in PE. But the trainer's warmups and drills already exhausted me. The indoor court was stuffy, and it was getting dimmer and dimmer in my eyes. Sweating profusely, I didn't have enough energy, enough water, to make it past the first 30 minutes of galloping then swinging my arm, then galloping again then swinging my arm.

It was the same for running, which was my PE in my sophomore year at university. I got tired in a minute or so and trailed behind everyone else, was lapped three times by one of my classmates. I detested feeling my weight in every step, how heavy and tight my hips felt, how my chest burned under my thick PE shirt. The running coach told me I needed to

drink some water before class to keep my energy up, but doing so made me feel bloated, heavier—oh, how I felt my insides jiggle—so I only took sips.

In my teens, my parents frequently told me to drink plenty of water. If I was dizzy, tired, or constipated, they would say it's because I wasn't drinking enough then proceed to sermon me to drink more. Once, I exclaimed, "But water's so boring!" My parents, who were in the business of purifying water for drinking, looked at me in disbelief, then laughed.

My parents' admonition on the importance of drinking lots of water didn't stir me to down more glasses. I stood by my opinion for years, and on a trip to Hokkaido just last May, I was even happy that I always had some water left in the 500 mL bottle that the tour guide handed out daily. In case I got thirsty, I would have water to drink. But even my lack of a drinking habit displeased my grandfather, who had taken me to explore the island with him and my grandmother. He often complained behind the tour guide's back that a small bottle of water wasn't enough for a day. When he would notice that I hadn't finished my water, he'd say I wasn't drinking enough, that I should drink more.

It all changed when I got a UTI. A few months ago, I woke up in the middle of the night with a persistent urge to pee. I rushed to the bathroom to relieve myself, then went back to bed. All normal. But before I could fall asleep, the tingling returned. So again I went to the bathroom. But this time, I only peed a few drops and felt a sting I'd never felt before, like my urethra wanted to be penetrated or sliced open. Then blood stained the toilet paper in my hand after I had wiped myself. I didn't know what to make of the symptoms; all I knew was that blood wasn't supposed to come out of the urethra, and that I was wincing in pain—a pleasurable, burning ache from the center of my body that wouldn't have its fill.

I left my mom a note about blood in my pee for her to read in the morning. Then I googled what blood in one's urine meant: either urinary tract infection or a kidney problem. When morning arrived and my mom saw my note, we went to a diagnostics center for a urinalysis and a kidney ultrasound.

Peeing became more excruciating by the minute. My urine was more red than yellow, and I could hardly pee for the urinalysis. When I managed to reach the minimum required volume for the urine sample and my bladder was emptied, it was time for the kidney ultrasound. The nurse told me to drink lots of water until I couldn't hold my pee in any longer. Following this, I soon felt my stomach bloat and my head swirl. Dazed, I started to take longer breaks between gulps; I felt something, bile perhaps, rise from my belly to my throat. I scanned the waiting area for my mom, and I found her with eyes wide open staring right at me and her upper lip curled to a tight line. I looked away. She was growing impatient and furious with me. To keep myself from being overcome with guilt, I told myself that as long as I drank enough, no matter how long it took, I would be okay somehow.

Getting UTI has led me to drink 10 to 11 glasses of water a day to flush out the bacteria in my urinary tract. Soon enough, my body began longing for this tasteless, oddly refreshing substance. If an hour went by without me drinking water, my throat tightened, my head throbbed, and my breathing strained like I was drowning. I got irritable and became unable to think of anything else other than to drink water *now*. And once the fluid glided over my lips, leaped down my throat, and flowed through my esophagus, my body calmed down. The world would re-emerge, and my mind would be attuned to it again.

Naturally, trips to the toilet became more frequent. I had made the mistake of holding my pee in in a three-hour class, so I got UTI again. It struck me how a single incident made the UTI recur, and it taught me to take bathroom breaks right when I had to. When travel or commitments were involved, I learned to pee before leaving for my destination or the appointment—to never miss an opportunity to pee. I nearly got the timing down so I wouldn't feel the urge in the thick of things. But when I did feel it on the road, for instance, I let go of my sense of shame and need for privacy on such matters, and mustered the courage to ask that we stop at the next gas station. To my surprise, the drivers often met my request with an obliging smile or a curt nod, both a show of understanding on the calls we mustn't decline.

In the beginning, having my life revolve around water made me feel like a lowly creature, a slave, before it. But as the bacteria count in my urine tests dropped and peeing became easier, I realized I had been ignorant of the inner workings of my body, that so much of what my body did was beyond my will. It wasn't the water I was surrendering to, but my own body.

The beach before me looks nothing like the ones in in-flight magazines or on billboards. The curves of the shore show up as a flat line in the pictures I take. In my eyes and on the camera's LCD screen, the scene is gray on gray. The sky appears platinum with light veil-like shadows for clouds. The water looks just like slate in color and texture. The coarse sand is laden with pebbles. There is no depth in the images. The beach is neither picturesque nor menacing.

I stare into the horizon and wonder what the magic of the beach is and why this is hidden from me. A thought rises: Perhaps the idyllic photos I've seen were altered or enhanced? Even so, turquoise waters, powdery white sand, and a bright blue sky must surely exist.

R asks me if I want to swim.

"We're going swimming?"

"Why not?" he says, and walks to the water.

This morning, when I put on a bikini and slipped on a loose shirt and a pair of shorts, I expected that after exploring towns a few jeepney rides away from Nasugbu, we'd go to the beach, but that we would only stroll by the shore again, just like the night before. To ensure no accidents, no drowning, I intended to stay away from the water.

R waits in the distance, and the water continues to ebb and flow, gently, as though assuring me that I would be safe. I consider wading, not swimming, to try to enjoy the water. It would be the comfortable middle ground, with only my legs submerged.

Given my decision, I still have to look like I intend to swim, that I'm not afraid. This means I have to remove my shirt and my shorts, an act that was always done in the privacy of four walls, now out in the open, where I could be observed by prying eyes and have different parts of me scrutinized—one by one then all at once. I freeze, conscious of the swell of my belly, my flat chest, my wide hips. A part of me wants to be invisible. I tell myself that other women have done this before, that this is ordinary.

On the Hokkaido trip with my grandparents, our tour guide Colin encouraged us to try the public baths. The several women I was touring with giggled at the idea and shook their

heads. My grandmother muttered under her breath that there was no way she would go to a public bath. I asked why not, saying it could be fun, and for the experience. She told me she's too old to get naked in public.

Colin pressed on. He suggested that to do away with our reluctance, it might help to think that our bodies aren't special, that everybody has one. That the body is what it is, so it is not something to be ashamed of in any way. The prospect of overcoming my sense of shame or embarrassment toward my body was enough to convince me to try the public bath.

In the locker room of the bathhouse, I expected to find cubicles for undressing, but there were none. Was I supposed to remove my clothes in a room full of people? I wasn't ready for my most intimate parts to be seen, and I didn't want to offend anyone. A woman a few meters next to me had a towel wrapped around her body and was applying deodorant. The other women around me were already packing up.

Unsure of what to do and reminding myself that I wanted to experience a public bath, I first slipped off my jeans and my underwear then covered my privates with the palm-size towel I had been given. I held that towel in place with one hand, and with my other hand, I unhooked my bra and tried pulling the straps down my arms through my longsleeves. I felt silly squirming before my locker, as I was rolling my shoulders and flapping my elbows to help slip the straps off.

When three women entered the locker room from the baths, I was surprised to see naked female bodies in the flesh and that I viewed them without any malice or criticism. The sight gave me the confidence to undress, so I took my top off as though I were alone, but also like everybody else around me.

The bathing area was dimly lit, but there was enough natural light coming in through the floor-length windows. There were several pools spread across the huge space. Some were elevated like Jacuzzis; others were housed in the Oriental hip-and-gable roof. Each pool was labeled with Chinese characters, and there were boards marking the different water temperatures. I dipped my foot in a number of pools, and it kept jolting up. The water was either too hot or too cold. Other waters felt cool at the start but scalded soon after. I flicked my foot off the water to find it bright pink and throbbing. I was starting to feel upset that I couldn't find a pool to take a dip in, then I caught a glimpse of a pool at the far corner of the bathing room. It was next to the window, which had a view of the mountains.

I dipped my foot then found myself going deeper into the water. The water was a cloudy turquoise that hid what was underneath it. I could cup the water with my hands and see only my hands, without the arms that linked them to me. They could therefore be anybody else's hands, which allowed me to look at them for what they were, without the lens of self-scrutiny. I slowly began to see beauty in my small palms, my short fingers, my tiny, squarish nails, the fine hairs. They looked like a child's hands, and they were good just as they were: hands that nonetheless pushed and pulled the water, hands that have shared and given, hands that have held and touched, and have been taken.

It occurred to me how partial I'd been against myself, that perhaps every part of my body possessed beauty that I had been blind to. Was it in our nature to always desire what we don't have, and to take for granted what's ours? Or were we taught to nitpick and be our harshest critics, that this was the only way to transcend our current selves?

I watched other women soak in the different pools. There was a thin woman who had stitch scars down her spine, and she reminded me of a cheery woman I sat next to at an x-ray releasing, who looked forward to a surgery that would fix the 45-degree tilt of her back. No matter how old the women before me were, how much their breasts sagged, how lined their bodies were with stretch marks or scars from cuts or stitches, they were all beautiful to me. Each was different, and they carried their own stories—not as burdens that made them stoop or triumphs that lent them an air of haughtiness, but as an embrace of the ordinariness of life as they lived it and as it had its way with them.

I set foot on the shore where the water reaches only up to my calves. I sigh. A few crunched-up tetrapacks, bottlecaps, and aluminum-lined bags float about in the water.

“Let’s swim!” R says, and he drags his legs to deeper waters. Fearful of drowning, getting hurt as a consequence of breaking my promise to my parents, and being alone, I can only watch him shrink as the distance between us grows. He calls out to me to follow him.

“I’m scared!” I finally confess, and I beg him to come to me.

R approaches but still keeps some distance between us. He beckons me to swim. “Swim, just swim!”

The water seems shallow enough, but seeing the big rocks through the water, I worry it’s too shallow to swim in. Keeping my head above the surface, I finally swim to his side. My knee scrapes against a rock, and I yelp but continue swimming until I could grab onto him. The adrenaline makes me laugh.

But as thrilling as it was, I tell him I don’t want to swim anymore. The scratch on the knee, in my mind, is a warning sign.

We go nearer the shore and wade aimlessly. He picks something up from the sand and shows me a horned starfish. I trace its outlines lightly with my index finger, remembering how fascinated I was some years ago to learn that the rays of starfishes can grow back, and how I wished people had the same ability. When I am satisfied, he places the starfish back into the water. Next to the starfish, we lie on the sand with our backs propped up by our elbows. A part of me worries about getting UTI from the saltwater. But I remain still, enjoying the waves crash over my body and tumble shell and coral fragments to and fro.

R tells me that I should expect to get some cuts or bruises when I go to the beach. “You’re bound to get hurt somehow.” I ask him if he has gotten hurt himself, and he answers in the affirmative—“All the time!” Letting his advice sink in, I look at the small slash on my knee and wonder if it’ll be a permanent reminder of this trip.

Suddenly, the wind feels cold, and I shiver when it gusts. The sky has dimmed. I recall a lesson on breezes back in grade school, that at night, a land breeze is cooler than a sea breeze. I chuckle to myself for having experienced this knowledge only now. Goosebumps appear on my arms, so I lower myself further into the water. Its warmth is comforting.

R stands up and asks me if I want to get ready for dinner. Keeping my gaze on the horizon to see that stretch of black again, I pretend I don’t hear him. He asks again. I slowly look up at him with a pout. I tell him the wind’s too cold and coax him to stay longer in the water with me.

“Come on,” he offers me his hand. “It’ll get much colder later.”

I wonder if I should take it. Then I do. And we both pull and find ourselves unmoved.

* * * * *

“The Cambodia Diaries”

by Benjamin D. Carson

“The Tears of a Seal”

Even a warrior’s heart can be broken, and Knut’s has been shattered. I met him in The Coffee House by Tuol Tom Pong, where, despite the mosquitoes that live in the couch cushions and make a malarial nuisance of themselves, one can get a good cup of coffee and enjoy a long, slow afternoon in Phnom Penh. I’d met Knut before. I knew him as the bald, slightly wired German guy who always seemed to need something: the password to what he called the “wee-fee,” a tissue, a lime. Always something. But he was nice enough. He always smiled and was polite. We regularly exchanged pleasantries, but today he sunk his claws into me. I shouldn’t put it that way, though. I should say, he reached out. He reached out as a man in need. A man recently fired by his Khmer boss and, as it turns out, former lover. He mixed business with pleasure, and now he’s bereft, and pissed.

Six weeks ago, she hired him as general manager of her company (a joint venture which merged his company with hers) because he was “fawking” good, he said. He was, and still is, a successful cameraman and entrepreneur. He’s worked with Susan Sarandon and Somaly Mam, the now disgraced ex-sex worker cum humanitarian who made herself famous and then infamous by penning two best-selling and apparently partially fabricated memoirs about her life in the sex trade in Cambodia, and he’s worked with Angelina Jolie as well. I saw the photos. There’s Sarandon. There’s Mam. There’s Knut. That’s Jolie.

Knut is also an ex-SEAL, a *Kampfschwimmer*, who was severely wounded in Afghanistan. His right calf looks like it has been put through a meat grinder. It looks like a cooked

chicken leg that has been hit by a hammer and then surgically repaired with twine. His best friend died in Kabul. This guy's been through some shit. He's seen the fires of hell. But this woman, his now former boss, a filthy rich film producer and entrepreneur, has nearly brought this soldier to his knees. Bullets might not always bring a man down, but a woman always will, read the lines on his furrowed brow. One shot, Cupid's arrow, right in the heart.

It was 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon, and I could smell the whisky on his breath. He'd just spent the last three days composing the letter he was going to give to her tomorrow at his final meeting with her spokespeople, she being too gutless (his words) to send him off herself. Word of his firing had reached him from Singapore, where she'd gone on business, unbeknownst to him, her putative business partner. And "would I mind reading the letter?" (This is what you get for too much eye-contact, for showing too much interest.) In full-throated broken English, the vitriol dripped from the page, a mixture of denials ("I didn't say what you were told I said!"), accusations ("Your business practices are unethical and unprofessional!"), and threats ("I'll go to the press!"), all coated in bile. What could I say but, "well, you don't mince words!?" For the next hour and a half or so I got the back story.

According to everything he didn't say, it's not the firing that's so upsetting; it's that he grew to love this woman, a woman the same age as his daughter, twenty-five, who, while not even that attractive, he admitted, has charisma and charm and an allure that warms his Teutonic cockles. He lusts for her. He fucked her and now he can't imagine not fucking her. He got to sleep with a very, very, very rich, fairly goodlooking woman and now she's gone, along with the moto she gave him, and the car, and the apartment. He bought the mansion of love but no longer possesses it. Does he deserve such sweet sorrow, this Romeo? Probably not. From the mouth of an entirely unreliable narrator, she sounds totally bonkers, a thoughtless, hyper-rich floozy who uses people and things like dental floss. She buys cars on a whim, including a \$150,000 Porsche that she had shipped from Germany via Thailand. She'll spend \$1,000 a night on massive dinner parties but then can't understand why Knut gives money to the monks who show up at their business each morning begging for alms. Knut's not just a trained killer. He's also a Buddhist, and has been since the early 1990s, even before he went to Afghanistan in 2001 to kill or be killed.

Desire, though, may be the greatest enemy Knut has ever faced, I thought, as I watched him pace outside with his cigarette, his head swimming with unknowns and what-ifs. No, not his head, and not even his heart. His gut and his balls, both coiled up in pain from what they cannot do, what they cannot have. The why? No matter. Irrelevant. No explanation would satisfy the loss. This is the substance of dark matter. His need for a why is truly human, but his tears, for this, might finally be the tears of a clown.

* * *

“Playing Slop with Rok MC”

I'd heard the Apros Pub house band's rendition of the only Adele song they knew a thousand times, so I headed upstairs to the pool table, which bears all the hallmarks of amateur play and humidity. But Khmer hospitality turned pushing balls around halfheartedly on a warped plane with a cracked cue into a salve against a rising tide of loneliness. I'm in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on sabbatical. I'm on leave, but now, at this moment, in this place, as images of my wife and two dogs after four long months begin to fade, I feel left. Exiled, I think. Banished.

Two of the four waitresses, who've come to expect me three or four times a week for Happy Hour, quickly wracked the balls, invited me to break, and it was on, a game of 8 ball, Khmer style, which means playing with two players, each player getting seven balls; the 8 ball gets sunk last. The waitresses at Apros have always been extremely friendly; they always smile and are quick to anticipate my needs. When not bringing me a beer or something to eat, they stand at attention along the walls, hands clasped behind their backs, scanning the room like sentries. They're all business. Until the balls are cracked. Then they're all smiles

and giggles. Which isn't to say they don't want to kick your ass. The two waitresses—my two favorites, I confess—and I take turns bouncing balls off the rails. One of them claimed the other was quite the shark and could suck down five beers without getting drunk. While unfortunately I didn't get to witness the latter, I did get a glimpse at the former.

The shark wears her hair short and smiles less than the other, and behind her stiff upper lip lies a woman who'd gladly see you lose. When I was shooting, she'd hang her head over the ball I was to hit and heckle me, while giving me the thumbs down, the same thumbs she used when I made a shot, no matter how great or just lucky. She could shoot, though, and she sank her shots with power, as though, even if she did only make one shot, I was going to remember it, like a tattoo or an old war wound. She bruised those pockets. I feared if I won I might end up with that ball in my esophagus. Luckily for me I sank the eight ball, and not when I was supposed to. Game over, and then game over again, and then again. Three times I sunk the eight ball, much to the delight of the two sirens. But alas, others, to my chagrin, demanded attention, so off they went, taking up their battle stations, tending to their subjects.

Which left me alone with my cue and playfully-battered ego, until a young man came along and asked if I wanted to shoot. This young man, typically handsome, just wanted to play slop, just break and hit whatever, which made him seem, compared to Thelma and Louise, a little soft, almost pudgy. So we played slop, and sloppily we played, though he too got the best of me. As he leaned over his stick, I noticed his shirt looked like one worn by a gas station attendant in the U.S. The name on the pocket read Rok MC. As MC hammered away at the balls, I missed the two outlaws and their mini-tempestuous battles over the cue, each wanting a chance to show they weren't just pretty faces, that angelic sentries, too, could aim and shoot.

I didn't even see Rok MC sink the last ball, but I heard it. We shook hands, and I offered "good game," and then picked up my bag and beer and walked out onto the balcony to watch it rain. Pouring again, I thought. Right on time. In the glow of the streetlight, the rain fell in long, thin braids, and drops pinged off the metal railing like BBs. And I knew it

wouldn't let up for some time, maybe not until morning. The rainy season. On the balcony, I could look down onto the street, onto a city that doesn't stop for rain or unrelenting sun, a city that could just go on and on and on and on. Because of the rain, all the cushions had been piled high, leaving two hanging wicker chairs, little bird nests, and I alighted into the one closest to the street, so when I put my legs up on a nearby table, little dollops of rain settled on my thighs. My beer gone, I just sat there, as if guarding the night, and watched it rain and rain and rain, comfy in my nest but far, far from home.

* * *

“Between the Tool and the Dog”

“Here am I with a babel of noise going on all about me.”

Seneca, “On Noise”

Phnom Penh is a city of rubble. The place is crumbling, a sea of misspent stones and brick. Something is always either going up or coming down, cement being mixed, steel welded. But nothing ever seems finished, and this concerns me. I live next to two construction sites. I don't know if what is being built is two houses or one house and an apartment building, but it doesn't matter. Whatever they are, they're being built by hand, brick by brick, stone by stone, by people shipped in from the countryside. They live on site and make about \$5 a day. Their scaffolding is bamboo, and they teeter on the edge of death for most of the day. They wear long sleeved shirts and hats to keep off the baking sun. I'm not sure how they don't pass out, how they just don't die.

Because two buildings are going up, both across the street, I get a stereo effect. It's like having a Bose Home Theater system but the only CD I have is of steel cutting steel. My apartment isn't totally closed. I have fifteen-foot high ceilings, and about twelve feet up there is an opening the length of the wall; and while barred, it's only screened. Dust and

soot have left the screen mostly opaque, and this probably accounts for the dust that settles like a pall on everything. I can dust, but like the morning dew, it's back the next day. A lost cause. The sounds from across the street, every one of them, ricochet off my walls so loudly I can't hear myself think. And the sounds often leave me confused. One night, after dark, as I was reading in my living room, I heard someone singing. It was a male voice singing what sounded like a Khmer ballad. It was quite beautiful, but I couldn't figure out why he was singing such a mournful dirge in my kitchen or how he might have gotten there. But there was no one there. Across the street, I saw a young man sitting by the side of the road, singing, alone. I turned off my light, stood by the window and listened, imagining, as I looked at the construction site behind him, so far from being done, keeping him so far from home, what he might be singing about. What he might be missing.

For people making only \$5 a day, from sunrise to sunset, they make a million dollar noise. It's incredible the sounds a dozen peasants can emit with crude tools, pulleys, and what must be the most godforsaken tool on earth. Is it a drill? An archaic torture device? It's like living across from a dentist's chair the size of Mt. Sinai. The sound begins when the sun meets the horizon, and it's vicious. The meanest kind of sound. It eats away at my brain, an interminable buzz. Phnom Penh is like this, though. It's a city of noise. There's a shop down the street that sells only drills. This afternoon I saw a little girl, maybe eight, in her school uniform sitting among what must have been a thousand drills—one only inches from the top of her head—eating soup out of a plastic bag. All day long, no matter the minute or hour, someone somewhere is pounding on something, someone is breaking a stone, banging a piece of iron with a hammer. It's a city that with time will be reduced to white noise—a perpetual hum that no one even notices anymore. A city rendered deaf out of sheer exhaustion.

But until my ears either collapse in on themselves or begin to bleed, I'm going to have to get used to the incessant hum, and a dog—maybe the only dog in the world—that I would strangle with my bare hands. It's white and wears a shirt, and lives across the street, where it seems all grating sounds emanate. Today the shirt was Eurasian teal. The little fucker. When the peasants sleep, Snowball picks up where they left off. Barking barking barking all

night long. All. Night. Long. I hate him. This dog, it must surely die. Between the tool and the dog, something's got to give. I can't take it much longer. It lives, like all things in Phnom Penh, behind a huge steel gate, but I'm sure I can grab him between the bars and throttle him. I'm sure of it. I could slowly squeeze the life out of him. If I can't reach him, I'll steal that fucking drill and cut through those bars and ring his neck. Then I'll smash that drill to bits, leaving nothing but its guts splayed across the street, a death for all to see. Two of them. Poetic justice. Then I'll sleep, the only sound in my ears a mournful ballad of a faraway village, where there are no construction sites, no dogs barking, just the sound of the wind in the banana trees.

* * * * *

“A Wolf, a Chipmunk, and Thirteen Kids”

by Amizura Hanadi Mohd Radzi

It was certainly not easy, trying to carry out a decent, engaging grammar lesson to a group of thirteen-year-old students at a small secondary school on an island, situated at the northwest of Peninsular Malaysia. Not to this particular class. Even though their number was relatively small compared to the typical volume of students for a class at a secondary school, these students were a special bunch. They required a bit of taming. I needed them to trust me first before I could even attempt to teach the first unit of the textbook, let alone the infamous first unit of the literature component, Shakespeare’s “Life’s Brief Candle.” I was given three Form One classes and two Form Two classes. One of the Form One classes was the last class in that particular form. Being just posted to the school, it was rather expected for the young, naïve teacher who had just graduated from the university to be given that last class, the one that was dreaded by all teachers teaching Form One in that school that particular year.

The posting of new teachers in my batch was done in June so, naturally, I took over the class from another teacher. Perhaps my coming to that school was a blessing to that teacher as a huge burden seemed to be lifted from his shoulders. Or it could also be a curse, if he was actually enjoying being the English teacher, up until I showed up and took over all of his classes, him being the temporary teacher and all. In fact, his record book, i.e., the teacher’s manual, was passed to me. I could still remember, flipping through the pages and seeing his handwriting. He had such beautiful penmanship, and most all the lines were made with coloured pens. It was quite a shame that I did not have a chance to meet him. Perhaps he could have shared with me some tricks on how to tackle that whimsical bunch of Form One students.

The first class I had with them was such a religious experience. It was the longest two periods of English lessons in my entire life as a schoolteacher. I was not anticipating a

perfect two-period lesson whereby all the objectives that I had prepared in the lesson plan would be achieved successfully. A few days earlier, I had a chance to chat with the other teachers who were also teaching that class. They had described their experience teaching that class for almost 6 months. From their descriptions, I sort of had a very rough idea of how the students in that class would behave like. When I stepped into that class, there were only two girls and the rest were boys; and in less than 10 minutes, they proved to be a bunch of boisterous boys. One of the girls—I could make a wild guess from the way she wrote and spoke—was rather special, the type who was academically challenged, who had lower than the average I.Q. Another girl was playing the role of an older sister, being taller and calmer than the other girl, who was clingy and rather temperamental. I found this out after having a few classes with them. One of the boys was being referred by the rest of the class as the character, ‘Giant’ in the Japanese anime, ‘Doraemon’. Just like how the character was portrayed, this boy was also a real bully.

The lesson started with the usual instructions, just like any normal English language grammar lesson. I instructed them to take out their textbooks as well as their grammar exercise books. The lesson was on present and past tenses. Among the exercises was filling in the blanks with the correct verb forms. They were well behaved during the first period of the lesson. The boys began to lose interest by the time the second period started. Truth be told, I was a bit flustered too. The largest boy in the class was chasing after the smallest boy, who was one of the cheekiest of them all. It started with the smallest boy making funny weird faces and calling him names that the other boy obviously loathed. That class was located at the end of the block of the building next to the teachers’ quarters area, where some of the teachers who were not from the island stayed. During the school holidays, most of the quarters would be empty. If the students made a lot of noise, this indefinitely would disrupt the peace and quiet time that the morning session teachers were enjoying in the afternoon. Like the wind picking up during a storm, their yelling seemed to grow louder by the second. I thought I really had to come up with something quicky to prevent the harrowing situation from escalating. Like a skilled magician pulling a trick out from under her sleeves, I suddenly got an idea. A novel that I read a few months ago suddenly flashed through my mind. Yes, I could tell them a story, the kind that would appeal to a bunch of Form One students, thinking that this story would hopefully calm them down.

I quickly made a deal with them. If they would be quiet and went back to their seats, I would tell them a story. The two boys suddenly stopped running, and their faces turned towards me. In fact, all of them were looking at me. This was my chance. I finally got a fish at the end of my fishing line. All I needed to do was reel the fish in. The tall girl turned towards the two boys all of the sudden and told them to go back to their seats quickly so that I could start telling them a story. I was rather amazed because the chaos just a few minutes ago seemed to subside in a matter of seconds. The two boys reluctantly went back to their seats, and all eyes were on me. One of the chapters of the novel, *The Smoke Jumper* by Nicholas Evans, came to mind, as soon as the two boys settled down. Since the two boys were behaving rather unruly earlier, I decided to tell them a story about a wolf and a chipmunk in the hope that they would learn the lesson from the story.

It was an Indian tale that one of the characters in the novel was telling to a teenage girl, another character in the novel, who was always getting into all sorts of trouble. The tale started with a pack of wolf pups that were all playful and feisty. They spent most of their days chasing a wild rabbit or a chipmunk in the woods. But their most favourite activity was zigzagging through a rocky trail in the woods. One morning, one of the largest wolf pups dared the other pups to run as fast as they could along the trail. All the pups were trembling in fear at the thought of crashing into the rocks and ended up injuring themselves. One of the pups, however, accepted the dare. The wolf pup wanted to prove that he was one brave wolf to the other pups. So he dashed through the rocky trail and kept increasing his speed. The other pups started to howl, cheering him to run faster. He was doing quite well, and all the other pups were quite impressed with his ability, thinking that the pup was probably the bravest of them all. All of a sudden, he lost his footing and went crashing into the rocks. His front leg was badly injured, and he was barely able to walk back to his den. Weeks later he managed to recover, but he was still limping all over the place. He wanted to play with the other pups but, because he was too slow, they began to ignore him. He isolated himself in his den and, due to his injury, he could not hunt for food. He became so weak and if that persisted any longer, he could die of hunger.

One morning, when the pup opened his eyes, he saw a pile of acorns on the ground. He was so hungry that he quickly gobbled up all the acorns and continued his sleep. The next morning, again, he found another pile of acorns right in front of his nose. He was so

grateful that he had something to eat for two days in a row. The pup was curious and wondered who would have left him the food. So the next morning, he decided to wake up early and waited for his food. Suddenly, he heard a strange noise—a loud puffing and huffing sound—and he saw a large pile of acorns approaching from the entrance of his den. The acorn pile then dropped to the ground, and the pup saw a chipmunk, the same chipmunk that he and the other pups were chasing just a few weeks earlier. The chipmunk was terrified as the wolf pup was wide awake and was staring down at him. The wolf pup however did not launch at him, and he just stood there, frozen on the ground. The pup then nodded to the chipmunk, thanking him for the acorns that he had been bringing to his den. The chipmunk made a little squeal and quickly left the den. The next day and for days after that, the chipmunk continued bringing a pile of acorns for the pup until he regained his strength. Obviously, both of them became good friends. The other wolf pups had also stopped chasing the chipmunk because he would growl at them if they attempted to start a chase.

The school bell rang as if on cue. Another lesson would begin soon and, before the teacher for the next period appeared at the door, I quickly asked what lesson that they could learn from the story. They gave many answers, but one stood out. It was from one of the girls, the taller one. She said that even though the chipmunk was always being chased by the wolf pup, he still helped the injured wolf, risking his life because he knew kindness pays in the end. I quickly ended the lesson and packed my things. The students said that they could not wait for another English lesson. I told them I would tell them another story if they promised to do all the exercises given to them. They nodded, and I smiled at them before walking out of the class. Walking back to the staffroom, I realized that the novel by Nicholas Evans had saved my life.

* * * * *

“Orchids on the Water”

by Dian Seidel

Khru Nok would countenance no wallflowers.

Bowls and baskets overflowing with orange marigolds, purple orchids, and white chrysanthemums covered the floor. Their fragrances filled the classroom the day before the full moon of the twelfth month of the Thai lunar year. To prepare for *Loy Krathong*, *Khru* Nok would teach our students how to make floating baskets.

The moment she spoke those two Thai words, a fragment of melody from long ago invaded my head. In October 1990, Steve and I heard it everywhere—in our Bangkok hotel lobby, in Chiang Mai’s marketplaces, at the beach in Hua Hin. The refrain *loy, loy krathong* was the soundtrack to our honeymoon. Twenty-nine years later, I still regretted our ill-informed itinerary. We had left Thailand before the full moon, so our only experience of the holiday was this earworm. Now, as teachers in an English-immersion kindergarten in Pathumthani, we were getting a second chance.

Twice a week, I happily handed the class over to *Khru* Nok, who taught our students, all Thai, their mother tongue. Neither Steve nor I had yet managed to keep these energetic children engaged for more than half an hour at a stretch, and we both relished the break. But *Khru* Nok insisted we join this lesson. After all, she said, everyone needs a *krathong* to honor the water spirits, cast off bad karma, and welcome what Thai people call the cold season.

First she taught about banana trees, essential to crafting a *krathong*. She gave us each an enormous leaf, a saucer-sized slice of stem, and a pair of blunt-nosed scissors designed for tiny hands. Following *Khru* Nok’s instructions, we all cut our leaves into circles and strips, then folded the strips into perky cat-ear triangles. With straight pins (definitely *not* designed for tiny hands), we covered the pithy stems with the shiny green leaves. With

a bucket of water, *Khru* Nok showed us how our *krathongs*, which resembled little lily pads, floated equally well.

Next we decorated them with flowers. Some children made riotous piles of color. Others created meticulously symmetrical arrangements. Unsure of Thai design sensibility, I kept mine minimalist—orchids only. As we worked on our baskets, I suddenly heard the melody. It wasn't exactly my earworm—memory must have modulated the original into a Westernized version—but it was surely the *Loy Krathong* song.

Most of the children knew the lyrics and sang along. A few of the older ones spontaneously formed a line to promenade around the classroom, their arms swaying rhythmically overhead. *Khru* Nok re-arranged the children, pairing each pro with a novice or two, and soon everyone had the steps of the simple dance.

Everyone except Steve and me. We don't dance much, and when we do it's a freeform affair. But *Khru* Nok's beautiful *yim suu suu*, her special smile of encouragement that made the children try harder to write their ornate Thai letters correctly, was irresistible. After tucking orchids behind our ears, she had us literally follow in her footsteps until we absorbed the rudiments of what I then understood to be an essential element of the holiday.

We all needed to work on the graceful hand gestures that make this dance truly Thai. *Khru* Nok's long fingers arched like swallows' wings. I was convinced every elegant movement had meaning, though exactly what remained a mystery. With each circuit around the room and each repetition of the song, my steps grew lighter until, magically, I no longer had to think. Everyone was moving in synchrony. Floating.

Steve and I headed to school the next morning eager to experience the holiday. Our class joined the others on the sports field for the festivities. Everyone was resplendent in traditional Thai attire. The children wore silk bloomer pants in dazzling colors, highlighted with golden threads that shimmered in the sunlight. The girls were in frilly tops, the boys in white jackets with gold buttons. Teachers wore styles ranging from Hmong tribal garb, with colorful embroidery, to southern Thai fisherman pants, with patchwork pockets. *Khru* Nok looked elegant in a purple sarong skirt and gold silk brocade jacket. Steve and I were self-conscious, and underdressed, in outfits from home.

The crowd quieted down as our school director, Dr. Pat, stepped onto a platform and began what I assumed was a welcome address. I heard the word *Amerigaa* and wondered what possible link she could make between this uniquely Thai holiday and the United States. A moment later, she was looking straight at Steve and me, gesturing for us to join her onstage.

Making our way across the field, I frantically tried to formulate remarks suitable to the occasion. The panic on Steve's face told me he was doing the same, but we had no time to compare notes.

When we reached the platform, the music began. *Loy, loy krathong*. No speeches were required. It was worse. Dr. Pat beckoned us to follow as she danced down the running track. Her steps were graceful and intricate. And completely unfamiliar. Apparently, we had learned the kindergarten version, but suddenly even that vanished.

Steve and I scanned the assembly for *Khru Nok*, but she was lost in the crowd. With all eyes on us, we had no choice but to follow Dr. Pat. Arms doing a hula wave, I improvised a step-together-step. Steve moaned, "We never signed up for this," then reluctantly followed my lead.

The oldest students first, class after class entered the parade as the song played over and over again. Rounding the second bend, we spotted *Khru Nok* with our class. Seeing them, I wanted to disappear.

But Steve laughed aloud. Our kids, unfazed by our mangled steps, joined his laughter and clapped. Then, inspired by *Khru Nok*'s example and her *yin suu suu*, they pressed their palms, bowed their heads toward us to *wai*, and entered the dance. By the time we completed the initial lap, we were going with the flow, buoyed by the crowd.

When the music stopped, Dr. Pat invited the kindergarten to launch our *krathongs* first. This wasn't the enchanting, moonlit scene that I imagined would unfold after sunset: candle-lit *krathongs* drifting on Bangkok's canals, along Chiang Mai's Ping River, and on the beaches rimming the Gulf of Thailand.

It was better. With a nod to *Khru Nok*, and another to Steve, I lowered my *krathong* of orchids into our improvised inflatable splash pool. A gentle push sent it floating toward the other baskets gradually covering the water surface. With an exhalation and a little prayer, I released my American anxieties to the water spirits.

* * * * *

“Unlearn, Relove”

by Livia Kriwangko

All my life I've heard my mother
attribute her misery to
my father.
Every heartache, every headache,
every diagnosis he caused.
My impressionable mind had no choice but
to believe her.
Harder and harder it became
the more alienated he became
to see him as anyone else but a villain.
Years I would spend looking
through the lenses my mother placed
before my eyes the husband of her perceptions, not
my father,
one half of me – one half of
the tier above mine on our family tree,
who stores precious memories in his phone,
who keeps precious memories in his heart.
My father
not an easy man to love
a man of many stories of few emotions
disappearing behind a charismatic persona
of a proud self-made man,
his stance always tall shoulders towards the back,

his words a knife and all hearts butter,
these qualities of his on the outside,
for so long I believed to be reflections of the inside.
Perhaps my own empowered lenses turned father into foe
my empowered mind, my empowered voice
understood I needed to defend my own.
After three daughters
after two granddaughters
after eighteen months with a now all too familiar companion, fear,
vulnerability peeked through the surface
I suddenly see more
of the person underneath the patriarch
of the husband aware and considerate
of the father,
my father,
who without hesitation forwent his greatest ammunition pride
so that I may live made me believe
in a father who loves.
This revelation marked the removal of all lenses
now simply looking through the eyes of
daughter
that I may unlearn,
that I may relove.

* * * * *

“I Owe You a Poem”

by Theo Itchon

I feel I owe you a prayer,
your haloed face illuminates the dark halls of this house
like candlelight during a blackout, when you learned
to dissect your innards.

The sound of skin tearing open fills the quiet room,
and you are still like a dead bird.

The Virgin Mary watches your closed eyes,
her face on a wall partially burnt and you turn your back,
Your hair is engulfed in flames, red-orange embers
streaking down your slumbering frame, ashes falling
like leaves to a tree, like beads to a rosary,
never to return.

I feel I owe you a song,
twinkling sounds echoing through this lonely emporium,
where you found out the moon whispered back,
and the trees really do wave their leaves for you.
Whistle me a song, and I'll ask you to tango,
two reflections, but we were never kind to each other.
The evening is quiet now, and our friends left hours ago.
Curtains roll back quietly onto themselves as the fire spreads,
folding and forever disappearing.

I feel I owe you an apology

for leaving so abruptly, for not leaving a note.
Sparks flew in my abdomen when I swallowed;
I ask Mary, "where do the crows go when they're too far to hear my call?"
Her mouth twists into a grin and says, "The crows live
in a perfectly hollow circle in the attic,
where you kissed your first boy,
and in the bedroom where you learned to iron your fingers
into stick-straight figures so you can count
how long it's been since you were yourself."
The ceiling came crashing down then.
"You're cold," I say.
You opened your mouth, and flames came spilling out.

I feel I owe you farewell
because your loss is my grief left unpunished.
Some days I open my mouth, and call your name;
my voice echoes back. I weep.
Mother is calling me home, as yours called you.
Perhaps there is a better ending for us,
somewhere in the middle but the evening is quiet now,
except for the crows, and one last photograph
still burning on the bedroom floor.

* * * * *

“Nature Poem”

by Theo Itchon

Perhaps I could write a poem
this one brighter than the last.
Perhaps I could put butterflies in it,
make them flutter around the scene:
a wide span of green grass, a cow or two,
and muddy banks over the sides.
I could take a nap, a cat on its belly
my head filled with sweetness
cutting through my sour fruits.
Perhaps I could write a song here.
Sing the ways I could love a woman,
and how she would love me too.
Perhaps I can dance in front of a fire,
let my skin prickle beside the heat.
This is a meadow I can claim my own,
from the setting sun to the croaking frogs.
The world is a silent hum,
always in the back of my head,
and it belongs to me.
Berries melt in my mouth and with it
an embrace from the sky,
warm like how forgiveness feels,
kind like cold water in the summer.
Perhaps I can light up my poem

just enough to capture an eyelash of the sun.
Its blaze would brighten my wandering soul,
finally worthy of the earth.

* * * * *

“The Funeral”

by Theo Itchon

Slowly, I pack my hats and my bling,
my cats, and my books and my coasters, too.
I take the framed pictures off the wall,
and like this home, I leave the hooks bare.
I let the dirty thing under the bed to groan,
protesting my departure, whining child-like.
I watch the dust settle, but I do not bid it farewell,
the earth will follow me wherever I go.
I take my decapitated head from the freezer,
mourn over my long orange hair
and my lovingly plucked eyebrows.
I wash my hands and kiss my scarred wrists.
I pick my arms off the floor, already in boxes.
I envelop my hips in a woolen blanket,
I say I'm sorry I never loved you properly.
But I leave my thighs untouched,
as they always should have been.
I leave my elbows on the furnace for them to find;
I never really left, I'll always exist here.
I put my neck, my fingers, and my ankles in keychains,
send them to my mother and father.
It's true; part of me always belonged to them anyway.
I leave this hallowed house, a new heart intact.
My brand new skin, glimmering in the sun;

no burning gashes, no bruises to poke at.
I lay tangerine-hued flowers on the ground
for myself to one day find.
Here lies brilliance and hope.
May you rest in peace.

* * * * *

“Grago”

by Matthew Jerome van Huizen

The decaying sampan bobbles with the tide, rising and falling.
Into the Malacca Straits, her fissures weep with *saudade*,
Awaiting the *pescados* in the cool plum mists of early morning,
Awaiting that old man who comes and tills the sea.
The last few of his kind.

Here at the edge of all things,
His white-haired, bob-nosed face scans the horizon,
He casts his nets and awaits what the sea brings.

* * *

A deep sigh greets the ever-brightening day.
The ever-silent empty nets now retrieved, all but one,
The cool, far-folded mists of the morn replaced with the realisation –
of an empty catch.

Alas! for this sickly old uncle,
Who in his youth was surrounded by happy times.
Like drunk men, who care not about the worries of the world,
Days filled with strong hours working.
And nights, with women, song, and wine,
And Christmas lunch with *feng* and *ambilek*,
With *ta* and *ba* and their daughters and sons.

Such naughty children who ask their mothers:

“Ma, what’s knife in Kristang” ...

And get a slap in return.

Those days have passed now,
And the waters are mostly empty,
the sea receding inch by inch,
Reclaimed land - for the government.

A salty wave pierces the last net. It moves –
A catch!
A glimpse of that happy world where he was born.
The dying sea creatures glimmer in the mid-morning sun.
Tiny dancing prawns, a couple of handfuls.
Grago, he says, his sweet eyes brighten.

He never forgets that old joke.
Knife in Kristang is *faaka*.
He smiles and jumps off the *sampan*.

* * * * *

“Dear God, Please CC Me Next Time”

by Louie Anne Mapa

My phone doesn't know how to ring.
Blessed be those who hear the words of God;
I checked my messages and still no signal,
perhaps your message is lost in tangled cables
and all I need is some patience.

In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice;
throat sore from all the dry heaving, and
screaming. Lubricated with holy water and orange
juice, then proceeded to wail. Do you hear me?
Banging the walls until my neighbor screams,
mistaking their curses and echoed complaints
as your divine reply. Dear God, why?

As per my last email...
Three missed calls later...
This user cannot be reached...
Ten unsent, send, send, send.
Remove message. unsent...
Sad face emoji, crying emoji, laughing emoji.
Seen at 5:45 PM.

Sorry for the flood.
It's been a month or so, hoping for one to be seen.
Guess, you're on silent. Don't worry, I'm not that clingy,

God forbid that I am. Praise is one thing, blind devotion
is desperation masked as love and faith.

I sought the Lord, and he has not answered me;
I hate silence.

The tongue has the power of life and death;
the quiet has nothing to offer but oblivion,
forgotten memories friends tossed into nothingness.
Longing and loneliness meet here, rendezvousing
with space and time; filling the room with static,
repenting for the noise that spilled and splattered,
waiting for... what am I waiting for?

Somewhere on the other side of this phone
is a network of prayers unanswered, dear God
can you not hear? I close my eyes and imagine
purgatory and hell until these messages will reach you.
Checked my phone to see that it was stuck on airplane mode,
try again please, dear God, I swear I'm listening.

* * * * *

“The Night Market”

by Grace Crocker

Come!

Join us.

Tonight, we
visit that place
by the old temple.

It's the night market.

Loud music plays.

They worship.

But we
shop.

Quick!

Don't fret!

Priests don't mind.

They're used to us.

We work, side-by-side.

Walk the night market!

Wander the streets.

Join us for

a night

out.

* * * * *

“Thailand, My Land”

by Dan Brook

I fly west
over the vast Pacific
to go east
as I have many times
sunset turns sunrise
re-orienting myself
realizing
that every orientation
is also a disorientation
especially
coming from the occident
my accident of birth
what choice do we have?
all learning involves unlearning
all being involves other beings
we are one
in our seemingly separate ways
recognizing
that the same place
is also a different one
each and every time
just as I become different too
always evolving
I cannot step into
the same Thailand twice

no matter how many times
I'm blessed to be here
floating
in a land of beauty
nature, culture, structure
humans, animals, plants
perspective, peaceful
passionate passionfruit
mangosteen madness
rambutan rambunctiousness
fresh tropical fruits
bursting with color, flavor, nutrition
revitalizing, reinvigorating
I've arrived, sort of
jet-lagged, culture-shocked, liminal
not quite here nor there
yet both
I return
to the oldest temple in Chiang Mai
trying to anchor my existence
ancient, large, stunning
yet nearly empty
I plan to sit
and sit and sit
a morning meditation
my daily re-orientation
the sweet smell of plumeria
the piercing roar of motorbikes
some birds chirping
the wet heat of the tropics
the buzzing flies making their way

as we all do
or at least try
Sawatdee kaaaa, she sings to me
greeting me with a glorious smile
that sunflowers would envy
and I am unexpectedly lost
in another fairy tale of sorts
a different disorientation
I almost respond to her
fumfering something in Tenglish
barely making sense
even to myself
though I am spared
with gratitude
the chill attitude
of mai pen rai
and sabai sabai
that let-it-go, no-worries, all's-good
Thainess
that I so deeply appreciate
offering me instant forgiveness
welcoming me
infusing me
letting me know
although so far from home
I am home nevertheless

* * * * *

“Buddhism”

by Dan Brook

a deer in Deer Park
Buddha preaches in Sarnath
outside ancient Varanasi
already ancient when he arrived
telling us what we know
yet we do not always realize
or remember
suffering exists
suffering has causes
suffering has solutions
instead of craving and attachment
we should align
our good thoughts, good words, and good deeds
whatever we desire
and most everything else
will eventually be gone
permanent impermanence
perfect imperfections
meditation for peace of mind
focused awareness without judgment
cultivating lovingkindness
compassion for others
compassion for self
it is not personal

no me without we
seeing reality for what it is
recognizing oneness
breaking the cycle
forming positive patterns
becoming free and happy
enlightenment