

Anak Sastra

Issue 49

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Contributor Bios

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Kenny Andriana  is a proud father of two cats, two fishes, and a few pots of plants. He is currently working to achieve his childhood dream of being a writer by constantly dreaming and over-analyzing it.

Robin Ray is an author and musician living in the Pacific Northwest of the US. His works have appeared in *Enchanted Conversations*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Blue Moon Literary & Arts Review*, *Hawk & Whippoorwill*, and elsewhere. He is the author of one novel, *Commoner the Vagabond*, and five novellas.

Liswindio Apendicaesar   is an Indonesian writer and translator. His pieces have been featured in national and international literary outlets, such as *Baca Petra*, *Tempo*, *Oyez Review*, *Voice and Verse Poetry Hong Kong*, etc. In 2021 he was chosen to be one of the emerging writers, as well as invited to be a panelist at the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival. He published his first Indonesian poetry collection, *Anicca*, in February 2022. Currently he works as teacher in Myanmar International School.


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Arjun Dhillon is an aspiring writer from Malaysia who is currently studying at an institution of higher learning.

Aside from being a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand, **Alan McNarie** has also been, at various times, a Missouri farm kid; a high school teacher on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona; a grad student at the University of Missouri--Columbia, where he became the first student in the school's history to receive a doctoral degree for writing a novel; a professor of English at a university in Hawaii; and, for thirty years or so, a journalist specializing in investigative stories on the Big Island of Hawaii. In addition to hundreds of journalistic articles, he has published a few score of poems and two novels; his first novel, *Yeshua*, won the Pushcart Press's Editor's Book Award. Since retiring in 2021, he has been concentrating on his first love, poetry.

Gab Jopillo  is an AB Communication graduate. When not writing, you can find her reading a book or working out at the gym.

Nicole Lee Jiaqi  is a nineteen-year-old girl from Selangor, Malaysia. She is currently a second-year student at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, studying a degree in English with Creative Writing. Having written numerous articles for her university's magazine as well as a poetry collection book on Wattpad titled *sunflowers by the sea*, Nicole's most recent works consist of the mental battle she has had with her mental health. She hopes to give comfort to others through her writing, that anyone struggling is not alone.

Leei Wong is from Singapore and currently resides in Australia. She is a lecturer at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Sheridan Institute of Higher Education (Australia).

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“The Couch”

by Audrey Silalahi

Yeah. So, we bought the couch from a random roadside furniture store in Ubud, remember? For how much we paid for it — 3 million rupiah— I thought it was worth the money. The old one had been looking frail and used up for months, its edges slowly becoming thinner and thinner as days passed by. Its initially brown nutty color started to resemble soil more than hazelnut, signaling a change.

The smell of old leather took over the living room the first night the couch was delivered. I remember hating the smell so much I lit up incense all over the living room. You thought I was overreacting, right? Like, the smell was bad but it wasn't horrible enough to make the house smell like sesajen.

I didn't want to make a big deal over it, obviously, because we both agreed on the couch and I was the one to bring up the fact that we desperately needed a new one. But the old couch was your space, you know? Between us, you were the one who spent the most time on the old one, spending time after work drinking beer or watching some soccer match on TV. If the smell of our old couch could be reduced into a perfume bottle, it would probably just smell like beer and cigarettes. So, when I knew that the brown leather couch in the store caught your eye the second we walked in, I knew we had to pick that one.

I hated the couch, at first. I know you're probably like, “Why didn't you tell me that?” I think I just thought I liked whatever you liked.

The couch just felt so old to me, you know? It didn't necessarily *look* old, but it screamed out-of-date more than antiquated. I guess dark brown leather just didn't complement our already dark living room — the terra-cotta rug would have looked like something out of an *Arch Digest* spread if only our tree root coffee table (that you chose!)

didn't look like something that came out of an early 2000s Indonesian soap opera. And to add to that, our muted cream-colored floral wallpaper reminded me so much of the walls of those kitsch hotels in Kuta, which, of course, unless you're a cheap white backpacker from Australia, there's nothing enticing about that. I felt that our already stale living room started to make me feel like how stale old bread does: sad.

But here's the thing, we were doing so good, you know? I was starting therapy again and you started taking me on dates again. Do you remember the number of times I've spilled wine on that couch? Or can you recall how I moved almost all of my current reads to the shelf under the living room TV because I started to prefer reading with you in the room instead of alone in the bedroom during the day? Do you remember how many breakfasts we had on that couch? We stopped having breakfast on that stupid, expensive mahogany table, completely moving our mornings to the living room, too. You started that new painting and work was going really well for me. We were doing so good. *You* were doing so good.

That one time when *my* oma came to visit, that time in June last year, we fought so much the week before that (something about you spending too much time in the gallery and me having to pick so much of your mess at home), that I knew she could sense something was definitely wrong. And I was so worried that I tried so hard to convince Oma that the guest room wasn't ready but then you came home and you were like, "Oma! I missed you so much — I got you your favorite cake from Biku." But you know what I initially thought when you did that?

Leave, I thought. I didn't know if it was meant for myself, or you. So, you and Oma sat on the couch and you told her all about the new painting commission you had. She was so happy she didn't even mention how much she knew I hated leather furniture.

When I was in middle school Adrian, I used to think that my dad liked to break things.

Did I ever tell you that? You know that he has problems with his anger but I never really specified how— he wasn't directly violent to either my mom or me, but he broke things. Mugs, plates, whatever fragile object that probably costed less than 100 rupiah and were easily replaceable seemed so invaluable to him whenever he's blinded by anger. And

because I was young and naive and I thought that since it was objects he liked to break, and not me, he wasn't violent. Not really.

And Oma would come to visit our Ubud house a lot in middle school. Back then, I never really thought much about it but now I know that my mom wanted to make sure that I had someone to lean on. Oma was the only person brave enough to stand up to my dad's rage, she would tell him, "Don't you dare talk to my daughter that way!" Now I'm wondering why I don't stand up for myself the way my Oma taught me to.

But then, this one time, during Oma's usual weekly visits, Opa came with her too, and I could sense they were being weird. It's one of those heart dropping feelings you felt as a child when you could tell the mood was shifting at home. They were being too nice, too weird. Her voice was softer; and okay, Oma always spoke in italics, you get this (That sounds like it doesn't make any sense if you don't know her, but anyone close to her will understand this. The soft-spoken nature of her Balinese heritage, with the influence of Opa's Javanese upbringing only made Oma more soft-spoken. For me, oma's voice was the calligraphy to my dad's rough-edges), but she was being extra, extra nurturing. Like asking me twice if I had dinner already and three times if I wanted something to eat. And Opa even gave me some extra cash from his wallet for pocket money.

I could physically feel that something was wrong so I asked them directly and they told me, "Mama and Papa want you to move in with us for a couple days. At least while they figure things out."

They were living in Batubelig at the time, and because I was fifteen and wanted to be closer to school and friends and the beach, I immediately agreed. So, that's how Batubelig became my home for a few months. God, now that I'm writing all of this, I wonder why I was so compliant and accepting. My fucking parents didn't have the balls to tell me themselves that they needed their daughter to move out so they sent me my grandparents instead?

I thought I was only going to live there for a few weeks but a few weeks became a few months and their divorce just never ended up happening. It made it feel like I was the sole reason they fought so much, you know? So, when my mom finally told me that they ended up

staying together and that I could move back in with them, it wasn't relief I heard in her voice, *it was disappointment.*

Do you understand why I'm telling you this? I was never taught to understand that leaving doesn't mean failure. I thought leaving was for losers. For parents who put their kids in elite private schools, only seeing them on weekends and letting them grow up with paid caretakers. But I lived with my parents the rest of high school. And they're still together, you know that. Acceptance and compliance and submission were all I ever really knew.

So. There it is. The big reveal: I didn't leave you when you told me that you'd been sleeping with other people because it felt like it was my fault you did that. That's also why I didn't tell you that I couldn't stand leather couches because *you*, somehow, thought it was "dope" and comfortable. I let you take up so much of our shared space in the living room because I mistook sacrifice for compromise. Because how am I supposed to know how to say "no" when I grew up saying "yes" to everything?

And then when you told me that you wanted to leave, that you physically felt like you had to leave, I too, physically felt like a bone inside me was breaking. I mean, it was two days before my birthday, you asshole. I wanted so badly to just say, "I'm turning 24 in two days, can we just forget this ever happened and move on? I forgive you. Can we, please?"

But I didn't.

The next morning, I woke up to you packing your bags. And two days later, I saw you got a fucking dog. On my birthday. On a new, non-leather, couch in a new house in fucking Canggu (Canggu! What are you? A tourist?). I mean you were the one who threw my birthday party last year; How is it possible that you went from that to completely ruining it this year?

I remember you asking me if you could take the couch that morning. It's the only thing you asked me that I really remember so vividly.

I could only reply so defensively, "You're going to take the couch?"

Isn't that sad? From hating something so much, to wanting it so badly that I finally felt like standing up for myself for once. All for that stupid fucking couch I never really even liked. I just wanted to have a piece of you and spite you at the same time.

“You want it?” You sounded so patronizing, like it was my fault we had to even have that conversation in the first place.

“Do you?”

“I mean, not really. I don’t really care” I remember thinking how good you are at hand picking things and calling them special and then leaving them to fall apart.

In the end, no one ended up taking the couch. You moved out and I quickly did the same soon after. And you made me decide to divide almost everything so equally that to our friends, the break up probably seemed amicable, a mistake, even. But not the couch.

So, yeah, for such a random couch from an even more random roadside store in Ubud, I guess we’ve given it life. I also want you to know that I’m selling the couch, letting it fill up some other living room with the smell of more cigarettes and beer and old leather and probably a hint of sadness. If that fucking couch could speak, Adrian, imagine the things it would say.

* * * * *

“A Piercing Eye”

by Barbara Kuessner Hughes

As the storm thrashed through the village, Azizah lay in the four-poster bed which had belonged to her aunt Haryati and watched through the window as trees assaulted the sky and scratched the moon.

She could have been in the middle of an ocean, rather than a village in Malaysia; the house was creaking like a galleon riding waves, its dark woods yielding subtly to the winds. Over a century old, it stood at the edge of the kampung and was a relic from the time when Makcik - Auntie's - family were the most prosperous people in the area. Carved fretwork lined its staircase, roof lines and porch, and inside, its floorboards and ceiling beams glowed with a patina of age.

Azizah pulled the sheet up to her chin and waited for the tempest to pass. She felt safe enough; the house, which had been built without the aid of a single metal screw or nail, its pieces carved to mould into one another, had withstood far fiercer onslaughts than this one. But the sounds in the wind made her think of voices and remember the stories Makcik Haryati used to tell her. Not just the traditional tales of Malay folklore, of *hantu* and ghosts, of creatures which lurked in the night, overcoming the susceptible – “Stay out of the forest”, Makcik would warn her. “It’s the domain of other beings. Stay in the kampung, where you’re safe” - but countless sagas of her own devising, frequently revolving around beings which inhabited the dark corners of old wooden houses.

Azizah’s mind had been plied with disquieting stories about aged crones whose sudden appearance in someone’s life would presage doom or serve as a reprimand from angry spirits. When she was a young child, her fear had grown so much that she would try to run the other way if she saw an elderly woman approach along the street.

'Why do you behave like that?' Makcik would demand. 'Running away every time a female elder passes our home! If you behave so strangely, people will say you're badly brought up!'

'I'm sorry, Auntie.'

Then there was Makcik's own unique legend of a monkey which was not a flesh-and-blood animal at all, but a canny-eyed, bandy-legged, sharp-fanged simian nightmare. This demon would steal fruit and pull all the usual tricks of climbing and swinging and chattering, but get too close and it would take out your eyes by supernatural means, and devour them.

As a result, Azizah would hide in the house if a monkey so much as approached Makcik's fruit trees, and on one occasion she'd cowered beneath her aunt's bed for several hours until Makcik discovered her there and pulled her out.

It had taken her several years to overcome her fears of harmless old ladies and monkeys, and another several years for her to realise she should never have had those fears in the first place. It was only when she left home that she learned most people didn't have entire eccentric mythologies of their own. How could her aunt not have realised how frightening her stories would be for a child? Had she *wanted* to terrify her? It was difficult to recall these incidents without rancour.

But now it was the school holidays, and she'd come to the house to tidy it, dispose of her aunt's clothing, and tend the garden. Even if her aunt hadn't died, she would have been in need of respite; teaching six-year-olds was stressful.

Giving up on the notion of going back to sleep, Azizah got up and began to wander around the house. The air currents blowing through the structure were scented by fragrant woods: carved screens, a camphorwood chest used to store linens, a sandalwood jewellery box containing Makcik's rings and silver necklaces. And everywhere was an odour of dust which Azizah had been trying to combat: opening the shutters on the windows and wiping over every surface with a damp cloth.

When Azizah was eight, the car in which her parents Mansor and Delima had been travelling was forced off a narrow, muddy mountain road by a landslide of red earth and pushed into a jungle ravine. They'd both died within minutes. There was a wedding picture of them on a sideboard: sitting on their *bersanding*, surrounded by blossoms, Mansor gazing

off to one side as though too overwhelmed to meet the camera's eye, Delima frozen-faced and so straight-backed that she could have been a plastic doll. Seeing the photograph always gave Azizah a pang, but she didn't remember her parents well.

There was also a framed photograph of Makcik's son Ashraf refereeing a football match. He lived hundreds of miles away and had rarely visited his mother. Azizah had never had much sense that her aunt was fond of her; she'd been taken on as a duty, but ever since the day she'd arrived in the household, Ashraf had worn a self-imposed hairshirt of resentful displacement.

Now that Makcik Haryati was dead, Azizah had ended up as the house's custodian; Ashraf had declared he wanted nothing to do with it. 'It's a heap of woodworm and rot. It's a burden to maintain. You're welcome to it,' he'd told Azizah on the phone.

Of course, he was still the owner, and he'd thrown the task of looking after the house at her as a punishment, a liability. But she didn't mind; she'd always liked it. It was the only home she could really remember.

Next to the photo of Ashraf stood a framed picture which Azizah had brought with her from the city: a mosaic of petal shapes crayoned in by Puteri. Azizah knew she shouldn't have a favourite student, but she couldn't help herself.

The characters of Azizah's pupils varied; some were cheekier than others, some more likely to be studious. There were daydreamy ones who strayed off the path like livestock. One boy, Faisal, already tended toward the scowls of a misanthrope. There was tiny Muda, who needed to be reminded not to pick his nose, and Nayla, who had to be instructed to do everything twice. Almost all of her young pupils were endearing, sparkly-eyed and possessed of sweet smiles, but Puteri was the only child Azizah thought about when she was not at the school. She even thought of her when she woke up in the mornings, imagining her running around and getting her school uniform dirty, or smearing *kaya* on an extra piece of bread.

The first day Puteri had arrived at the school, skipping through the compound as though entering an enchanted forest full of beauty and wonder rather than a potential battleground, her uniform of blue pinafore dress and white blouse far too big for her, and her piratical smile revealing that one tooth was missing, something about the child had glowed out to Azizah.

In no time, the loquacious little girl had revealed that her name was Puteri binte Ismail, she lived with her extended family, and she'd tripped and lost her tooth whilst hopping up a staircase. Where most of the children were deferential, even shy, and already well trained in the art of showing respect, Puteri was chatty and uninhibited, and when it emerged that she was also motherless, Azizah had felt her heart being lifted out of her chest and rearranged forever. Orphanhood was something they had in common, and Azizah's soul ached for the child.

'I don't like spring onions or goats,' Puteri had announced on that first day of school.

'Why don't you like spring onions?' Azizah asked, charmed by the child's tooth-gap.

'My auntie puts them on our food. She says it makes it look pretty. But I don't like the taste.' Puteri stuck out her tongue.

'And why don't you like goats?'

'I don't like the noise they make.' She'd imitated a bleat, rather well, and Azizah struggled not to giggle in a most unteacherlike way.

I like eggs and chocolate. I like beef curry and ikan bilis, but I don't like any other fish. Ever since then, Azizah had remembered every word Puteri uttered.

Pacing restlessly, she encountered her own reflection in a standing mirror: pale curves and under shadowed eyes, the texture of her skin like the surface on lumpy rice pudding, and that night, she was showing every one of her forty years. Soon, she'd be one of those "aunties" to whom strangers offered their seats on buses. Best not think about that now...

She followed the corridor towards the kitchen, glad to hear the storm dying down. Beneath a colourful woven food cover, there was chicken waiting for her, left over from earlier in the evening. An aroma of curry powder, oyster sauce and garlic greeted her nose, making moisture run into her mouth, and she bit into a drumstick. She also took a slice of bread pudding, delicious with coconut milk, orange peel and dried fruit, and as she chewed, she imagined her aunt sitting there with her.

She remembered the atmosphere when she was a child: the voices of Makcik and her sisters, and cooking aromas of garlic and belacan, so strong they were a physical presence.

The family, never very fruitful or long-lived, had peeled away until, apart from Ashraf and a couple of distant cousins in another state, only Azizah remained.

Just as well. If she'd had relatives, they'd have shaken their heads, bemoaned her single status and lack of offspring and pitied her, as she was sure Makcik's neighbours did.

Everywhere she went in this house, every time she turned a corner, she expected to be confronted by her aunt's slim, bent frame, beaten-down expression, and hair whose unruliness seemed to hint at internal frazzlement. Makcik was in the habit of creeping around the house as if she were afraid of it, muttering to herself when she thought no-one could hear. Her nerves were always a mere tremble away from the surface, and not helped by her sense of shame at her late husband's behaviour; Pakcik Ahmed had drunk alcohol, frequented massage parlours, and worst of all, had the habit of telling the world his business.

When Pakcik had died one morning a few years before, and been buried by sunset of the same day, from the moment he'd been put into the ground and the boxlike coffin arranged over him, it had been taboo to mention his name in the house.

But if Pakcik had been a curse for Makcik, Azizah recognised in her most honest moments that she'd never done much to increase her aunt's joy in life either. She would stand in the middle of the kitchen, bombarding Makcik with a hailstorm of grievances and jealousies, regaling her with overheated stories about the professional rivalries at the school where she worked, about which teacher was trying to curry favour with the head, and her own sense of being left behind whenever one of her colleagues got married or moved on to a better job. 'And then Norainah denied it! And 'Cik Yusof said... And Puan Safrina said... Of course, she was lying!' she'd rage, seeing her aunt shrivel up like a dry plant under the sun.

'Now, now,' Makcik would reprove her in the early days before she'd given up. 'Patient, calm and forgiving: that's how we should try to be. You mustn't get angry all the time.'

'Yes, you're right, Auntie,' Azizah would say with a meekness she didn't feel. Now, she felt chagrin at the memory of her own behaviour.

When Azizah had completed her teacher training and announced that she intended to share a house with other unmarried female teachers, her aunt had voiced no objections. If anything, Makcik's face had shown a delicate delight. The arrangement made sense; the

house was near the school compound, whereas getting to the kampung meant a meandering bus ride of at least an hour. Azizah suspected that her aunt, far from dreading being left alone, had rejoiced; she could sit on her veranda and chat with neighbours without needing to prepare a meal for anyone or stay up late to listen to their problems. Her only duties had been feeding her chickens and tending to her house and garden, and that had suited her fine.

Suddenly, Azizah registered wistfulness. She missed the sounds of her housemates in the town: pop music bouncing through the wall of her bedroom from Aisha's radio, chinkings from the kitchen as Nur cooked herself instant noodles before bedtime.

What was going to happen to this house? She had no desire to live by herself in the countryside. Although... The laidback rhythms of rural life were lulling her into a kind of stupor. Rising at dawn to the racket of cockerels, taking time over her prayers and filling herself with serenity, enjoying the familiar beat of the drum calling the faithful to the mosque. She felt purified by the pollution-free air, rinsed clean by the tomatoes and cucumbers from Makcik's garden, and in the evenings, on the veranda, she'd immerse herself in the glory of sunset and watch the moon come out, her ears ringing with insect chirpings.

All at once, as though the storm had left wisps behind it, there was a soft moan of wind, and Azizah's thoughts turned back to Makcik's anecdotes about the paranormal.

Azizah believed she'd once met a supernatural being, although she would never be certain. When she'd tried to raise the subject with her aunt, hoping to be told she was talking nonsense, Makcik's face had conveyed the message that some things were best not spoken about.

The first encounter had happened on a stressful day when Azizah was rushing to catch a train and she'd collided with a wrinkled woman wearing a purple-and-orange sari and carrying bags of fruit. The impact had been hard enough to make the woman tumble, scattering yellow pomelos, bristly red rambutans and a spiky pineapple onto the platform, and in her hurry to get past, Azizah had trodden on the woman's hand.

Then Azizah had noticed that the train's departure was slightly delayed. Thinking that she might just manage to board it, she'd started to run again.

And that was when it had happened: an amber eye had appeared, parallel with her own eyes, looking straight at her with a skewering directness, and she'd realised that the eye,

sharp as a hook, belonged to an old woman with sparse hair scraped into a bun. The woman's other eye was coated by a milky cataract, but somehow it seemed just as seeing as the fiery one.

Quite how it was possible when Azizah was already in swift motion, she'd never understood, but the woman had kept pace with her.

'Listen to me, Azizah binte Mansor,' the woman had hissed, that clear golden eye never letting up in its condemning scrutiny. 'Aren't you ashamed? Elders and the vulnerable deserve your respect and protection.' The eye had flared so luridly, it seemed likely to singe a mark onto Azizah's cheek. 'You must do your duty and help her.'

Without understanding what was happening, without even wanting to, Azizah had found herself doing an about-turn. She'd returned to the injured woman, uttered a stricken apology, picked up the pomelos, and checked the severity of her wound. She'd even bought her a cup of coffee and offered to take her to a doctor, a suggestion which was waved away. The woman's gratitude had warmed her, and afterwards she was glad she'd tried to help her. It had only been as she was waiting for the next train that the question had come to her: *How did that weird stranger know my name?*

The second occasion when she and the eerie stranger met hadn't left such a comforting...

But no, Azizah couldn't bear to think of that now.

Dawn had arrived, and a purple mist was floating above the ground. She decided to drink a large amount of coffee, take a bus into town, and do some shopping.

* * *

A few hours later, after browsing through a handful of clothing stores and eating a lunch of chicken curry, Azizah was walking back towards the bus stop when a distracted couple stepped backwards out of a sundries shop and collided with her. As Azizah overbalanced, she saw the man as a brief blur of black songkok and pristine white shirt. Her flailing arms released a column of plastic basins from their hook outside a shop, and they flew across a narrow ditch into the road, causing a car to halt.

'Sorry, sorry!' the man murmured, after his female companion had helped Azizah to her feet and the basins had been rounded up. 'Are you hurt? So sorry!'

'I'm OK lah,' Azizah said, more irritated than injured. Why couldn't people look where they were going?

'So sorry, sorry!' the man repeated, adding, 'Assalamualaikum,' and something about his voice set recollections flickering through Azizah like a juddering vintage movie. She realised she must be staring, that she must appear concerning, because the man's helpful female companion took a step backwards.

It took Azizah a moment to find her own voice: 'Wa'alaikumussalam.'

'I thought it must be you. It's I, Ibrahim!'

'Ibrahim,' Azizah repeated in a stupor. *Can this really be Ibrahim?* But yes, it had to be. This man with the black songkok on his head, wire-rimmed spectacles endowing him with a scholarly air, and the sharp handsomeness of his face fudged by middle age, too much food and too many thick, syrupy coffees had been a figure on the edge of her life and in the centre of her thought processes for so long... But how could someone become so unrecognisable in a few short years?

'I was sorry to hear your aunt passed away,' Ibrahim said, regarding her with solemn eyes, and now the woman standing beside him looked at Azizah with open sympathy.

'Yes...' Azizah said, befuddled by tiredness and the oddness of seeing him again.

Ibrahim peered at her through his spectacles. 'To Allah we belong, and to Him we will return.'

Nothing in Azizah's brain was functioning as it should. She noticed a fluttering in her chest, just as there always had been when she saw him, but it wasn't as pronounced as before; the butterfly was weary.

'This is my wife, Rahimah.' Ibrahim indicated the woman beside him. As though Azizah were training a telescope on herself, she watched as she and Rahimah salamed, touching one another's hands lightly and bringing their own hands to their hearts. As if she were a foreign tourist, she noticed the grace in the greeting, but she had little idea why she was performing it at that moment. Everything was a performance by rote.

Rahimah had a vivid blue tudung, pasty skin and smudgy features. The most distinctive thing about her was a small sickle-shaped scar on her left cheek. It lifted the

woman's countenance into something noteworthy. But not particularly attractive. Azizah's thinking was becoming sharper, outrage rising. *She's not prettier than me!*

At the time of Ibrahim's wedding, people had enthused about the beauty of his bride, the daughter of a local teacher. By then, Azizah was already living in the town, shielded from most of the gossip, but she hadn't managed to evade all of it.

She had to drag herself out of the swamp of bitter thoughts she was sinking into. It was just as well that a man walked past her, carrying a bag exuding a strong odour of dried fish. The smell caught Azizah's nostrils as effectively as smelling salts and brought her back to herself. When had she last met Ibrahim? When she came home to attend the wedding of Aayiz bin Yunus, son of the village head. She'd seen Ibrahim on the horizon, bustling about and holding one-way conversations with the most distinguished guests – a minor politician with a large, doughy stomach and a factory owner wearing a costly watch – as a self-styled local intellectual and unofficial village dignitary, and even through the lingering haze of her adoration, it had struck Azizah that he was a trifle self-important.

'I thought you moved away from here a few years ago?' Azizah said, pleased with herself for managing to ask a coherent question. 'After we all attended Aayiz's wedding?'

'Yes, but we moved back a few weeks ago because my wife and I want our three sons to grow up near our families.' *Three sons!* Azizah thought, envy stabbing at her. 'Besides which, I missed the peace of the countryside.' Ibrahim pulled himself a touch taller and smiled with visible pride. 'We've bought a house on Jalan Masjid – near to the mosque.'

Azizah remembered Ibrahim used to do desk work for the police. He must be earning well.

'You've inherited your aunt's house, of course,' Ibrahim was saying. 'The best house in this kampung, I've always thought. So pretty!'

'I haven't inherited it. It belongs to Ashraf. I'm only staying in it.'

'You're so fortunate to have it! It could go in Muzium Negara as an excellent example of indigenous architecture!' Ibrahim didn't seem to have heard her. 'But actually, it's strange it was built here, so far from the region that style comes from. You realise it's an outstanding example of a rumah kutai?'

'It is?' Azizah had no idea what Ibrahim was talking about.

'Haven't you ever noticed there's no other house like it in the area?' Ibrahim sounded reproving. His glasses were sliding down his slippery nose, and he poked them sharply upwards, as though to punish them.

Azizah had noticed. Sort of.

'You must have noticed the predominant style of house in this kampung?' Ibrahim demanded. "'Rumah limas". Here in the state of Selangor we have some splendid examples.' He pointed along the road at the scattered row of houses, each surrounded by its own small garden, each individual and yet – yes, she could see what Ibrahim meant; there was a unifying overall style. 'You see the pyramidal roofs? That's an influence from Dutch colonial times. And the stone supports under the houses? You don't get those everywhere, you know! Elsewhere people make do with wood!' He sounded as reproachful as if the stone supports were precious gems mistaken for pebbles. 'Did your ancestors happen to come from Perak, by any chance?' He was self-satisfied, waiting to be proved right.

'Er, I don't...'

'My husband likes old houses.' Rahimah's tone mingled apology, indulgence and gentle impatience, and Azizah half-expected the woman to roll her eyes.

'I'm interested in *traditional Malay architecture*,' Ibrahim corrected his wife. He'd developed a ponderous way of speaking, pausing halfway through each sentence as though arranging his notes on a mental podium. Azizah had first noticed it when he was waylaying the bigwigs at the wedding five years before, but she'd told herself she was imagining it. 'I'm interested in all those traditional forms of our culture which are compatible with our faith. And I've always wondered why that house style was built here, in this kampung.'

'Well, maybe my ancestors did come from – where did you say? Perak? And maybe they felt homesick?' Azizah suggested. Realising she was baring her own ignorance about several topics, not only vernacular building styles and the community where she'd grown up, but the very folk whose flesh and blood had bred her own, she felt a blush creep up her neck and heat her face. The conversation, the entire situation, was beginning to feel absurd, and her head was hurting from lack of sleep.

'That veranda must be a fine place to sit in the evenings,' Ibrahim mused. 'Like a princess. You can watch the whole kampung pass by, and they can see you, too.'

Suddenly, Azizah realised her solo occupation of Makcik's impressive house made her a person of status in Ibrahim's eyes. Now he thought it was desirable to know her! So many years of returning to the kampung to spend festivals with Makcik and running into Ibrahim from time to time... Only the most conventional courtesies paid to her aunt, the respect due to a senior citizen, only the most fleeting and dismissive of glances directed at her, Azizah. Years of being ignored and forced to ignore, and here he was, addressing her as though she were a figure of importance! She felt... irritated. Dismayed. And, she realised... repulsed.

'You must excuse me...' she mumbled. 'I'm going to miss my bus...' Ignoring their surprised faces and trying not to betray how disorientated she felt, she plunged away and pretended to scrutinise the inflatable animals and scarlet aeroplanes hanging up around a shop doorway. She kept her back turned for several minutes until, risking a glance over her shoulder, she saw they'd disappeared.

Then she walked to the bus stop, too agitated to care that the sun was striking her skin. Sweat was building up under her selendang and trickling down her neck, but she barely noticed.

Passing the grocery store run by old Mr Tan, the wizened Chinese man who was sitting outside it with his feet up on a blue plastic chair, she managed to compose herself enough to give him a wave.

'Hello, "Uncle"! she called, and he smiled and waved back, a man of few words at the best of times, now lulled into doziness by the growing heat of the afternoon. His faded T-shirt did nothing to hide how concave his chest was, nor how stringy his arms. When Makcik was ill, Mr Tan had checked on her every day, delivering her meagre supplies personally, and when he'd found her sprawled on her veranda with only a few hours of life left in her, he'd been the one who alerted the neighbours. Years of tenacious, longing thoughts about Ibrahim had pursued Azizah, yet now she would rather see a hundred Mr Tans than him!

Unfortunately, her route to the bus stop obliged her to pass along Jalan Masjid. There was only one house located near the mosque: a white concrete one-storey structure surrounded by coconut trees. It was imposing, but so plain that Azizah could understand Ibrahim's fascination with the filigree ornateness of her aunt's house. Bougainvillea bushes lined the compound on one side, and on the other, there was a grove of fruit trees: rambutan,

lime, jackfruit and mangosteen, partially concealing a water tank. The water in the tank must be used for the aubergine, long bean and cabbage plants which were just about visible from the road.

When she was a girl, full of quivering emotions and hopeless hopes, this particular stretch of road had been a path of golden dreams. Every rut, every puddle had a magical significance, and when it was time for Friday prayers, she would strain to catch a glimpse of Ibrahim in the distance: the handsomest boy for miles around, gifting his smiles like presents.

She'd thought they were in love. There was no physical intimacy, of course, and very few personal conversations. Actually, there was nothing except an occasional handsome smile, but she'd thought the feeling was mutual. Yet, no proposal had ever come. Ibrahim and his family had never approached her aunt. Azizah had stayed unmarried, and the topics of parenthood and the non-future of the family had been avoided. She and Makcik had both had a sense of impending disaster, of a ship nearing the rocks. All through her upbringing she'd been conditioned to think nothing was more important than family, therefore nothing could be more terrible than a family running out of members. In all the years since her fixation on Ibrahim had led nowhere, she'd made a habit of failing to notice other men and failing to notice them noticing her.

With only a couple of exceptions, the most important one being her Indian admirer, Mustafa. Azizah had liked his handsome face and amusing manner, but she'd never done anything to signal that his advances would be welcome. She'd assumed because he came from a different race and a humbler background and walked with a slight limp, Makcik wouldn't accept him as a suitor. And it had never entered Azizah's brain that she could assert herself.

She felt something deep inside her plunging downwards. Perhaps, in spite of everything, Makcik would have been happy to see her married off...

Oh, what a fool I've been! she thought, and it was as though she'd been felled by lightning. As if half of her brain had caved in. As though a lifetime of miscalculations were hanging in the air for her to read. Giant banners with all her mistakes emblazoned in

scorching colours. How could her perception of her entire lifetime swing about and collapse in the space of minutes? And yet, it had.

Am I having a nervous breakdown? she wondered. But no – she'd never seen the truth so clearly. One half of her was standing at the bus stop, engaged in the mundane business of waiting for a bus on a sweltering day. The other half could feel her consciousness being starved and spiked by colossal revelations. And she couldn't fathom why it had happened now.

Ibrahim had never cared about her. She'd never meant anything to him at all. And she could have married someone else. It was plain to her now. With just a little encouragement, she might have received an offer from Mustafa. Or from Adnan, the coffee shop owner's son. But she'd thought he looked like a frog. She'd ignored his inner qualities, the kindness of his heart and his readiness to help his neighbours.

She had only herself to blame, and as she sat on Makcik's veranda that evening, the taste in her mouth, which should have been sweet after eating a mango, was acrid, and the drifting clouds illuminated by the moon had a sinister edge.

* * *

A couple of days later, her equilibrium recovered, Azizah was wandering around the market in town with her belly full of delicious *laksa*, drifting about in the aimless manner which made it easier to act on a humid day, when Ibrahim and Rahimah appeared and greeted her with warm words and overenthusiastic smiles.

'Ah,' Ibrahim exclaimed. 'I was hoping we'd see you again!'

What for? Azizah wanted to ask. *So, you can fawn on me just because you like my auntie's house?* But she restrained herself.

Azizah could see they'd reached an agreement on how to handle her, should a meeting like this one occur. Ibrahim asked, in a soothing voice, 'So, you've settled in now? Things must have been very difficult for you recently.'

Azizah decided to feign obtuseness. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Well, you know... Your aunt...' Ibrahim stabbed his glasses up his nose. He was beginning to appear less confident. She wasn't reacting as he'd expected her to. *He expected gratitude for his attention,* Azizah thought. 'So, how *does* it feel to you to be back home? As

you know, I was away for a few years, but I can't imagine what it's like to be away from your home village for *so long* and then return here to stay.'

'Well, I don't know if I am going to stay here...' Azizah said, irked. She tried to tell herself he was only being friendly, that he felt sympathetic regarding her essential plight in life, her solitariness, but she couldn't dislodge the hard kernel of resentment which had grown in her heart.

'If you decide not to stay, you could sell the house for a good price.'

'It's not mine to sell.'

'Or you could rent it out,' Ibrahim forged on. 'And the plot of land is a good size. You could do many things – maybe build more houses. Your aunt didn't want to hear about such ideas. I made suggestions, but you know how the older folks are – set in their ways. Stubborn.'

At this display of less than complete respect, Rahimah shifted uncomfortably beside her husband. *And surely, Azizah thought, there's another reason why Rahimah feels ill at ease; doesn't her husband realise that burrowing into somebody else's private matters is impolite, especially financial matters, and especially when the advice hasn't been solicited?*

Azizah could feel herself bristle. The house had nothing to do with him, particularly after years, no - decades - of him having nothing to do with her.

'Your cousin Ashraf wouldn't listen to reason either,' Ibrahim pushed on.

So, he'd had the same conversations with her cousin? Like tendrils breaking their way through concrete, thoughts were forcing their way into Azizah's mind. Of course! Ibrahim had a relative in the construction business, a relative rumoured to have built himself a fine bungalow, a relative who drove a Mercedes Benz. There'd been other rumours, too, less savoury ones, about regulations being ignored. She'd never given the matter much thought; after all, there were always tidbits of hearsay to be savoured like sumptuous morsels, and how many people cared whether they were true or not? But now her mind was going into overdrive.

'Let me know if you need any advice,' Ibrahim was saying. 'It must be hard to have to decide everything by yourself. Maybe my cousin can assist you. He's a helpful person.'

Oh, I'll bet he is. You think I'm helpless and vulnerable, primed for using as you please.

She turned away, furious, reverting to her default position of both antagonist and antagonised. She could imagine what the neighbours were saying, what the entire kampung must be saying about her. Foolish. Pitiful. So unlucky! Unmarried and childless! A burden to her aunt. And now ripe for picking, like a naïve, festering fruit.

‘You must come and visit us at our house,’ Rahimah said gently, seeming sorry. ‘And bring your husband and children! We’d like to meet them.’

Ibrahim gave his wife a wincing look, and Azizah understood that Ibrahim had never talked about her to his wife. She might as well never have existed. And if there was one thing even worse than being gossiped about and looked down on, it was not being talked about at all...

Ibrahim and his wife were relegated to the status of enemies. Azizah turned her back on them and stalked away through the crowd. An object of pity and derision, in her own eyes if in no-one else’s.

* * *

The next morning, after a sleepless night spent replaying conversations in her head and becoming more and more agitated, Azizah got up to sort out the chickens. Afterwards, as she was about to climb the steps back up to the front door, she noticed the neighbour’s stump-tailed tomcat skittering around on the ground between the pillars which supported the house. It was pawing at something.

‘What have you got there?’ Azizah murmured. She was wary of this animal, but sometimes she threw it scraps from her meals. ‘What have you got there, hmm?’

The cat lifted its head and stared at her with large hazel eyes, and Azizah was startled to realise it was playing with a dead rat a quarter of its own size.

‘Ugh. Well done for killing it. But leave it alone now!’ She fetched a broom and tapped the flattened earth, and the cat flitted away with a sour expression.

Left on her own with the corpse, Azizah approached cautiously as though it might still be alive. She looked at its half-closed rolled-up eyes, at the collar of blood so scarlet around its furry grey neck, at its whiskers and teeth, its paws bent as if to beg. She stood there looking at it for some time, not thinking about much, merely conscious of time trickling by, and

becoming aware of a disconcerting fraying feeling in her head. She hadn't experienced it in some time.

Not since *that* day...

She'd been standing at the bus stop outside the school, and Puteri was with her. Why it had happened that particular afternoon, the bursting of a long-nurtured bud into a corrupt and dangerous flower, Azizah had no idea. Her mind had been fevered, her thoughts flying. There was a sort of hissing in her brain, recklessness bursting out of her like pus from a boil. On the one hand, she was in a weird delirium, on the other, she was aware that her venture needed painstaking execution. She'd pleaded illness, told the rest of the class to go home fifteen minutes early, and watched in a daze as they departed in a cheerful gaggle.

She'd held Puteri back. 'Would you like to see something interesting, Puteri?'

The little girl had tilted her head to one side and waited, curious.

It had occurred to Azizah that Puteri's oft-expressed desire to see the ocean might be put to good use. 'Don't go yet. I've got some seashells and seaweed to show you!' She'd added an untruth to ingratiate herself even further. 'I went to the seaside specially to get them for you!'

'Where are we going?' Puteri had asked as they were standing at the bus stop, and gazing up at Azizah, her eyes had reflected a hint of wariness. She'd no longer seemed so keen on seeing her teacher's souvenirs. Azizah was aware she needed to say something reassuring, something to prevent the child from trying to flee or call for help.

But most of all, her attention had been fixed on the bus appearing at the end of the road. In a moment, the vehicle would pull up and bear them away to a new life in a distant town on the other side of the country, where she would bring up Puteri as her daughter and they would co-exist happily until the end of their days.

And that was when it had happened: suddenly, she'd felt something: a hot breath on her neck? A shiver of knowing?

A woman in an emerald-green baju kurung was rushing along the road nearby, pulling a little girl of about four along with her. The child looked like a younger version of Puteri.

'See over there, Azizah binte Mansor,' a voice had crinkled in her ear, a voice she'd heard once before, on a train platform. 'Do you see that child? Look at her.' Azizah had tried

not to look but was somehow forced to obey. The mother had stopped walking to wipe the child's eye with a tissue. *'Look at her. You see how important a child is to those who take care of her? If you take Puteri away, her relatives will be heartbroken. And if you get away with your crime, they will never recover. You'll consign them to a living hell. Aren't you ashamed of even having such thoughts?'*

Yes, yes, I am. Flooded with a toxic shame which had swept away all the schemes bubbling in her brain, which stilled her internally and hollowed her out, she'd stumbled back into the school, closed herself in a classroom, rested her head on a desk, wept, and begged God for forgiveness.

Only when she had calmed down did the question come to her: *How was that woman able to see inside my mind?*

Since then, she'd tended her attachment to Puteri like a tender shoot, but never again had she come close to a moment of criminal insanity.

Yet now her mind was full of Ibrahim and Rahimah. Full of indignation and a huge, amorphous vindictiveness, not really knowing what she was doing or why she was doing it, Azizah fetched a newspaper and rolled the dead rat onto it using her garden broom. Then she folded the paper up into a parcel, put it inside a plastic bag, and placed it under an inverted bucket beneath the house.

* * *

Somehow, Azizah found herself standing next to Ibrahim and Rahimah's water tank, clutching the bag containing the mangled rat. It was dawn of the next day, and she had scant awareness of how she'd come to be at their house; the memory of her progress to get there was even vaguer than a dream. She intended to climb up onto the tiny platform next to the tank, lift the edge of the lid, and drop the rodent into the water. It was clear to her she must do it, even if there was a tinge of uncertainty about why.

Yet suddenly *she* was there, dim but condemning in the misty early morning light. That bright eye contained a light so ferocious, Azizah could scarcely bear to look at it, and yet, it was the other, opaque eye which seemed to discern more when it looked at her.

'Azizah binte Mansor, you're not going to do that, are you?' the scratchy voice demanded.

Startled, Azizah hesitated. She turned her head and looked straight into the shrivelled countenance. Azizah felt she ought to be smelling decay and mouldiness, but she detected no odour at all. 'Yes. Yes, I am.'

'But why? Ibrahim may be intrusive, self-serving, perhaps even greedy, but what has he done to justify this behaviour?'

'His intentions are corrupt.'

'Are yours any purer?'

A lifetime's worth of unaddressed grudges and grievances were roiling around inside Azizah's chest, clamouring for release.

'You plan to poison the water of a family, members of your own community, and risk killing them? You're going to murder children?'

Oh! I didn't think of the children! Azizah realised, and the thought whipped at her, causing her pain. Suddenly her mind was full of Puteri's face.

'And you're willing to run the risk of being sentenced if they die?' the old woman persisted.

Azizah shrugged. How could she explain she was in the grip of something so much more powerful than herself? How could she explain she no longer had free will? 'Why are you picking on *me*? Why don't you go and bother somebody else?'

The glowing eyes acquired an extra veneer of hardness. 'You know the answer to that question. Because you are more in need of intervention than other people. Ibrahim and Rahimah are not responsible for the disappointments you've suffered. Your life hasn't been easy, but you need to be strong. It's too easy to be weak and wicked.' Azizah turned this way and that, trying to find the strength to argue. 'You're not going to leave a decomposing rat in their water tank. Throw it into the bushes at once.'

'But -'

'You are going to give them this instead.' Azizah became conscious of a tin of biscuits lying on the ground next to her. 'You're going to present this to them as a token of friendship. And from now on you are going to live your life as a generous and virtuous person. Because -'

The face changed, twisting and becoming something so chilling that Azizah was robbed of her breath. A face from childhood nightmares. A mask from her aunt's disturbing tales, the shrunken ebony likeness of something half-human. Something with luminous indigo eyes. 'This is your last chance. You are failing to conduct yourself as well as you should in this existence, which - never forget - is a rehearsal for the next, and if you don't mend your ways, when the Day of Judgement comes, you are going to fare badly.'

A moment later, the woman had disappeared.

* * *

Azizah stumbled out of Ibrahim and Rahimah's garden, stooping low so as not to be seen from the windows of their house. She prayed no neighbours had seen her. There was a stretch of land between Ibrahim's house and the nearest neighbour. She might be lucky...

A man wearing a lacy white kopiah passed along the road on an antique bicycle: Encik Umar, an acquaintance of Makcik's, popular for his sense of humour. He gave her a wave and she returned it, trying not to appear like a crocodile lurking in a pond.

Her heartbeat was beginning to revert to a normal speed, and her mind was clearing. She must have imagined the woman. She *must* have. Her mind was playing tricks on her again. But there was one truth she couldn't deny: regardless of the emotional turmoil which might be the cause, one more attempt at serious misconduct, and she'd be doomed and banished to Hell. Of that, she was certain. From now on, she was going to live her life accordingly.

A couple of hours later, having breakfasted on coffee and roti at a food stall some way along the road, she approached Ibrahim and Rahimah's house, clutching the tin of biscuits, and rang the doorbell.

A face topped by a dishevelled bush of hair appeared at a window, startled by the unexpectedness of the visit.

Azizah was full of powerful feelings – relief that she'd stopped short of committing a heinous act, relief at not having caused harm to an impertinent man and his harmless spouse, relief at not having jeopardised her own eternal destiny. They were emotions so potent, she had to stop herself from weeping and jabbering at Rahimah, throwing herself at the woman's feet and begging her forgiveness.

'It's all right, it's all right,' Rahimah murmured, ushering her distraught and rather peculiar visitor through the front door. 'You're very welcome in our home! You're still upset about your aunt, aren't you? Oh, you poor thing! I know what it's like to be bereaved. Come and sit down and have a drink and a nice piece of Milo chiffon cake. I baked it yesterday. And you'll see: everything will be fine.'

Just as Azizah was about to succumb to this kindness and leave the outside world behind, she happened to turn her head and catch a glimpse of the bus stop on the other side of the road. And suddenly she had a sense – a notion which sent ice cascading down her spine - there was a shadow standing next to it. It was the shadow of an ancient woman, her scalp showing through the thin strands of her hair, her luminescent eyes as incisive as lasers.

* * * * *

“Misc. Marginalia”

by Kenny Andriana

Hello,

It’s been a while since the last time I spoke to you. Has it been days? Months? Years? I think I’ve finally gotten used to it now so I don’t realize. You always taught me how to say without speaking, see without looking, feel without having to touch, and it seems that you’re still trying to teach me that.

So many things have changed around here. Have you heard that the motel across from the cinema we used to come to has been torn down? I remember they used to call it Kotak Sulap, or the Magician’s Box, for we all could disappear in it for a while without anyone knowing. Well, the trick has been revealed, and the illusion has been shed. They found it.

I’m not going to lie to you, I expected sneers, spits, rocks, rage, and blood—things we were taught to receive and endure, deservedly so. But here’s the weird truth: none of that happened. I think what happened is that it revealed so much more to the people beyond our simple tricks of the trade—the disappearing act, the mask and the cape, a mere performance that we know all of our lives as living. They finally see what’s behind the curtain. They finally see us.

Ever since then, people have realized that there is no greater sin than refuting the love that has been inscribed on each and every one of us. There have been marches, riots, and endless

dialogues between forces that center on one thing: that love is the highest virtue of man and the beacon of hope in their lives. And this time, it won.

If you are here right now, you can feel the difference. The love that we used to keep hidden—or was it *that* that kept us hiding?—becoming what it is supposed to be: unbounded and precious in its abundance. There's so much love to go around for everyone in this world. I think we are visionaries for realizing it far sooner than everyone is.

However, it doesn't escape me that our life might have been so different if it did happen sooner. Now, I just hope that wherever you are, you are surrounded by so much love. I hope someone holds your hand the way I wanted a thousand nights ago. I hope someone looks at you with so much tenderness and fondness the way I had, and have still. I hope they can say the word that I didn't have in my vocabulary then, the word that I felt but didn't know how to pronounce yet, the word that now fills the mouth and closes the gaps in the lives of many.

Since there is so much love and so many ways for it to bloom, maybe through silence is ours. "Only in silence the word," Le Guin says, and only in there is us and only then I know love. So, even without *us* here, this is still a good place and time to live for *you* and *me*.

For eternity,
Yours

* * * * *

“The Road to Hanoi”

by Robin Ray

Kim Nguyen phoned her son, Robert, Saturday morning. Instead of an answer, she received a voicemail prompt. Undeterred, she called his roommate. He stated he couldn't reach her son either, as he went shopping and left his phone behind. Worried about her 72-year-old father, Kim needed another voice reassuring her he was okay. She never fretted about her father, Thanh. He played board games at the Vietnamese Center with other folks. Once a month, he volunteered at the Asian food bank in Seattle's Chinatown-International District. Now, he spent his days and nights working on a boat in the garage of her house in Beacon Hill.

Thanh, a strong-willed, singular man, didn't lean on anyone for help. Using his savings, he bought planks of wood, rope, hardware, and large blue plastic barrels. In addition, he gathered electrical wires and two outboard motors for boat building. He stored the equipment in Kim's garage, the only space available. She didn't mind how the activity forced her car out into the street, but it concerned her because his planned watercraft could fail.

Nguyen Thanh Ngoc labored day and night on his contraption, annoying his next-door neighbors with his loud taps. Born in Hanoi in 1940, he was in his early 20's when the Vietnam War broke out. He worked as a police officer at a station in Haiphong, a coastal city about 60 miles away from his birthplace in northern Vietnam. As the fighting raged south in Da Nang and Saigon, he watched as the country changed overnight. Although the Viet Cong didn't capture and imprison him, the conflict weighed on his conscience.

After the war, he worked in the redevelopment of southern coastal cities such as Qui Nhon and Nha Trang. Facing the horrors of war tested his will. He watched as the scourge of heroin addiction ate his fellow officers alive and swore he wouldn't become like them.

In 1977, when he turned 37, he secured a passport and flew to Los Angeles with his wife, Cam, and three-year-old daughter, Kim. Working in maintenance, he learned about job opportunities in Seattle and the growing sea of refugees there. So, packing his bags in 1981, he and his family hopped on a Greyhound and have lived in Seattle ever since.

He worked two jobs. The first, as a maintenance man for a business cleaning company, went well. The other, as a writer for an Asian tabloid, suited him fine. Although it paid little, it helped him develop a better grasp of the English language, as writing bilingual poetry gave him great joy. He self-published three books. They contained poems and stories reminiscent of growing up in a war-torn land. The gloomy subject troubled him, but he knew it best.

Cam passed away in 1990 around the same time his grandson, Robert, arrived. After the funeral, Thanh became withdrawn. Whereas he volunteered often at the Vietnamese Center, now he became a plaque and a photo on the wall. His daughter asked him to move into her Beacon Hill home with her and William Wilson, her American husband. Thanh rejected the idea. After what he'd been through, accepting handouts and freebies disturbed him. His pride wouldn't allow it. When he discovered he'd be taking care of his newborn grandson while still working at maintenance in the evenings, it became a different matter. He moved into the spare bedroom in their furnished attic. With Kim teaching grammar at a middle school, and William working at an internet provider, the arrangement was perfect.

Thanh retired in 2002 at 62 with Robert at age 12. The two became close. They frequented the movies, zoo, and aquarium together. The young man relished Thanh's love of nature. Both enjoyed outings at the Pacific Science Center and similar attractions around the Seattle area. When Robert attended college in Spokane six years later, it saddened his grandfather. Though consolable, he mourned as if he'd lost a best friend. Initially, they communicated via letters, then e-mail, but as Robert's studies grew more intense, he wrote less and less.

Thanh, not a "sit on the porch, watch the world go by" kind of fellow, kept busy. At 5'5" and 120 lbs., he burned energy as if it was going out of fashion. If he didn't keep in motion, he suspected he'd wither and die like a rose stranded in a desert. He took long walks and patronized the central library, occupying his time as best as he could. Sometimes, he visited the movies by himself. He never gave Kim and William any worries because it was apparent

he still enjoyed life. Since he could drive and had a license, Kim let him borrow her car. He visited places such as the Washington Park Arboretum and Japanese Garden, Ballard Locks, and the Woodland Park Zoo.

It wasn't until he brought home the first plank that gave Kim anxiety. She asked him what it was for. He revealed he was building a pontoon. A pontoon? He showed her his drawings, which she studied while William watched them over her shoulder.

“Eh,” her husband stated, “let the old man do what he wants.”

In reality, William avoided getting in the middle, believing it was a father-daughter affair.

For the next couple of months, Thanh labored on his boat. He did all the wood cutting at Home Depot since he lacked a power saw. And although he preferred working alone, he accepted aid from his son-in-law.

The chevron shape of the base of the pontoon measured eight feet from port to starboard, twelve from bow to stern. Structured from pine, it resembled the deck of a sunroom. Beneath it lay eight barrels fastened by rope with four on the port side and the others starboard. The seven-foot-high cabin in the center of the platform was seven feet from port to starboard and eight feet bow to stern. Three feet of space existed from the front of the cabin to the tip of the bow. One foot of space dwelled between the rear of the cabin to the edge of the stern.

The boat, nicknamed Grasshopper, contained twin 30hp solar-powered engines. She had a cast iron fire pit anchored to the bow and one rear-facing seat nailed to the stern. On top of the cabin on the concave roof sat two 100-watt 12-volt solar cells, each unit about the size of a suitcase. Thanh designed them as power supplies for the twin motors, a marine band radio, LED lights, and the 2.6 cubic foot refrigerator in the cabin. As a safeguard, he diverted some of the power to a backup battery. Using a trickle-down supply, he would use it at night when there was no sunlight.

The cabin contained acrylic windows on all four sides and in the starboard side door. The simple panel Thanh made had a speedometer, an odometer, and a battery charge meter. It also contained a steering wheel and controllers for the outboards. A saucer-sized compass abutted a marine band radio. The middle and rear of the cabin had a chair, a sleeping bag, and a blue 20-gal plastic trunk on wheels. In it were a fishing pole, trawling net, bait, beef

jerky, a first aid kit, and waterproof matches. In addition, it carried extra wood for the pit, filet knives, biodegradable toilet paper, soap, plates, pots, and utensils.

One day, the family flew to Spokane and visited Robert, interrupting Thanh's construction. As the young man was graduating from Gonzaga with a degree in journalism, it wasn't an event they could miss. Thanh, however, needed persuading. He was so involved with his boat building he hated putting it off even for one day. To his surprise, he had more fun visiting Spokane than he imagined. Believing it would be all academia, he brought along a notebook of his plans. His grandson, however, was so thrilled with seeing him and his parents again that he took them to several local sites. These included the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture and River Park Square. They also visited Manito Park, Riverfront Park Ice Palace, and other attractions.

After graduation, Robert returned to Seattle, since he didn't have a job lined up anywhere. Kim and William were happy having their son home with them again even though they knew it would be for a short while. Over the next few weeks, Robert left applications at newspaper and magazine offices and TV stations. He also dropped bids at Microsoft, Amazon, and other tech spots. Because of his mother's urging, Robert tried persuading his grandfather against building the boat. In her mind, it would be a catastrophic failure. The youngster's influence failed. Thanh kept laboring as determined as ever.

One afternoon, Thomas returned home from dining with a friend at a restaurant in the International District. He saw Thanh toiling in the garage. As the door was up, he walked in.

"Hey, grandpa. What's cooking?"

"Hi, Robert. As you can see, I'm almost finished."

The young man surveyed the craft. "It looks good so far. Will it work?"

Thanh stopped operating on the motor's electrical system. "When I lived in Hanoi, I built many boats, sampans, for fishing. Do you know how we waterproofed them? Buffalo dung. We made the boats from bamboo, but the seams were porous."

"How come this boat has no hull?"

"There will be one. I'm testing its seaworthiness first."

"Seaworthiness? I thought you were going out on a lake with it."

"I am. I'm testing the strength of the motors. How about if you take her for a test spin?"

“What? Me? Where?”

“Lake Washington.”

Robert scratched his head. He was 100% percent behind his grandfather in all of his endeavors, but this was much more challenging than he expected.

“I don’t know, grandpa. It makes me nervous.”

“Okay, tell you what. At least help me get her down to the launch site. You stay ashore. Can you at least do that?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Around 2 pm, the duo lifted the boat onto a trailer Thanh bought a week ago. The craft itself wasn’t that heavy. A fair estimate would place it at 400 pounds. After hitching it behind Robert’s car, they drove four miles to the boat launch in Seward Park. Passersby stared at the unfinished craft. Though none giggled or snickered, Robert thought he sensed derision.

“This is a bad idea. People are laughing.”

“No, they’re not.”

After paying a fee, they pulled the car near the edge of the launch, exited, and unhitched the boat. After Thanh donned his life vest, the two pushed it toward the rim of the lake. Robert faced the old man.

“Are you sure about this? Can you swim?”

“Of course. Are you leaving, or will you wait for me?”

“Leave?” Robert removed his cell phone. “Videotaping you and throwing it up on the internet is what I have in mind.”

Thanh smiled, accentuating the crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes. “Good idea. It’ll help me look for irregularities such as a list or a sway.”

Together, they heaved and pushed and had Grasshopper in the water. Watching her float, Thanh jumped for joy. Robert had never seen the old man so elated. Thanh, hugging his grandson, ran and caught the boat before it sailed off. Leaping onto the stern, he walked into the cabin, sat down at the console, and activated the motors. Whirr. Like silent jets, they sprung alive, thrusting the pontoon forward. Thanh waved as the boat took off.

Robert clasped his chest watching Grasshopper zip over the water like a bionic insect. Eyeing it through his camera lens, he saw his grandfather’s boat slow down, speed up, bank

left, and bank right. She also completed a circle and maneuvered between other boats. The twin hp motors were fast. He guessed they topped off somewhere around 30 knots. Speedy for electric motors.

About 30 minutes later, Thanh returned to shore. Robert had turned off his cell phone because the battery was running low. As his grandfather pulled up, he raced over and greeted him. Thanh turned off the power and stepped off the boat. With his grandson, they pulled the boat onto land.

“How was the ride?” Robert asked.

“You tell me? Did she look steady?”

“Yes. I’m surprised. How come these little motors have such power?”

“It’s those plastic air barrels beneath the boat. They’re buoyant. Takes a lot of strain off the motors.”

“That’s the most impressive thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah. That’s what they’ll say in Hanoi.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

It was typical of Thanh when he left an idea hanging in search of a home. It frustrated Robert when he was a kid; he’d since grown used to it. Thanh reached over and held his grandson’s shoulder.

“I’m taking her to Hanoi.”

“You mean...”

“I’m sailing.”

“What? On this? Across the Pacific?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Grandpa, that’s 5000 miles.”

“It’s six thousand, eight hundred and twenty-seven point eight miles, but who’s counting?”

“This is insane.”

“You mean I’m insane.”

“That’s not what I said, grandpa.”

Robert eyed his grandfather and smiled. "Ah. You're pulling my leg. Good one, grandpa. You had me fooled for a minute."

"Think what you want, Robert. Come on. Help me get her up on the trailer. I remembered I have a doctor's appointment."

Over the next few days, Thanh attached wooden ribs from the bow to the stern and fastened a fiberglass hull to the skeleton. At the stern, it was 12 inches high, and at the bow, 18 inches. Instead of using buffalo dung, he modernized, using boat sealant as he'd done to the bottom of the craft. He also painted the cabin white with blue sections matching the hull. After painting "Grasshopper" at the stern, he invited the family to the garage.

All four stood admiring the project. It impressed Robert, painting a grin on his face an ocean wide. Kim bit her nails, but William smiled at his stepfather's job.

"What's this I hear about Hanoi?" Kim asked.

Thanh, his shoulders drooping, eyed his grandson. "Oh, he told you."

"Is it true?" William asked.

"If you must know, yes."

Kim's eyes widened. "On this thing?"

"On this thing."

"Why don't you fly to Hanoi? Wouldn't that be easier?"

"The adventure lies in the sea."

"You should reconsider it, grandpa," Robert advised him. "Think about the potential for hurricanes and squalls. What about crests and wakes? The weather might not be in your favor."

"I'm not worried about storms," Kim offered. "There could be pirates. The world is much more dangerous these days. You've seen the news. Pa, what do you plan on doing? Take weapons on board with you?"

"Of course not. As long as you've known me, you know I'm a man of peace."

"I'm sorry for your past," William expressed, "but you must understand how risky this is and how much we care about you."

Thanh hung his head. The last thing he planned on doing was bringing guilt to his family. He knew this moment would come, accepting its consequential gravitas.

"I'm a fortunate man," he explained. "I've been lucky, luckier, than the thousands of people I grew up with. My friends died one by one at the hands of the Viet Cong. But the Viet Cong were not my enemies. We're from the same blood. We're brothers torn apart by the viscosity of war. They shot children on the beaches and betrayed mothers as if they were stray dogs in the rice fields. An entire generation grew up with no home and no future. But they gave me a chance. I survived. Why? Why me? Coming to America was a gift. Being capable of telling my story so future generations would know and understand our pain is a gift. Being Vietnamese and Asian makes me part of the sea. I was born there. It's where I belong, where I must travel, and where I must tell my story. Understanding this journey is easy."

Kim, wiping away a tear, walked over and hugged her father.

"You should've been a lecturer at the college. If it means so much to you, pa, go with my blessings."

"I guess I wish you good luck," William stated. "Have a wonderful trip. You should be back in, what, a month?"

"Something like that," Thanh responded.

"You mean *we'll* be back in about a month," Robert corrected.

"Huh?" Kim asked. "We?"

"I'm going."

"What do you mean you're going?"

"It'll be a great experience."

"You're tagging along?" Thanh asked his grandson.

"Sure, why not? I'm still unemployed. No one's hiring for the summer, anyway."

"You should reconsider," William informed him. "That's a long time at sea."

"Two heads are better than one," Robert insisted. "Plus, what a good start for a career in journalism. I can write about the complete trip and publish it later."

Kim bit her bottom lip. "I can't hear anymore tonight. The couch is calling my name."

Turning, she exited the garage and entered the house.

"I hope you two think about this," William opined, then went inside.

Robert rubbed his fingers along the hull, caressing it as if it was a fair maiden. “We’ll add another seat in the back and a sleeping bag.”

Thanh pointed to the sleep sack in the boat. “You can have that one. I don’t snooze much, anyway. Plus, I’m staying up just in case.”

“You’re brave, grandpa. Most people would never attempt something like this.”

“Sailing from Cuba to Florida in a raft is dangerous, but people try it. Climbing Mt. Everest has enormous risks, but folks do it every day. The human body is stronger than you imagine.”

“I hope so. How are we coming back home? Not the same way, I hope.”

“We’ll fly.”

“Good. I’m glad you have it all planned.”

On the night before the trip, Robert visited his grandfather in his attic room. It’d been years since he’d seen it, but it was as he remembered—tidy, with everything in place. Entering, he saw a twin bed on his right. A chest of drawers abutted it. Across the room sat a desk with a computer. A bookcase and a freestanding closet stood next to it. The house designers fixed an octagonal window in the wall behind the desk. The space, tranquil and intimate, suited the old man well.

Thanh, perched at his desk, was making notes in his books. He stretched a map of the Pacific out next to the computer. Robert stood near the closet.

“How long do you think it’ll take, grandpa?”

“Fortune favors the patient. My guess? About 15 days.”

“Wow, that’s a long time.”

“That boat has a top cruising speed of 35 knots. At least worrying about fuel won’t concern us.”

“What about food?”

“I’ve loaded up the carrier with beef jerky, rice noodles, dried shrimp, and fish sauce. Bring potato chips or pretzels or whatever you want. I’ve already put drinking water in the fridge.”

“Fifteen days. Won’t we run out?”

“I’ll teach you seawater purification. Ancient Vietnamese secret.”

Robert wrung his hands, recalling his boy scout memories. If he needed Survival 101 skills, now was the time.

“What about the bathroom?”

“What about it? It’s an adventure, Robert, not an excursion to London. I’ve packed biodegradable toilet paper and soap. For meals, there’s a fire pit on the bow. We can eat sashimi every day.”

“We’ll be fishing?”

“Of course. We’re communing with the sea. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. Think of the story you’ll tell.”

“Don’t worry. I’m looking forward to it.”

Early the next morning, after loading last-minute supplies into the boat, everyone jumped into William’s car to which he’d tethered the craft. They drove north for two hours toward Port Townsend. Thanh, sitting in the back with Thomas, gazed at the scenery. The Pacific Northwest, a lush jungle, brought back memories of his days in Vietnam. Kim was quiet most of the way. She didn’t cry, but her face wore a “this can’t be happening” look. She even asked herself, “Am I saying goodbye to my father?”

Picking up a case of bottled water in Port Townsend, the crew drove to Fort Worden State Park on the city’s northeastern tip. All four assisted with pushing Grasshopper onto the beach. Once she was in the water, Thanh and Robert hugged goodbye to Kim and William. Robert noticed his mother’s tears in her eyes.

“I promise I’ll be safe, mom,” he whispered. “I won’t let you down.”

“I’m so scared for you. I can’t sleep at night.”

“I’m a powerful man. I’ll look after grandpa.”

“You mean he’ll look after you.”

“Yes, mom. I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

“Hurry back. I love you.”

Minutes later, Thanh and his grandson, both wearing life vests, were adrift on the Salish Sea. Heading west along the Strait of Juan de Fuca, they waved as they passed the Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge and Port Angeles Airport. Other sites passed included the Salt Creek

Recreation Area, Clallam Bay, Shipwreck Point, and Neah Bay. After 75 miles, and 2 ½ hours, they were face to face with the expansive, endless, magnificent Pacific Ocean.

Thanh had the foresight of building amenities into the craft. One of Robert's favorites was the high-capacity solar-powered battery charger. With it, he recharged his iPad and cellphone, his means of entertainment. At least, for the journey, he wasn't without his favorite composer, Beethoven. He brought his symphonies, piano and violin sonatas, piano concertos, and chamber works for the trip. For variety, he also carried the symphonies of Mahler, Bruckner, and Brahms and the tone poems of Richard Strauss and Franz Liszt. With all the time at his disposal, he pondered bringing Wagner's long operas, but he wasn't sure if Thanh would enjoy them. His grandfather loved classical music, but he believed singing ruined opera.

So far, everything looked promising. Thanh, sitting at the console steering the boat, was swaying his body to the left and right. Either he was responding to the music in the cabin or comforting himself. Robert sat in one of the rear-facing seats looking out at the ocean.

"This is great," Robert admitted. "So, this is how Columbus must've felt."

"The Nina, Pinta, or Santa Maria weren't this efficient. Think about being an oarsman. Stuck below deck, you can't see anything. It's you and a hundred other sailors and the overseer with his whip yelling 'stroke!' I would not have liked it."

Robert got up, stepped into the cabin, opened the refrigerator, and retrieved one bottle of orange juice. He counted nine bottles of apple juice, 12 bottles of water, and 12 packages of đậu sốt cà chua, or fried tofu with tomato sauce. In addition, he eyed 12 packages of barbeque pork, four packets of bacon, two containers of eggs, and two gallons of lactose-free milk.

"Looks as if we're in good shape."

"I'm surprised."

"About what?"

"That you didn't pack any beer."

"I thought about it, but I wasn't sure if you'd like the idea since you don't drink."

"It wouldn't have bothered me. That's what you young people do. Not my business."

"Oh, well. Too late now."

"It's okay. Tomorrow, I'll show you fresh water distillation from the sea. We may as well start because our supply is minuscule."

"Should I take the wheel?"

"Okay. Come. I'll show you."

Thanh rose, relinquishing the command to Robert.

"Grab the throttle like this," his grandfather illustrated, handling the wheel. "I've altered the motors. They work in tandem, off the same throttle and steered by the same wheel."

Robert tested it by speeding the boat up while holding the circular wheel straight.

"See?" Thanh noted. "We're at 30 knots."

The college graduate eased off the throttle. Thanh smiled.

"Yes, keep it like this. We're cruising around 22 knots. Lock your eyes on that compass."

He pointed to the saucer-sized instrument anchored to the console. "Our heading is 26 degrees west. Maintain that mark."

"Aye, aye captain."

"I'm glad you came along, Robert. Many people would not do what you've done. I'm proud."

"You caught me at a good time."

"I'll lie down for an hour. I'm spent."

"Sure grandpa. Good ahead. I'll be fine."

"Don't let me sleep too long. I'll check the heading later."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Wise guy."

Two hours later, Robert peered at his watch. It was 9 pm. He turned on the cabin's LED lights and gazed at his grandfather. Passing on waking him, he preserved his post at the wheel. According to the compass, he was on course. Taking a break, he changed the music on his iPad and put on something more energetic. A big fan of metal, he played tunes by Godsmack, one of his favorite bands. So, he won't disturb Thanh, he kept the volume down. Kicking out the knots forming in his legs, he left his post and ambled out to the bow. Spreading his arms, the sea breeze blew around him, the briny mist diffusing through his lungs. He gazed at the calm ocean; its infinitesimal lines of slow-moving water pushed to a

perfect horizon. Even though the sun was gone, he could see the moonlight glistening off shallow waves. The cloudless sky promised no rain soon.

Returning to the wheel, he gazed at the compass with the craft headed as Thanh plotted. He clicked the marine band radio on. Static emitted from its speakers. He flicked on the roam button hoping it would latch onto a used frequency. Finding nothing, he turned it off. He opened the blue container behind him, removed a beef jerky, unwrapped it, and took a bite. Resuming his post, he took control of the steering wheel once more.

The cool Pacific winds, floating through the cabin like wandering spirits, made his body shiver. Getting up, he closed all the windows. As it was late, he turned off the music on his iPad. His grandfather stirred and peered at his wristwatch.

“Wow,” he yawned, stretching, “that was a good rest.”

“Hey, grandpa. Slept well?”

“I’m surprised I napped at all. That was my first time with the bag. It’s comfortable. Are we on track?”

“Everything looks fine.”

“Good. My bladder needs emptying. When I come back, I’ll take the reins.”

“Okay.”

Walking to the stern, Thanh relieved himself over the side of the boat. Then, dipping his hands in the water, he splashed some of it on his face. Putting his hands on both motors, he recoiled from the heat they emitted. Turning, he went into the cabin.

“Throttle down a bit,” he cautioned his grandson. “We should preserve the motors.”

Robert complied and brought the speed down to five knots.

“Good. Why don’t you get some shut-eye? Tomorrow’s gonna be our first full day out here and you’ll need your strength.”

“No problem.”

Renouncing the command, Robert stepped away from the console and walked toward the sleeping bag. He stared at it, rubbing his chin.

“What’s the matter?” Thanh asked.

“I’m thinking about whether I should use the bathroom first.”

His grandfather laughed. "That's funny. It's weird how we use these terms with no fuss. Bathroom, as if there's one anywhere near here for miles."

"Well, you know what I mean."

"I know, Rob. Just having fun with you."

After Thanh took the controls, Robert went to the bathroom. Minutes later, after splashing the brine on his face, he returned to the cabin, crawled into the sleeping bag, and nodded off.

The following morning, the smell of cooked bacon wafting in through the cabin awakened him. Getting up, he noticed Thanh missing from the wheel. The boat stood still. Looking towards the bow, he saw the old man's head and shoulder from the back. Working at the fire pit, he was flipping bacon in a pan greasy spoon-style. Grimacing in pain, he stopped every few seconds and grabbed the right side of his abdomen. Robert walked over. The old man resumed cooking; his grandson unaware of his distress.

"Morning, grandpa. How are you holding up?"

"Never better."

"What time did you start the fire?"

"About an hour ago."

Thanh removed the pan from the pit. Two plates, each holding scrambled eggs and crackers, rested on the 20-gallon trunk. He placed three strips of bacon on each plate.

"When I get married," Robert notified him, "I'm hiring you as a cook for us."

"Fat chance. You couldn't afford me."

They both sat down on the bow and ate their breakfast.

"Did you write in your journal yet?" Thanh asked.

"In a minute, I will. I'm soaking in this entire experience."

"This brings back memories, doesn't it?"

"You mean during my boy scout days? Yeah, I remember."

"Oh, I forgot the milk."

He stood, but Robert motioned him down. "I'll get it."

Rising, he got up, walked over to the fridge, removed the milk, grabbed two cups from the blue container, and brought them over. He poured a glass for his grandfather and one for himself then returned the milk to the fridge. Seconds later, he rejoined Thanh.

“Remember how you told me about Vietnam?” Robert asked.

“Yeah. Depressing stories in the middle of the night.”

“I remembered some of them. Back in college, I used a lot of our conversations as essays and papers for my classes.”

“I’m glad you remembered me.”

“Of course, I did.”

Robert paused, his face drooping, staring into the old man’s eyes.

“Did you think I forgot about you, grandpa?”

“Not at all. I know you’re busy with school. Can’t concern yourself with an old fool like me.”

“I know you’re just saying that. You were in my mind all the time.”

Thanh ate the rest of his bacon and eggs and washed it down with the milk. A speedy eater, he never let his food get cold.

“I had a girlfriend,” Robert revealed. “I thought it was a serious thing, too.”

“What happened?”

“Well, you could say we weren’t compatible. We got along fine, but different interests popped up. We have no hard feelings between us. Things didn’t work out.”

“When we’re done here, I’ll show you water distilling. I’ll start the engine, though, because we shouldn’t waste time.”

They sailed westward for the next few hours with Thanh at the wheel. Robert, sitting in one of the stern’s chairs, bided his time by reading an eBook on his iPad. A fan of Vietnamese literature, he occupied himself with Dương Thu Hương’s novel *No Man’s Land*. He continued reading the book while lying in a sleeping bag. Other times, he’d stop and watch his grandfather manning the wheel. Every few minutes, the old man jotted notes down in his ledger. Robert got up, walked to the cabin, and gazed at the odometer in the console.

“How many miles have we traveled?”

Thanh picked up his notebook and handed it to his curious passenger. "See the odometer? It says 687 miles, but in reality, it's closer to 600 nautical miles. We're on track."

Robert checked his watch. "It's close to 1 pm. I'm gonna wash my body."

"I'll stop."

"No. Don't do that on account of me. If you slowed down to about five knots, I can handle myself."

"Okay."

Thanh throttled down to five knots.

"I'll be quick," Robert promised. "I'm feeling sticky."

"Okay. Don't forget the soap."

"Thanks."

Returning to the cabin, Robert stripped naked, fished the soap out of the container, walked out to the stern, and leaped into the water. He held onto the boat with his left hand as he washed with his right. Thanh, seeing the difficulty his grandson faced, stopped the motors.

"Take all the time you want," Thanh shouted.

Robert waved to his grandfather and let the boat go. He breast-stroked in the water.

"This is the craziest thing I've ever done," he screamed. "A shark can swim up and bite off my *watusi*."

"Well, then I suggest you hurry."

Robert soaped and washed, then donned his clothes. Because the men made no provisions for clothing, he wore the same attire. Later, the old man illustrated freshwater crafting.

Thanh lit the starter logs and dropped them in the fire pit. Robert manned the wheel while his grandfather kept the logs burning. 15 minutes later, the old man dipped their ten-liter aluminum pot in the ocean and filled it halfway with the brine. He then placed it on the grill above the pit. Grabbing a two-liter Pyrex beaker, he placed it in the pot where the water level was half the height of the transparent container. He then positioned the pot's transparent concave lid upside down over the pot. Both travelers waited as salt water boiled

and condensation formed on the lid. Within minutes, the condensed, salt-free water dripped into the beaker.

They filled an empty apple juice bottle with water and repeated the procedure. Over the next few hours, with Thanh at the wheel, Robert created four new bottles of fresh water and refrigerated them. Both men, sweating from exhaustion, took naps with the engines off.

Later that evening, as the boat continued westward, Thanh showed his grandson trawler-fishing. He tied bits of jerky in the weighted net, attached it to a pole, and dragged it into the water from the bow. Per the old man's request, Robert slowed the boat down to 15 knots as they risked missing their catch. Within minutes, they hoisted six three-pound roundjaw bonefish and one five-pound mackerel out of the water.

After putting the bonefish on ice, Thanh sauteed the mackerel, filling the boat with its tempting aroma. That night, after eating, they set the boat on autopilot, sat together in the stern, and angled using their fishing rods. A strong yellowfin tuna that must've weighed at least twenty pounds pulled Robert toward the water. Reeling in the monster, they kept it in a plastic bag and hung it off the stern. Tomorrow, it would serve as breakfast and lunch sushi style.

Over the next few days, their luck changed. A handful of supplies remained. The foodstuffs lasting included a few sticks of beef jerky and bottled water. Miles from nowhere, hunger at their heels, they captured groupers averaging two pounds. They returned the jellyfish they trawled to the sea, as they were poisonous. Fishing from the stern wasn't that successful, either. Later, with their arms and necks aching from the trials, they turned off the motor and slept on the opened sleeping bag.

Three hours and one hundred miles later, a voice coming in over the marine radio awakened them. Getting up, Thanh grabbed the microphone. It was the Honolulu Coast Guard. They spotted Grasshopper bobbling twenty nautical miles away from Hawaii. Thanh explained who he was, saying they were okay. He then docked at Kahana Valley State Park in Hauula. Curious spectators, some taking pictures of their homemade craft, greeted them. Robert snapped a lot of pictures himself.

Thanh told his grandson their layover would be brief. Robert protested, stating he'd never been to Hawaii before and this was his one chance. Relenting, his grandfather agreed

to a fleeting rest in a hotel. Two hours later, with their clothes washed, they refilled their fridge and returned to the wild unknown.

A day and a half later, they stopped at Johnston Atoll, a National Wildlife Refuge, 750 miles west of Hauula. Although military personnel closed the isolated atoll, they allowed the sea trekkers an hour's visit. Robert, seizing the opportunity, photographed some of the flora and fauna indigenous to the island. This included red-tailed tropicbirds, green turtles, and Hawaiian monk seals. The next place they stopped, Wake Island, took two days of sailing. There they had a run-in with the United States Air Force. Interrogated at an airport, they produced papers and showed they were simple journeymen and meant no one any harm. Robert took a few pictures, but a lieutenant warned him if he didn't cease, they would confiscate his cell phone. Complying, he stashed his device. Minutes later, they were back on their boat. At least they got a handful of water purification tablets and a crate of MREs, or Meals Ready to Eat.

Two days later, they stopped at Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands north of Guam. By then, both gentlemen were several shades darker and five pounds lighter. With his body aching from the voyage, Robert convinced his grandfather he would appreciate an overnight stay there.

"You young people," Thanh argued as they stood on the beach. "A brief trip and you get tired."

"Brief trip? We've been on the sea for days. I suppose now you'll lecture me with a 'when I was your age' speech."

"Do you want one? I have many."

"I don't know, grandpa. You look like you're in a rush."

"I'm not. Your imagination's running away like it did when you were a kid."

"I don't want us fighting. It's a mystery why you're in such a hurry."

"We should call the coast guard and have you brought back to Seattle."

"You're not being fair. I said I'd come along and I did. Let's take it easy, huh? All this is new for me."

"Don't you think I'm stressed, too? Maybe you're right. I'm too old for this."

"I never said that."

“But I bet you thought it.”

“Now, who’s imagining things?”

The old man closed his eyes, rubbed the stubble on his chin, and looked at his grandson.

“Sorry, Robert. I’m excited that this is happening. Forgive me.”

“It’s okay, grandpa.”

“You’re right. Let’s stay in a hotel.”

“Are you sure? Do they even have hotels out here?”

“There are 14 islands in this archipelago. There’s bound to be a hotel somewhere.”

“Or a field of hay.”

“I’ve slept in worse.”

The next day, after resting in a hotel, they boarded their little cruiser and set off once again. For the first time at sea, it rained. Thanh, manning the wheel, discovered how difficult it was keeping a lightweight boat upright in heavy winds. Righting the craft often challenged him to keep it straight. Robert bailed water out of the boat while his grandfather steered. This went on for four hours. Grasshopper fought against the swirling saturated winds with all her might. While Thanh wrestled with the controls, Robert secured loose items with rope. With the waves lashing against the boat, the vehicle verged on capsizing. At least her passengers weren’t arguing.

Later, after the storm passed, the two made peace with each other. Robert promised Thanh a fine time at the restaurant of his choice. His grandfather hinted at getting Thomas a 55-gallon fish tank for his Christmas present. Shaking hands, they trekked on.

At 9.30 pm, they reached Santa Ana, a city on the northern tip of the Philippine Island of Luzon. Dense with mangroves and waterfalls, the site resembled a tropical wonderland. Along the beach, they met a couple who told them they should visit Cagayan Casino where they worked. Robert liked the idea, but Thanh vetoed it, saying he didn’t have the money to waste. After stretching their legs, they pressed on to the Paracel Islands, or as the Chinese called it, Xisha Islands. Thanh explained the Vietnamese know the disputed archipelago as Hoang Sa Islands.

In the South China Sea, territorial disputes erupted between Vietnam and China over its occupation. Robert learned from his grandfather that the islands were now under the

administration of the People's Republic of China. Avoiding the Chinese authorities, the duo skipped the islands altogether and continued. Thirty hours later, a long strip of land came into view. Thanh perked up, his hands trembling at the wheel. Robert noticed the change.

"Grandpa," he asked him, "are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Do you see it? That's Vietnam."

"I see it. Looks forested."

"A lot of it is. Could be dangerous, too, since guerillas maintain hideouts there. It's okay for us because we're entering an area where they don't exist."

Robert pointed to a cadre of small round vessels docked near the shoreline. Each looked like it could carry a maximum of four people.

"What are those?"

"Basket boats, for fishing or sightseeing. We call them *thuyen thung*."

"There are so many. It's beautiful."

Without hesitation, Robert snapped pictures of the crafts. Minutes later, docking at the Xuan Thuy National Park, they stepped out onto the windswept beach. Thanh, tears in his eyes, fell to his knees and hugged the earth. A handful of people walking by stared at him, but none made fun of him or ridiculed his presence.

"Are you happy now?" Robert asked him.

Thanh grabbed his grandson. "If only you knew. This is a triumph for me, not because of the distance, but over time as well."

"Is this Hanoi?"

"No. We're about 70 miles east."

"How should we get there? What about Grasshopper?"

"Leave her for now. No one will take her."

Minutes later, after getting their important objects—the iPad, notebooks, cell phone, and other items—they took a taxi to Hanoi. On the way, they made a quick stop at Noi Bai International Airport.

"Stay with the driver," Thanh told Robert. "I'll go inside for those Seattle tickets."

After leaving the airport minutes later, they arrived in downtown Hanoi at 9 pm. The vibrant city, its neon lights aglow everywhere, resembled midtown Manhattan or Las Vegas.

Rife with pedestrians, the area hosted rows of restaurants, fruit stands, and souvenir booths. Robert snapped photos of the kites stuck in trees and the never-ending stream of moped riders zooming past in the road. Later, standing on Hang Bong Street outside the Hanoi Old Centre Hotel, Thanh filled his lungs with the urban air.

“Do you smell that, Robert?”

“Yes. Roast duck.”

“I meant the essence. Can you feel the spirit? It shoots through me like Cupid’s arrow.”

“We’d better get a room now.”

“This air intoxicates me.”

“Cool. Can you intoxicate inside?”

At the front desk, Robert giggled listening to his grandfather speak Vietnamese to the clerk. Kim urged Thanh to speak their language more, but he maintained assimilation was best if they stuck to English. Robert had a fair grasp of the Asian tongue, but not enough to converse with. Entering their room minutes later, he glanced at his watch.

“What time is it in Seattle?”

“They’re fourteen hours behind.”

“It’s 9:45 pm. That means in Seattle it’s 7:45 am. Perfect. I can call mom before she goes to work.”

Using his cell phone, he dialed her number. It didn’t connect.

“Use a calling card,” Thanh advised him.

Robert narrowed his eyes. “Man, with the advances we’ve made in telecommunications, you’d think a simple phone call would go through.”

“Why don’t you see if the front desk has any phone cards? I’m gonna lie down.”

“Good idea.”

Ten minutes later, Robert secured himself a phone card from an English-speaking desk clerk. At a lobby phone, he dialed the endless string of access numbers and called his mother.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Hey, mom.”

“Robert, my goodness. You had us worried.”

“I’m fine. Grandpa is fine.”

“Where are you?”

“Hanoi.”

“Wow, I’d love to be there. They’re talking about you two on the news.”

“Are they?”

Robert, known for his shyness, shunned the spotlight. Still, an article in a tabloid or a blurb in the Sunday news didn’t seem so bad.

“Yes,” Kim continued. “They mentioned the storm you went through and all the islands you visited. People are rooting for you. I hope you took pictures.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Where’s grandpa?”

“Upstairs.”

“Listen, his doctor called us this week. He never sanctioned that trip.”

“Why not?”

Kim cried.

“What’s the matter, mom?”

“Robert, your grandfather has inoperable prostatic cancer.”

“What are you saying?”

“It’s metastasized to his bloodstream. Dr. Chen didn’t believe he’d last this long.”

“How come I didn’t know? How come nobody told me?”

“I didn’t know myself. Your grandfather kept it a secret from everyone. It’s only now because he went sailing that they told me.”

Robert grabbed his head. “Oh, mom. This is too much. I can’t think straight.”

“Maybe the doctor’s wrong. Did you already buy two tickets for Seattle?”

“Grandpa took care of that.”

“Are you sure? Ask him. The airport shows he only bought one.”

“That can’t be. I was with him when, you know what, I stayed behind in the taxi. What do you mean there’s only one?”

“He went to Hanoi to die.”

Her son slammed his palms over his ears as tears welled in his eyes. “That can’t be. I’m gonna go upstairs and check it out.”

“Okay, Robert. I love you both. Be good.”

“I love you, mom. Tell pop I said hi. I’ll see you two in a while.”

Hanging up, he took the elevator to his room. Entering, he saw his grandfather lying supine beneath the sheets and approached him.

“Hey, grandpa. Is there anything I should know?”

The old man didn’t answer.

“I agree we had bad times,” he continued, “but isn’t that natural? I mean, families get into heated discussions, don’t they?”

He stared at the old man again. “Grandpa?”

Standing above him, he increased the light on the night table. His grandfather, once a vibrant man full of life, bursting at the seams with energy, was gone.

“Grandpa!”

Kneeling, crying, he hugged his grandfather.

“Why didn’t you tell me, you selfish bastard? Why didn’t you?”

He gazed at the old man; his internal flame nullified. Robert lost his best friend.

An hour later, after the police investigated, the coroner picked up the body. The constabulary and his deputy determined there was no wrongdoing. Going through Thanh’s pockets, they found one plane ticket. As Thanh had made it out to Robert for his return trip to Seattle, they gave it to him. The young man eyeballed the ticket. His grandfather achieved what he wanted. With no festive balloons, brass fanfare, or honorary medals, he went out like a northern star. He arrived at his destination. His deferred dream materialized.

* * * * *

“The Cat”

by Liswindio Apendicaesar

One day there was a stray cat who wanted to be a human. She told all the cats on the block that she'd grown tired of being a cat. She hated it whenever she had to scavenge food from one trashcan to another, or when she had to pretend to be sweet and pitiful at the same time so that people who passed her by would give her food. But most of all, she hated the humans who violently picked on her.

Other cats laughed at her. There's no way a cat could be a human, said they. They tried to advise her that the best possible scenario was to be adopted by a rich human, not become a human itself. She, however, insisted. She didn't want to be a pet. She wanted to be a free individual who wouldn't have to scavenge for food, or begged for it. She didn't want to be confined in a house or any metal box being a pet with the risk of being dumped someday when her owner got bored of her. She wanted to live independently on her own.

She knew there would be a lot of things to work on if she wanted to be human: from the way she walked and talked, and other human skills that she had to master. It wasn't easy, but she wouldn't give up.

The stray cat practiced day and night to walk and talk like human. She often visited the town library to read everything about human. She learned writing using her claws. At first she was befuddled because—to her surprise—there were so many types of letters throughout human civilization. She wasn't sure which to pick and learn. There were also so many languages. So, she looked at other people's choice of books and listened to people speaking, which writing

system and language was most used, and she chose them. I will learn more languages once I master the most popular one, she thought to herself.

She learned how to talk like most humans around her by carefully listening to them and tried to imitate their vocalization and articulation. There were words difficult for her to pronounce because her vocal cord and mouth were biologically formed for cat, not human. She, however, kept practicing. Because of the morphological differences, she ended up developing her own dialect in the process, but at least now she could speak human language.

Before long, she already could stand and walk by two feet, talk like human with normal accent both in casual and normal manners, write complex sentences with perfect grammatical structure, and eat using fork and knife, or spoon, or chopsticks. She even now understood politics and calculus after reading a lot of human books.

She was now pretty much knowledgeable in human history and this at first made her afraid to proceed further achieving her dream to be human. She learned how there had been a lot of miserable and bloody wars throughout human civilization, and she might be involved once she entered human world. Before she truly became a human, she decided to study about good and evil concept in human world to make sure she would avoid any conflict later.

It was really difficult to understand good and evil concept for the stray cat because she had been living her life all according to the nature's will, which there was neither good nor evil, just like any other cats. Apparently human world was a complex realm where actions and motives were more than just about survival. The cat never expected that it would be this complicated to be human. Her existential enquiry and moral crisis seemed to start taking shape just like it did in most humans.

I'm not a cat anymore at this rate, but not yet human, she murmured to herself. She was so determined to learn more until she could have some humanity within—even though the

word “humanity” itself was too absurd for her to fathom since there was never “catnity” for cat equivalence—for she was so sure that possessing humanity would make her fully human.

Several weeks passed and the stray cat now was certain she already understood what it meant to be human, however absurd that would mean. She promised herself that she would live her life to the fullest and cherish every moment she would spend with others. She would embrace every feeling and emotion and let herself be humane in whatever situation she had to face. Should a conflict happen between her and other people, or worse, she ended up involved in a war, at least she knew how to defend and protect herself instead of dying in vain on the street just like most cats would.

So, she started her new life by looking for a job. It wasn’t easy to find a job as a new human, but eventually she got one. She worked for a statistic company where she had to input data from 9 AM to 5 PM. The salary wasn’t too big but enough to pay rent and other bills. She also liked to work overtime to get some extra cash. She woke up to every drowsy morning with a high-spirited excitement ready to take every challenge the world offered. Her excitement was so brightly reflected on her cheerful face that everyone she passed by along her way to the office would turn their heads toward her and be infected by a burning optimism in life.

She worked industriously and sometimes made her superiors surprised by her initiatives to take more tasks than she was already assigned. Her determination in her job enabled her to finish every work she had scrupulously with a pace that everyone else in the office found hard to keep up with. Nevertheless, whenever other employees asked for her help, she would be gladly to lend a hand. As she was a very dedicated employee and fast learner, she soon got promoted to fill one of the positions in the top management.

The cat, or rather the new human, was also humble and generous. People in her neighborhood and office liked her. Every day she greeted her neighbors and helped them with anything they needed (as long as she could). She always waved and smiled to the security guards by the office gate, greeted fellow employees along the hallway, and

sometimes she bought pizza for everybody in the office. She liked to go to the cinema with her colleagues, and sometimes they went to a café for small talks. She was really grateful that now she was truly living her dream.

Things were great for her until one day one of her friends talked about love life. A self-realization came to her in surprise. If she ever fell in love with a guy—a human guy—would her feeling be reciprocated? Or did she have to marry a male cat instead? No way, those cats are stupid and uncivilized, I won't ever marry them, she thought. However, was it possible for a human guy to fall in love with her? She was sure that she was fully human, she could do what other humans could, but did they really look at her equally as human?

Is there any guy in the office that you find attractive? asked one of her friends. Her face turned red hearing the question. She lied to her friends saying she didn't feel well and then left home because she couldn't deal with the mixed feelings she had right now.

At home, she looked into the mirror trying to search for what human, or cat, might there be. She found a cat, but also human. She was puzzled. She couldn't remember when the last time she had acted like a cat, talked to other cats, and ate like a cat. She couldn't even remember how to purr and growl anymore as a cat. She knew she was a human deep inside, but she couldn't fake her cat appearance and other biological features. She knew it was impossible for her to build a family with another human for that matter.

She stopped hanging out with her friends. She was still humble and generous, but no longer sociable. She directed all of her attention and energy into her work, ignoring and avoiding all of talks about love life or even other friendly conversations. She became very self-accomplished to the point that her boss would send her into business trips or sometimes delegate her to meet and negotiate with business partners, and this made some of co-workers get jealous of her. As she kept distancing herself from everyone in the office, people started to misunderstand her, believing she was arrogant especially now that she was very successful. One day she found out that one of her co-workers talked behind her back about

how strange it was to have a cat at work. She was angry to hear the rumor. She thought she had been accepted as a fellow human being, and yet some people still looked down on her and wanted to kick her out just like when she used to be a cat.

She confronted him, telling him that she was a human just like him, and most of all, she could do a lot of things that humans could and even better than him. She reported this case to her boss, saying that she was treated unequally by a fellow employee. The boss was on her side, most especially because of her worthy contribution to the company. For the boss, it never mattered whether you were a human or a cat as long as you could benefit the company. The boss eventually fired the gossipy employee.

It was the first time in her life she kicked out a human. Oddly, she didn't feel good about it despite knowing it wasn't really her fault. She remembered how she had been picked on and mistreated when she was a stray cat. She knew it's wrong to make other people suffer. She didn't want this conflict. Her humanity spoke so loud from deep within, but there was nothing much she could do. To begin with she understood that sooner or later she would have to experience the ugly side of human life.

Disappointed in herself by what just happened, she decided to quit her job. Her boss, though, didn't approve of her resignation. The boss tried to convince her that the company really needed her and her valuable skills, and she was never once looked as anything less than human, at least by the boss. She instead was given a week leave to rest and refresh her mind. She agreed.

One night she was taking a walk around the town. It occurred to her that she'd never actually had a night life since she became a human. The town was always busier and noisier at night as she remembered how it was like to live on the street. It was also more colorful than during daytime. When she was a stray cat, she didn't get it why people seemed more aggressive and why they had different shades of faces at night. Now that she looked at it as a human herself, she understood everything: the sinister lonesomeness that people tried to escape from, the

voices in their heads, and the question marks demanding nonexistent answers that kept them awake at night.

I guess the air is fresher at night, she talked to herself.

She kept walking until she passed by a jazz café. There she heard a song was being played so loudly that even those outside could hear. She listened carefully to the lyrics: *Ev'rybody wants to be a cat...*

She was petrified to hear the lyrics. How could there be any song like that in human world? Why on earth did human want to be a cat? They know nothing about the pain of being a cat, she said to herself.

Everybody's pickin' up on that feline beat

'Cause everything else is obsolete

She paused and closed her eyes. She recalled her memories from the time she was a cat. Life used to be so much simpler. She could eat and sleep whenever she wanted, she could run to every place in this town, and she didn't have to worry about the bills. There was no unnecessary conflict because things would spontaneously work their way out and immediately be forgotten. It turned out that life as human was too complicated for her, and even for the humans themselves.

Of course, everybody wants to be a cat, she muttered and suddenly a smile was formed on her lips washing away her night gloom. She continued her steps heading home.

At home, she looked at herself in the mirror again, and this time she was glad that her appearance was still a cat. Suddenly she had an urge to once again feel what it's like to be a cat. She missed her "catnity". Not that she was fed up with whatever humanity had to offer, but she was just being nostalgic, and the thought of it made her happy. She tried to purr, but

failed. It made her a bit sad. She told herself maybe she should visit her old friends, the stray cats, to find again her old self. So, she came to the alley where she used to live with all the stray cats.

They were surprised to see her this late at night. Now she looked so beautiful and smelled good. She wore human dress and stood on two feet. She even said “hi” instead of “meow”. She tried to talk to them in human language, but the only reply she received was “meow”. At first, she couldn’t understand, but they kept trying to talk to each other and slowly she regained her memory of the cat language. Before long, they already could understand each other, and she told them about everything had happened to her. Those cats were astounded by her stories.

Why do you come back here now? asked one of the cats. She didn’t know how to answer. She wasn’t actually sure whether she missed them and the life as a cat. Human life was relatively great for her in spite of the recent situation she had been getting into. So why did she return to the stray cats?

No. Human life wasn’t great at all. At that moment she realized how she had been consumed into work, grief, anger, and everything else that was actually mundane. She wondered if human life was better at all than cat life. She wondered if kicking out other people was always human nature, was part of humanity at all.

She wondered if she wanted to be a cat again. But she couldn’t. Once you opened the door and entered the irony of human life, it’s really difficult to untangle the twisted threads. It might even be impossible.

She couldn’t tell those stray cats about it. Lest they found out that she had regretted her decision to be human. I have to be strong just like human, she thought to herself.

So, she replied, I just want to, but don’t worry, am only visiting.

It was past midnight and she felt tonight was enough for her to be outside. She left and said goodbye to the stray cats. She promised she would regularly visit them and bring them some food next time. The stray cats were happy to hear that.

Listen, ev'rybody wants to be a cat, she sighed with a smile as she was walking away.

We know, said one of the stray cats proudly.

* * * * *

“Spectres of Childhood”

by Carla Silbert

My three-year-old’s face flashes red, projectile tears and a piercing wail rising from him like a human fire-engine. *It’s gone, it’s gone* he bellows through spit and snot, clutching his tiny wrist as I check to see if it is broken. I try to calm him through the sobs as he shows me his bare arm as proof – not of an injury, but of an absence – *it’s gone*.

I pull my hair tie out of my ponytail and put it around his hand, telling him he’ll be ok now but he is unconvinced. The string that fell off – pale pink cotton – was tied on him at the first *baci* ceremony we attended soon after arriving in Laos, held by our neighbours to welcome us. It was tied on him not by me – sweating since the moment we landed here six months ago like a water-balloon with a slow leak – but by a man with a golden tooth and bare feet. At the *baci*, we sat around a centrepiece of banana flowers as prayers we didn’t understand were chanted, and people we didn’t know bound cotton strings to our wrists to keep our souls in place and protect us.

Don’t upset the ghosts the landlady of our new house in Vientiane tells us. We are living only a kilometre from the Mekong and can see Thailand on the other side of its murky riverbank. I wish she hadn’t said this within earshot of Sacha, but his eyes immediately widen. The landlady shows us the small wooden spirit house in the garden where we must offer fruit and marigolds to the ancestors who lived here before. Sacha stands on his tip-toes to peer into this doll’s house with its tiny jade and jewelled Buddha figurines. I learn that here the game ‘rock, paper, scissors’ is played as ‘monk, young girl, ghost’. I line up this translation

with the English version of the game – a young girl can defeat a monk, and a monk can crush a ghost, but a ghost will slice through a young girl.

Sacha's little brother seems unaware of the ghosts, but apparently the ghosts are aware of him. Passers-by tell him *pen ta sang*, which translates as 'I hate you' but when said to a child is a coded way of complimenting them as cute. To say the truth out loud could mean the ghosts hear and come to steal the child away. Telling a baby that it is hated is the safer option.

In Laos my own ancestors would be called *phi taihong* – spirits of the violently killed who are never at peace. There are memorials to them, but no graves, vast museums and sites all over Eastern Europe where the gas chambers once stood. I light a candle for them once a year on *Yom Ha Shoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day, but now that feels like not enough. I wonder if they would like to be remembered with marigolds too. I see these ancestors in my dreams sometimes, before I am woken to small bodies clambering over me asking for breakfast. My own *baci* string fell off months ago.

Sacha conjures magic soups from frangipani petals and blades of wet morning-grass, lurid green from rainy season downpours. He anoints the baby's forehead, chanting a spell in a melodic gibberish that is his approximation of the local language. He weaves flower stems together, creating a new bracelet for his wrist – an amulet of protection plucked from our garden. The kids play tricks with time, their baby-selves shape-shifting into little children so fast that it feels supernatural. I wish I could bundle them to another realm where they can't grow any bigger but are preserved with sparkling eyes and wet mouths forever. I understand why the ghosts want to steal them.

In the garden, I take fresh incense sticks to the spirit house. I whisper a wish for the ghosts to keep the house calm, to keep the children protected. Better to be safe than sorry. Sacha runs out, barefoot with mud caking his toes, and stands beside me as I strike a match. We watch the incense ignite and ribbons of white smoke curl skywards, before disappearing as if it never existed.

* * * * *

“Death Row”

by Jun A. Alindogan

Death, although expected, still comes to us by surprise. The initial death in my family came when I was two years shy of adulthood. The family was certain that dad would pass away, in his own time, but no family, for that matter, would want to part with any loved one. All material and non-material resources are utilized to prolong life so one can enjoy a blissful journey till old age. For a month, dad was connected to life support from being comatose. This was his second heart attack. In my junior year in high school, he suffered his first stroke but eventually recovered. I remember quite clearly the thanksgiving dinner that the family had in a Chinese restaurant prior to his death, a year later after a celebration of a sibling’s accounting board success. It was a prelude to providing for our needs through my brother’s job and mom’s public-school teaching after dad was no longer around. For many years, dad worked as a freelance bookkeeper, handling diverse clients that ranged from a tailoring shop, *Fookien Times* yearbook, to the now defunct Escolta-based Chinese specialty restaurant named Hua Tay where I used to accompany him after he had his first stroke while en route to the university belt area for my college studies. During our meals together, apart from the Hua Tay staples, dad would deliciously enjoy a good serving of Chinese fried rice and different kinds of cured meats usually with tea or coffee at lunch. Oil-rich food makes flavors appealing across age groups and creates a continuous desire for experimental concoctions, notwithstanding the ill and even fatal effects of such seemingly trivial diet decisions. This was my dad’s case.

On the day my dad passed away, I was at school with a few classmates, totally engrossed in doing our advertising assignment at the university theater lobby, where we could audio

record our copy clearly. This was in the early 80s when mobile phones and the Internet were unknown. There were still a few passenger jeeps plying the university area to our residence even at night, but on this particular eve, I arrived home both hungry and late, without any hint that it was my dad's first wake. My eldest brother approached me on the main road to the small pathway leading to our residence and said: "Dad's already left." All eyes were on me because most of them thought that I would break down as I was the only one left who did not know of Dad's death. On the succeeding nights, a typhoon hit our area, and so his wake got extended until the weather cleared and a few of his siblings arrived from the South for the funeral. In death and life, our concepts of mortality and the afterlife constantly shift from being passive to active and vice-versa until we become comfortable and confident in managing and resolving our personal issues about eternity.

The second death in my family that I had a close encounter was that of mom's elder brother. Uncle Em worked for the longest time at Popular Bookstore in Manila. In my sophomore year in college, I flunked trigonometry, which I assumed, because of my naivety, that Uncle Em did not understand it either. In fact, he knew some people at our university bookshop as he worked as a sales clerk. And so I had to stop schooling for a term when mom discovered my secret, which prompted her to relocate me to a "vocational typing school." In time I was able to finish college but was out of work for two years after graduation. It was the worst of times politically and economically, with masses of people courageous enough to risk their lives to overthrow the dictatorship.

Since I was jobless, I had to think of ways to earn some money through the selling and buying of apparel and accessories, ice candies, and ice buko. This was also the period I experimented with writing – investigating and analyzing information from credible sources to come up with a non-biased viewpoint that would enable me to develop valid insights for my personal consumption via professional publications. Uncle Em, whom we fondly call Memeng, was witness to these articles and letters to the editor as well as paragraph-long entertainment arguments in broadsheet columns as he took his daily walks and shower visits to us in the scorching summer heat. He occasionally gifted us with gallons of decadent ice cream flavors. Medicine claims that genetic predispositions are irreversible and could be classified as

generational curses. Memeng was hypertensive and so were his male siblings. Diabetes and asthma also run in the family. Overturning physiological and spiritual curses require a fairly good dose of common sense and a strong commitment to identify the culprit by withdrawing from “bad-food-world-love” relationships and a stressful life. As if to foreshadow Memeng’s death, in a shower, he consciously saw his spirit rise and detach from his body, which triggered him to call his spirit to return. In the end, his heart failed him.

The next death in the family was personal to me. Uncle Nor, together with his wife, used to own Our Lord’s Drugstore—a small one—in South Caloocan City. When they had to go for a holiday in his wife’s coastal town in the South, my first cousin and I were invited to stay at the store and sell accordingly. When my laundry was done upon return home, it reeked of dirt from car fumes that invaded the pharmacy regularly. Ironically the store also brought weakness and death to its residents. My youngest brother stayed with them for a time to help with a few errands and to oversee the care the couple needed for being childless. Growing older and frail, they suffered from cardiovascular, mobility, and renal disorders. The first to pass was my aunt-in-law, and the only recourse for my uncle was to resettle in his ancestral home in Bulacan together with my cousins. He was jobless but well provided by overseas-based cousins for his medical and personal needs. I once took care of him upon confinement at the then executive building of the Philippine General Hospital for urinary issues. He was an easy patient and did not wish to be burdensome. At the end of my personal shift, he wanted to give me some cash, boasting that he had more than enough to cover expenses. I politely refused the offer. Being generous in well-being is quite common but doing so in tragedy means an appreciation for life that even limited resources are to be employed for the larger benefit of a family, community, and even a nation. No progress and redemption is possible in self-centeredness. Both Uncle Em and Uncle Nor were interred in our family tomb.

The final death in the family took place over a decade ago. People claim that death comes before or after one’s birthday, but no empirical evidence is available to support this theory. Mom passed away two months before her 80th year. Her memory gradually faded into oblivion in a non-Tagalog-speaking region. However, there were certain incidental

memories that stayed—her parents, her older brother, and the Lord’s Prayer—until her death. Meaningful processing of memories is created in a relationship that persists through time as they are inversely and conversely impactful, with fellow humans and the Divine. Her funeral and interment were all set with a memorial service, flowers, balloons, food, and tomb at a date we agreed upon. Unfortunately, the original plan was scrapped. Mom did not approve of this idea, according to my brother’s interpretation of events. It was summer and yet, on the day my brother and some guests and close friends from Bulacan were to land in the island, the weather was terribly bad, which forced the plane to hover endlessly and return.

Her remains were brought for cremation in Manila and finally laid to rest to join my father and other departed relatives in her hometown.

Death surrounds every family although the circumstances are of varying intensities. We may not completely understand the reason for deaths, but we are assured that our memories—whether good or bad—will still shape our past, present, and even future images of life.

* * * * *

“Last Ichor”

by Amber Pineda

I suppose it's here, where I become an all too familiar Filipino with an American heart and where your molting skin is the only thing that solaces, that I whisper my ube veins into the cascading stars and eat at their perpetual deaths. It's here, where the only thing that can combat this engulfing heat is your numb hands and where words become the unwanted stains on your paper digits, that I am the agony you know today.

Perhaps I should've expected this from the beginning, when your verdant vitality and porcelain dreams grew weary and obsolete. Just like that, you crawled back into your sheltered self. And suddenly, this feeling of jellyfish stings and burning, roaring, scorching gums becomes the very thing I am, and I can no longer look at you in your leashed joy and be solaced in your molting skin.

Your blood is mine and mine is yours. I proclaim myself the flesh under your fingernails and the biting dirt under your learning, keen, fatigued eyes. From this heavy throat, I wail with crumbling elusivity and among quiet storms, sleepy and spacey until the last thing that remains of us is the wit of your mouth and the brown of my skin.

* * * * *

“Accepting Who You Are”

by Arjun Dhillon

To the gorgeous one,
With the red shawl,
You are the apple of my eye,
The pinnacle of my soul.

Why cower away from me,
When all I seek is truth,
You're who I love,
One day to be married with.

Although I'm deformed,
Often frowned upon by everyone,
Including family and friends,
I am just human like everyone else.

If you are repulsed by me,
Say it to my face,
Say that you hate me,
I will leave you alone.

I am a man of dignity and honour,
In spite of being crippled,
I shall not be tormented and disrespected,
Not in a million years.

* * * * *

“The Snake and the Centipede”

by Alan McNarie

I knew I was in a different culture when
I stepped into the bathroom
and found a brilliant green
snake curled around the water jar
and told Kuhn Pa. He owned no shotgun
but didn't even grab his machete
only a broom
which he used to
gently unwind the snake's coils
from the water jar, and then carefully herd it
out the door and into the garden,
and then calmly warn me
that it was deadly.
My own father would have killed the snake
and did kill them, when they got anywhere near his family
or pets, or livestock. But here,
even a poisonous snake's life
was sacred.

I learned culture's limit
when some furniture factory workers
moving lumber, unearthed a footlong centipede.
It charged them. They dodged, beating it

with whatever lumber or long tools
they could seize: no quarter given
by either side, until the centipede
at last slithered into a crack
in the earth, and disappeared.

I later told
a friend about the two incidents.
“Why did the snake deserve mercy,
but not the centipede?” I asked.
“A centipede is all blind hatred,” he said.
“It only knows attack and poison;
fangs at one end,
stinger at the other.
But the snake is only poison on one end.
You can reason with the snake.”

My father and Kuhn Pa, my adopted Thai father
both valued life, both valued family;
but my dad didn't value a snake's life nearly as much
as his family's, or even his pets' and livestock's.
Kuhn Pa, a devout Buddhist, weighed the snake's life
Against the risk to himself and Kuhn Ma and sister Som and Brother Num
and me, and found its life worth the risk to us
since he could persuade it to leave.

But neither Dad nor Kuhn Pa
Could have persuaded the centipede,
The power of culture
ends with the unreasonableness of your enemy.

* * * * *

“The Winged Beast”

by Alan McNarie

The refugee camp gleams white as a moon
for day: new in its tin roofs,
its immaculate clay baked hard.
Overhead, one kite flies,

watching for something dead, fourteen kilometers
from Panat Nicom, the Cleanest Town in Thailand,
and the shrine where Buddha flies, standing

on the back of the Winged Beast. Three whores leave
the volunteers’ rooms at ten, pulling their red T-shirts
taut; it’s Sunday. Buddha rides
plastered with gold leaf; they found him
in a new ditch east of town. The beast’s name is still unresolved
in scholarly journals.

The volunteers yawn and shave. They’ve cleaned soaked feces
from infant skeletons, while Pol Pot’s soldiers
looked on. Panat Nicom’s old women have already gone
to sell T-shirts outside the camp’s
bright barbed wire. Buddha’s new gold gleams
like the garbage truck’s hubcaps. It’s Sunday.

The volunteers dress and leave
with their ampules, and don't recall how Sundays
sometimes ride, thin and gleaming
as gold leaf; as pale as taut skin,
over blood and nerves—as Buddha rides
smiling
on the back of the winged beast
with horns, its face about
to scream.

* * * * *

“Pause... Then Let Go”

by Gab Jopillo

Teetering on the edge of a breakdown, I clench my jaw and attempt to breathe deep.
But my head starts to throb and my chest starts to heave
As my guts slowly spill out of me; my body beyond my control.
Rationality and insanity separated by a blurred line,
Like my vision whenever you stand on the periphery of my sight.
Your thick smoke punches a hole in my lungs, but they don't exist
Any more than they do in my head when you erase them with your kiss.
There's a burning pain and discomfort from holding on to you when my palms are slick
with sweat and dirt
But when the line fades completely and insanity has taken over, I allow myself to hold on to
the hurt.
Because it's all you ever taught me, don't give in to the pain
Let myself absorb it, let the calluses remain
So as I stand on the brink of my black hole,
I unclench my jaw and swallow my breath.
There's no point in standing still when you were all I had left.

* * * * *

“help me”

by Nicole Lee Jiaqi

I wake up every morning despising how I have to drag my limp and lifeless body out of bed to get through another day, and I despise how I have to carve a smile out on my face so people won't ask me if I'm doing okay. If I'm doing okay? Well, I can't feel my legs because they are prickling from pins and needles, ants running all the way up my spine and down back again. And yet, yes. I'll plaster on a smile, nod, and say I'm okay. I just need to keep my body moving. *Keep your body moving, keep your body moving. Keep. Your. Body. Moving.*

I don't feel cleansed whenever I take a shower, even after lathering my skin with an absurd amount of soap I have pumped into my palms, or when I dry myself with a white towel and change into a fresh set of clean, crisp clothes. I look into the mirror and wonder: does my hair look funny, do my clothes look strange, is that something on my face, is my stomach bloated today, would everyone be staring at me? *Why would they be staring at you, you stupid girl? The world doesn't revolve around you, you know.* Walk it off, just walk it off.

Well, maybe if I dye my hair a crazy colour, I'll finally feel something. *No! You've dyed it blue before at four in the morning and all that did was stain the tiles of your no-longer white bathroom floor. Poor daddy couldn't even recognise his own daughter when you came walking down the stairs.* Then maybe if I go to the hairdresser and get him to chop all my hair off, I'll finally feel something. *No, no, no! Don't you dare touch anything. You already look like a mess with that impulsively-done, self-snipped fringe that is much too blunt and much too short. Not to mention the fact that you have to spend twenty-minutes in front of the mirror every single bloody morning giving yourself a fright with your own reflection while struggling to pin it up. So don't you dare make yourself look any worse than you already do.*

I want to tell this voice in my head to “Shut. The. Fuck. Up!”, that I know what I’m doing. *No, you don’t. You don’t know what you’re doing at all, you stupid girl. You just don’t want to accept help, because accepting help also means accepting the fact that you have a problem. That you’re mentally fucked up, like really fucked up in the head, and that means you’ll have to go for therapy or something and you’ll just end up being more of a burden to another poor medical worker who’s probably overworked and underpaid.*

I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I can’t help myself, so let me help you instead. It’s the only thing distracting me from myself. So please, use me. I’m begging you to use me. Break me into two, shatter me into a million pieces if you can. Use my body and suck out whatever’s left of my soul when you push me up against the wall and forcefully kiss my lips. I won’t fight back. I’ll lay there on your mattress like a piece of heavy, dead log and I’ll make the sounds you want me to make because I am desperate to be destroyed. *You can’t even destroy yourself so you’re just letting somebody else do it at this point.* Yes, maybe I’ll sell my body too. Put it up for sale on the dark web or something, nothing much there to begin with anyways. Just a lump of skin and bone with four limbs and a head which I am constantly, silently screaming to run away from. Walk it off, walk it off. Just walk. It. Off.

I’ve walked over twenty-four thousand steps today and I can still feel the jitters in my nerves, itching away within the pores of my bones. Someone, anyone, please, help me. I want to lock myself away into my room, curl my body up to be smothered under the comfort of my own blanket and simply just lay there until my flesh rots into a shade of greyish-greenish putrescence and breaks down into a pile of dingy, dusty mustiness left to be swept up and away by the wind. *Maybe then the floor will finally open up and swallow you whole, you stupid girl. And you’ll find yourself free-falling into a bottomless pit of a pitch-black void where*

I can barely breathe in –

I

can't

breathe...

The air can't fill my lungs even though I'm gasping away like a flounder out of water with my arms and legs flogging and flailing, and the back of my throat is closing up and everything around me is spinning, and I can feel myself drowning down into a whirling whirlpool and the waves are crashing into my ears as rip-roaring thunder and I wish I had my earphones in right now so I can blast "Motion Sickness" by Phoebe Bridgers to block it all out -

I'm drowning,

I'm drowning,

I'm drowning...

I'm drowning and I can't write anymore and I despise my work and I despise the fact that I am going to be stuck with this body and this mind for as long as I live and most of all,

I despise the fact that

I miss you;

I miss you and I think of you every day, and why must you slip into my dreams when I sleep to escape? *Maybe it's because you made this cruel, cold, mad and impossible, ghost of a girl, feel something.*

God, please help me. I'm not even religious but I'd go down on my knees for you, suck out oozing, fresh blood straight from the roots of my own gums with the raw ripping offs of my own teeth and lick off the remnants of my own vomit from the cracks found within the pavement floor if that means you'll help me. So please,

help me

* * * * *

“An Intersection of Diasporic Experiences”

A review of Miriam Wei Wei Lo’s *Against Certain Capture* (Five Islands Press 2021)

by Leei Wong

Miriam Wei Wei Lo’s *Against Certain Capture* is a welcomed addition to Australia’s Chinese diasporic poetry scene and an important contribution to the Australian-Asian dialogue regarding multiculturalism. The book demonstrates the intricate characteristics of Eva and Yue Xian (Lo’s maternal and paternal grandmothers, respectively). Through the lens of an earnest grandchild, the poet creates a vivid picture of the historical context regarding her grandmothers’ youth and journeys.

Against Certain Capture is a refreshing biography of these two women, written in poetry and divided into two distinct sections. The first section starts with the backdrop of the East-Malaysian Chinese culture, with allusions to “ikan bilis” (Southeast Asian popular fish) and “latex” (from rubber trees in Malaysia), for example, in a poignant description of Yue Xian. It then transitions into the second section with an Australian outback setting, painting the beginning of a young woman Eva’s journey.

The book narrates the women’s stories – their youth, romance, family, aspirations and struggles, especially in World War II’s historical context. Both were highly inclined towards academics and strived to be different to the stereotype of women during those times. Yue Xian went to Canton University (p. 7), and Eva “just missed a distinction in French” (p. 20). Education may seem to empower the women, but eventually their destinies seemed to be subjected to life’s unpredicted struggles brought on by war. Yue Xian married Foot Kee the

same year when the Japanese attacked Kuching; Eva had married Cliff before the war and was taking care of two kids, while pregnant with twins, when the war struck.

Lo is comparing the image of women now to her grandmothers' time, which was not so long ago, yet there were distinctive differences and similarities between their two cultures and contexts. Yue Xian and Eva were both inclined to pay their respects to elders regardless of their cultures: Yue Xian would greet her mother-in-law in the kitchen (p. 12), and Eva had to try "keeping her mouth shut" in response to her mother-in-law's words: "*You haven't polished the silver...You're not a farmer's daughter...*" (p. 22).

The uniqueness of Lo's poetry stems from Chinese culture and Biblical references, resulting in a concurrent theme throughout her collection. It subtly represents Lo's context as a person of Malaysian-Chinese, Anglo-Australian descent and her Christian beliefs and values.

A representation of Chinese culture, for example, is given in the image of Lin Dai Yu, the character in Cao Xue Qin's 18th-century classic, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which is repeated in these lines in "Lin Dai Yu (Self-Portrait)":

Lin Dai Yu
Her heroine
Trapped...

Yue Xian's bravery and determination to shake off (extricate) the feudalistic social conformist chains cast on Chinese women is evident. She, like Lin Dai Yu, longed for the pursuit of personal freedom, but she would not be the ever melancholic, frail Lin Dai Yu in the epic scene of the novel, helplessly burying fallen petals and sinking in sorrow over the demise of flowers.

Besides featuring Malaysian Chinese culture, this book includes Lo's usual personal stylistic inclusion of Biblical images – when Jesus asked the Jewish fisherman Simon Peter, son of John:

“Simon, son of John,
Do you love me?” (p. 10)

Peter had declared that he would die for Jesus but had denied Him three times. In this way, Lo mirrors Yue Xian’s longing for the kind of love that she sees in Cantonese operas, such as “Cantonese lovers pledge(ing) (their) eternal faithfulness” (p. 16).

Perhaps the climax of the series is the exploration of the theme of intercultural marriage, with a sweet love story in “Farmgirl Marries” (p. 29). Lo’s dad, Danny, on a Colombo Plan scholarship to Australia, met Eva’s ninth child, Susan, and they decided to get married. Both families were shocked at the news of their children’s intercultural marriage, and Eva especially opposed this idea. Nevertheless, the intense love between the couple eventually overcame Eva’s stigma towards intercultural marriage, as she put it: “It is wrong to marry someone from a different race!” (p. 29).

The tension appears to be later reconciled in the last two proses, in “Don’t Call Me Grandma” (p. 30) and “Silver” (p. 32), with Lo bringing the stories full circle, demonstrating the acceptance that has taken place. This collection recognises Australia’s multicultural landscape and the forerunners who have paved the way for appreciating different cultures. On a personal note, I eagerly look forward to a recorded reading of the prose by the author herself with the publication. It would be *jin shang tian hua* (loosely translated as “adding icing on the cake”).

Against Certain Capture is a collection of poetry that tugs at the readers’ heartstrings, reminding us of the brave women from different sides of the world paving their way through difficult hardships. Significantly, this book shows a change in perspective towards acceptance of different cultures.

This genre of poetry is a must-read by generations young and old, for it demonstrates a unique identity that readers should be exposed to, since, as Timothy Yu describes in his 2013 review of *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* (edited by Adam Aitken, Kim Cheng Boey and Michelle Cahill, Puncher & Wattmann, 2013) in *Cordite Poetry Review*, the characteristic of contemporary Australian-Asian poets compared to American-Asian poets, tends “to be seen as an intersection rather than an identity”. Indeed, as per Kinsella’s theory of “international regionalism” in poetry written in his book *Polysituatedness: A Poetics of Displacement* (Manchester University Press, 2017), this series of poems is an example of the multi-faceted intersection of the diasporic experiences of the poet. Such experiences need to be valued and accepted by society, so that we can appreciate not only literature but also different aspects of our humanity by understanding one another further, regardless of culture or context.