Anak Sastra
Issue 40

Issue 40 Contents

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Contributor Bios

Civil litigation lawyer turned writer/actor/vocalist, **Tina Isaacs** is an award-winning writer of literary and speculative fiction, as well as an active participant in the Malaysian performing arts scene.

Sebastian Z. Minlatt is an aspiring writer from Yangon, Myanmar (Burma). He occasionally writes book reviews on his Instagram account.

At 29, **Divakaran Prabhakaran** (Twitter: @11over13) is a freelance writer and former journalist from Malaysia who is just starting to branch into short fiction writing.

Josua D. Quiniquito, 26, is a senior high school teacher from the Philippines. He handles creative writing, 21st-century literature, and research subjects.

Once **Tom L. Lombaerts** secured a loan to buy an airplane, he didn't buy it, but double-crossed the bank and took it. Funneled the bank's money through a mundane automated teller machine and started Who's Who, a small café situated on the slope of Bali's most revered volcano, where he writes his odd little stories.

Michelle A. Zabat (Twitter: @michelle_zabat) is a Filipina-American biologist. She received her BA in Health & Human Biology and Food Studies from Brown University in 2018, and she conducted research as a 2018-2019 Fulbright Fellow in the Philippines. She is an incoming M1 at the New York University Grossman School of Medicine.

Erica Fransisca was born in Jakarta, Indonesia. She is now pursuing her bachelor's degree in English Literature at the University of East Anglia, UK. Her journalistic pieces have been published in *The Jakarta Post*, while her creative work has appeared in UEA's *Concrete*.

Virginia Ryan is a former journalist and marketing writer and now is focused on an independent writing career. She holds a BA in Journalism from George Washington University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University. Her stories were published recently in *Delta Sky Magazine* and the literary journal, *Adelaide*, and she is working on a novel.

Joshua Ip is a poet, editor, and literary organiser. He has edited nine anthologies and written four poetry collections, most recently footnotes on falling (2018). He has won some awards. He co-founded Sing Lit Station, an over-active literary charity that runs community initiatives including SingPoWriMo, poetry.sg and several workshop groups.

Renee Agatep lives with her husband and their two children in Tampa, Florida. She earned her master's at Northeastern University and is currently studying creative writing at the University of Central Florida. She is a 2020 Best of the Net nominee. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in *The Lascaux Review*, *Rust+Moth*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, *Dear Damsels*, *Dunes Review* and elsewhere.

Adam Ashraf Ramlan is a recent mechanical engineering graduate from the University of Manchester. He had lived his whole student life in Selangor before that. He is fairly new to the ways of life and would like to share the unending swirl of emotions that rarely make out sentences when he tries to talk about them. Funnily, the occasional bursts of inspiration only come when they're not wanted.

Ismim Putera is a poet and writer from Sarawak, Malaysia. His works can be found in several online magazines such as *Ghostheart Literary*, *Ayaskala*, *Prismatica*, *Eksentrika* and elsewhere.

Emmanuel Lacadin hails from the Philippines. He writes poetry, flash fiction, and essays, with some of his works published in *Katitikan: Literary Journal of the Philippine South*, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, and the Hong Kong-based 聲韻詩刊 *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, among others. He is the recipient of the Joseph Mulry Award for Literary Excellence (2020) and Loyola Schools Awards for the Arts in Creative Writing (Poetry) (2020).

Anuradha Chelliah works as a teacher in a primary school. She enjoys teaching and is always ready for the challenge. She has ideas to write and has written articles, poems and short stories to *The Star*, *Iris Magazine*, *Eksentrika* and *Malaysia Indian Anthology*.

Jeremy Gadd has published four volumes of poetry: *Reflections While Flying on Empty* (Aldrich Press, 2015); *Selected Poems* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013); *Twenty Six Poems* (AICD, 2000); and *A Tale of Tai Ringal and Other Poems*, a livre d'artiste with engravings by P. John Burden, published by the Bournehall Press (now found in rare book collections such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London).

Matthew Jerome van Huizen is a 27-year-old Kuala Lumpur-based maritime lawyer who grew up in Seremban and studied law in Malacca. It was there where he began writing. He loves to write Malaysian/Southeast Asian-themed poetry.

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“Convergence”

by Tina Isaacs

I try to make her feel settled, but Kak Lili’s face is wrought with worry.

“Kak Lili, you and the kids will be fine right here, ya?” I pat Kak Lili’s arm. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Clasped around each of her thighs, two of her young kids look at me with watery and wary gazes. The eldest, a boy of five, has a blackened eye and discoloured jaw. His abah had rewarded him with a flying kick because his precious Legos were found discarded on the living room floor. The second is a pretty girl not quite three, her threadbare cotton shirt haphazardly buttoned together in what must have been a rush to get out of their house.

Bundled in Kak Lili’s arms is her youngest, just two months old. My eyes soften, thinking that it was fortunate that the beautiful baby girl came out no worse for wear. When Kak Lili was 35-weeks pregnant, her husband had knocked her unconscious, complaining that his chicken had been undercooked. A neighbor had sought us out and brought her in. That was the first time we’d met. She’d stayed three nights, and I’d begun to make plans for her for permanent lodging, but she’d slipped out the next day.

My eyes settle on the two cherubic kids and smile in understanding.

I turn and lead the way, staring ahead but nevertheless assured to hear the soft thuds of footsteps following behind me. Kak Lili and her kids settle into their bed for the night. It’s a simple mattress on the tiled floor, but it’s a clean, safe haven for them.

Most importantly, they are no longer within grasp of the monster who calls himself Abah.

Kak Lili said she’ll make arrangements to return to her family home in Batu Pahat this time. I hope it’s a permanent arrangement for her. Our organization will assist her, of course, notwithstanding. At least temporarily. The shelter is crowded and just like all our others, places are desperately in demand, but we can always squeeze in a family or two.

I bid them farewell and flip the light switch on my way out. I wave to Madam Chauly as I pass the administration room, and I'm out the main door. I pause until I hear her activate the bolts and multiple padlocks behind me.

I step out onto the streets, blinking my eyes to adjust to the early morning sunshine. There's so much to do, and I'm half-minded to turn back. But I know I would be useless to them dead on my feet.

I release a long sigh and walk up to the end of the street.

In ten hours, it will be the start of yet another day of tending tortured souls.

Today marks the fifth anniversary since I joined this organization, and it's as if I'm hardly making an impact. Every day I help one or two ladies and their children escape abuse, and the very next day, I am faced with more.

I came into the NGO telling myself that life is more than just getting a degree, a job, and getting married. But lately, it has begun to feel like a never-ending cycle of hopelessness.

As I turn the corner of Jalan Bukit Bintang, I think of the journey to my apartment at Brickfields and the fluffy mattress that awaits me.

Using my smartphone, I call for a GrabCar service.

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"I have something for you, Shindy," Phay Phay said at dinner last night. He gave me a rattan ball for my twelfth birthday.

"Don't encourage him," May May had said as she cleaned the dishes. "You know his leg is deformed. It'll make it worse."

May May is always worried about my leg. It got stuck in some construction debris when I was seven and got badly scarred. She wants me to learn A-B-C and 1-2-3 with the NGO volunteers who teach the Rohingya community around Pudu. But the jumble of symbols is too hard for me to grasp. And it's embarrassing to sit in class with the small kids.

Phay Phay wants me to be smart too. He worries that if we never return to our motherland, I won't have a future but working as a hard labourer. What else can I hope for? Phay Phay says the Rohingya are a forgotten charity case that no one wants. But he also wants me to enjoy a carefree life while I still can.

This morning, as soon as all the men and young women left for work at daybreak and before May May can stop me, I am at the dirt road leading to our dwelling. I play further away at the road corner near Jalan Pudu so May May doesn't see me.

Aung Zuy and Ba Shin won't usually play with me because of my bum leg. But I try to think of Phay Phay's reminder: I should count myself lucky that I didn't lose the whole foot; I must learn to enjoy life despite it.

When they see my rattan ball, Aung Zuy and Ba Shin will join me for sure.

* * *

I ignore the phone's notification chime as I grip the steering wheel and maneuver my 7-series Bimmer across lanes.

There is a terrible jam in the city today. Some stupid fucks decided it would be fun to hold an anti-government rally smack in the middle of the Golden Triangle. These fucks want to be idealistic about politics at everyone else's expense.

They don't have appointments and clients chasing them to complete surgeries.

I can just imagine the conversation: "Oh, sorry, Mrs. Dworkin. We'll have to reschedule your 8:00 am tummy-tuck for which you've paid handsomely because I was stuck in a traffic jam this morning."

That would be a perfect end to a perfect month. And I would have to kiss that European holiday that I'd promised Mary goodbye. I didn't know if I was more afraid of losing the bonus or facing Mary's disappointment.

I cursed as I swiveled away from the path of another motorcycle, wondering whether it was time I hired a driver just like the other doctors did.

Oh, how I detested giving up control. Even if it was merely for driving.

Shaking my head, I send a call through my Bluetooth speaker to my clinic.

"Betty,"

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Is the patient there yet?"

"Yes, she is, sir. With a few members of her family."

"Harummph. Prep OT5 for me and have everyone on standby. I am on the way."

"Sir, OT4 is already prepped. Doctor Chin and Mr. Sarkar are ready for you."

"Thank you. Convey my apologies to the family for the delay. I'll be in shortly."

"Yessir."

* * *

"Maaf, tak boleh. Tak boleh lalu," I say with a stern voice, bringing on my inner sergeant major, as I wave the car aside. I nod as the car skids towards the next lane.

My irritation must be obvious because a couple of my colleagues trot over.

"Rileks, bro," Lance Corporal Rahmad says, "It's still early yet…"

Lance Corporal Azmi chimes in. "I know you're stressed, bro. Didn't get any last night, huh? When's the wife done with her confinement?"

I cut him a glare. His face deserves a fist to make it look better.

Azmi raises his palms. "Cool la, bro. You need to *cover line* in front of the public. If they report your bad number, who'll have to deal with shit?"

I ignore them, continuing to wave the traffic past the blockage cones and towards the detour. Eventually, Rahmad and Azmi slink to their stations.

Throughout the morning, the drivers mutter and roll their eyes at me as if I'm at fault for the traffic standstill. As if I had chosen to wake at 3:00 am, leave my new baby and beautiful wife, to be on duty at Dang Wangi Station before the break of dawn.

I have no problem against the people asking for a better government. A strong opposition is a good thing, isn't it? Keeps everyone on their toes. So, kudos to them for standing up for everyone's rights.

But, of course, I can't make my feelings known. Just like I had to turn the other cheek when my colleagues stole cash from those Indonesian workers.

When I'd signed up for police training, I thought I'd get to be one of the good guys. As I continue waving to the traffic, I shake my head at the thought that, somehow, I had ended up as one of the bad guys.

* * *

They told us street workers to stay indoors. There's a protest march along this road. But a girl's gotta *cari makan*, ya know?

It has been tough to *cari makan* lately. With price of petrol, rice and cooking oil gone up, entertainment is the first budget to be slashed at times like this. All the work I can get lately are some quick hand jobs and blowjobs; hardly 10 fucks throughout the week.

"Abang, want a good time, Bang?" I call to the tall, muscular man who walks by my lane.

He's a cutie. Just my cup of tea.

This Abang Sado turns to me, smiles and shakes his head. From his timid smile, I can tell he's polite and kind. I'm sure he won't make fun of me as a lady-boy, like most customers. I would show him a good time and throw in some extras completely FOC.

Alas, he's not interested. Probably he has a girl who's not deformed like me.

I wander out and stand at the corner of the main street. I pray there are more customers as the day goes by.

I started early, didn't I? Early bird gets the worm, and all that…

I hope the police around the corner won't see me.

I raise my foot to an angle so that my skirt slit is lifted, and my sexy thigh is more visible.

* * *

I weave in and out through the traffic to reach Plaza Rakyat, but it's no use. I can see it at the end of Jalan Tun Perak, so near but so far away.

Even with all the incentives, this private taxi service is hardly worth it. They pay me ten ringgit for a short journey, but we don't get any allowance for the traffic jam.

As the car inches forward, I wonder whether I had made the right choice to quit my clerical job of ten years. The newly appointed supervisor had been driving me crazy, nitpicking my work like a noob. If I was still there today, I would be waiting for my year-end-bonus announcements. Instead, now I'm stuck in traffic with a freaking backache.

"Hang on ah, miss," I say over my shoulder. "*Teruk* la the traffic today. So bad."

"Yeah, it's okay," the Chinese girl replies, her voice as weary as I feel. "Got the rally today la. After this, you better leave the city centre."

I nod, thinking home is my next destination anyway.

I looked around at all the protestors who are starting to gather, holding placards lambasting slogans. There are so many of them, across the road, out on the pavements. And us stupid vehicle drivers didn't have anywhere to go but crawl forward at a snail's pace.

* * *

I look at the GrabCar driver in the rearview mirror. He's frazzled and looks beat. I wonder if he's been working longer hours than I have.

If I take off, make way on foot to Brickfields instead, will he freak out, ah? At the speed of this traffic, maybe it's a good idea to do that once we reach the main road.

The driver sighs and jerks the car to the left, entering a small lane between two tall buildings. The Perodua MyVi bounces up and down over the badly tarred roads.

As we exit the lane and turn the corner, everything happens in a split second.

The driver of a BMW seems to have the same idea as my driver and wants to use the small lane shortcut, only he's coming from the opposite direction. The BMW turns at a sharp angle into our lane, coming right at us.

From the corner of the road, a scrawny boy of about ten chases after a rattan ball. He steps right into the path of both cars.

The driver of my GrabCar applies his brakes, and I'm thrown forward. But the car skids amongst the oily puddle and grime that litter the back lane, inching closer to the boy.

The silver BMW is also skidding, from the opposite direction of the boy.

From the left, I glimpse a tall woman dressed in a very short miniskirt rushing out after the boy.

From the right, a traffic policeman breaks away from his station at the corner of the street and rushes towards the two of them.

I can only watch in disbelief from the backseat as the cars move towards each other as if drawn by magnets.

My mouth opens in a silent scream.

From the rearview reflection, I can see the GrabCar driver's mouth mirroring mine.

Meanwhile, like a bent refraction, the three figures of the traffic policeman, the woman and the boy, are reflected in the shiny chrome mudguard at the front of the fancy BWM.

The three are trapped between the two cars but there's nothing anyone can do to stop both vehicles' trajectory.

* * *

In a split-second, six points of views converge.

One life is lost, and the other five changed forever. For all of them, the Malaysian future they had hoped for can no longer be achieved.

Who most deserves to die?

* * * * *

“A Blue Night”

by Sebastian Z. Minlatt

It was just another Friday night. The rain had stopped, but the streets were still a little busy. Nick was hanging out with his colleagues at a pub nearby his office. A few rounds of drinks later, he started to feel like the music was getting too loud and that the conversation between his two colleagues was unbearable. He needed a break, so he left for a cigarette. Outside of the pub, he could still hear the music, so he took his time and enjoyed the solitude.

He heard a clap of thunder and right before he put out his cigarette, he heard approaching footsteps. A woman in a blue dress was walking towards him with a cigarette between her two fingers.

With a half-smile she asked, ‘Do you have a lighter? I can't find mine.’

With a simple nod, he crushed his finished cigarette with his shoe and took his 90 cent lighter out of his pocket and handed it to her. Uninvited wind gusted through and made her wavy hair dance wildly, yet with such poise. She blurted out a nervous giggle as she couldn't light her cigarette. He cupped his palms near her face to cover the wind. In that slight moment, the music from the bar changed to ‘Porcelain’ by Moby. Within the first few seconds, they both voiced ‘ahh’ with utter joy. They looked at each other and laughed.

‘I love this song,’ she exclaimed. Nick smiled and said, ‘likewise.’ Who doesn't like that song, he thought.

He lit up another cigarette to buy some more time with her but had no idea why he wanted it. Perhaps he was not ready to leave her. He felt a few drops of rain. She felt it, too. It started to rain again but not the drizzle kind. Quietly and gracefully it fell.

‘I love such slow rain,’ she said as she exhaled the smoke.

He could sense the amusement in her voice. ‘Me, too,’ he replied. ‘But I love all kinds of rain.’

She cringed a little and said, ‘Really? Even the massive rain on a Monday morning?’ That made him chuckle. Good point, he thought to himself, but only smiled in return. He wasn't sure if he exhaled the smoke or sighed with relief.

Their shadows intertwined with the colourful reflection of the streetlights on the glistening pavement. Two people standing in the rain and having this small conversation nonchalantly might look a little bizarre. But they could not care any less, as they were lost in that little moment. They seemed to be running out of things to say as the music slowly died. She crushed her cigarette with the toe of her left shoe.

She looked at him up and said, ‘Thanks for the light. I like your tie, by the way.’

He beamed and replied ‘Thanks. You have lovely hair and…' he hesitated for a while and then continued with ‘you have gorgeous collarbones.’

She looked into his eyes trying to find something, and he looked back into hers not looking for any answers. Finally, she looked away, brushing her already perfect hair through her fingers and said ‘Thank you. Hey, it's a beautiful night. Enjoy.’ She started walking away.

‘You too,’ he shouted when she had reached quite a distance from him. She turned around and gave him an impeccable smile. He drew another cigarette from his pack as she walked across the street. He lit the cigarette and his eyes continued following her until the hint of her blue dress slowly faded into the crowd.

Nick stood there for a few more minutes after finishing his cigarette. The rain started to fall faster and everything in front of him became blurry. He scurried back to his friends before he got totally soaked in rain. When he was back inside of the pub, he noticed the music had stopped. Everyone was staring at the TV screen with shock on their faces. The breaking news was about a terrible accident.

He asked one of his colleagues about it, and she said there was a car crash. The accident had occurred a few blocks from the pub. Right in front of Nick’s office actually. As the camera panned through the accident scene, Nick shook a little. There was the woman in

the blue dress. Her face was pixelated, but he remembered that blue dress and knew the curls of her hair, despite being drenched in the downpour. The woman in blue was lying lifelessly in a pool of blood and clutching a lighter in her right hand. Lying next to her was an unlit cigarette, soaking in all her blood.

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"The Forgotten"

by Divakaran Prabhakaran

If I could choose to have any superhero power, I'd choose the power to tell if someone is lying. Yeah, I know it's not the usual superhero ability like flight or strength, but the reason is simple. First, it means I get to call out anyone for lying whenever I want. The moment someone tries to trick me into falling for their trap, I'd just instantly know. Heck, I would even play along sometimes just to mess with them.

Second, imagine just how far I can go with this power, especially in this line of work I'm in. I will be my department's greatest asset. I might even be a national star and get to be on television.

Actually, you know what, scrap all of that. I think I'm going to pick the power to go back in time instead. At least then I would not have ended up here.

I've had a pretty unremarkable career so far here at the Social Welfare Department. I spent my first three years working at headquarters in Putrajaya where I thought that I could change things. Yet, every time I tried to introduce a new concept or propose something outside of the box, it would get shut down. My bosses were just as powerless as me to change things. So instead of carving out a meaningful career, I learned that we are all being betrayed by the system and turned into mindless drones.

When I submitted my transfer request to the Petaling District, I had hoped that being in the trenches would change things. Well, it surely has spiced things up, but not in the way I thought it would. I sometimes feel that it might have been the biggest mistake of my career.

There is a clear disconnect between Putrajaya and the district offices. In Putrajaya things move slowly, and you are constantly pushing papers all day long. Here, on the other hand, you actually have to struggle with the outdated and incompatible 1960s-era policies. There

is no time to just hang around eagerly staring at the clock till 5pm. You are on call almost 24 hours a day.

If you aren't doing house visits, running roadshows, or endlessly writing meaningless reports that benefit no one, you are doomed to picking up your phone to answer the same questions all day to yet another desperate individual. No wonder so many public servants will only give you their office number, which of course no one in their right mind answers anyway.

Maybe you would even be one of the lucky ones that gets a call from your boss, telling you to fulfill some ridiculous request just because some big-time politician wants something. Let me tell you guys a secret everyone knows. Politicians are all the same. Does not matter which side they represent; they all want to be seen and heard, and they are shameless when using JKM's resources to promote themselves.

Picking up water bottles for politicians is not what I had signed up for as a social worker. The only cool part about this job are the government perks and that I get to flash my JKM badge while on the job like some sort of big shot authority figure.

More than half of my salary goes to paying loans and bills. After 6 years of working for JKM, I still earn below RM4,000 and now that the government is only hiring staff on a contract basis, I won't even get a pension out of this job. It's a good thing I work all the time, because that way I don't spend all day thinking about the miserable sum of money in my bank account.

I feel like such a loser, helping others who are struggling while not being able to earn enough to have a comfortable life for myself. The poor helping the slightly poorer. What a joke.

I wonder if some of the NGOs are offering their staff higher salaries. They probably do, but then again, working for an NGO is not really stable. Funding is a problem even in the government, but more so in the NGO world.

There are a few kinds of NGOs. One thing to bear in mind is that politics is everywhere you look and the battle among the grassroots is strongest within the poorer urban communities. It is here where you are often introduced to the NGOs that are almost always

associated with the political parties. The parties essentially have control over these NGOs and often use them to give assistance based on their own criteria.

The politically ambiguous NGOs are present, but they pale in comparison to the influence of these ones, especially because the political grassroots structure complements the way residents' groups in urban poor communities are set up. Instead of the political neutrality you would expect these groups to have, residents from opposing camps align themselves to different political parties as a way to gain influence within their community. It is not unusual to have a single block of low-cost residential flats represented by multiple resident groups with leaders from opposing parties.

Aside from these groups, there are those who do this welfare thing just because they believe it is their destiny to do so. These are the NGOs run and funded by the well-to-do. With their expensive degrees from overseas universities, I know they look down on us JKM people. They think we are stupid and racist just because we are in the government.

Sometimes, I feel like they fancy themselves the United Nations, always talking about concepts like the sustainable development goals and developmental justice without caring for a moment if their audience understands them. And yet when it comes to giving aid, they insist on asking the poor what they want rather than giving them what they need.

Though our methods may differ, one thing that we both can agree on is that poverty in Malaysia is a national problem and not a race-based issue. I only wished that those in charge would someday have the courage to frame it that way. It seems like the only time any politician says anything about Malaysia's multiculturalism is when they want to promote 'Malaysia Truly Asia' to unsuspecting tourists and foreign dignitaries.

There is no national identity, and as a people we are fractured. We live side by side as we have for generations now, yet we rarely venture from our own little enclaves. At least in the past, there was a little more interaction between us. Now it seems that we have all retreated into our own communities, while viewing one another with great suspicion. Things have changed, and there is a growing toxic rhetoric of hate that is threatening to widen the gap between us.

There is a certain kind of subtle underlying negativity from being associated with people other than your own. It sadly exists in every community here in Malaysia, including my own. I broke down crying the first time I encountered the discrimination, the disgust, and the look that I am inferior to someone else just because of my race and religion. I felt a mixture of anger and disappointment that was hard to swallow. When I confided in my friends at that time, they preached hatred and told me to be wary of an imaginary enemy. Yet, I knew better, for Ayah always taught me not to let anger control me, and he would have been disappointed to see me go that way.

However, as much as I have to say on the wretched lies we are told about poverty and racism, there is a far more disturbing reality that fills me with deep dread, sorrow, and misery. It is the main reason why I dream of escaping the Petaling District.

This is a problem that no one ever talks about in this soon-to-be aging society that we live in. You can see it clearly here in the older urban centres in this district. In every corner, seemingly abandoned houses have become the homes of residents long forgotten by us. They live in dilapidated old structures that are often far worse than what we see from the outside, along with up to 15 others of around the same age.

Every encounter with the forgotten tears me to pieces, but the memory of Susan and Elizabeth Yeoh is perhaps the most deeply etched in me. Even as the rest of this job has made me numb to the pain and suffering I see others around me endure, I cannot shake the emotions I feel when recounting their story.

It must have been years ago since I first stood in front of Susan's gate, patiently waiting for the hunched old woman while her dogs barked relentlessly at me and my colleague, Maya.

"Hi aunty, we are from JKM. Is this the home of Susan and Elizabeth Yeoh?" Maya introduces us in Malay before the elderly woman has a chance to ask us who we were.

Susan looks up at her. "Yes. From the hospital, ah?" she asks, while she flashes a friendly smile at us.

"No, auntie. From JKM. The hospital did call us to check up on you, and so we are here to see how you are doing and how we can assist you," I say in response.

“Sorry, I can’t really hear very well anymore. You are from the government? Okay, wait. I will tie up my dogs,” she says and turns away to attend to that task even before completing her sentence.

Maya and I aren’t particularly close to one another. So while we patiently wait for Susan to put away her dogs for the next 10 minutes or so, we simply indulge in a little office gossip. Nothing memorable, just the usual complaints about new directives and incompetent staff.

When we finally get to go in, I start to take in my surroundings. The house is made of brick and yet still gives off the sense similar to one of those old attap houses you find back home in Perak. Meanwhile, the interior design confirms my earlier suspicion that the building was probably constructed in the pre-war period.

“Auntie, I am Farah and this is my colleague Maya,” I start when all three of us are seated on the old sofa. “We are from JKM. We received a request from University Hospital to come meet you and your sister, as they tell us you had an accident recently and that you may need some welfare assistance from us. Is your sister around?”

I wanted to tone down on the formality with the questions. After all, there does not seem to be any reason to be so uptight with a woman who seems happy just to have a new face to talk to.

“No, Elizabeth is not here,” she says plainly. “Both she and I were crossing the street in front of our house when I tripped on the uneven pavement and fell. I didn’t actually realise what had happened. All I remember was that I was lying on the ground, and there was pain everywhere. My sister tried to help me get up, but she ended up injuring her spine,” says Susan. When she is done talking, she looks up to us as if looking for an indication if she has correctly answered what we were asking.

“Is your sister sleeping?” asks Maya as she makes another attempt at the question.

“Oh no,” says Susan, “she isn’t here. She hurt her spine, so she is now at the nursing home. It is actually the building next door. I cannot look after her anymore. I am 88, and I have a back problem myself. I have to depend on medication and painkillers all the time. It is impossible for me to look after my sister in my state.”

Maya and I look at each other. We know that the nursing home would not be registered with our Ministry. Many of these residential buildings have been converted unassumingly to illegally run elder care centres. It is common and popular in these areas to have such homes that are unlicensed simply because it is a cheaper alternative. Proper nursing homes can run up to thousands of ringgit each month.

“We could go there later if you’d like. After all, it is just next door,” says Susan to which the both of us agree.

“Auntie, we just need to ask you a few standard questions before we go visit your sister. Do you have any source of income?” asks Maya directly.

“Both me and my sister have been living off her pension for the past 30 odd years. Elizabeth used to work at Radio Television Malaysia as a clerk, so she has been receiving pension from the government each month. That is our only source of income now. I used to be a typist, but I never really earned much, and I retired in the early 1990s. I still remember my last drawn salary. RM800. It’s all gone now,” says Susan. She laughs at the end of the last sentence as if she is telling a joke.

“Auntie, according to our records, your sister Elizabeth receives around RM250 in pension each month. How much has the current medication for your injuries come up to?” I ask.

“Each month, the nursing home charges us RM350. Elizabeth has been there 3 months now and so it has been hard to get provisions with the little money we have left. We have almost no savings these days. The last 30 years haven’t been great, but we would manage to sustain ourselves by being very prudent with our money,” answers Susan.

“Why have you never applied to JKM for help all these years?” I ask.

“We didn’t know. No one ever told us about it. Both me and my sister don’t go out or indulge in any hobbies. Almost all of our money goes towards food and medication. We are old now, and we don’t eat as much as before, but medication these days is also getting expensive. There aren’t any government hospitals nearby. The closest hospital we can afford is University Hospital, and their prices are still very high for us. This is why we cannot afford to keep Elizabeth in the hospital for very long,” says Susan.

She pauses for a while before starting again. “You know ah, the price of medicine these days is so expensive. I cannot really afford medication, especially for my hips. The doctor lady gives me the medication for a few months at a time, but I cannot keep on going back to her so regularly. Do you know how to get the doctor to give me more medicine? You know any doctors who can help me ah?” she asks eagerly.

“Have you not been taking your medication regularly?” I ask.

“I have the medication, but because I cannot go to see the doctor all the time, I have to space them out. I only take them some days, and I bear the pain on the other days. Medication is expensive, but it is also not easy for me to travel to the doctor in my condition,” she says.

“We will try to find out,” says Maya unperturbed by the story she has just heard. Maya has been in this line of work for much longer than I have, and she has been hardened to the realities of the poor and marginalised. I sort of understand her lack of sympathy now, as I too have started to feel that way, but back then I absolutely hated her for it. I thought she was among the more heartless welfare officers I had ever come across. It was like she had no soul.

“Who does this house belong to? What about other family members?” continues Maya.

As she says this, I look around the house for any signs of the life they had lived. It is a common practice for us during house visits to do a little investigative work. You would not believe just how many frauds we encounter.

The house is not big by modern standards, but it is more than enough space for two people. The living room, which we are in, is also a large corridor located at the centre of the house. It is the only way to get to any of the other rooms in the house. The end of the living room simply opens up into a small kitchen. The kitchen gives off a suspicious look like it has been left unattended for at least a decade. It is common to encounter old people at that age not being able to cook for themselves anymore, so I wasn’t so surprised. I assume the sisters probably rely on prepared meals and prepackaged food from the nearby hawker stalls. Looking at Susan’s frame just then, I cannot imagine her lifting up a pot let alone trying to serve food to anyone.

Furniture-wise, there is very little to celebrate and, like everything else at the house, it is all old and stuffy. At every corner you can see stacks of old books, newspapers, clothes, records, and plain old junk either stacked up neatly or just lying in a pile on the floor. From the looks of it, none of it has been disturbed in years.

“This is my family house. My mother and father moved here back in the 1920s. They were hard people living in a hard time. My parents were one of the first residents in the area. There was nothing here back then, just jungle. This is where my siblings and I grew up. There were five of us. Two girls and three boys. Both my parents died before World War II. My father died of a heart attack in his early 30s and my mother followed him just 2 years later.”

“Who took care of you after your parents’ death?” I ask, surprised by this revelation.

“My elder brother. He always looked out for the family. I think he felt that it was his responsibility, being the oldest, to keep us all safe and together. He raised all of us in this very house, and I have to say he did a really good job. It didn’t even matter that we were poor because he kept us all happy and together.

Later on, one by one my siblings got married, and they moved out. Elizabeth and I never got married so we just remained here.”

“Where are the rest now?” I persist. I had to know if any of her other siblings were in a position to help her financially. A lot of the time, we find many people hide the fact that they have family members who are more than able to support them, just so that they can qualify for welfare support.

“My elder brother died 5 years ago. He was the only one we still kept in touch with and the only thing that brought us all together. My two other brothers live in Subang and Klang respectively. They have families of their own as well, but I haven’t heard from them in a long time. That’s my family for you. No one really cares for each other, especially not the younger ones.”

After a brief pause in which Susan looks almost lost in thought, she looks up at us and says, “You see the pictures on that wall? These are of my family.”

There aren't many pictures around, but the few that are there are prominently displayed on the wall of the living room she is now pointing at. Most of the pictures are in black and white, but there are some pictures that look like they were taken in the 1980s and 90s.

"Who is this," I ask while pointing to a picture of a woman that looks like a younger Susan standing next to a young man in front of a waterfall. It is the picture that looks like it is the latest to have be taken, so I thought it might lead me to a clue about her family.

"That is my nephew and I at Genting all the way back just before I retired. He is in the US now," she said. This set off a chain reaction as Susan starts showing us the other pictures of her family on the wall. To my surprise, she even had her grandparent's photos, probably taken in the late 1800s, on display. As we go through each one with a fair amount of detail, I thought that I was bringing Susan to a happy place from the excitement she was showing. Although I don't think that Maya is much too amused by this. She is notoriously direct and practical and rarely approves of such time wasting.

Maya, and then I, take a little tour of the house. It is much smaller than what we initially thought. Perhaps it is the clutter that makes it look even smaller.

We know from our background check, that there is no record of either Elizabeth or Susan owning the house, and so we suspect the property might belong to one of their other siblings or family members.

When we are done, we tell Susan that we are ready to pay her sister next door a visit. Maya and I will have to ditch our badge and vests first. We don't want to spook those running the home by letting them know that we belonged to the agency that could shut them down.

Although it is just right next door, the trip does seem to take longer than expected due to Susan's struggle with walking. The nursing home as it stands today is clearly not the original structure. It is a slightly modern three storey bungalow that, while a big contrast from the house we were just in, does not seem out of place at all in the residential area. From the outside, there is not a single indication that this is a nursing home.

Susan rings the bell and a young Bangaldeshi man comes to meet us. He looks at Susan and then at the two of us closely. "They are with me. We are here to visit my sister Elizabeth," she tells him.

For a moment it seemed like the man is reluctant to let us in, and that he somehow senses we are up to something, but the moment passes and he shows us in. We are led to the living room that looks like it has been converted into a break room for those living there. It seems like most of those staying at the home are not simply retirees but instead those with severe medical issues that require constant attention. This impressed upon me a sickly atmosphere instead of the welcoming one I was expecting moments before.

A nurse comes to greet us. She asks us to take a seat on the sofa while she goes to get Susan. Aside from us, there are two others in the room. These two patients are seated in front of the television, which is also the only form of entertainment I see in this room. One is sleeping with his mouth wide open and head leaning back on the sofa, while the other is staring intently at the television as though he is watching a programme on the TV, despite the fact that the TV is turned off. To add even more eeriness to the situation, he will at random intervals start reacting to the non-existent programme that is clearly only playing out in his mind.

We wait in silence until Elizabeth is brought into the room on a wheelchair. When the nurse leaves, Susan introduces Elizabeth to us, but there isn't much excitement from the thin and frail looking woman in front of us. She was clearly asleep just moments before, and she does not seem to be too happy about receiving company. She looks at least 10 years older than Susan and more sickly despite being the younger sister.

"These ladies are here to see how you are doing," says Susan.

"My back still hurts. I can't really do much these days but spend my time on my bed sleeping," replies Elizabeth, jumping straight away into the conversation. As she speaks, she looks directly at us both. She isn't too bothered about who we are or why we have come, and she keeps a smile-free face throughout. She then goes on to repeat the same story Susan had told us about the accident, only much slower and with less detail.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude or anything, but I want to get back to my room," says Elizabeth abruptly. "Just as well," I say to myself. It does not seem like Elizabeth has much to add, and she is obviously in a state of discomfort. I am also quite relieved to go just then

for the man at the corner of the room, who is still starting at the silent TV is starting to freak me out.

“No worries, auntie. We got what we needed. Take care,” says Maya. Elizabeth simply nods and indicates to the nurse that she wants to return to her room.

As we are leaving, the nurse tells us that it is bad for Elizabeth to lie on her back in bed all day and asks Susan to advise her to be more active. “She doesn’t even want to be around others,” she complains.

Satisfied with the visit and certain that the two sisters would indeed be entitled to government aid, we say goodbye to Susan and leave for the office.

At first, I treat the visit as I did all other house visits. I did not think much about the sisters except when I was filing my report. The pair seemed to disappear from my mind for a while.

About a week later, my office receives a call from the University Hospital doctor that had contacted us about the sisters previously. She tells us that Elizabeth had succumbed to her injuries two days earlier. When I hear the news, my mind immediately goes to Susan. An air of sadness fills me till the next morning when Maya and I visit Susan again.

At the same old and rusted gate we stood in front the week before, we realise that Susan does not remember us and has no recollection of the visit, and so we once again make our introductions and after being presented with a confused reaction from Susan, who again thinks we are from the hospital, we are eventually let in.

“How are you doing Susan,” Maya asks.

“I’m okay, my sister passed away recently,” she says. Susan does not look sad or disturbed in any way. It was as though she knew all along that her sister’s death was coming.

“There was no funeral or anything. They took the body away and the nursing home helped us arrange for the body to be buried,” she continues.

“Did you contact the rest of your family?” I ask.

“I don’t know how to contact them anymore. I don’t have anyone’s number,” she admits.

“Well, at least she had me to mourn. My death will be quiet by comparison,” she says while letting out a cheerful and unexpected laugh. Her humour fails me and instead pierces my soul with immense sadness. But I smile at her words, afraid to make Susan feel uncomfortable.

I have never been able to figure out what kept Susan going. My best guess is that perhaps she was already at peace with the fate that would eventually befall all of us someday. Here is a woman with absolutely nothing left to look forward to but death itself. I used to want to live forever as a child. To have eternal life would have been a kick ass superpower. Now, I’m not so sure if I even want to see 70.

When we left her house that day, Maya and I promised Susan that we would look into getting her into a government-run nursing home. Although she agreed at first, Susan would refuse to move when the time came. She lived for another year before dying a lonely death. Her body was discovered two weeks later by her neighbors after they realised that her dogs were not fed.

Susan and Elizabeth were among the growing number that make up the forgotten. Once full of life, promise and expectations just like us, they are now relegated to the edges of society. Once the hope of their generation and the strength of a nation, they are now the ones without any family to come visit, whose children have all migrated, whose entire social circle is now replaced by the strangers they lived with and the shop owners they visit every now and again for supplies.

Susan was right. No one would attend her funeral. But unlike many others, she will continue to live on in someone else’s memory.

* * * * *

“The Note in the Library”

by Josua D. Quiniquito

Waiting gives a sense of poignancy, as he visits the library. This was where they had their trysts. He smells the scent of the books' old pages, writes poems in cursive for Safra, and hopes for her to come back.

"Can you blame me if my days, months, and years are not moving? That I am nailed on the calendar of 2009 when we used to cuddle and utter those sincerest "I love yous" while looking at each rain drop and every falling leaf through the windows? With streaming tears I smile as I imagine your lips, your cheeks like rosy apples, your hair cascading over your slender shoulder, your unguarded jerks and gestures, even your parting words that frequently echo in the room. Our names—carved on the cherrywood table with a heart shape in between—go stale through the passing of time. Gazing at them, I observe that they are alive, breathing dust as if recalling the promises we made.

It's a sweet sorrow to reminisce these bygone memories with you. I can still feel the shiver and butterflies of yesteryear. Though your presence is absent, part of you stays here in every corner. What an excruciating pain!"

These are Jayme's words written on a scrap of paper. He inserts it in Safra's favorite novel and returns the book on the shelf in the Fiction section. He’s certain that when she comes back to this familiar place, she’ll have picked up the same book she has read thrice from cover page to colophon. He envisions that somehow, as she turns the pages and happens to read the note he left her, that his words will be like needles and pierce her deep in the valley of her heart, leaving her motionless and stupefied.

* * * * *

“A Gnome with See-Through Pants”

by Tom L. Lombaerts

Beep! Beep!

7 a.m.

Boom!

I woke up, sweating, with grains of yellow sand stuck between my two front teeth and a foul layer of WTF lingering on my tongue.

Quickly I rinsed my mouth with some sour old wine I found on the bedside stand while throwing the over-starched linen from the Triple Island Totel™ -a Total Hotel- off of me. Jumping out of bed I was nearly taken down by the sharp shards of a broken whisky snifter trying to ambush me on the floor. Luckily my army training kicked in just in time.

‘Motherfucker!’ I shouted and threw the rest of the broken glass straight out of the open window.

Sipping the wine I looked into the mirror on the wall. Crusts of old blood unbeautified my one of a kind face.

What the fuck have I been up to?

My fists didn’t hurt. My wallet was still empty. Just these weird grains of yellow sand stuck between my two front teeth.

Bloodied up and smelly, a shower seemed unavoidable.

Dammit.

I stuck on some T.I.T. slippers and made my way to the bathroom where I turned on the faucet, cracked my neck, and readied myself.

And then it hit me…

Fuck me. Soap! No soap?!

Of course no soap!!

Two days ago, in need of a magical helper, I used the block of easily moldable material to craft my very own Golem.

Boy did he smell good.

However, before I was able to instruct him on the nefarious mission laying in front of us, the slippery little bastard got away.

I took the phone and tried room service, but alas, the number I was trying to reach was not being recognized.

Dammit!

Out of options but in dire need of some soap I threw on a bathrobe and made my way to reception.

Ping! The elevator announced my arrival.

'Aah, good morning mistereuh.'

'Hi there, I need some soap, please.'

Soap? Mistereuh needs some soap?

'Yes, soap.'

'Soap. Mistereuh needs some soap?

Uhm…

Mistereuh needs some soap?'

While rummaging through some papers on his desk, the receptionist kept repeating the same line over and over again, making it quite evident he had no idea what I was talking about.

'Maybe this?' He tried as he showed me a small complimentary face mirror engraved with the T.I.T. initials.

What the Fek?

I plucked the quaint looking mirror right out of his hands and just when I wanted to oops him upside his head, a reflection caught me straight in the iris of my eye. There, mirrored from across the street was a shop with a banner which clearly stated:

qoнS qpoS ƨ'ʃnɒwooнƨiS ʞɔiS

Well, will you look at that? Finally, those five hundred dollars I spent eleven years ago on a reverse mirror reading and writing course, while on a camel race through Mongolia, paid off. I turned around and hastily crossed the road, opened the door, and entered Sick Sitshoowant's Soap Shop.

'Hi, and welcome to Sick Sitshoowant's Soap Shop.' someone, presumably Sick Sitshoowant himself, greeted me. 'How can I help you?'

'Hi there,' I replied to the fellow with the weary beard, the one droopy eye, and very yellow hands. 'I would like to obtain some soap.'

'Well, well, lucky you!' Before I could say another word the bearded man behind the counter started to ramble on about his collection of soaps.

Where he found the inspirations for his creations. How he collects the base smells. How he handcrafts each and every one of them, and so on and so on. All the while making me sniff-taste a thousand different bars.

I don't quite remember how exactly I insulted him.

In a flash, that droopy eye turned evil and he insisted I had to smell his special bar.

I really didn't want to, but he insisted and the moment I came closer to that special bar I knew I was gonna get fucked, and man…

I got fucked.

* * *

Boom!

Gasping for air I woke up deep in the belly of a rusty barge in the middle of a filthy lake somewhere in Central Africa.

I was certain it was Central Africa by the distinctive sounds the birds in the vicinity of my newly acquired whereabouts were tweeting, a nifty trait I had picked up during my years in the ornithology department of Asdin Bilabam's magical zoo of West African birds and Hippopotamuses.

Still wearing the T.I.T embroidered bathrobe, I had a small piece of Sick Sitshoowant's special bar of soap stuck deep inside my left nostril, a beard on my chin, and a chain with a lead ball around my foot.

As I slowly glanced around I noticed that the beard belonged to a one-armed troll standing on my chest assessing my strength.

What the Fek?

The troll followed my every move, glaring as if he wanted something from me.

Who?

An awkward stare-off ensued as I was trying to figure things out.

And then it hit me.

'Are you?' I stammered as the troll pressed down on my chest.

'Are you…'

'Is your name Rumpelstiltskin?'

WACK!

With the dirty back of the wrinkly hand of the one muscly arm he had left, he slapped me straight across my face, fixated his beady little eyes right onto mine, leaned forward, hung over my face while foamy spittle started to form in the corner of his lower lip, and answered in a strange whispery voice:

'No… My name is Puk, and I am ready to…'

'How! Yow!! Yow!!!' I halted the little critter right there and then.

‘There has to be another way!?’

…

‘Fekedi Fek!’ A sorely miffed Puk grunted while pointing halfhearted towards a badly written sign hanging on the dank walls of the small cabin we were in.

-TO REGAIN YOUR FREEDOM UNTIE THE KNOTS-

???

‘What? This is knots.’

Boom! I did it again.

Another genius play on words. Out of nowhere. Just like that.

Remarkable, but Puk didn’t seem impressed. He jumped off of me, waddled slightly dismayed towards the metal door and slammed it shut.

…

The space I was being held captive in contained nothing more than the metal sheet on which I was laying, a porthole that looked out over the filthy lake, and in the corner of it all, one big ball of tangled knots.

What was going on?

Staring out of the porthole I soon discovered the lake was guarded by an angry

Hippopotamus.

So….

Imprisoned by the one armed troll named Puk, who systematically came to check up on me through a big peephole in the metal door, there seemed no way out. I had but one chance to regain my freedom: untying knots created by fuck-nuts trying not to knot.

It was an uphill battle like that Greek fellow Sisyphus, but without the boulder and the hill that went up. The more knots I unknotted, the more I created.

And the days crept slowly by.

I trained my hands, but to no avail. There were just too many knots.

And the days crept slowly by.

A month had passed, when I stumbled upon an adjacent room with a bed, a toothbrush, the key that freed me from the lead ball, some floss, and a convenient balcony overlooking the lake, all hiding behind a very unassuming door. It was there and then my sheer genius mind and I devised a cunning new plan to flee from this barge of misery.

The days that followed, I, with my out of this world sleight of hand, a trait I had mastered during the years I spent as the stunt double of the great Hairy Houdini, unknowingly to Puk, pulled strains of mucus straight out of his big troll nose.

Once alone again and shaded by the blanket of the dark night, I rolled the mucus between the tips of my now well trained fingers, molding it into tiny little worms which I tied onto the floss and subsequently used to catch fish.

One fish became two fish, became tree fish, and so on.

And on.

With my collection of fish I lured the Hippopotamus, jumped on its back and for the next seven hundred and fifty meters separating me from the shore, I threw a fish in front of it.

As long as I had fish to throw, I figured, the Hippopotamus would be distracted enough not to shift its attention to me standing on its back.

Still one hundred meters to cover.

Eighty meters.

Sixty.

Forty four and a half.

Twenty…

And then it turned on me.

'No more man.'

'What?'

‘I ate too many already man.’

‘I mean what? You know how to talk? Why didn’t you say something before?’

‘I only speak when it’s absolutely necessary.’

‘Why?’

‘Cause of the pain man.’

‘What pain?’

The Hippopotamus brought me to the shore where it opened its big mouth to show me its ordeal.

There, in the back of the vast maw, lodged in the hole where there used to be teeth, a strange plastic white pearl was festering.

WTF?

‘Yeah man, I was playing this stupid game, we were all stoned and laughing and before I knew it man.’

I straight away realized that, with my now well trained hands, it would be a walk in the park, so I cut him a -I dislodge you / you dislodge me- kind of deal. We exchanged paw slaps and I got to work.

Boom!

Laying with my back on the fat flaccid Hippopotamus’s tongue, I immediately succeeded in honoring my end of the deal.

It was now up to him.

The Hippopotamus didn’t disappoint and gave me clear directions on a way out of there, so

I expressed my gratitude and with the plastic white pearl as a souvenir, I dashed off into the lush jungle undergrowth where I instantly got lost.

It took me a week surviving on my own piss and raw birds before I ended back up again at the shore of the filthy lake and asked the Hippopotamus if he maybe had an alternative approach of getting me back to the people’s world.

He called a friend of a friend and out of nowhere a beaver appeared.

Excited, because I had never ridden a beaver, I once again thanked him, said goodbye and disappeared once more into the lush jungle undergrowth.

I rode that beaver well over 5 hours until I reached the onset of a boundless desolate desert, it was the furthest the beaver could take me, so I hopped off, said goodbye to the beaver and looked around.

As far as the eye could see there was nothing but yellow sand being rattled by a hot enticing wind coming from the East.

I bit the bullet, went for it and one minute in, I was saluted by a fashionably dressed gnome, looking to make a trade.

'Is it the people's world you seek?'

'Yes, yes indeed' I hastily replied.

'Well, well, well…'

'Yes.'

'Well, well, well.'

'Yes. Well?'

'I have for you the solution.'

By all the Saints, at last. I vehemently thought.

'And?' I requested. 'How can I procure this solution of yours, oh fashionably dressed gnome?'

'I shall trade the solution for your odd looking plastic pearl.'

Hot dang. As I had no plans in keeping the smelly plastic pearl, I gladly gave it up for a trade.

So collecting the pearl, the desert gnome grinned from ear to ear, went deep into the pockets of his see- through pants made of the finest Indian silk and presented me with three dry fungi.

‘Nibble exactly thirty se…’

My heart stopped as he clumsily dropped the fungi into the desert sand, but unfazed the little gnome picked them up, dusted them off and continued.

‘Nibble exactly thirty seven times before clicking your heels and they will bring you home home, home, home.’

He repeated home for added effect.

Nibble. Nibble.

Flash!

Lightning struck and before I knew it, I was back in my room sweating, with grains of yellow sand stuck between my two front teeth, a foul layer lingering on my tongue and no recollection of what had occurred.

My crotch reeked of beaver and I felt like taking a shower, shower, shower.

* * * * *

"Quarantine Tastes Like"

by Michelle A. Zabat

I am watching my roommates journey home from within the walls of our shared house and the confines of quarantine. We are four strangers, together by happenstance, yet held together still—by the complications of distance, the tumult of home dynamics, the inhumanity of American immigration—even as society shrinks into itself. *Quarantine is a time to be with family*, I keep hearing, and it seems that for the present moment we are filling this role for each other.

Strange, then, is this experience of home amongst strangers, of togetherness despite distance. It is warmth amidst uncertainty; community in compliant defiance of isolation. Strange, too, is the peculiar sense of equanimity I have found here, walled into my Cambridge bedroom and disconnected from the people I love.

But the longer I sink into this reality, the more clearly I remember: I have been here before. In another bedroom, in a distant life. Isolation is familiar to me, as it is to all those who know the company of an eating disorder. Confined and disconnected, while the world spins around me, indifferent: I have been here before.

Yet while isolation is familiar, the experience and sensation of it are not. Neither are these parallel experiences presented by my housemates, whose lives are decidedly discrete but tied up with mine all the same. As intensely individual as the experience of isolation may be, I am finding mine curiously colored by theirs: by the habits they've cultivated, by the routines they've settled into, and—most unfamiliarly—by the scents constantly sneaking under the door and through the window of my kitchen-adjacent bedroom.

Family and home; food and isolation. *What are you cooking?* was once a misguided defense mechanism, deployed to reinforce solitude. More recently, it has been the polite language of

space split amongst strangers. But here, now, as we all reach toward home in whatever tiny ways we can, it has become a familiar and familial refrain.

* * *

You learn two things as a daughter of immigrants: what is safe and what is good. Home is safe, and you find it in the kitchen. It is the music of women's voices, the anticipated decadence of evening dessert, the air of summer evenings spent over aperitifs on the patio. The world offers no guarantees, but the safety of home feels close.

You also learn what is good, but these lessons are harder to digest. *Good* feels like everything and nothing at once. You are taught to take up space, to stretch further and speak louder, because being *good* requires being heard; yet you are implored to simultaneously shrink, to fit to pre-templated ways, because being *good* requires being palatable. All of these things are *good* when they are served *together*, and so too should you be.

In truth, g*ood* as a function of these incompatible interests is impossible to achieve and unbearable to embody. But all you know is the safety of home and an aspiration for goodness, and so you grasp at ways to guarantee this implausible dream.

* * *

My Vietnamese roommate in our smallest upstairs bedroom is like me—a child of immigrants, raised firmly-rooted in the Midwest—and not like me—a woman stylish in color, confident speaking her mind. I am learning a different language as I watch her step into her mother's shoes to navigate the shops lining our multicultural East Cambridge main street. The working-class neighborhood is in the early stages of upheaval: bistros and boutique childcare conspicuously intermingle with the peeling-paint Uyghur kitchen and the Live Poultry, Fresh Killed butcher.

Just like our mothers, we are lucky, and we exist astride both old and new. Oil-slick *laghman* noodles shine from upturned chopsticks like the imported jars of fruit preserves purchased from our *boulangerie*; wholesale sleeves of freshly-ground meat travel home atop bulk produce boxes from the organic grocery. But while the old feels familiar, the new feels foreign—and we, more than ever, are grasping for home.

She stretches for it by turning culinary status symbols to Southeast Asian street food on the granite countertops of our kitchen. Rainbow carrots are matchsticked and pickled; bright herbs are plucked and arranged; French baguettes are split open and spread thickly, with creamiest mayo and richest pate. Bahn mi, breakfast comfort, amidst the chaos. Fish sauce into hoisin and peanuts; carrots onto cucumber and mint. Soften the rice paper, wrap everything up. Spring rolls, with the spirit of home tucked inside, spread across the dining room table.

* * *

The most insidious aspect of eating disorders is the isolation they breed, both within and outside of yourself. They consume you; they become you. Unchecked, they will snuff out every spark that brightens you and snip every thread that ties you to others. To do this, isolation is essential. Secrecy is critical to concealing the symptoms and crucial to avoiding others' interventions. More so than only physically, eating disorders shrink you until you scarcely exist at all.

My eating disorder would have loved the confines of quarantine. The absence of others' watchful eyes; the lack of external accountability for self-abusing behavior. Nobody to resist its compulsions but me, who had already and unconsciously surrendered to them. I wonder in what state I would have emerged from isolation, had a pandemic ensued then. I wonder if I would have at all.

* * *

When I asked my mother last month for a translation of the Tagalog word *ulang*, she did not know the answer. For an evening, the word bobbed between us, a hollow void swimming in a milky sea of *sampaloc*-soured soup. *We were probably too poor to have it*, she reasoned. *Too expensive for us to ever hear the word*.

I wonder who and where I would be, had I grown up in a home contending with questions like these. How stark, that the money in your pocket for a morning at the market may gatekeep the ways in which you can speak of the world.

* * *

The mid-size upstairs bedroom is occupied by a computer scientist from Bangladesh, the youngest and furthest from home of us all. He is of the hyper-mobile younger generation that is arguably most acutely impacted by the pandemic: on the cusp of graduating into an upended economy, and unsure of the next time he will see a family half a world away. I think of my little brother, facing the same undeserved misfortune, and regret that this pandemic has thwarted all the older-sister advice I promised myself I would always have at hand.

We are learning about Bangladeshi cooking at the same pace, although its flavors are familiar to him and foreign to me. I study his frying pan from a splatter-free distance as he smokes spices in hot oil before adding other aromatics; I sit, wide-eyed, as he cooks rice in ways so colorful they are incomprehensible to a palate shaped by grains simply steamed. The whole-bark cinnamon he uses is not rolled into the quintessential cigar that sits, unloved, on American supermarket shelves; rather, it is pounded flat and left that way, little brown shingles that sing when they hit the hot oil.

* * *

In more dimensions than one, an eating disorder is incompatible with life. And while the possession of life, perhaps, is binary, the experience of living is not. It is the transient texture of warm lips on warm cheeks; the way summer rain sinks in yet slips off your skin; the fresh intake of breath that gives sound to the quietest admissions.

But nothing else can exist, whether it be life or living, and in exchange for your life, an eating disorder instead dampens your sense of living. It leeches the spring color out of the magnolia trees, drains the music from the moving rivers. The living dance around you, but you cannot sense the rhythm. You exist in a vacuum, and there is nobody but you—and this thing that has become you—within it.

Isolation is not unfamiliar.

* * *

My memories of home are of soupy summer humidity and hot concrete against my feet, of acrid charcoal smoke and T-bone steaks stacked up on dinner platters. *Beef was a luxury in the Philippines*, my parents told me as a child. *And even then, always only gristle*. Still, I

would pass them pieces I deemed too tough, too cooked, too fatty. They celebrated every one.

Years after college graduation, I found out my parents stopped eating meat when I started school. The marginal cost at the butcher's counter was yet wrung out by even the aid-assisted cost of U.S. higher education. The American Dream promises fewer options for putting food on the table than does daily living in the developing world, it seems.

* * *

My roommate in the master bedroom is of a patchwork quilt of cultures. Ethnically Chinese, Canadian by citizenship, but raised in Jamaica, she has called Boston home now for nearly a decade. She is from a generation of daughters, and I can sense it. Sometimes it feels like I've come as close to having an older sister as I ever will. Broken boiler in the basement, invading ants in the kitchen, trash bags lost in the closet—*We'll just ask her when she's home.*

She is also from a family uncommonly intimate with both Chinese heritage and tropical living, and I can sense that, too. Sometimes I find myself thinking back to Binondo when I watch her make brunch on weekend mornings. She maneuvers her way through the sprawling maze of Asian mushrooms in the sure-footed way I never quite caught onto. The plantains, she has told me, seem to ripen strangely in Massachusetts. I always ask her if mine are ready for frying.

* * *

Crayfish. *Ulang* are crayfish.

* * *

So often, they start with control. Uncertainty is inherently uncomfortable, yet the world is awash in it. You drain the ocean of ambiguity by clinging to whatever false anchor you can conjure. An eating disorder, in all its counterfeit commandments and self-imposed stipulations, is exactly this: an illusion of stability, an appealing but artificial respite from reality.

But it isn't real. It starts with control, and ultimately ends with none.

The act of recovery, then, is an exercise in letting go. It is a willing submission to uncertainty, a mediation on stillness and surrender. Compared to the exhaustion of illness, the softness of recovery sounds like sweet relief.

Yet control is predictable, and softness is anything but. It leaves room for the uninvited—fear, anger, loathing, all self-sustaining and self-directed—to enter and settle. Turning away and taking refuge in isolation so often seems easier than suffering the scarier parts of yourself. This, perhaps, is why recovery waxes and wanes.

But you must face them, and to recover is to face them with love. Find them, hold them. Turn them toward the light and observe them in all their shameful splendor, their awful opulence. Goodness exists, but not in the ways the world teaches us. Instead, in our collective imperfection, we are *good*. Here, we are safe; here, we are home.

* * *

The coffee-shop-wine-bar around the corner has been serving Sangiovese alongside sourdough grilled-cheese sandwiches every Friday since I moved to Massachusetts, yet I have never managed to make it in for a glass. Indeed, until a few months ago, it felt like I'd barely lived in this house at all, let alone with the others who inhabit it. Different schedules, different circles, different life stages—it has been so easy to indulge excuses for staying out, to find reasons to come home late, to exist among each other as ghosts you hear through the walls but never quite see.

But the coffee-shop-wine-bar around the corner is still serving Sangiovese and sourdough grilled-cheese sandwiches—and now we are here, home, together.

Now Friday evenings are spent in a living room of collectibles carried with us from past lives. We pour wine into mismatched glasses as we lounge on inherited couches, and we make incongruous dishes feel like a proper meal. Leftover *saag* reheated in the microwave, take-out *momo* from the nearby Nepalese restaurant, onion galette fresh from the oven. When I can find the ingredients, flavors from my childhood home: *adobong manok*, *arroz caldo*, *champurrado*. A single sourdough grilled-cheese sandwich, quartered and shared, because quarantine is a time to be with family, and this is what family does.

* * *

My eating disorder would have loved the confines of quarantine, and so I find myself marveling at moments in the present when, instead of fearful, I find myself feeling fortunate. The silence of social distancing is deafening in the same familiar way, but this time there is the precious color of sensation. Rising tides of joy, fleeting glimpses of beauty, striking instances of clarity—I am acutely aware these simple experiences would have been impossible just a few years ago. So easily, they could be impossible now.

The acuity reminds me that this moment, still—for all its turmoil and turbulence—is living. I hear it in the sigh from my coffee grounds, blooming at first pour of the kettle; I see it in the dappled light of early morning, splayed across the foot of my bed. I feel it in my body, stretching and changing, as I settle into new ways of moving.

Eating disorders never leave you. You make room for them; you adjust to them; you cohabitate with them, tucked intimately together in this body you call home. So too then does home never leave you, though it may never feel you've found it.

Here we are; here I am. Though the familiar moments of breathless anxiety may still arise, though the motions of past habits may still move me—this time, I feel them, honor them, let them move through me. The only thing left, over and over, is *Thank you*. *Thank you, thank you.* Life has slowed to a standstill, but still: I am safe, I am home. I am living.

* * * * *

“Dear Great-Grandma”

by Erica Fransisca

It's been almost five years, yet every time I pass your room downstairs I still half expect you to be there.

Your bed remains, as do the picture frames of family shots and my mother's maiden photograph. She said you'd always liked her. Even before Dad thought of proposing, you’d wanted to see them walk down the aisle and dreamed of attending your grandson's wedding. But once they were husband and wife, you had a different dream: you wanted to witness the child. And at eighty-five years of age, you heard your great granddaughter's first cry.

I think your dreams granted you strength, *thai-thai,* for when you dreamed to see me grow up, you saw it come true. I actually turned fifteen, you know, that day you were admitted to the hospital (and never came back).

Hospital visits weren't unusual, because you'd been coming and going several times before that last one. It was never anything serious–in the end you always came back home.

I honestly don't know if anyone had seen it coming.

I mean, you can tell me now that it was probably your time to go, for you'd been here almost a century. But isn't that the point? All my life you were the oldest person I knew, though you were barely ever bedridden until the last *couple* of years. It never occurred to me that you would ever leave us, that you even *could*.

I still remember your cooking (even grandma still can't beat yours) and the childhood flavors I had learned to love. I remember the red pockets you'd give us every Chinese New Year. I remember your hair, which had always been grey for me, and your eyes–so old and

loving and full of answers to the questions I never asked. I remember greeting you every morning before leaving for school, and each afternoon that I came home.

I remember the first days after your funeral. I'd forgotten and called out at an empty room, and found myself in tears when I saw there was no one on your bed.

My dad never cries, but I saw his cheeks damp upon waking up one morning. Perhaps you came to visit in his dreams.

I know that you were close to him, and he probably loved you (and loves you still) more than anything.

Thai-thai, I don't know what to say except I'm sorry.

Even on your last days when your memories fractured, you remembered me. You remembered my name and you called out for *me,* but I wasn't there when you did. I heard it from Mom.

I'm sorry.

It was a Friday afternoon right after school, exactly one week after my fifteenth birthday.

I was half-conscious walking through the hospital crowd, toward you. It was the same path I'd taken every day that week, but something had changed. I could hear singing far before I reached your room, and I shuddered because I recognized the voices.

My parents, my uncles and aunts, my cousins.

And I cried because I discerned an edge in their melody. *Sadness, denial. Grief.*

Thai-thai, I miss calling out your name. And I will never forget how I couldn't believe you dead, even when you breathed no more.

It was surreal, even now, when together we chorused “farewell, farewell, farewell,” for I saw all eyes were fixed on your static chest and closed eyes, unwilling even for a second to look away for fear of looking back only to see that you were not just sleeping after all. That the body which lay frozen was not the woman we loved. It was an empty shell.

I'm writing now mainly because I have to apologize, for all the times that I wasn’t there enough, and that I didn't listen enough. I'm sorry I never asked you for your story - what it

was like to be a single mother in times of war and chaos, what our nation was like back then, what you thought, what you loved, what you cherished.

But I also wanted to tell you that we'll remember, that you might never be truly gone. I still feel your warmth in my grandpa's laugh, and see your smiles in the hung photographs. We remember, as a family, because none of us could even be here if it wasn't for you.

Thank you.

I hope you know I love you so, and I will make you proud.

Much much love,
Your great-granddaughter

* * * * *

"Making Change"

by Virginia Ryan

I once lived in a stilt house on the side of a mountain in the northeast of Thailand. Mud-covered water buffalo grazed nearby in the muck of rice paddies. A thick white haze often blanketed the ground at dawn so it looked like the buffalo were standing in a field of snow.

A dirt path led to the village with its cramped shop selling dust-covered pantry supplies, a hair salon where the local ladies gathered every Saturday for a wash and set, a bus stop and cafeteria that kept fragrant curries and stews simmering on the burners to entice travelers passing through.

I was a Peace Corps volunteer and my personal mission was to help this rural community secure better education and self-sufficiency.

At the start, I felt like an imposter. It seemed presumptuous to think that I, a 25-year-old former journalist with four months training, could improve the teaching skills of professional teachers or convince lifelong farmers to adopt new, sustainable farming methods. Even when teaching English to young students, my enthusiasm and good intentions could not compensate for my lack of experience. Being a teacher requires far more than knowledge of the subject matter.

Peace Corps drummed into us not to work to change the culture but to make change by working within the culture. And yet. I was an idealistic, righteous feminist who struggled in the Thai conservative, patriarchal society. I strived to develop *jai yen*, the much admired Thai quality of having a cool heart: patient, calm and slow to anger. When I failed and became a stereotypical *jai ron*, hot-hearted American, those traits were on display not only to my students, but to the family with whom I lived. Which is why it took me 30 years to return.

A year into my service I moved out of my own place and in with a family. I wasn't trying to "go native," and I was no more passionate about my work than other volunteers. I

was simply lonely. No other foreigners lived in this part of the country, and there weren't Western tourists; the nearest volunteer was 90 minutes away by bus. The town had no cafes or movie theaters, no health clubs or shops. The quiet of being on my own from 4 in the afternoon to 7 in the morning every day caught up with me.

When I casually mentioned to another English teacher that I would like to live with a family, within the week a plan was set in motion for me to move in with the Chantara family.

Kuhn Paw, the father, and Kuhn Mae, the mother, were warm, supportive and loving. My father was a regal man, full of pride over his work measuring twice daily the height of the river that ran through our village. The river was critical to the survival of our village. It was where we bathed, did laundry and, in the dry season, watered gardens. Sometimes Paw listened in on my English lessons with his sons and blurted out random words he recognized: Very hot! Football! Hamburger! Once, when I was on my way to Bangkok, he made me change out of a sleeveless blouse into something more appropriate. My mother spent most days tending the family rice paddy near the village or gathering fruits and vegetables in the wild. Mae spoke only the local dialect, which I never learned very well, and so we reinforced our conversations with sign and body language. We spent a lot of time laughing. My strange foreign ways and fumblings with Thai cultural practices made her cackle with amusement, a lesson in and of itself in being *jai yen.* Spending time with her taught me how much can be shared between two people without ever saying a word.

Their son, 16-year-old Mongkut, was responsible for getting me into their home. Though not one of my students, he had a passion for learning English. He used to stop by my desk every day to say, "good morning, teacher" and practice new words and phrases. His 8-year-old brother, Somsak, was a student in the second grade and spent as little as time with me as possible. He, understandably, preferred spending his time playing football and takraw, a Thai version of hacky sack but with a rattan ball.

Sasithorn, age 14, was their only daughter and had dropped out of school the year before. She worked from dawn to dusk cooking and cleaning and, when I moved in, teaching me the Thai way: How to cook, how to eat, how to wash my clothes by hand or take a river bath without exposing myself to the entire village. She taught me to securely tie

a *pahsin* (a sarong), the common Buddhist prayers and the proper ritual of morning alms. And she was always correcting my Thai.

She was thorough, patient, determined. She was also smart. Too smart, I thought, not to be in school. One Saturday while we were cooking, I asked Sasithorn how she felt about leaving school.

It was wrong of me to ask; it was too personal and direct a question that I knew she could not answer honestly without going against her parents. Thai children knew to be respectful and unquestioning of their elders. Cheerfulness was a quality taken seriously in this "land of smiles." Without losing her's, Sasithorn said she was sad and missed school but *mai pen rai,* do not worry. Taking care of the home, taking care of her parents is *pau dee*, good enough. She didn't have a choice. She was the only girl. This was her duty.

I was familiar with this idea of duty. In those days, many Thai kids in rural hamlets only went as far as elementary school. Subsistence farmers could not afford the fees for the middle/high school or see the point of traveling an hour or more for an education they thought had no practical use. Once children knew how to read, write and do basic math, school had served its purpose. Even in village centers and towns, Thai girls commonly stopped their studies when the need for them to learn to tend house outweighed the benefits of a formal education. Back then, tradition called for the oldest daughter not to marry but to remain home to care for the family home and the parents as they aged.

Although I encouraged my students to imagine that they could be whatever they wanted -- a doctor or teacher or farmer or mechanic -- I disciplined myself not to nudge Sasithorn away from her traditional duty and toward anything other than her destiny. I didn't want to make trouble for her or her family. I loved the Chantaras; advocating on her behalf would dishonor our relationship and violate the trust they had put in me when they welcomed me into their home.

When my end of service approached, Sasithorn surprised me when she confessed despair over the life that lay in front of her. She didn't want to keep house, be a subsistence farmer or serve as her parents' caregiver with no life of her own. I tried to find out from her what she might want to do instead. After a few days of exploring her options, which seemed nonexistent, we came up with the idea of her being a seamstress. It interested her, would give her an independent income and allow her to live at home and take care of her parents

and the house. I arranged for her to get an apprenticeship with a seamstress, $500 financed by an uncle of mine in the States, and then I left.

Five years later. Sasithorn moved to Bangkok to work in a clothes factory. Ten years later, she moved to Detroit to marry sight unseen the son of a second cousin, who had come to America as a child. She visited me soon after the wedding, young and excited and seemingly unchanged from when I saw her last. She still spoke barely a word of English. Her husband was considerably older and worldly, more American than Thai. I was very worried. This was not part of the plan. I didn't like that she had come to America under these circumstances and could not help but wonder who was taking care of her parents.

We stayed in touch. Sasithorn had two children and was running the restaurants her husband's family owned. They bought a house in the suburbs. She changed her name on Facebook to Susie. Eventually, she opened a restaurant of her own.

A few years ago, my husband and I went to see her. She was as beautiful as ever but now with a modern hairstyle, tasteful makeup and American skinny jeans. We had a joyous reunion at her restaurant. Her daughter was in middle school, her son in high school. They were smart, polite, honor roll students and active with sports and music. It was clear Sasithorn was a great mom. Her life seemed good and she could provide financially for her parents back in Thailand, even if she visited only once a year. She radiated such confidence and pride that I thought, maybe, things had turned out well for her

Sasithorn's mood shifted when her husband entered the restaurant with a little boy in tow. I couldn't figure out who this child was. I would have known if she had had another. She became more formal and though her smile remained, the light in her eyes faded.

Later, when we were alone, she explained. Two years prior, out of the blue, her husband had brought the boy home. He was his son with another woman. Sasithorn's child now, to raise. I tried to hide my horror and stifled making the kind of judgmental statement this news deserved. How did she feel about that? I asked. Her answer was eerily familiar. "*Mai pen rai.* It does not matter. It's my duty. I don't have a choice." She didn't bother to fake a smile.

There was more news. Her older brother, Mongkut, had moved to the south of Thailand. Her younger brother Somsak was living in Chicago. I left our visit crushed over her situation and feeling responsible.

It occurred to me that my existence in the Chantara's home had set in motion the events and decisions that led the family to disband. If that was my effect on Sasithorn and her family, what of my students? Was it possible for a foreigner to come into a family, a school, or a community and not change the culture? Whatever the good intentions of a program like Peace Corps or the need in a community for better health, education and life, I feared the consequences of outside influence was too strong.

It took me 30 years to return because I was unwilling to see what I would find. If nothing had changed in my village or school, my service would have been for naught. Finding everything changed, might be worse. I knew through social media contact with my former students that modern conveniences – cell phones, internet and coffee shops -- had come to even our remote corner of northeast Thailand. I didn't know if any of them had, like Sasithorn, veered away from their duties or destinies because of me. Could modernization and the shrinking of the world led them to drop those traditional values, like being *jai yen*, that were the very best part of the Thai culture. Sasithorn kept me updated on the health of her parents; with all their children gone, I wondered if they regretted the day they welcomed me into their home.

I might have put off the trip forever but for my youngest son. When he was 19, he took a semester off from college to tour Southeast Asia. Bali, Vietnam, Cambodia and, finally, Thailand. He spent a week with my family. Paw and Mae treated him like a grandchild, my students treated him like a long-lost friend. Their hospitality toward him calmed my fears enough to book a flight.

I sent my travel information to a few former students and had Sasithorn let her parents know our travel dates. The trip, after that, was out of our hands.

A former student met us at the airport in Bangkok; a few days later, the son of a former student picked us up at the airport in the provincial capital an hour or so from the village. Thirty years ago the airport was not much more than a plowed field with only one flight a week to Bangkok if the weather was good and the plane working. I never had the chance to fly.

We pulled up to the Chantara's home, different from the one where I had lived. I had expected this. Constant flooding 10 years ago had forced them out and, thanks to Sasithorn,

they bought an acre of land and literally picked up the old house and moved it to higher ground and built a relative palatial addition.

Paw was sitting outside in a vinyl covered kitchen chair as if he was waiting for me to come home from school. He wore a red striped polo shirt, gray plaid trousers and a beaming grin. His skin was the same burnished chestnut, his chiseled cheekbones and chin as angular as ever. Though he was 78 years old, he had a full head of mostly black hair.

I got out of the car and brought my hands together in the traditional *wai* greeting and, raising my hands to my forehead, I bowed in respect. Up close, I could see the effects of respiratory and cardiac problems that Sasithorn had told me of. He was frail and struggled to stand, but his voice was reasonably strong as he shouted, *Mae, Mae*, *come home*!

I looked to see where he was calling. Beyond a vast chicken pen, beyond the brown fish pond with a dingy resting on its muddy bank, beyond a stand of papaya and banana trees, Mae emerged.

Osteoporosis bent her at a 90 degree angle. She wore a floppy blue check hat and sun-sensitive glasses and stopped by a cement urn to wash off her boots and change into flip flops. I ran down to meet her at the urn, but when I got there, didn't know what to do. I had never seen Thais hug or kiss. Public displays of affection were limited to "sniff kisses," where one – usually an older woman – would nuzzle into the cheek of a child and inhale. Once, at a wedding, I saw a groom sniff kiss the face of his new bride. It was both chaste and surprisingly erotic. On my last day of school 30 years ago, my female students came up to me one at a time, giggling, to sniff my cheek. But all I could do when I left the Chantara family for the States was offer a deep bow and a Thai *wai*. Not knowing if things had changed, I did that again with Mae.

My mother seemed thrilled to see me and to meet my husband. She yelled for her niece, whom Sasithorn had hired to help out during our visit, to bring us water. Mae gave us the tour, proudly showing off the rooms furnished with Western couches, beds and a television. There were electric lights, two bathrooms, and a cold water shower, although Mae admitted that they bathed upstairs using the traditional bucket and trough method.

In the inside kitchen was a fridge and a microwave which they used only when Sasithorn visited. Cooking was done as in the past, on charcoal fires out back. Instead of Sasithorn, their niece hovered over the fire. A series of ongs, large clay urns, collected rain

waters from a system of PVC pipes and aluminum gutters. There was plenty for washing and cleaning now, no need to use the river, thank goodness, because it had dried up in the last three years. They no longer drank rain water; the air, Paw explained, was too polluted.

After lunch of grilled fish, papaya salad, soup and sticky rice, we lazed on a little deck that overlooked the fish pond. Mae, Paw and my husband napped; I rested easy in the heat of the afternoon, relieved that my influence so long ago hadn't caused such calamity that I was disowned.

What followed then was three days of reunion, not just between me and my students but among the students themselves. Unlike most students in grades above or below this group, many in this class had gone to college or technical school. They were working and raising families in cities and towns that had more to offer than our village or even the town. Those that didn't come to town caught up with us on FaceTime and text. I was as happy watching them catching up with each other as I was catching up with them myself.

Most were recognizable and I easily recalled their names. It wasn't only their physical appearance, but their ability to speak English seemed to have frozen in time. The only student whose English had improved was a young woman who had been outgoing and brilliant even when she was just 12 years old. After she graduated high school, she won a prestigious, competitive three-year scholarship to an Australian university.

I was dismayed that my students' progress in English had come to such an abrupt halt when I was no longer their teacher. Although I had come to terms with the foolish idea that my influence was omnipotent, I had to question whether I had accomplished anything at all.

One night there was a gathering of students at the home of a couple of retired teachers and over plates of amazing food and glasses of beer (served over ice, mostly to the men), I teased them about speaking Thai and laughed as I told them I must have been a terrible teacher if they didn't remember any of their English. I didn't actually think this; maybe I was prodding them to prove me wrong.

They laughed, too, but over the course of the night each one of the students made it a point to speak with me alone, in Thai, to tell me how I had changed their life. Supanee had become a nurse. Kanika studied education and taught English now in the local school.

Sukanlya was a STEM teacher. Kittisak was the assistant principal. Jintana was a government official. Kiet was doing public health and responsible for the region's Covid-19 outreach and education. Sunan, who had shown up in a snazzy Mercedes SUV, was an entrepreneur running an alternative energy company. They told me of the others: more nurses and teachers, a college professor of veterinary medicine, an environmentalist. One of my favorite stories was from Noi, the woman who had studied in Australia. She had lived in Bangkok and traveled the world, first while working for an airline and then a software company. Only last year she had returned to the village to become an organic farmer and raise horses. She also teaches English to local kids on weekends.

On our way back to America we stopped in Bangkok and spent time with Sasithorn's oldest brother, Mongkut, the one responsible for getting me into his family's house 30 years ago. He and his wife and son drove four hours for a two hour visit. We cried and laughed and cried over and over again. His message to me was the same as my students. Life had been changed because of me. Mongkut worked for an international company in a resort town, repairing exercise equipment for foreign travelers. His English, though not good enough by his standards, came in handy. His 21-year-old son was in his second year of university studying English and international business. He told me that his dad taught him English as a little boy and pushed him to dream of bigger things.

I know for certain I wasn't a great volunteer. I had too little experience and limited supplies and teaching aides to be truly effective. I was often at odds with my principal, frustrated at the lack of interest some of my Thai colleagues had in adopting more interactive teaching styles. I chose to spend more time with my family than participating in social events with my teachers.

But I did some pretty good things. I started an adult education class for the local *songtaeow* drivers for the inevitable day when western tourists would discover the mountain (it hasn't happened yet). I helped farmers get access to supplies to raise fish in small ponds, which helped with their income and get more protein into the local diets.

More important, perhaps, my students said they saw in me a young woman who wasn't afraid to go out of her comfort zone to try new things and to live, even for a short time, outside of what was expected of her by her family and society.

A few days before we left the country, we met an old Peace Corps friend for dinner who had married a Thai woman and settled in Bangkok. We traveled by boat to a riverside restaurant and were struck by the incongruity of modern luxury skyscrapers next to falling down shacks and so many slums. Clearly, Thailand had plenty of wealth, plenty of educated people.

"Why is Peace Corps still here?" I asked.

"Do you remember the mission of Peace Corps? Technical assistance, which they (Thais) obviously don't need anymore. And cultural exchange. It goes both ways. What they learn from knowing you, what you learn from knowing them."

Days after we returned from Thailand, the United States recalled all 7,300 volunteers because of Covid-19 and suspended the program. It got me thinking of Peace Corps' value and what I had learned. I freely told people that I got more out of being in Peace Corps than I gave. But it had been years since I thought about the specifics.

My Thai family, students and friends taught me the value of hard work. They taught me how much can be gained when one person simply puts another at ease with a smile. They taught me the value of having a cool heart, not by being cold or distant, but by tempering my reactions to challenges and disappointments. The experience taught me the best way to problem solve is to go beyond finding out what an opponent wants, but why. And that there is absolutely nothing I cannot do if I am willing to work hard, learn from setbacks, make sacrifices, and keep trying. These lessons formed who I am today, even if I fail to use them all the time.

Many former volunteers fear the current administration will use the virus as an excuse to permanently end the program. I hope that doesn't happen. My return trip showed that the impact of my service on the Thais and myself cannot be defined as purely positive or negative. But it was extremely important. If we chose to, we could see challenges and opportunities through a different cultural lens. For me, that has made all the difference.

* * * * *

“Cleaner Than Clean”

by Joshua Ip

is money a washing machine or does money buy washing machines? do vigorously agitated coins left in the pocket accelerate the bleaching process?

certainly i have left my credit card in the spin cycle before and recovered it with fainter numbers. does the money then rub off on my socks, underwear? is money colours or whites and how loaded is my machine with that question?

money is a dryer doubling as a washing machine, for it is all spin, whether or not you insert water. money is also the washing powder, or fluid, that you deposit into same nameless compartment and later turns up in the odor of your clothes.

have you laundered money before? those faint, wispy notes that give it a smell? the singapore government in all its squeaky cleanness made money of plastic explicitly to avoid this purpose, in all its wisdom knowing us, eminently practical, hygiene-loving, are the most literal people in the world.

* * * * *

“Barako”

by Renee Agatep

He minds the screaming
kettle, silentious and steady,
measured in teaspoons
of amber clover bouquets

He speaks in porcelain
tones slid across woodgrain
awaiting closed-mouthed sips
burning bitter caramel, sighing

agitated smoke signals
curling, calming
this way and that,
he talks in teacups.

* * * * *

“The First Taste of Heartbreak”

by Adam Ashraf Ramlan

Dread,
Every pore of my existence just leaks out dread,
A smoky, dark shadow emanating from my flaming chest.
Occasional flows of serotonin leak into red river veins,
Probably a self-defence mechanism, pushing to keep me alive.
Only distracting myself from the impending doom as I sit here, destroying myself.

The timeless fear of the future,
The endless chasm of despair,
The unease and distraught no longer a stranger in the deep quiet mind.
Tears well and dry like the ocean tide.
I wonder when did it bring me here?

Repeated words ring through my ears,
Whispering death and sadness and doubt and death again,
I want to cry but I cut ties with my emotions sometimes,
So I question if the tears are sincere, or merely acts?

I’ll hurt alone, I won’t let my family in.
They don’t deserve such a sad first child.
Ultimately lacking in mettle and spine,
Wasting their hard-earned money, love and time.

To my dear, you deserve better,

I lack what you seek, and I won't make you sadder.
I'll let you go once I silence the clutter.
And find out what I can do to make myself matter.

Is a sad tale one that should be cried for?
I seem to have brought this upon myself, tears have no meaning here.
I lacked trust in God, I lack trust in myself.
I can't even cry on my dusty prostration mat.

I can't say goodbye to my life that easily,
I love the people that will be troubled by my passing.
I'll stand again once I find my feet,
And smile again when I feel I deserve it.

* * * * *

“Home Less”

by Erica Fransisca

You were born with one foot out the door,
Set sail the next morning and never knew the shore.

You flew before you learned how to walk,
And dissected the world before you could talk.

Some call you a wanderer, others a permanent guest,
At worst you're a vagabond, or a traveller at best.

You've climbed the highest mountain and seen the darkest spot,
For the heart is never content when the globe is yours to trot.

Tell me, little bird, what are you searching for?
Peace or fairytale love, or how to stop from wanting more?

You tease your roots with soil, and again you're on your way,
You say it's just one home less - isn't that a reason to stay?

* * * * *

"Rowing Down Two Rivers"

by Ismim Putera

The Melanau folk religion believed that this world is a likou *(river). When Melanaus dreamt of people getting on a boat, in their interpretation, it signifies death.*

You always say
        the sky is the sea
the rivers dissolve ashy omens
from the jasmine-scented cemetery

We sit on the sampan
two bamboo oars split the salty
stream   into half
fishes jump and burrow into my chest

two nights ago you dreamt of *likou*
        encircling our stilt house
and the next day at noon I roll my tongue
with areca leave to curse the   water dry

        The moon is high
you grip my elbow
and stop me from rowing further lips on my neck
your tears burn my back

Two rivers meet
        the water dull grey
like fish bone   the other

purplish like morning glory vines

The morning mist is a marbled mirror
only the dead row unharmed into it
two rivers flow side by side
pushing us apart

I cry myself to sleep
a waterfall flows out from my spine
my face is as pale as
the new-born water nymph

Our sampan is two rivers away
but one stream closer
yours drift to the sea
mine to the sky.

“The Mosque”

by Ismim Putera

Half of me wants to
perch on the mosque’s
roof

seizing the moon and stars effigy
returning them to the
sky

God welcomes us
from pre-dawn to pre-dusk

anytime

the carpeted floor is clean
like Heaven; dustless,
sinless

we can’t hear His voice
because we murmur using His
sound

we stand in rows, straight like
sunlight, we bow and prostrate

humbly

men roll their tongues, eyes

enchanting runes, imagining His

presence.

* * * * *

“Parliament Is Paper”

by Emmanuel Lacadin

With just enough pressure,
the hand that holds it,
can fold and fold and fold it,
to any desired shape—
a box, a boat, a plate.

Every shapeshift,
folded then unfolded,
lines of seeming division.
Still it's one, a single impressionable canvas,
and now a creased hand puppet.

Crisp now lost, it can only last so long,
and playing with fire will surely cost.
No, folding does not
extinguish fire or flammability.

The hand that once held it
cannot bring salvation.
In its bareness,
fire could mean doneness;
water, dissolution.

It is not a hand!

Now exposed is
but the delicate paw
of a paper tiger,
its iron fist crumbling
to chunks of rust,

a paper tiger,
awaiting its burn notice.

a paper tiger,
folding to the people's win,

a paper tiger,
ashed by the people's fervor.

* * * * *

"The Blooms"

by Anuradha Chelliah

The alarm was not ready to wake you up,
The rooster's crowing was not necessary,
The sun shone as usual, never a bother to you,
You just bloomed, without waiting,
Even if it had rained…..

You never needed a blueprint nor a strategic plan,
Everything happens for you as you planned,
Without a worry, without a second thought,
A meeting or a discussion; not needed…..

You just knew what you had to do,
You prepared for the good and the bad,
You just bloomed and cheered the world,
Put up smiles on many faces with your beautiful colours,
Oh, what a world would it be without your colourful blooms?
Keep on blooming, keep on cheering,
Keep on shining, keep on inspiring,
How I wish I could be you…..

* * * * *

"HMS *Repulse* & HMS *Prince of Wales*"

by Jeremy Gadd

They sailed to defend Singapore,
so Singaporeans might not
become slaves to the Rising Sun;
might continue to be merchants
enjoying the fruits of their trade;
but, now, both battleships,
vanquished by samurai blades,
lie many fathoms beneath the sea
but, apparently, not deep enough ...
The rusted vessels are being raided,
dredged, broken up, degraded,
for prized, low-background,
pre-nuclear, scrap metal and
sailors' bones are being lost in
the slush of the sea-bed, tossed aside
or being crushed within the wrecked
hulls by those whose culture,
supposedly, venerates the deceased.
No respect, no homage, no honour
for these desecrated dead ...

* * * * *

“Hang Tuah’s Tomb”

by Matthew Jerome van Huizen

Opposite the straits of Malacca,
beneath a headstone blurred,
and white-washed sepulchre, lay in stone
a great Malay hero with nothing shown
No grandiose stories, nor amour or pleat,
Just a small exhibition of the absurd—
A tomb that extends to ten feet.

Such is the plainness of Muslim iconoclasm,
That it scarcely attracts your gaze, until
You notice the sombreness, still
elicited by his valorous legacy; and
the famous allusion emblazoned nearby,
That the Malays will never die
On this land.

“*Takkan Melayu Hilang di dunia*”

The tomb lies unassuming,
But in death, its occupant will not know how
His fame will spur on a voyage
for his race, through triumph and damage,
Together his progeny;
in richness and poverty;

Cast away the yoke of oppression;
As on the day in Midian
by Merdeka. Rigidly they

Persisted, linked together through the centuries
through the long lengths
Of time. Against powers that rose and fell,
The Portuguese, the Dutch, and the teeming womb of royal kings.
Of which they were made subjects.
Subjects of a foreign king
But also to murder, torture, and exploitation
Which through the ages

Washed at their identity.
Yet like the man in the tomb,
they were brave.
In war. Fighting the horrible rise of the ancient sun
In bloodshed. Freedom was sought.
Which at *Bukit Chandu* they wrought.
Using the same courage of old.
Awakened once more from the tomb.

The passing of time has not changed them still,
Unlike Hang Tuah's tomb, weathered and aged.
Their ties that bond: religion, custom and family,
It shall not die. It shall remain.
And so will their bravery and pride,
Stemming from that achromatic grave.
I know now what he said rings true:
His people will always survive.