

Anak Sastra

Issue 41

Issue 41 Contents

short fiction

"Marbles"	6
by John Rey Dave Aquino	
"The Space Between"	13
by Zachary Frye	
"The Assumption of Manang Renata"	24
by Cat Aquino	
"Reunion"	28
by Lo Sin Yee	
"Deliver Me with Cornmeal"	34
by Ben Umayam	

creative nonfiction

"Testing the Waters"	44
by Farid Hamka	
"What I See Is Not an Orang-utan"	50
by Christina Yin	
"Kep Sur Mer 2019"	52
by David Etheridge	

book review

Eileen R. Tabios' <i>Pagpag: The Dictator's Aftermath in the Diaspora</i> ...	78
by Neil Leadbeater	

p o e m s

"Kretek"	80
by John C. Mannone	
"Perhentianings"	82
by Salman Akhtar	
"Cameron Highlands"	84
"Robertson Rose Garden"	85
by Kelly Kaur	
"Another Morning Has Broken"	86
by Malachi Edwin Vethamani	
"All Over the Sea of Blue"	88
"I See Crownless Kings with Eyes of Green"	90
by Ku Ezriq Raif bin Ku Besry	

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Contributor Bios

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Lo Sin Yee is an English language teacher in Miri, Sarawak. He uses his underdog experiences as grist to the mill.

Ben Umayam (Twitter: [@UmayamBen](#)) moved to NYC to write the Great American Filipino Gay Short Story. He worked for political consultants, became a chef at a fancy hotel, then worked privately as a chef for priests. He is now retired and is working that short story again. Recently he was published in the online magazine *Maudlin House*, *Digging through the Fat*, *The South East Asia Drabble Anthology* published by Insignia, and *34th Parallel Magazine*.

Farid Hamka has a predilection for the unaccustomed earth and is an avid believer of the redeeming power of literature. He will start his MFA in Writing in the California College of the Arts soon. He graduated with a B.Sc. in Government and Economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science and worked as a management consultant. He believes in how things can be improved by taking an interdisciplinary lens. His prose and poetry have been published in *Anak Sastra* and his essays and reviews have been published in *Magdalene* and LSE's *The Beaver*.

Christina Yin lives in Sarawak, Malaysia with her husband, children and two mixed-breed dogs. A senior lecturer at Swinburne University of Technology, Sarawak Campus, her fiction

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David Etheridge is a Canadian currently living in Phnom Penh. He has taught in colleges and universities in Canada, Hungary, Republic of Georgia, PR China, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and most recently Cambodia.

Neil Leadbeater is an author, essayist, poet and critic living in Edinburgh, Scotland. His short stories, articles and poems have been published widely in anthologies and journals both at home and abroad. His publications include *Librettos for the Black Madonna* (White Adder Press, 2011); *The Worcester Fragments* (Original Plus, 2013); *The Loveliest Vein of Our Lives* (Poetry Space, 2014), *Finding the River Horse* (Littoral Press, 2017), *Punching Cork Stoppers* (Original Plus, 2018) and *Penn Fields* (Littoral Press, 2019). His work has been translated into several languages.

John C. Mannone has poems appearing in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Le Menteur*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Poetry South*, *Baltimore Review*, *2020 Antarctic Poetry Exhibition*, and others. His poetry won the Impressions of Appalachia Creative Arts Contest (2020). He was awarded a Jean Ritchie Fellowship (2017) in Appalachian literature and served as celebrity judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018). His latest collection, *Flux Lines: The Intersection of Science, Love, and Poetry*, is forthcoming from Linnet's Wings Press (2020). He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and other journals. A retired physics professor, he lives near Knoxville, Tennessee.

Salman Akhtar currently lives in—and carries spiritually everywhere he is displaced—Kuala Lumpur, where he masquerades as a teacher in the day, and various other beings at other times.

Kelly Kaur's poems and works have been published in *Sanscrit*, *West Coast*, *Singa*, *CBC*, *Mothering Anthology*, *New Asian Short Stories 2015*, *Short Story Dispenser* (Central Library), online *YYC Portraits of People*, *Time of the Poet Republic*, *Canada*, *Word City Monthly*, *Best Asian Short Stories 2020*, *Calgary Public Library: Pieces of a Pandemic*, *SAAG Reader*, and *Blindman Session Stories*. She is a 2019 Borderlines Writers' Circle participant through Writers' Guild Alberta and Alexandra Writers' Centre in Calgary, and she has completed her first draft of her novel, *Letters to Singapore*.

Malachi Edwin Vethamani is a poet, writer, critic and bibliographer. He is currently Professor of Modern English Literature at the School of English, University of Nottingham Malaysia. His publications include: *Coitus Interruptus and Other Stories* (2018), two

collections of poems, *Life Happens* (Maya Press, 2017) and *Complicated Lives* (Maya Press, 2016).

Humble, mediocre and lackluster—these are the opposites of **Ku Ezriq Raif bin Ku Besry**. He uses humour to trudge through life; hence, this relatively unorthodox bio. Although a bit narcissistic (with good reasons), he is not without a shred of thoughtfulness towards the suffering of others, and of his own anguish. He wishfully hopes for a better tomorrow for everyone.

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“Marbles”

by John Rey Dave Aquino

All the framed pictures, certificates and medals had been taken down from the wall, the space relinquished to the small, white coffin, along with the dull silver of funeral paraphernalia and the gloomy array of condolence flowers. Monobloc chairs and a bamboo bench lined the walls, occupied by neighbors, friends and some relatives who took the bus from their respective cities and towns. Tonight’s wake-goers talked in hushed whispers, as the previous nights’ did, perhaps out of respect for the deceased. Atop the coffin, the large portrait of two-year-old Aldrin, bright-eyed and dimpled, provided a reprieve from the somberness of his last night.

Sonny had taken for himself the seat nearest the coffin, close enough for him to touch the white fiberglass if he reached for it. He had sat there since the first day, not leaving except for meals, bedtime, and showers in the neighbor’s bathroom because superstition dictated that no one should take a bath in a house where a wake is being held. Though it was already past his usual bedtime, he didn’t need to attend class tomorrow. Their family would be accompanying his brother’s coffin to the cemetery.

On the underside of the coffin’s lid, Aldrin’s pictures reflected a healthy toddler, all plump cheeks and arms—here looking at the camera, there playing with his tiny cars, here sitting on the foot of a jolly bee mascot’s statue, there munching on a burger with the mascot’s face on the partially unwrapped plastic. That such a lively child suddenly died baffled the wake-goers. They whispered among themselves, lest they be heard by the grieving family, but Sonny could hear them alright, amid all the chit chat condemning pregnant teenagers, illegitimate children, and homosexual neighbors, all usual things to gossip about.

“How did he die?” a woman asked her companion, two seats away from Sonny.

“No one noticed that he swallowed a pebble and it got stuck somewhere in his stomach.”

That was true, in part, though Sonny doubted that Aldrin’s death had been that simple.

The family lived in a rented house with only one bedroom. Sonny and his sister, Trina, shared the single bed while their parents, Manuel and Diana, along with Aldrin slept on a sleeping mat spread on the floor. When Sonny woke up near dawn to a retching sound that seemed like someone was coughing and choking at the same time, he had dismissed it, attributing it to the cold night, until the revolting stench of vomit reached his nose. Bile threatened to rise up his throat. The lights went on.

Sonny heard his father curse. Opening his eyes, he gagged when he saw what was between Aldrin’s legs: undigested rice mixed with saliva and bodily fluids that were meant to stay inside. Aldrin sat with his legs apart on the mat. He puked again, and more vomit joined the wet, unsightly lump between his tiny legs. Everyone had woken up. Diana made small circles on the tiny back of her youngest son. Manuel went out of the room and then returned with a pail of water and three rugs, put it down and went back out, then returned with a glass of water. Aldrin couldn’t drink even half of the water. When he stopped throwing up, Diana washed him in the bathroom and changed his clothes.

“It must be something we ate,” Manuel assumed. He had taken the dirtied mat out and spread out a different one where Aldrin was already asleep.

“Maybe. He’s a bit pale,” Diana said, gently stroking her youngest child’s back as the young boy tried to get back to sleep.

No one else in the family went sick, however, and for the next couple of days, Aldrin always threw up after a meal. Sonny heard his younger brother vomit every night with those awful coughing and retching noises in the bathroom, and none of them could properly sleep. Aldrin had developed a mild fever and was too bushed to play with his toys.

When Manuel’s mother visited them on the third day, Baket Elena said that “the spirits must be playing with him. He must have accidentally brushed arms with something or someone that we can’t see.”

Sonny understood. His mother always reminded him to be back home once the sun set so that he wouldn’t disturb those that ‘can’t be seen,’ or those that ‘we can’t see.’ She

said there were invisible creatures that might make fun of him; they could make him ill, give him boils, or curse his nose to become larger than it already was. If he were to go outside, for any reason, he must recite a chant — ‘Bari-bari, Apo’—though Manuel had jested that it should be in Tagalog — ‘Tabi-tabi po.’ Other rules included not peeing outside, not throwing anything outside, not spitting outside.

“The poor boy,” a woman lamented.

“I heard they brought the child to Lakay Caloy,” said another one.

That was also true. Elena suggested they bring Aldrin to the resident albularyo in the barangay, who Baket Elena recommended for virtue of him being Ilocano like her. “He would know what to do,” she guaranteed.

Lakay Caloy lived in a shack that leaned on the outside of a poultry factory compound’s walls. He did not look as old as his honorific suggested. His hair was still mostly black, though the darkness of his home made it difficult to see the graying strands. Inside the constricted space of his shack dwelt the smell of boiled leaves, herbal oils, and candle wax. Sonny sat beside his father, eyes following the old man’s veined hands touch his brother on the forehead, the stomach, the feet. After muttering a prayer, he brought out a small plastic basin and filled it with water, then placed it in the middle of the room, setting it on top of a tree stump he used as a makeshift table. Lakay Caloy held a lit candle above the water, horizontally. He let the wax drip on the clear water while he whispered under his breath, another unintelligible prayer. Sonny heard his father’s deep, quiet breaths beside him. They all watched Lakay Caloy, except for Aldrin who slept in his mother’s arms.

“It’s a frog,” Lakay Caloy concluded, beckoning them to look in the basin. Sonny looked in the basin and saw a lump of candle wax floating on the water’s surface that had the vaguest hint of a frog’s figure. Still, his parents listened as the old man explained that a frog was in Aldrin’s stomach. “The child has angered those that we can’t see.” Lakay Caloy proceeded to lick his index finger and made a cross on Aldrin’s forehead, belly, and heels. He took one of his jars and poured the sweet herbal-smelling liquid into his palms, rubbed them, and gently massaged Aldrin’s whole body while the boy slept.

To further ensure the expulsion of the stomach frog, Lakay Caloy told them to burn frankincense in any type of container, take it to all corners of their home and let the smoke take over the space. Manuel put a burning piece of charcoal in a pan and put the yellowish

pieces of frankincense on top of it. He brought the pan to all corners of their small house until it smelled like a church. The albularyo also told them to let Aldrin inhale the smoke straight from the incense, so the little boy was made to sit in front of the pan and breathe in the fumes. He coughed all night and couldn't sleep.

"Quiet." The women shushed each other as Diana entered the room. She sat beside Sonny who had taken his place again near the coffin. "Are you sleepy yet?"

Sonny shook his head. That ended their conversation, and they went silent, seated near Aldrin's coffin, until someone approached them to express their condolences. Diana thanked them for coming then led them out the front door. The whispering had stopped; the gossiping women had also left. Sonny was alone in the room.

Watching his mother go, Sonny remembered how she'd been distressed since she returned home with the coffin. They all still were. He remembered the sudden wail in the middle of the night, his father cursing himself and the world, and Trina asking what was wrong, what had happened. Manuel didn't answer. He just cried and cursed himself for leaving his youngest child to die in the hospital. He punched his chest too many times to count. Trina and Sonny hugged their father, to stop him from hitting himself, and they sobbed altogether for what seemed like hours before he changed his clothes, told them to sleep for a while longer, and left to accompany his wife at the morgue. But they couldn't sleep. Sonny's tears streamed down as he looked out the window at the early morning darkness. Images of Aldrin flashed before his drowsy eyes while the sound of laughter and toddler shrieks still rang in his ears. He refused to accept that his brother was dead, and he imagined that he would see Aldrin again in the morning, healthy and smiling.

By dawn, his eyes were already hurting. Come afternoon, the coffin arrived.

Every day after he returned from school, Sonny used to play with Aldrin in the sala. They owned a simple battery-powered train set, a Christmas present from Manuel. Sonny laid out the train's route using the blue plastic tracks, then he set the train on the tracks and flipped a switch. They watched the train as it chugged around the mini railroad, until Aldrin got bored and took out Sonny's remote-controlled truck, a gift from a well-off ninong.

In the small living room, Sonny drove the car with the remote, making it go around the room while Aldrin chased it. He would then turn the car around and chase after his brother. Aldrin only went two ways. Sometimes he made a beeline for the bedroom where

Trina, doing her homework, helped him climb the bed when he came squealing inside. Other times he ran to the kitchen where he hid behind Diana's legs while she prepared dinner. She never told them off. When he closed his eyes, Sonny could still imagine his younger brother's high-pitched screams and giggling as he chased him with the truck.

"Aren't you sleepy yet, Sonny?"

Sonny looked up. It was Manuel asking this time. "Not yet, Pa," he lied. His father sat beside him, and Sonny unconsciously leaned on his father's arms. He gave in to the pull of drowsiness, his eyes fluttering closed in only a minute.

When he woke up hours before sunrise, he was already in bed with the electric fan spinning near his feet. He sat on the bed and looked outside the window. There were only a few people left, mostly relatives. His bladder started to protest, and he went out to piss.

Diana was guarding the coffin in the sala. "Why did you wake up? Are you hungry?" she asked.

"No, Ma. I just need to pee."

"Your father is using the toilet."

"I'll just go outside," Sonny said.

Diana nodded, then reminded him, as an afterthought, "Don't forget to say 'Tabi-tabi po'."

Sonny went out the kitchen backdoor, to the mango tree beside their house. It was dark anyway, and no one would see him. He lowered his shorts.

He glanced at a one-inch indent in the ground, close to the tree's roots, which he had dug with a large stick a long time ago. It was a hole around which he and his neighbors played with marbles, hitting each other's marbles and shooting them in the hole. Sometimes Sonny played alone, to practice his finger flicks and beat his playmates.

Sonny was playing alone with his marbles just before Aldrin went sick. He was flicking marbles outside, while his mother and sister cooked in the kitchen. Manuel was working weekends at a construction site, and so the task of distracting his younger brother fell upon Sonny. Aldrin seemed to enjoy watching his older brother flick and shoot, cheering whenever Sonny hit another marble. His little brother squatted on the ground with him, pointing at the marbles and saying something in his yet developing toddler language. Sonny understood, and he hit any marble that Aldrin pointed to.

Then he heard Diana's voice from the kitchen, asking him to buy sinigang mix from the store. He had left his brother alone.

When he returned, Aldrin was ransacking the red trash can they have out front. "Aldrin, no!" he had yelled, surprising his brother who started crying, starting with a sniff, followed by the scandalous open-mouthed bawling. Sonny noticed that Aldrin's lips were smeared with dirt, as well as the neckline of his shirt. He guessed that his brother must have stumbled and fallen to the ground.

Unlike other kids, Aldrin didn't push anyone or thrash when he cried. Sonny carried his brother inside. Diana asked him what was wrong, and why Aldrin was dirty. "He stumbled, and he was messing with the trash can," Sonny answered.

Diana made a *tsk* sound, pulled a towel from her back pocket and wiped the dirt and tears on Aldrin's face. She shushed Aldrin, "Who made you cry?"

Aldrin pointed to Sonny. "Kuya," he stuttered between sobs.

"Hm, stop crying. Here, I'll hit him." Diana put her hand on Sonny's and slapped it twice with her other hand to make a slapping sound, but hiding it from Aldrin's view. "Bad kuya," she fake-yelled.

Aldrin stopped crying when he heard the sound, then stood between Diana and Sonny. "Stop, Mama, no," he said, standing like a little guard boy defending his older brother.

Diana smiled tenderly, then turned to Sonny. "Go give your brother a shower."

Sighing and raising his shorts, Sonny took a step towards the hole. He let his eyes adjust to the dark and squatted on the ground. He had forgotten to collect the marbles he'd left there that day, but they were already gone save for one marble in the hole. He picked it up, holding it between his thumb and forefinger, rolling it back and forth, his stomach churning and eating him from the inside. He imagined that the marble was about the same size as the pebble that killed his brother — a tiny thing that had passed through Aldrin's throat and swam in his stomach for a while.

Even though they followed Lakay Caloy's prescriptions to expel the mystic stomach frog, Aldrin didn't get better. His body rejected most of what they fed him during his last week, and he grew more feverish by the day. Just as they were about to bring him to the hospital, Diana noticed the strange black object sitting in the toilet after she had washed

Aldrin's bottom. She called Manuel to confirm her suspicion, and only then did they know that Aldrin had a pebble in his stomach, and no one noticed that he had swallowed it, or maybe they just missed it.

Sonny had thought it was over then, but Aldrin was still sick for the succeeding days. They brought him to the hospital, where the doctor said he had contracted a severe infection, but he could still get better. However, Aldrin was already too weak even with the doctor's and the nurses' attentive care.

Tearing up and feeling like throwing up, Sonny placed his shaking knuckle on the ground to serve as a launching point from which to flick the marble. He placed his other hand on top of it, the marble between his bent index finger and the knuckle of the thumb. He let go of the marble with a quick motion of his fingers. The marble entered the hole, but his baby brother wasn't there to cheer anymore.

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“The Space Between”

by Zachary Frye

Prelude:

In 2023, change is on the horizon. In a remarkable set of events, the U.S. President and a nationalist coalition in Congress have shut down U.N. Headquarters in New York City, claiming the U.S. couldn't allow an international body acting on behalf of foreign interests to function on domestic soil. The new headquarters have just opened in Shanghai. Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, countries have been quietly but forcefully positioning themselves within the increasingly lucrative Chinese sphere of influence. ASEAN, in accordance with contracts pertaining to increased market exposure via Chinese firms, have partnered with the CNSA (China's National Space Agency) on a mission to send the first humans to Mars. Here, two young Burmese cadets, one Rohingya and one from the ethnic-majority Bamar population, meet and become part of a journey with far reaching implications.

Part 1

When Sanda and Samira first met each other, there weren't many good feelings between the both of them. It wasn't so much that they consciously disliked each other or were openly hostile; it was more of a subtle wariness—and also a bit of an expected rivalry. Among the whole ASEAN coalition they were the only ones, at least according to the rest of the world, that came from the same country. That said, they didn't feel like fellow countrymen. Sanda grew up in Yangon, the bustling capital city, and had never met a “Bengali” before. While widespread negative feelings toward the Rohingya weren't really all that uncommon in Yangon, especially among the Burmese elite that her family was a

part of—Daw Suu loyalists who mostly thought of the helpless minority as a stain on their country in the eyes of the world—Sanda was more uninterested than anything else. This isn't to say she wasn't a thoughtful person or a nice one. She was. And very smart, attending an international school as a child and then getting an all-expenses paid double degree in linguistics and Asian languages from University College London. Simply put, she just wasn't inoculated into a social culture where their plight was given much credence. It's also worth mentioning that while her family was considered part of what passes as Yangon elite due to her family's political connections, home life wasn't one of gilded towers and golden spires. The family's home was a quite modest two-story house about half an hour's drive from the Parliament building. Sanda's mom had been elected to national office, retaining the post since NLD's wave of victories in 2015. She was usually away at work, oftentimes staying overnight at the sleeping quarters directly adjacent to Parliament that were reserved for late-working civil servants. Her father was a modest, polite man who took good care of his two young girls. Sanda, though, was his favorite, even if he wouldn't admit it.

Samira, by contrast, had lived a life riddled with uncertainty. After the Burmese military burned down a neighboring village, her mom decided it was time to leave. It was just the two of them, as she was an only child whose father had died several years earlier. Subsequently, she spent two years at the Kutupalong Refugee Camp just over the border in Bangladesh as a teenager. It wasn't ideal, to say the least, but she managed to stay out of trouble and maintain her health. Her time in the camp ended when her mom tried to get her daughter smuggled out into Bangladesh proper. Unfortunately, the smugglers were scammers that were only interested in the profit one could manage from trading in human flesh. As a bright young woman, Samira knew something was wrong soon after she was hurried into the back of the van and driven out of camp. By fate, or maybe just a token of luck, though, she was spared from whatever it was that awaited her. The traffickers had managed to trek the whole latitudinal span of the country and reach India in matter of just a few days, but a scrupulous border guard couldn't be bribed. She was taken to an Indian immigration center where she would have been repatriated if she had citizenship. As a stateless refugee, she had none. She was placed in a boarding school on the outskirts of

Delhi, where in the years that passed, she particularly excelled in the sciences. Her top-notch grades and inspirational story helped her gain entrance to National University Singapore, one of the most prestigious universities in the world, where she would study integrative sciences and engineering—and become quite proficient in Mandarin. Her mother died in Kutupalong during her senior year in Delhi from a treatable infection, although she would be unaware of her fate until much later in life. It was here in Singapore that she caught the attention of ASEAN officials. The ASEAN/CNSA partnership was looking for recruits and she fit the bill. Snags came, of course. She never received citizenship in India and was on a student visa in Singapore. Once they learned she was Rohingya, though, there was sympathy among some, especially within the Malaysian and Indonesian delegations. Still, it wasn't until Chinese approval came down of the decision to add her to the cadet ranks that it became official—with the new Shanghai headquarters receiving a lot of handwringing from European powers over the predictably poor optics that accompanied *the* major U.N. power center being situated in a country with a decidedly poor human rights record, the Chinese inclusion of a Rohingya woman was partly a calculated move meant to raise eyebrows in Brussels and smooth tensions at the start of a new era.

Part 2

Sanda thought of her inclusion in the expedition, as a linguist, to be primarily one that existed to bridge the language differences among the different crewmembers if need be. Although as a prerequisite Chinese would be the lingua franca on this journey, she thought it was smart to include someone like her just in case there was confusion in what was undoubtedly going to be a high-stress situation. For Sanda, what was more remarkable was that humans were finally going to attempt a Mars landing—what an amazing experience to be a part of! This was more than a once-in-a-generation opportunity; it was a once-in-the-history of mankind opportunity. As she said goodbye to her parents on the day of her scheduled flight to Beijing for training and preparations courses, she knew her life would never be the same. Samira was more even minded about the whole situation. Although she was definitely excited, and a bit scared, there weren't many people to celebrate with. She was disconnected from family, and the friends she made at university were mostly

superficial; she stayed focused on her work. So, for those reasons, there was little conscious reflection of what this whole thing meant. She was ready to go and play her part, but when the day came to pack up and leave for Beijing it was mostly met with trepidation.

Training commenced much too quickly for everyone involved. Some in the crew, especially among the Chinese, had experience outside of Earth's atmosphere. Some had even been on missions to the International Space Station or had been involved in the technicalities of maintaining Chinese satellites in orbit. Most of the ASEAN crewmembers had no such experience. That's not to say they didn't have expertise—all of them had irrefutable qualifications, and all were good-natured people. This is more important than one might think, and credit is due to the Chinese powers-that-be for managing to get a group of people together whose default was to find a way to coexist without too much effort and solve problems when they arise. Still, as is natural, Sanda and Samira were drawn to some people more than others. Samira especially connected with a Laotian engineer who would serve as the crews' repairman. They would often eat lunch together during breaks from training. She would try to avoid Sanda, though, as she felt it a bit weird to interact with someone in such a conventional manner who was so directly tied to the types of people she felt were responsible for the terrible ordeal she went through as a young girl—notwithstanding the people she knew who lost their lives because of the decisions made by those types of people. Either way, it was just a feeling of uncomfortableness; she was smart enough to know that Sanda herself wasn't directly responsible for those terrible things. To say it wasn't a hindrance to the development of their relationship, though, would be shortsighted.

The journey took a full six months to complete one-way. Fifteen days before touchdown, though, everything changed. It happened during what had become a monotonous routine of evening team meetings on the bridge—and unexpectedly so: this wasn't the first time the Chinese had been to Mars. For Samira, Commander Zhou's comment was met with shock. Up to this point, during the whole of the training period and during the entire flight over thus far, the mission was clear. The team was to land at a predetermined landing zone in

the southwest corner of the Daedalia Planum, collect samples of the soil, set up the terrestrial weather-monitoring system, and use a boring device to dig several meters down to check for water—and perhaps microbial life forms whose existence might radically alter the way human beings viewed themselves and their place in the cosmos. The last bit was a pipe dream, but Samira held out hope, albeit mostly in an ironic sense: how much of a letdown it would be to tell everyone back on Earth that the only Martians we were able to find are ones that need to be viewed under a microscope!

Either way, at this point, none of that mattered anymore. In that tiny southwest corner of the Daedalia Planum, at the bottom of a 200-kilometer impact crater, sat a 4 by 4 meter solid block of smooth, finished palladium. Circumnavigating its base was an inscribed language, made up of word letterings that the Chinese couldn't associate with anything related to Earth, perhaps unsurprisingly. There were pictures; breakdowns of previous tests that confirmed its chemistry. The Chinese were stumped. What was it? What was its purpose? The new plan was subsequently laid out, but Samira was appalled. She felt that the news was met with a decidedly worrisome lack of pushback. There was shock, to be sure, but on the whole most of them seemed to just take it in stride. Commander Zhou assured everyone that they couldn't tell them before the trip due to security concerns and the specter of leaks—especially for fears of other space agencies getting a heads up on what was going on. This was Asia's moment to shine, they emphasized. Still, in truth, Sanda and the rest of the crew felt just as uneasy. Excavation of the block seemed dangerous. How could they be expected to be any more adept at analyzing something so bizarre? For the Chinese, though, this moment was a culmination of a larger set of plans coming to fruition—one more step in a reveal toward mainline global legitimacy. What a monumental revelation it would be for this discovery to be announced under the direction of a Chinese-led international coalition! Previous trips to the location were kept under tight wraps, guarded intensely from the highest echelons of Communist party rule. Xi Jinping's tight grip on power had only been reinforced over the past decade; threats of ruined lives were made apparent if something were leaked. The national press was completely unaware. Previous expeditions were launched off man-made islands in the South China Sea away from prying eyes, and Internet filters continued to run unobstructed.

Part 3

The crew wasn't able to see the cube until the tenth day at basecamp. They hadn't been able to leave the main facility much during that time span either. Those first few days were spent familiarizing themselves with their new surroundings and solidifying the training sessions pertaining to proper movement in the Martian atmosphere. It was here that Sanda and Samira started noticing each other more. On the journey over, there was much more time and space to exist outside of regimented official structures, and they mostly kept their distance. Here at basecamp quarters, they were much closer. One evening Sanda caught eye of Samira performing her daily prayer routine. Samira would lay out her worn carpet, kneeling her head down to gently touch its fibers, always in the direction of a small light in the corner of the sky, visible only at night, that was Earth. It put in perspective how far they've come, to be sure. Sanda knew the basics of other religions, of course. She knew how Muslims prayed. But there was something about seeing it in this context that filled Sanda with a subtle sense of superiority; it seemed rather pointless to her from this vantage point. How couldn't Samira see that she need not be further bound to the ancient superstitions mindlessly followed by the masses on a planet millions of miles away? Here was a place of freedom, a chance for reason. It wasn't that Sanda necessarily thought of herself as an atheist. She was culturally Buddhist. But without that culture around her, she thought little reason to make a show of it in front of her colleagues. She wasn't much into her religion anyway. Not one to meditate, especially as she got older. She preferred reading and studying.

As the crew wound down a path that hugged the sides of the crater, Samira was able to see the cube down below. The ASEAN team, along with a few Chinese lieutenants, had set out for the crater a few hours earlier. This trip, the first of several planned, was mostly meant as a reconnaissance mission. A few hours in, however, a severe sandstorm upended all that. The crew had been walking in pairs down the path toward the deepest hollow of the crater. The storm was unexpected. It was thought that the advanced weather tracking systems the

Chinese had made could predict these types of storms, which were not entirely uncommon on Mars. This time, though, it seems something had gone awry. It was on them within seconds, with chaos not far behind. Samria noticed her communications systems go out first. Between the haze and wind, she was able to attach herself to the closest body she could find. The two crewmembers managed to tie their grappling hooks to each other, equipment primarily meant to steady the footing in case of steep gradient changes inside the crater. As they continued walking down the path together, the storm wouldn't relent. Luckily, through the smothering, within thirty minutes or so they had managed to reach their destination—a small outpost at the bottom of the crater. The outpost was nothing more than a glorified shed that was set up almost directly adjacent to the cube, meant to house a few heavy computers and other pieces of equipment that were unsuitable for continued back and forth movement between the site and basecamp back on surface-level. The door to the outpost was unlocked. Considering the location, perhaps the Chinese didn't have much to worry about in terms of intruders. After setting the airlock system and managing to take off her helmet, Samira's heart sank a bit when she saw Sanda standing in front of her. Of all the people she had to get stuck with, there stood the only crewmember she hadn't developed much of a relationship with. They looked at each other and managed a smile, though. The storm passed about an hour later. During that time, they waited patiently for other members of the team to show up. Not only didn't anyone come, the communications systems remained down. Perhaps they got scrambled somehow during the storm, Sanda thought. After sharing a meal of space-rations together, they decided it best to try and sleep; maybe when they woke they'd be able to make contact with the rest of the team.

The next morning Sanda awoke finding herself alone. She was spooked and quickly got on her gear and went into the air decompression chamber to make it outside. It was a clear day. If she hadn't known there was a storm yesterday, there wouldn't have been any reason to suspect anything out of the ordinary happened here. She saw Samira next to the cube, crouched down and looking at it intently.

"Amazing, isn't it," she said.

“Can you make anything of it,” Sanda replied.

“Not really. I’m going to take pictures of each mark so I can put them into the database to compare them with any known languages.”

“But what good is that going to do? The Chinese scientists already said they couldn’t identify it with any documented script.”

“Yes, but maybe we can try to look for any common patterns regarding syntax. It’s a long shot, but whatever this is, it’s got to have a set of rules. You can help—you’re the master with languages, right?”

Sanda was a bit annoyed at this proposition. Yes, she was a scholar of linguistics, but this was something clearly outside her expertise. How could anyone make sense of this? She came closer to the markings at the base of the silvery-white block. They were beautiful but simple markings. They weren’t that intricate. To say she wasn’t fascinated would be wrong. She was, but she felt it irresponsible to focus too much of their attention on it given their situation. They had to find a way to make contact with the others. As the days wore on, though, it became apparent that this was the best way to keep them occupied. Going back up the path wasn’t smart; they noticed that certain segments of the suspended metal gratings that were built to bridge rough portions of the trail were broken; they agreed it wasn’t worth the risk, especially with the limited communication options.

Sanda and Samira spent the subsequent days in a state of focused determination. There was enough food to last them in the short term. At least if they kept working, they would have something to show the others when they finally made contact. Samira was concerned though. It didn’t make much sense as to why the Chinese weren’t able to make it back down to them yet. It had been almost a week since separation. Did something go wrong? Maybe the team somehow got swept away and the rest at basecamp figured they were gone as well. Maybe they estimated it too dangerous to make another attempt down the crater to confirm if anyone was still alive for fears that another unexpected storm would wipe out more of the team and put the whole mission at risk. Maybe they were already days out on a journey back to Earth. Regardless, the power of a common goal to bring people together

was palpable; they even managed to develop what could only be described as a tentative fondness for one another. Samira was impressed with Sanda's broad knowledge of languages and her deftness with navigating the database software. Sanda was taken aback by Samira's unquenchable resolve and penchant for insight at just the right moment. They were making progress, they thought, even if at this point it was just confirming which languages the markings had no terrestrial connection with, and for what reason.

On another chilly night a few days later Samira had a bright, lucid dream. She was back at home in the Burmese countryside as a child, playing in the flower groves near the rice paddies of her neighbor's farm. She was alone, sometimes sitting down and lowering her head near the ground to notice small insects and the rustling of short grasses around her. A slight breeze swayed her hair. The next moment she looked up, startled, terrified at the sight of a faceless man in green and beige running towards her, stopping several feet in front of her, towering over her. As he raised his fingers in the shape of a gun in her direction, a small child emerged from behind his shadow. Samira doesn't recognize her at first. She runs herself between Samira and the man, soon collapsing with blood spitting from the back of her head.

Samira woke up early that morning, shaken. Instead of going back to sleep, she positioned herself in front of the computer a few hours earlier than she normally would have. Sanda joined her a bit later. By noon they were looking at each other with expressions of disbelief, mouths halfway open. Over the past day or so Sanda had been mulling over a promising possible connection. It wasn't until this morning, though, that they were seriously considering the viability of this connection, and the consequences of what they thought it meant. They couldn't be absolutely sure they were correct, they conceded. Perhaps these markings were so far removed from any terrestrial connection that it was a fool's task to even try to translate its meaning. Maybe they were remnant of a long extinct Martian civilization whose artifacts were strewn all over this dusty planet, waiting to be found. Maybe the cube had been built by beings light years away from the Solar System, maybe

even from the whole galaxy itself, for reasons totally obfuscated to them. Maybe this connection was nothing more than a case of anthropocentrism—just another example of the human species lack of imagination or wherewithal to think beyond their dismal tendency to make themselves the center of the universe. Still, Samira somehow felt they were right. She felt that it made sense, although perhaps if you were to ask her why she wouldn't be able to fully communicate a satisfying answer.

In short, they were able to match the markings and their arrangement to an ancient Bedouin script that's now mostly extinct, a language that was once widely spoken among nomadic tribes that roamed the northern Sahara a thousand years earlier. The words seemed to match one particular verse in a book that some scholars claim was an accepted part of the scriptural Islamic cannon before its standardization in the seventh century. Before too much further reflection could commence, though, communication abruptly came back online. Dara, the Laotian repairman that Samira had befriended during training was on the other end. There had been a mutiny at basecamp. The ASEAN team had revolted after it was found out that the sandstorm that had broken their communications system was a ruse. Apparently, one of the lower-ranking Chinese officials, Biyu, confided with Dara that the commander's ambitions were more than scientific—a potential breakthrough from the two of them would show the world that Beijing was more than just an economic and technological juggernaut; they could be forces for reconciliation. His voice was full of static and soon faded. Sanda and Samira were stunned, but there wasn't time to idle; he sounded desperate.

“We're not going to be manufactured celebrities on a manufactured space trip,” one of them quipped.

They decided their only chance of escape was to attempt the perilous journey back up the crater together, taking along an external drive that contained their research. With fresh coordinates mapped into their systems that were wiped out before, rappelling hooks, and a little bit of teamwork, they were able to reach basecamp in half a day's time. When they arrived, however, to their dismay the crew was gone. There were signs of a struggle inside the main command center, and on closer inspection the escape pod had launched—a small ship attached to the main structure that allowed its occupants to reach Earth in case of an

emergency, albeit in a manner that would double the one way journey from six months to twelve. At this point, they could only hope the rest of the crew made it out safely. With the main ship still operational, Sanda and Samira wasted no time getting off the ground. It could be manned by two people, though take-off and landing would be more treacherous than if a full crew were present. On the trip back, Sanda and Samira worked on translating their findings to different languages. They were ready to show the world what they had found. Months later, as they approached Houston and asked permission to land, they prepared the English translation for broadcast through their radios. As the craft screeched into Earth's atmosphere, those who tuned into the correct frequency could hear a message from the Daedalia Planum:

Children of the desert, have you forsaken me?

Left to roam plain and mountaintop

But now stand wholly removed

The time is nigh for redemption

To see once again with eyes unobstructed

* * * * *

“The Assumption of Manang Renata”

by Cat Aquino

Maria Renata’s body and soul ascended to heaven at the age of fifty-four. Or at least, that’s what ABS-CBN’s TV Patrol, GMA 7, DZMM, and every radio station said this morning while the whole Philippines sat with ears straining over the weekday noise and eyes glued to their screens. This included my wife and I, even though our four children sat disinterested and instead focused on their breakfast, consisting of one hotdog each in the absence of rice and eggs. We slurped leftover instant noodles as the reporter on TV stood outside Sta. Lucia East Grand Mall’s grounds in a coat drenched from the wet weather. He was speaking into his microphone while Maria Renata’s 1 x 1 employee ID photo floated on the righthand corner above the mall’s sayote green walls. He said that Manang Renata—as her fellow janitors liked to call her—had last been seen scrubbing the clothing shop’s floor at 11 pm before disappearing for three days. The camera then cuts to Manang Renata herself, hovering fifty feet above the mall’s roof. Floating slowly and ever upward in her un-ironed gray janitor’s uniform—her arms outstretched and her palms wide open to be accepted into heaven. Her face is turned upward, the way Mary Immaculate’s was during her assumption. Her eyes are closed as though asleep, and her smile is serene. Through helicopter whirring and ABS CBN’s shaking cameras, she appears sacred and saintly—safe in God’s warm embrace.

My wife and I line up to see Manang Renata. We are cramped in a sweaty smelling jeepney on Felix Avenue in a surge of cars, along with everyone else whose work had been called off due to this “national emergency.” The noise of horns and hawkers is deafening. There is no Moses to part the roads, no Jesus to help us walk over to Sta. Lucia’s driveway. No miracle. My wife lightly elbows me in the stomach to chat about Manang Renata. *How holy she must have been to deserve our lord God’s eternal love! How blessed we are to witness*

her. Take pictures, ha! I nod, say *oo, honey*, and agree with everything she says. I keep my thoughts to myself and crave all the prayers Manang Renata can answer if her assumption into heaven were miraculous—an apartment instead of a hovel in the projects, regularized work instead of my contractual retail job, all the things I could buy for myself with more cash (a new TV, more cell phone load, money to treat my friends to karaoke and beer) and better cooked sinigang from my wife. This is the way we are.

What looks like the entirety of Metro Manila is already there by the time we reach Sta. Lucia: a horde of young and old; men pushing their way through warm bodies to get a closer look; lolos in open-toed sandals and rich photographers in heels; lolas saying *sabi nga ba eh* to their disbelieving relatives; mothers clutching rosaries in their trembling palms; mall guards and policemen doing their best to keep everyone in line with shouts and shoves. But none of them matter. Manang Renata is but a shadow in the bright blue sky, no larger than my thumb.

I raise my phone—the one I bought secondhand and spent three month’s worth of my salary on, much to my wife’s disappointment—with two hands, surrounded by hundreds who are doing the same. From where I stand, Manang Renata’s form resembles Jesus’s crucifix. I tap on the cracked screen to let the shutter go off as many times as it can before the crowd muscles me away from my wife and the noise of claps and fevered prayers overwhelm my senses. Tears swell in my eyes. How good is God that He grants even old maids like Manang Renata the miracle of heaven? How bountiful is His love?

* * *

In the few days since Manang Renata’s assumption, the country has been in ecstasy. News of our nation’s blessedness spread even to America. The archbishop of Manila reported on Caritas radio that he had received hundreds of calls from all 17 regions about the miracles praying to Manang Renata had caused—babies coming back to life after their hearts stopped for a few seconds, the disappearances of tumors, lifelong physical conditions, and mental illnesses. Even my bosses, who don’t speak a word of Tagalog, have been kinder to my co-workers and I, even as we misunderstand direct orders and glide through our department store aisles, imploring customers to indulge in shoes and suits we could never afford while we dream of what other miracles God will bring. I recite the rosary in Manang Renata’s name every day and pass by as many churches and chapels as possible

when walking to work at Rustan's so that I can make the sign of the cross and say a little prayer. My jeepney rides home have been assaulted by young boys waving xerox brochures that contain novenas and petitions about Manang Renata and stories from her life: how she longed to become a doctor in her youth but chose to support her twelve-member family by working at the age of twelve; how she never missed a single day of mass; and how she always smiled at everyone and prayed when she had breaks from her work as a wiper of walls. I bought one, even though it cost 150 pesos—good enough for a week's worth of commutes. I wanted to learn more about this holy woman and her good life, as all good Roman Catholics need to be devoted to whomever they pray to.

It's a Saturday night, and I am at home scrolling through Facebook Marketplace on my phone, while my wife feeds our children and tries to tell me about her day spent at home washing their dirty underwear, gossiping with the neighbors, and trying to apply for cleaning jobs (but to no avail). It is always like this, especially ever since she got fired from the house she used to do laundry for, back when her boss accused her of stealing her wedding ring. What a broken record she is. This time she complains about how her bones have been feeling weightless in the last few days.

I nod and cycle between replying *oo*, *totoo* or *tama* to feign interest and support. My thumb endlessly scrolls down and down my phone, pushing me to discover more about Manang Renata. A high school friend's long, emoji-filled Facebook post reports that a petition has been sent to the Pope to review her miracles and canonize her as "Venerable" or "Blessed" before declaring official sainthood. Facebook Marketplace shows off Manang Renata's relics: a blue handkerchief that she sneezed into a week before her assumption, locks of hair from her mattress, and her yellowing dentures. Each one is priced at around 2,000 pesos. A piece of old news from Manila Bulletin confirms that no helicopter or airplane could retrieve Manang Renata's body during her heavenly ascension—she had simply disappeared into God's arms.

I will bring my entire family to hear the highly anticipated mass in the Stella Maris Church down the road, which our neighbor said would be visited by Manang Renata's youngest sister. She is going to share more about her sister's life and collect donations for families even poorer than us.

* * *

As usual, my wife thought of everything before I even woke up at 7 am to take her and the children to mass. My least-stained white polo shirt and my children's pressed jeans and dresses are folded next to our beds on the floor ready to be worn. But my wife is nowhere to be seen. There aren't many places to look either—our humble home is three rooms large, enough for our mattresses, shared comfort room, and our kitchen.

I leave my children to sleep and exit our makeshift house, stepping out onto the muddy ground of our slums. The day is bright, and the sun is harsh, as it always is in this country. But a shadow casts darkness over the narrow alley in front of me.

I look up, and there she is. My wife, who has never looked more beautiful, floating with her pale blue duster billowing around her, hands clasped in prayer, lips parted, eyes open, and looking at the clouds. Further away and above, closer to God's embrace, are other women suspended in midair. If this is a miracle, I did not ask for it, but I remind my heart that it is a miracle nonetheless, and I watch as my wife ascends to heaven—body, soul, and tsinelas.

* * * * *

“Reunion”

by Lo Sin Yee

“Sin Yee,” asked See Wei over the phone, “are you going to attend our first reunion?”

“Sure,” I replied, unable to suppress my excitement. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for a long time.”

See Wei, my ex-classmate, was organising a reunion at a nearby restaurant. I was among the first few to be contacted.

See Wei was the only classmate I would see around, for his pet shop was situated in the vicinity of my neighbourhood. The rest seemed to have evaporated into thin air. After completing primary six in 1982, the majority of us moved to a secondary school in Lutong while the rest ended up in neighbouring towns or overseas. By the time we finished the fifth form in 1987, we had gone our separate ways and saw each other less and less until our names lost their scent of familiarity.

As the day for the reunion drew near, a string of forgotten names resurfaced from the dark recesses of my memory. Thankfully, See Wei had formed an alumni group on WeChat. Out of 52 friends, 35 had been located and contacted, but less than 20 had signed up for the group. Apparently, most of us had spent the early part of our adult lives—the formative period of our careers—beyond Miri, our hometown. No wonder it had been difficult to see each other. In recent years many friends had returned to Miri, either planning for their impending retirement or through the expansion of their businesses.

“How were you as a primary school pupil?” a colleague named Aida asked me.

“I was a loner, very quiet, perhaps girlish,” I replied. “Many classmates liked to bully me.”

“Do you still harbour hatred towards them?”

“No, never,” I laughed. “I am not the vengeful type.”

Of course I was lying. As a matter of fact, my life at school had been traumatic, all because of a big bully named Yong Liang. When I was in primary four, he transferred to our school from Bintulu, and my life had never been the same. He was taller and bigger than any one in my class, and, according to a classmate, knew some kung fu. In only a few weeks, almost all the boys in my class became his followers. During one recess, he spotted me wiping sweat with a pinkish-red handkerchief and called me "Missy!"

From that day onwards, Yong Liang often caught me unaware, just to torment me. One day he grabbed my crotch, squeezed it very hard until I gasped and exclaimed that it was the smallest one he had ever laid his hands on, making the whole class roar with laughter.

Since he was the only son of the chairman at our school, no teacher dared to scold him when I reported to them all the terrible things he had done to me. He even enjoyed pulling up the front portion of my shirt and telling everyone that I had boobs. One time I pushed him back, and he reacted like a mad man, inflicting bone-crushing pain on me with his fists. I ended up vomiting into a drain all the food I had eaten.

At secondary school, while sitting behind me, he would push my head and scribble random shapes at the back of my shirt. I sucked up all that in silence. If I scored high marks in a particular subject, he would snatch the test paper from my hand and tear it into pieces.

One afternoon, I was en route to my classroom from the library, carrying an English novel. Yong Liang snatched it from me and held it high in his hand, shouting, "Missy want to be Mat Salleh! Missy want to be Mat Salleh!" I tried to take the book back from him, but since he was taller than me it was beyond my reach.

I pleaded with him to return it, but he laughed maliciously. The rest in the classroom dared not say anything lest they should incur his wrath.

I began to tear up. With a smirk on his face, Yong Liang said, "See, how sissy you are? Stop faking that you know English. You're not fit to know it."

"Please," I begged. "Return it to me. I've done nothing wrong to you."

"Nothing wrong?" Yong Liang tsk-tsked. "Showing off in front of me is a sin."

"Please, stop making fun of me!"

"Dare you raise your voice at me," Yong Liang snapped. "If you want the book back, you have to shake your butt and throw a kiss at everyone, or I'll tear it!"

"Over my dead body!" I yelled in English.

But Yong Liang, not understanding it, just gawked at me.

I picked up a pot of cactus and threatened to hurl it at his face. Yong Liang gasped, and the book fell to the floor. I quickly grabbed it and ran downstairs as fast as I could. The bell soon rang, and I lingered around in the backyard garden of our school, hemming and hawing, scared to face the bully in the classroom again. When I finally returned to the classroom, the teacher, who had come in shortly after I had run out, glared at me furiously and demanded an explanation. Panicked, I burst into tears, unable to tell the truth through my stammer. Then one witness after the other declared that I had been playing around outside, obviously telling lies out of fear. So I was punished and made to stand in front, while the trouble-maker sat triumphant at his desk.

When the long-awaited evening of the reunion rolled around, I was the first to arrive at the restaurant, followed by Yien Fook, an insurance agent, and Chui Wei, the proprietress of an electrical shop. They did not recognize me at first because I had become a big, overweight man. They were even more surprised when they found out I was an English Language teacher, a profession they had least associated with me as kids.

Time had made us strangers, and we barely talked. The awkwardness was broken when more and more classmates arrived. Suddenly, the table was alive with chatter. Thirty years had passed, and most of our hair had turned grayish and our waists, particularly the men's, paunchy. Mee Ling, a housewife, took us down memory lane with her vivid recount. Ding Ching, a contractor, cracked us up with his banter. Chong Seng, running a family plumbing business, seemed to have a knack for knowing the whereabouts of almost every classmate since our school days. See Wei kept surprising us with tales about our teachers' foibles. Yu Ngie, an active Lions Club member, dredged up some embarrassing moments that made me blush. Nyuk Lan, the brainy one, looked arresting with her slender figure, reminded us with her presence how much weight we had put on.

Meanwhile, Zheng Xin, another shop owner, and I spoke very little, smiling and nodding now and then.

"Where is Yong Liang?" See Wei asked Chung Xin, Yong Liang's childhood neighbour.

"He told me he would be late," Chung Xin said as he glanced at his watch.

My heart was beating fast. A part of me wanted to see him, to know how time had treated him. But the other part of me did not ... the mentality of me being a victim of his bullying.

I thought back to that fateful day at the end of a history lesson, when Yong Liang tripped a boy and the teacher scolded him. Yong Liang snapped back rudely at her, and they got into a heated argument. Yong Liang threatened to hit the teacher, and she quickly summoned the help of the principal through the monitor. As a result, Yong Liang was suspended for two weeks. For the first time in years, my days at school passed without anyone disturbing me. I ought to have felt happy, but the way Yong Liang had rebelled against the teacher made me worry about him.

When the period of suspension was over, Yong Liang returned to school a different person—very sombre and morose, often keeping to himself in one corner. In less than a week, he had a clash with the same teacher again and disappeared for another two weeks. This went on and on until the day of SRP, Sijil Rendah Pelajaran, an entrance examination to secondary four. Yong Liang, academically weak and having missed a lot of lessons, flunked the examination while the rest of us cleared the hurdle. Without the bully around, I enjoyed school life very much. Sometimes I could not help but recall all the times he had bullied me. No matter how hard I wanted to forget it, the pain was still palpable in certain parts of my heart.

At 7:15 pm, we agreed to wait another twenty minutes for more classmates to come, but nobody else showed up, so we decided to order food. Our order ranged from steamed fish, various stir-fried vegetables, and braised pork with salted fish that set us back a whopping RM250. All of us shared the cost.

The moment the inevitable postprandial lull settled over the table, our chatter turned into a dwindling murmur. Around nine, Yong Liang finally arrived, and my heart skipped a beat. The way he looked was a far cry from what I had in my mind. He looked much thinner, though still the tallest among us, yet there was a touch of sorrow in his voice when he spoke, and his eyes were full of drowsy resignation. When asked why he had lost so much weight, he said that he had been swamped by the stress of life. Then he saw me, looked a bit startled and extended his hand. I rose and shook it, surprised that I was almost the same

height as him. His grip was light, with almost no energy. Given my present size and weight, I could easily crush it.

Nyuk Lan had to leave early so Yong Liang took her seat, thus we sat side by side. We ordered beer, and Yong Liang drank way more than any of us. I stopped at three cans, but Yong Liang kept on drinking. The others plied Yong Liang with many questions. Despite being unable to go to secondary four, Yong Liang had been managing his father's business rather well and was married with three children. He had been ill for quite some time, though I could not help but wonder why he had no compunction about drinking in excess.

He talked about how he grappled with the high turnover of his workers, how inconsistent his business profit was, as well as how sometimes he felt like letting his hair down and leaving his business behind. The way he spoke still gave off some air of recklessness we had known of him as a child. I could tell that despite not ending up in university like some of us, he had been leading a respectable life and earning quite a considerable sum of money. However, when quiet, he appeared sad and ill at ease as if he had a lot of regrets.

"Sin Yee," See Wai suddenly asked, "who among us bullied you the most at school?"

The question, as if testing my reaction, caught me off guard.

Shaking my head, and trying not to look at Yong Liang, I laughed, "No, I've forgotten everything."

Yien Fook chuckled, "It seems that every one of us had more than their fair share of bullying you. But you've grown so large now. It's time to get even with us."

We all broke into laughter.

More beer flowed, and when the number of customers around began to thin away, Yong Liang seemed a bit drunk. His head lolling to one side, he put his arm over my shoulders, giving my round blade a light squeeze, and whispering, "Sssy childhood.....so distant."

Was he calling me missy again? I could not really catch what he was saying, but he choked on the last word. A little moisture came to my eyes, and I patted his back a few times ... already I had forgiven Yong Liang. The way his voice cracked had eased all the long-buried pain in my heart. During the process of growing up, we had all lost and gained some things. God was fair and square to us.

When Yong Liang completely gave in to his drunkenness and snored away, I decided to take my leave. I was glad that we had had the reunion because it had provided us with the opportunity to bury the hatchet and move on with life.

* * * * *

“Deliver Me with Cornmeal”

by Ben Umayam

How much do Filipinos love beauty pageants? As much as good fried garlic rice for breakfast. That is saying a lot if you know anything about Filipinos. Seven thousand islands, so many people, and they are all glued to the television when The Miss Universe pageant is on. There is a YouTube video from the 2010 contest that took place in Vegas. Four Filipino kids, all guys, all gay. They represent how enamored Filipinos are with these pageants. The kids are of all shapes and sizes. One kid is picking his nose, the others are counting down, some clap when their favorites are announced. The clip is the announcement of the 15 semi-finalists. Miss Ukraine, France, South Africa, these contestants get loud applause from their fans. They are down to the last contestant, the 15th runner up. The chubby one says it will be Miss USA. Another folds his hands in deep prayer. The other kid makes the sign of the cross and picks his nose.

With a dramatic pause, the emcee announces contestant number 15, the last of the girls from many countries who will potentially be the next Miss Universe. He hems, he haws, the kids sweat. Remember this announcement is for the 15 semi-finalists, not even the winner! He announces loudly, “And number 15...Miss Philippines!” Bedlam, they go nuts. They scream and jump for joy, they hold hands, scream some more, and thank the Lord, just like the whole country is doing at that same point in time. That is how intense Filipinos are about Miss Universe. Search on YouTube, “We love you Maria Venus Raj” and go to the 2:15 mark to see how insane this is.

I am retired and have not visited the Philippines in 40 years. I received a BA in Journalism from the University of the Philippines while under martial law. Marcos and his Army ruled. When the schools closed down to stop student activists, I got a job as a radio deejay, at The Rock of Manila. I also started writing record reviews and music articles for a magazine

called *Jingle*. Their logo was an angel, back turned, peeing. They reprinted lyrics to songs with chords. Copyright was not a big thing during martial law. It was a very popular publication, ran no ads. Singing along and playing guitar with friends was popular under the rule of a dictator.

With martial law, the army took over most media. Military tribunals ran radio stations. They introduced payola. Instead of playing what I wanted, I had to use a playlist of songs that record companies had paid the army tribunals to push to sell their records. I quit and wrote about radio industry payola in *Jingle* magazine.

I was invited to an investigation, me in front of several generals who held my fate in their hands. I envisioned disappearing like Roland, an activist classmate who no longer existed on the face of the earth. Nothing happened to me. I was offered a job at the *Manila Times*. They would train me to be a financial reporter. No thanks, I said. If I can get invited to an army tribunal for writing the truth about payola in a magazine whose logo was an angel peeing, I would pursue a future career elsewhere.

Forty years later, I am visiting my father's hometown in the northern province. There is a new celeb in town. She has just won Miss Photogenic in an international beauty pageant. The twist, it is a transgender, transsexual beauty pageant. As with all beauty pageants, this news is wreaking havoc. Held yearly in Pattaya, Thailand, a Filipina has won the title two times before. This trans from my father's hometown is almost guaranteed a spot in the top 5, having won Miss Photogenic a few days before the actual competition. I should be able to sell an article about her to some gay mag back in the US. Did I mention that another reason I left the Philippines was that I wanted to come out as being gay? Not a comfortable thing to do under martial law.

In the States, the gay revolution had come and gone along with the AIDS crisis. The US Supreme Court had made same-sex marriage legal. Being gay is now LBGTQ whatever. There is a girl named Francis/Chiara who just won Miss Photogenic in an international annual Miss Transgender/Transsexual beauty contest in Pattaya, Thailand. This was the 15th year. It is called the Miss International Queen beauty contest, "because that is every girl's dream, to be a Queen!" Queen Puhleeze! In my retirement years, I was itching to use my

journalism degree. I was going to interview and write about Miss Photogenic, who just might win the year's trans Miss International Queen!

* * *

I ask Francis on the phone about her trans name, Chiara.

“Chiara is an Italian name. You use the hard “Kuh” sound to pronounce it, like Christine. That's how Italians say it. Still, others want to pronounce it like Charles. And some like to pronounce it like a “sh” as in Shy. That’s what makes my name great. You can pronounce it three different ways, depending on your mood: Key-Yara, Chih-Yara, or even Shee-Yara. Italian is my favorite. Do you know St. Clare? She is a saint that is always mentioned in conjunction with St. Francis of Assisi. Chiara is her Italian name.”

I ask about her christened name.

“I was christened Francis as in St. Francis. My daddy says when I was born, birds would come by the windowsill in my room and sing. The *butike*, the geckos, they would come down from the ceiling to visit my crib. Daddy chose Francis for my name after the patron saint of animals. Daddy is so poetic. I got those traits from him. Sensitive, lyrical, romantic, that is how I was as a child named Francis. My parents doted on me, especially my dad. I was daddy’s little boy.”

Chiara says she has a photoshoot and has to go soon. “Only I always felt not like a boy, but like a girl. In my dreams, I was always a girl! I always preferred what the girls in town did. When I started school, I did not feel comfortable with the other boys. I did not play with guns, robots, or trucks. *Nakakadiri!*” She crinkled her nose in disgust. “I did not shoot hoops. With the girls, I always felt good. The boys, I always felt they were doing things contrary to my nature. Looking for frogs, competing with each other in sports, and being mischievous to no end. Me, Francis, I held back. I would rather play dolls. I preferred to learn the crafts that the mommies taught their daughters.”

* * *

Chiara’s mommy, Juris, and I talk at their home, a chicken farm ten minutes away from my father’s old house.

“Francis was religious for a little boy. I was not surprised he was. You know, how you say in English, he was so *bakling*, so fem?”

“Do religious fervor and femininity go hand in hand in the Philippines,” I ask.

“Yes, of course. You are so American! You don’t know that? Francis would go to church often. He would pray to all the saints, Mother Mary and Baby Jesus. But he also prayed to Tuglibon, the wife of Tuglay. Do you know their story?”

I do not.

“You are more American than Filipino, *hindi ba?* They were the beings who created the world according to our ancestors from Mindanao. They took cornmeal and created the first human beings. The husband, Tuglay, got it all wrong at first. His humans were stiff and ugly. They walked in a herky-jerky manner, not graceful. Tuglibon, his wife, complained that his humans were faulty and they needed to be corrected. He was insistent that there was no problem with them. One day, she was fed up, so she threw cornmeal in Tuglay’s eyes. While he struggled to rub the cornmeal out, his wife created male and female beings that were beautiful, who moved with much grace. When her husband could see, he agreed with Tuglibon, that these humans were an improvement. The graceful humans procreated and that’s how the Filipino race came into being.”

Great story, I thought.

“Francis prayed hard to Tuglibon whenever he had a chance. He told me, he felt he was a girl trapped in the body of a boy. I taught him this prayer. Dear Mother Tuglibon, deliver me with cornmeal. When I grow older, make me a woman for that is what I feel that I am in my heart. Our Christian God and native father Tuglay got it wrong. Fix me, please, I pray to you. Francis would pray this at church, after his rosary and novenas, and especially after the stations of the cross.”

* * *

I talk with the dad over San Miguel, the native beer, at the town beer garden.

He says he always understood Francis. His mother has told me otherwise, that the dad preferred a more masculine child who would marry, have children, and carry on the family name.

“Francis did not hang out playing male games, being more like other boys. When he was eleven, they told me he was walking around the square swaying sexily like a girl. I did not get mad.”

Juris has told me stories of anger and fury.

“I encouraged him to hang out with my cousin, Jock, who had changed his name to Jackie. He was very *binabae*.”

That is the word for gay in Filipino. It literally means to act like a girl.

“My wife believed Francis, being *binabae* and so devout, meant Francis would become a friar like his namesake. The kids would make fun of him and call him St. Francis is a sissy. That was his whole life, kids making fun of him. Me, I was always supportive. You know why?”

“No, why?”

“Transgender, transsexual, trans whatever. It is a matter of acceptance. I am the one who taught Francis about Tuglibon.”

I know that the wife, Juris, had done the teaching.

“It never worried me that he acted like a she. We are what we are. You just have to accept it. I knew Francis needed a makeover. Francis would find a way with Tuglibon to fix the mix.”

The dad’s name was Pinkerton, like the guy in *Madame Butterfly*. He became somewhat of a Pinay trans hero. Pinay trans is the Filipino phrase for ladyboy. Ladyboy is the Thai name for transgender/transsexual. Pinay trans has a more non-demeaning connotation. Chiara’s daddy’s nickname was Pinky. With the new media attention, Pinky was becoming a hero in the Pinay trans community, a father completely supportive of his trans offspring. They were calling him Sir Pinky now.

* * *

It is Juris who tells me more about the instrumental uncle/auntie.

“My husband’s cousin, Jock, during puberty he changed. He used to really be a jock. Then he became very *binabae*. Used to be so sporty, he was a great swimmer, loved the water sports. Francis loved his Uncle Jock. He followed him everywhere. When Jock became *binabae*, he taught Francis all his tricks. How to walk like a girl. How to soften your voice and use a feminine cadence so that when you talked on the phone people thought you were a girl. When Jock moved to Manila, Francis was crushed. I promised him, he could follow his Uncle Jock, now Jackie, to the big city. First, he had to finish high school.”

* * *

Chiara is still busy having won Miss Photogenic. She makes some time for me.

“I go to Manila after high school. I did not fall into the cracks. Most Pinay trans, when they can't get a job, they end up as prostitutes. I had my Uncle Jock, well, Auntie Jackie, to save me.”

I tell her I know about Jock/Jackie from her parents.

“He was not transsexual. He did not dress up in women’s clothes. He was very effeminate though. He looked like Ru Paul, dressed as a man.”

I get the picture.

Jackie takes Francis under his wings. With his guidance, Francis, now Chiara, joins a trans beauty pageant. She is beautiful as Chiara. She is a finalist. Jackie uses his connections and gets Chiara a job as a model around the time when androgynous models were so big. Within a few months, Chiara becomes THE transgender model in Manila. She is young, gorgeous and has those pouty full lips everyone loves. The magazines from Japan, Korea, and Thailand all come knocking. Chiara the model is hounded. She is so successful, making so much money. She is sending some home. Sir Pinky and Juris have built a fish farm and are raising tilapia to supplement the chicken farm. All the success, she says, she owes to Jackie and someone else.

“I always went to the famous church near Jackie’s house, in Quiapo. This church houses the famous Black Nazarene statue. During Lent, thousands pour into the streets for the annual

procession. This Jesus is a more accurate depiction of a Jewish prophet from the Middle East. He is almost black. All those preachings on the mountains and walking on the waters, you figure Jesus would be quite tanned."

I agree.

"I went there and I prayed at the altar of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. She looks the least Western of all the depictions of Mother Mary. She looks like the women in the desert between Afghanistan and China, Eurasian, almost Asian. I envisioned her to be the closest to what Mother Tuglibon would look like. Her crown and clothes are like the Igorot goddesses from the mountain province! All my modeling successes are Tita Jackie's successes. But it is also because I prayed at that altar of Our Lady of Perpetual Help/Mother Tuglibon!"

Chiara's gotta go and says we will talk again tomorrow.

* * *

Sir Pinky tells me the sad, untimely end of the Jackie story. A year ago, Jackie and his boyfriend went on a scuba tour of Palawan, which has some of the best scuba diving in the Philippines. It's an island near the deepest part of the waters in the Philippines. Jackie went missing. After two days of searching, he was presumed dead. A few days later, they found his body, entangled with his boyfriend's in an embrace. Both were trying to share the valve of a tank that had gone empty.

* * *

In our interview the next day, Chiara says, "The Miss International Queen beauty pageant, my Tita Jackie set it all up. It was her dream that I do this. So that is why I am here in Thailand, in Pattaya. I may not win. Already, two Filipinas have won. And this is the 15th year. The fact that I won Miss Photogenic, that is big. Tita Jackie, she set me up with my modeling career. I believe that success helped the judges decide I was most photogenic."

Chiara almost whispers to me on the phone. "Can I share with you? Last night, I dreamt of Mother Tuglibon. She was smiling. I don't know if that means I might win. To me, it means I am a winner, even if I lose! Oh, and when I woke up, there was a small puddle of water near

the bed. I tasted it. It was very salty, like the sea! Tita Jackie and Mother Tuglibon, they have visited me. I believe they will be happy with whatever will be the outcome!"

Spooky, I thought.

We hang up. Chiara needs her rest. The beauty pageant is tomorrow.

* * *

I return to the Chiara house after the phone call. Juris has invited me to *merienda*, which is at 4 o'clock. You might call it teatime, but Filipinos don't drink tea or eat biscuits. They eat another meal called *merienda*!

"Pinky, he told you about Jackie's demise, so sad. But Jackie had a plan, and it was all in motion before the accident. Chiara was scheduled to participate in the beauty pageant. Two years ago, Jackie started her on estrogen. She would take the female birth control pills for the hormones. It is the cheap way of Pinay trans transition. Her hips got rounder, and her breasts developed."

Me, I remember walking my dog, Murray, at 6 am one summer in the Village. A drag queen taking birth control pills was cruising the last of the Johns. She was wearing short shorts and was shirtless, baring barely developed breasts. Many cars with Jersey plates stopped to ask how much. In between she admired Murray, referring to him as 'she' even though he had a 'he' name. Murray was a rescue with a broken foot. His two front legs were in a permanent ballet position, 4th or 5th except his knees weren't crossed. He had a doggie male organ but stood like a ballerina.

Juris says, "Jackie didn't care if Chiara won or lost. The idea was to get her to Thailand. We are very Catholic here. We do not tolerate Pinay trans the way the Thais tolerate the ladyboys. The Thai people, they are 90% Buddhist. And Buddha teaches acceptance. Big difference from the Catholics!"

"They have many doctors in Thailand, Bangkok especially, who perform sex-reassignment surgery. There is one who has done over 70 a year. Jackie and Chiara set up an appointment with him; they scheduled surgery after the pageant. Mother Tuglibon's work will be done by a Bangkok Doctor, aya, too many syllables, I cannot pronounce his name! Chiara will

return, as Jackie would say, no longer a chick with a dick. That Jackie, he could be so vulgar at times!”

I laugh, Juris cries. Jackie is gone.

I leave Juris, Chiara’s mother, full of the *merienda*, allowing her some moments to shed tears for Jackie the jock who drowned in the deepest of seas in his lover’s embrace.

* * *

On the day of the pageant, Chiara still has time for my phone call.

“I am most nervous about the swimsuit competition. You know many of us still have the male organs we were born with.”

And how do you deal with that?

“We tape it up. We shave down there, use packing tape so you do not see it when you wear a bikini. It is like the women who do not want it to be known they have breasts. They use packing tape to tape it all up.”

“*Naku*,” Chiara says. *Naku*, loosely translated means ‘goodness gracious’. “Some trans entrepreneurs should start a packing tape company for us. We use it so much! They can call it Trans Tape. ‘For those packages, you want to hide!’ Let me put you on speaker while I finish taping.” She speaks with an echo. “I have a *stampeta*, a Holy Card of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, you know, my icon for Mother Tuglibon. I am keeping the *stampeta* taped down there for safekeeping. A few years back, Miss Brazil, she did not package correctly, and it popped out of her swimsuit. *Naku!*”

“Win or Lose, I have Our Lady of Perpetual Help/Mother Tuglibon with me!”

* * *

The Miss International Queen Beauty pageant has a viewership of a few million in Southeast Asia, mostly in Thailand. In the Philippines, many have gathered around the television to cheer on 2019’s Miss Photogenic. There is no jumping up and down or screaming with joy. Chiara does not even make the top 5. Her answer to the question, “Why should you become Miss International Queen?” is a rambling extolment of the merits of

Mother Tuglibon and how she will deliver the trans community with cornmeal. Miss Brazil wins, the first black person to win since the inception of the competition. Her response to the question is “My dream is every young girl’s dream, in my case, to be a black queen!”

* * *

Chiara is not upset with the outcome. She is happy and jubilant. She keeps her appointment in Bangkok with Doctor No Dick. She returns home, victorious, Mother Tugliban’s work complete. There are banners in the town square. Balloons surround St. Augustin Church, a UNESCO site, a Baroque church built in the 1700s with enormous buttresses on the side, a style you don’t see much. Some call it earthquake rococo.

* * *

I call, a year later. I have not sold the piece about a transgender, transexual international beauty pageant in Southeast Asia. I might turn it into fiction and sell it that way.

I call just to see how they are all doing, Juris, Sir Pinky, Chiara. I find out, Jackie had one last card up his sleeve. Aside from having managed her finances, Jackie had Francis deposit some semen in a sperm bank. With the abundant modeling jobs Chiara has had since the pageant, she can afford an in vitro baby. She has to leave the Catholic Philippines to have the baby and return after the baby is born. But she can now afford all that.

Sir Pinky is happy, the family name will continue. Juris and Chiara are happy with their faith in Our Lady of Perpetual Help/Mother Tuglibon. And Jackie is smiling from heaven.

A Jesuit sociologist termed a phrase back in the ‘70s for all this. He called it Split Level Christianity. I call it the brand of religion from my native 7,000 islands, Catholicism with an undercurrent of primitivism.

There is an altar at St. John the Baptist Church near Penn Station in New York City. It houses the local shrine of Padre Pio. At the back of the church is a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Of late, I go there and pray to Mother Tuglibon. I ask her to help me sell my story. I also ask her to use her cornmeal on my peas and carrots. At my age, 64, I could use the help, especially with the carrot.

* * * * *

“Testing the Waters”

by Farid Hamka

Raka stares at me from the edge of the aquamarine pool. He stands on the step, noticeable because of the lighter tone of its tiles. People are scrambling around him. So many colours and sounds. Bright yellow swimming tubes, swimming caps in an assortment of patterns, shouts and splashes of water. Mothers shouting at the children to make sure they stay away from the deep end of the pool. Children ignoring these calls. Fathers frantically walking around the same spots, repeating the same business jargons to their phones. There is no rest for the wicked. In the whole vista, it feels like the colours of human skins are more abundant than the blue of the pool. It is no surprise. It is a Saturday afternoon. A heatwave blighted Jakarta the whole week. People are so eager to be in the water. Everything is an idyllic summery scene. Everything but the fury on Raka’s face.

Amid everything, his eyes brim. He is grinding his teeth. I can tell from his twitching cheeks. His face betrays any attempts of being cool. His incessantly interesting face composed of those button-like eyes, small nose, and curved, thin lips. I always tell him how I never get bored observing it. Even this combination of raised upper lips and scrunched forehead, his signature expression of rage.

I paddle towards him, carefully avoiding the swimmers doing their laps. I settle in a space near him.

‘Is something wrong, Rak?’

‘Why are you doing this to me?’ His voice growls like a wounded animal. His tone accusative. My limbs begin to feel cold and listless. What has happened?

Just around twenty minutes ago, we were splashing in the jacuzzi, impersonating our friends. I copied Steven’s animated expressions, and he talked a heavily accented Indonesian, surely a parody of Paramita, who is from Surabaya. ‘Mita does not sound like

that!' I smacked him on the back. We laughed at our own exaggerated attempts. The jacuzzi was a good respite from the dance class I attended before coming here. The whirlpool spray massaged my aching muscles. The stiffness gave way. Something calm settled in me. I interlocked my fingers around his inside the water. Nobody noticed us. The warm water complemented the overwhelming tender heat building inside my body. That was as much affection I would ever dare to display in this city.

What did I do to hurt him? My mind starts jotting the different permutations of everything I may have done wrong. Is it because I have been doing laps and not talking to him instead? Perhaps he thinks that I have been checking out the other men at the pool? Maybe he finds the sweater I got for his birthday tasteless? Maybe he is just in one of his funky moods? Oh goodness, what is wrong this time?

I float nearer, trying to pat him on the shoulder. He parries my hand firmly.

'You made me feel like a helpless child'

Now I am even more puzzled.

'What do you mean, Rak?'

Without answering, he briskly got out of the water, dried himself with the oversized towel that looks like a rug ready to swallow him. He reclines on a pool chair. He just stares at the clouds. His cheeks are still shaking. Knowing him, he is probably trying to find rationalisations for himself. I cannot even begin to make hypotheses of what went wrong.

I stand there at the edge, gauging my possible courses of action. I can go follow him and confront him, risking an escalation. I can give him space until he cools off and pretends the tension has never happened. In the four months I have known Raka, I have always chosen to let things go. I have been afraid of enlarging the fissures that appear now and then. Our relationship has frankly been a fragile one. Every time tensions appeared, I felt like reacting would hasten the end so I stayed silent. As long as I have friends who lend their shoulders for me to let out my grievances, it was all enough, wasn't it? I always thought of myself as a rational judge yet affection has its ways of numbing all your sensibilities. I was so new to relationships and all the complexities.

Today something feels different. Have I not mentally prepared myself for this relationship to be over? Better to cross that tightrope now than later. I have to act. I get out of the water, sit on the pale white plastic chair beside him.

'You have to tell me why you are mad at me.' Water droplets drip on the leather paddings of the chair. The smell of chlorine permeates everything around this pool. It stings my eyes.

'No, just forget it. It's not your fault.' He sounds a little more serene than before, but his voice still cracks slightly. This only happens when he has got a lot of white noises in his head. He is overthinking.

'You clearly are angry.' I push

'Yes, I am angry, it's just... Can we not just let it go and shower?'

'I need to know why you are upset, Rak. Otherwise I will not be at peace.'

'Alright, how do I even begin...' he raises his body up from his pool lounge. He looks at my face and exhales.

'It might sound dumb, but I really don't understand why you insist that I do those breathing exercises and dog paddles.'

'But that's a necessary step before..'

'I know, I know...' he cuts me off '...it's just all these kids around are doing them so easily, and I cannot.'

He turns his head and stares on the granite floor.

'It frustrates me thinking just how I am somehow inferior to all these kids. I cannot even do basic steps.'

I put my palm on his shoulder cup. His brown skin feels warm. Is he sunburnt?

'I am sorry that you felt that. You have to know I never meant to be patronising.'

He puts his hand on my other hand on the chair.

'No worries, Stev. Sorry for making such a scene. No hard feelings, ok?'

'It is alright, Rak. I am here for you, you know that? It took me really long also to learn how to swim.'

'I didn't think that our first argument would be in the pool.'

'As good as any other place to have one!'

He smiles and gets his swimming goggles and kickboard. 'I'm going back to my room. I'll see you upstairs soon?'

'Sure thing, I'll shower first.'

I do some more laps before finally showering. Swimming comes naturally to me now. I learnt it when I was merely seven years old. My father taught me, which I am grateful for. He was a typical authoritative dad. Harsh criticisms, strict rules and violent outbursts loomed every time I spent time with him. However, in the pool, that calculating and short-tempered man seemed to dissipate completely. I remember how he used his hands to support me as I kicked forward and paddled. He would playfully throw me in the water and jumped in when I struggled. He taught me how to hold my breath while collecting dead leaves from the bottom of the pool. When I finally learnt how to float around, we would have races and he would take me to the beach to swim. He got sunburnt really easily, so he would just monitor me from the distance with his sharp eyes. No matter how strong the waves were, I never felt terrified. As long as my dad watched over me, I would be able to weather any terrains. Through the swimming lessons, he gradually changed from a tyrannical patriarch into something more like a reliable mentor. It felt like it was in the pool that I first had a glimpse into my father in his fullness.

I think about the whole argument with Raka earlier. Before it all imploded, I was instructing him to do simple breathing exercises. Bobbing up and underwater every three seconds, I was trying to inculcate a rhythm so that it would be imprinted in his muscle memory. That would be useful so that he would not run out of breath treading around the water. Raka has learnt how to do breaststrokes, but without breathing properly. He would either hold his breath for too long, or he would thrash around and run out of breath in the process. He skipped a crucial step in the process.

I always feel that there is a similarity between music and swimming – they deal with waves. And you do not just emerge playing a virtuosic Beethoven sonata on the piano. The seven-minute symphonic melodies are constructed through robotic finger exercises, practising the scales, the mind-numbing metronome clicks, and the persistence to repeat

over and over again the difficult phrases. In those performances, the small steps and details are as important as anything else.

I feel like today I have started a small step in my relationship.

At the end of the laps, I feel like my whole body is in sync. Being in the water lets my body forget the rigidity that it has accumulated over the years. Being in the water lets my mind wander in an appropriate pace, nothing of the discursive, tangential thoughts done while being idle. I forget whether I have finished six or merely four laps. I feel a certain fulfilment settling inside me.

After taking a quick shower, I go up to Raka's unit on the eleventh floor. He left his door slightly ajar. I enter and walk to his living room. Everything feels so temporary in that unit. The assortment of books on the rack: a collection of Beat poetry, a book of Nigerian short stories, a few Kazuo Ishiguro novels, the Bible. The potted plants on the corner of the room. The stacks of paperwork and documents beside the dining table. The life of a diplomat, I guess. Only a few months left in his sojourn here. He is lying down on the robin blue sofa, which was rather oversized and incongruous with his general austere earth-coloured decors. He is falling asleep. I sit beside him. He suddenly pulls me closer and hugs me. Not too tight, not too loose. Just right. Something in his embrace makes it all feel okay. Something tells me I can soar. Isn't a hug so paradoxical that way? I curl like an embryo, our heartbeats slowly syncing after a few minutes. Outside the flat, the skies are filled with the dying ember of sunset. The smooth golden rays drench everything in that living room. All the edges around feel softened and tender, even the mechanical looking television set. His hands starts jerking slowly and his teeth grind, a sign which, through these months, I know means that he is falling into slumber. His warm breath tickles the nape of my neck.

'Let's build something beautiful.' I whisper. He is fast asleep by then.

Later that night I have a more vivid dream than usual. I am sitting in a lotus meditative pose on the bottom of a really deep pool. Its tiles are turquoise blue, like those of my childhood home. I look up and see blurry, distorted views of palm trees and the Sun, its rays are dispersed like a curtain of electricity. The air presses the surface. Everything

outside the water is convex, like the world is falling down inside the water. I cannot see the limits of this pool. It all seems so vast, so oceanic if not for the artificial blue of these tiles. I look up and see Raka gliding through the water, his hands swaying gently like a butterfly. Starting from the surface, he blows bubbles to fall slowly towards my direction. Face nonchalant, almost blissful. The smoothened sunrays dancing gently on him. He is so at ease with the elements. No longer scared of the depth.

* * * * *

“What I See Is Not an Orang-utan”

by Christina Yin

What I see is not an orang-utan. It is a Gigantopithecus. We come upon it suddenly, opening a door at the end of a long corridor. The gigantic head on broad shoulders covered with long, light brown hair gazes from its glass exhibit case with a strangely kind expression in its eyes. It is framed by bamboo shoots, believed to be its favourite food. We are entranced as we are so far from home, yet here in the middle of Iowa where our younger daughter has come to study, we find a replica of an early relative of our state’s iconic red ape, *Pongo pygmaeus*. My husband sits on a bench next to the university’s natural history museum’s exhibit. The Gigantopithecus’s head is twice as big as Melvin’s. I take a photograph. He will use this later in his work presentations on wildlife and extinct species.

When I read about the Gigantopithecus that we chanced upon, I discover that the villain of Disney’s 2016 film version of *The Jungle Book* had truly existed! Disney had not made it up. *Gigantopithecus blacki* had roamed parts of India, China, Vietnam and Indonesia, and is the largest known primate to have lived, reaching three metres in height. Its closest living relative is believed to have been the orang-utan. Climate change resulting in habitat alterations from forest to savanna and a diminishing amount of bamboo and fruit are believed to have led to the extinction of the Gigantopithecus some 100,000 years ago. Extinction is, unfortunately, all around us. In our life time, the Sumatran rhinoceros has become extinct in the Malaysian wild. The number of the world’s most poached animal, the pangolin or scaly anteater, is fast declining in our lands with one seizure of scales alone in Singapore amounting to 21,000 dead animals. Reports of pygmy elephants being poisoned or shot in Sabah appear in the news almost weekly. It does not seem that we will have long to wait for more species to become extinct in our country.

I am reading about the great ape that still lives in our country on the island of Borneo, which we share with Brunei and Indonesia. Different biologists writing in different times do seem to agree that the orang-utan’s numbers have fallen whenever humans have

expanded their own range. Habitat loss and hunting, both caused by human activities, are understood to have led to the shrinking populations of the orang-utan now confined just to parts of Borneo and Sumatra.

It is hard to argue with those who say that humans should come first; that human life is more precious than that of animals, even the most intelligent of primates or the most endangered of species. After all, it is true that there is no Planet B and there is no Noah's Ark we can board to save all these species and ourselves from doom. Yet I wonder if we truly value human life. It seems not when we consider the fighting and wars within the borders of countries and between nations that are happening in different parts of the world – relentlessly. And daily, we oppress others in the workplace, in our schools, in the markets and in everyday life. We seek to improve ourselves so that we can be better or the best! And as we enter the new year and new decade, we make resolutions, pray for blessings, seek prosperity and greater happiness. But at what cost?

It is not an orang-utan that I see. It is the *Gigantopithecus blacki* and it is fading from my view. The gentle, genial look on the strangely familiar face disappears. In its place, perhaps, there are frowns and anger for the world around it is changing. Then, one day, the *Gigantopithecus blacki* is gone. It only returns as a museum exhibit. Other animals take over the changed terrain of what had once been its natural habitat. Perhaps one day it will be the same for the *Pongo pygmaeus*, for its home range in rainforests is shrinking and its populations are diminishing due to opportunistic and deliberate hunting, land conversion and the illegal wildlife trade. For the appetite of the *Homo sapiens* is insatiable. We seek trees for timber, more lands for plantations and unnatural environments that depict our so-called successful development. Or we seek the companionship and glamour of exotic pets that few others have and a status that is elevated by the possession of endangered species.

Finally, perhaps one day, we, too, will face the same fate. For we, the *Homo sapiens*, continue to try to shape the natural environment to suit our needs and desires without a thought for the consequences. This has not resulted in a happy conclusion for the other living things that share the planet. Perhaps one day, we too will be unable to adapt to the environment we are changing. And so one day, like the *Gigantopithecus blacki* and *Pongo pygmaeus*, the *Homo sapiens* will no longer be seen, either. This, I believe, is true.

* * * * *

“Kep Sur Mer 2019”

by David Etheridge

Motion without Direction

An hour to get out of the city, another through a sliver of Kandal province where the highway is an asphalt smear on mud, and further south there’s country road teeming with motorbikes, overloaded minivans, trucks packed with women garment workers, half-tons hauling too-wide rosewood furniture. It takes patience and criminality to drive here; no centerline, no shoulders, people drift through the muck dodging potholes. Flooding has caused the mess, and there’s only erratic reconstruction work on National Highway 3 to the coast.

In Kep families lounge on open-sided platforms, built beachside to catch the Gulf of Thailand breeze. The women needlepoint, and their children cuddle on mats eating barbecued fish, watching Indian ZEETV romantic soaps on their phones. Above them the men in hammocks sleep through the afternoon.

Macaques rip apart garbage baskets, and, in the middle-distance, whaleboats crisscross in front of shimmering Koh Thonsay. In the reflected light, the Saravoan Hotel rises up as a white square cliff from the beach. Chill in the infinity pool ... chew on a string of green Kampot pepper corns ... your mouth waters, cheeks implode ... breathe ... Kep Sur Mer is the smell of your own skin.

Otto stands with one foot on the parapet of the Saravoan overlooking the street, squinting into a dusk pin-pricked with swaying crab boat lanterns. A slow loris dozes on his shoulder. He's watching the horizon for lightning flashes of a storm.

"Make money during high season and that carries you if you break even through rainy season and the rest of the year ... but this year is better than last by 20% ... Those fishermen out there get into gunfights with Vietnamese, but nobody can shoot straight, so no one gets hurt; even police skimming the fishermen, both sides of the border ... Everybody's pissed at everybody ... A woman Lorrie from *National Geographic* was sniffing around trying to make a documentary ... yeah ... and I hire Khmer staff to talk to the local workers, and they say they'll come tomorrow but they don't ... they'll come this week but don't ... It's shit trying to repair a room door ... and offseason is the only time you can fix the plumbing, OK ... you can't close a room in the high season ... But they don't care ... but when the Chinese come ... Have you seen Sihanoukville? There a couple of weeks ago ... didn't recognize it ... casinos and KTV ... online gambling ... Chinese and Khmer street fighting gangs ... moved all the locals off beach street ... construction everywhere ... That's why we're up this year ... guests come here ... say they're never going back. When the Chinese come ... and the big man's cousin is in the municipality and they want to build a casino here, but they haven't voted yet ... after the election they say ... but we know the election result ... so they will come ... they'll have to care or they don't work ... even shit casino jobs ... Khmer clean the ashtrays and do the laundry ... maybe croupiers ... 80% Chinese jobs ... Khmer aren't guests or gamblers ... it's law ... and this place becomes a cesspool environmentally ... and money washers, prostitution, meth ... you name it ... but I'll be outta here before that ... back to Holland ... or dead ... new breed of bullshit talking expat taking over ... Chinese this time ... don't misunderstand me ... the Chinese are smart and work ... but it won't be the same ... Kep with 'Chinese characteristics' ... Ha! ... Khmer feel inferior to the Chinese ... Oppa ... Vietnamese ... occupied for years, still occupy their heads ... Thais ... Oppa ... Singaporeans ... Oppa-pa ... except maybe Laotians ... Khmer feel superior ... maybe ... so they don't see the value of what they've got here ... give it away for a few billion dollars ... We don't take them, the Chinese, we turn them away ... noisy, smoke in the rooms too much. If they book online ... nothing we can do ... we take them ...

Even though it's Kep, after six, seven months, you have to get to Phnom Penh for a few days if only to find out how really shit that town is – KTV karaoke at 4 am ... villains eating Mekong snakehead fish at the wet market ... no escaping the garbage stink in that motorbike-clogged restless town. You renew your love for this place ... Battambang? ... don't know ... hear the ponytails have headed there, Mondulkiri too. Also heard Chinese money is going into a university up there ... saying a piece of the population is moving ... don't have much contact with local expats ... it's what I hear from Khmers. One American migrated from Ho Chi Minh to Phnom Penh and then to Battambang in 3 years ... heart of darkness next ... Marlon Brando land. He's balding ... writes cook books ... had the fever."

Sokly shimmies her head side-to-side saying, "Americans are new Russians – angry and weird. Nobody trusts them."

It's a dry, dry season so Mekong water levels are low, and with hydroelectric dams running at 50% capacity, the government solution is daily four-hour power cuts. Living in the tropics without fans and AC is poor. The rich and their enterprises don't suffer ... strategic outages ... but that's as it should be says HS. "They make the country work," if you call this working.

"It's exam time, everyone. Put your name on the front page and when you're finished you can go."

We could have postponed to the next class but there's no guarantee there'll be power.

"Teacher, you look so handsome in black."

"Black is a good color for me. You can't see I'm fat."

"You always look handsome."

"Youuu! Oh, we like you, Sokly."

“Oh-my-Got!”

“Sorry about the heat. Are there any questions?”

Sokly is twenty years old, not quite a woman, tall with big feet and long fingers, and a transparent heart. I hide mine from her. I study her; she follows me on Instagram — if I revealed myself, I’d have to resign.

The kids sweat, fan themselves, try to concentrate on the exam. The girls twist their long hair onto their heads and off their necks. Pichmarina blows into her T-shirt. The heat’s a relentless distraction. Lightning flashes and you count ... 14 kms and approaching ... the classroom darkens and Kimhak with eyes of perpetual hurt looks up. Everyone has prayed, and now rain roars down on the tin roofs. And you’re timing and through the blurry window you see the wheelchair couple — she sits and he pushes, and sometimes he sits and she pushes; they beg at the White Lady Statue on route 33A and smile for tourists taking selfies — struggle for cover. And that’s the problem with a writing task ... there’s too much time to think about working in a country you know little about, at a job you’re tired of, and wondering where home is.

CS Phalla’s head pops up; she’s hunting a word — she’s heard it; maybe I’ve said it. She snaps her fingers, then writes the word on her palm; then she’s head down. Vichaka turns around checking on Meyling when I write the time on the whiteboard.

When the AC returns, everyone cheers; Sunvandeth says, “We’re not like Venezuela!” And she’s serious. Some Phnom Penh power consumption analyst had copy-pasted last year’s estimates and then gone to Starbucks ... describe this place as a combination of man-made and natural dangers.

They hand in exams. Before leaving they put their palms together and bow; provincials deferential, Kampot town kids blasé. The school pays little; the students appear to respect a lot.

Haven't received a salary check and have enough saved for another four weeks. Telegram lights up with stickers for patience as money would arrive soon. I've cut spending to \$7 a day on food, beer, and bottled water.

"Teacher, you sad?"

"Thanks for that, Seanghak."

"You are sad."

"I'm not sad ... but I am sad."

"Not clear, teacher."

"No worries. Not relevant."

Seanghak speaks like he has marbles in his mouth ... "rice" becomes "ri" ... "nice" ... "ni" ... "price" ... "pri" ... it's awkward. He'd come from a rice farming family who'd put him in the pagoda because they hadn't the money to feed or educate him. And pagoda secular education is substandard as older monks who'd received a similar poor pagoda tuition and upbringing teach the new monks. When Seanghak arrived, he was earnest but ill-equipped and had an elevated status among the students as he was a monk, but he rarely admitted to not understanding which was losing face.

The Essential Guide to Cambodia is a to-do list of sights, towns, 'quirky bars, intimate galleries' with shiny pictures but offers none of the hawkers' knee-buckling noodle wok fry or filth or politics, child labor, meth, pedophilia. Swoon over vibrant green rice paddies but don't see the fallow hectares without irrigation because of government infrastructure neglect. The men go to Thailand; their wives sell coconuts and bottled water at roadside stands; and to pay off micro-finance debt, daughters are trucked like cattle to work in garment factories for \$160 a month.

So ... on phones the lucky ones are thumbing through interactive verb tense exercises on a grammar website; the room is quiet, eyes on screens. The literature said, when you read the literature, that there was little crossover between grammar practice and improved writing ... sad but true ... but students like drills as long as they're quick and self-corrective; they silently fist-pump their successes and three of 19 have made improvements with subject-verb agreement ... but really ... just download Grammarly.

And having given up on the PD of better teaching, you've become a stealth observer of skin tone, complexion, nail color, toe size, ankle bracelets ... a moments collector. Studying student details is creepy, but that's it. Vichaka wears a Korean-style black mouth mask and finger dances. CS Phalla plaits a single braid and with a plastic pink bow pins back her bangs. Sokly pulls her straight black hair off her shoulder revealing a neckline so perfect that you lose yourself and hope nobody catches you goggle-eyeing. Cheata comforts herself by smelling her hair and curling her lip as if it were a mustache. Walking by Kimhak, you smell fish and rice in her sweat.

Sokly isn't the most beautiful – but you can't stop looking at her caramel skin. She tilts her head and bends in deference, hands together in *anjali mudra*, “Good bye, teacher.” She's a magnet — when she leaves, you swing your arms and pace, unstuck, not knowing what to say to anyone.

At the hotel cafe Otto suffers alcoholic Brad from OZ who expects him to sympathize because his Cambodian 'girlfriend' — who calls him 'Bard' — emptied his bank account and used the money to open her own bar in Siem Reap, and it seems craggy-faced *barangs* just have to have their Asian ladies, and they never quite figure out that when you pay a woman for housecleaning, cooking and sex, even for years, you don't own her ... and she was doing the work to survive until she could do better — his ATM card. “Aussie awflies,” Otto calls

them. "Cheat your Khmer girlfriend," he says, "she'll wait for you to fall asleep and cut your toes off with a cleaver ... 'Won't run-me-round after that,' she'll say."

Kep village is holiday packed ... Not so many Chinese or white folks. Sokly says that Khmers won't travel to S'ville anymore:

"We afraid of Chinese gangs."

"Your government's giving away the country ... you know that."

"*Jah, bong.*"

"Push back."

"I'm half Chinese ...," she says, pulling up her sleeve revealing skin, " ... black Chinese."

Cheata begins crying, "I am losing my country."

"I don't have words" ... Vichaka.

CS Phalla says, "If we can build Angkor Wat, Cambodians can do anything," which is precisely what Pol Pot said during the darkness.

At Booking.com, agents predict the destination will have a huge year. Cambodian companies' staff karaoke parties are booked on Kep beach now.

"Otto's bitter. They don't spend much money – it's in, beach, sing, out. Still some business ... better than none," Sokly says.

"Here's my best friend in Kep." I show her a picture of a long-tailed macaque walking an overhead power line.

"Why do foreigners like monkeys?" She doesn't get my joke.

"We don't have them at home."

"Garbage eaters. Bite you."

"You grew up with them."

"Brazen things."

The crab market is blaring Khmer love songs. When Sokly dances, she's a slightly sped up version of a classical folk dancer with bent and shaped fingers, sculpted hands and swiveling wrists with smiling eyes and sleepy arm and hip movements. At green vinyl covered tables with plastic garden chairs, buyers and sellers haggle over buckets of blue crabs, red snapper, calamari, and prawns.

We're eating fish amok with Kampot peppers, steamed rice and Anchor beers; it's Chhay Chhay's on stilts, with the roiling Gulf under our feet, and Otto says:

"Chinese offered Bard \$40,000 for his guesthouse ... Two government men came with ... saying '*maybe maybe*' they'd find health and safety violations if he didn't sell and leave in three months ... Bard's selling ... Pattaya hippies who couldn't afford Thailand drifted to Kampot ... OK ... now they run to Ratanakiri ... going to be The French Riviera development at \$23 billion taking two-thirds of the coast ... no backpackers and marijuana allowed. The Chinese build port ... dock cruise ships ... bus tourists to Bokor Mountain casinos ... big man approves lifetime residence visas for Chinese with \$500,000 to invest ... soon they'll run the politics and they'll have Malaysia-Singapore all over again ... OK ... The Khmer should just give them Koh Rong Island to start with ... this weekend I'm sending Sokly. An aunt she trusts says she can buy a villa ... four floors ... in a compound ... partially completed and when finished she can rent to the Chinese for \$3,000 a month ... special economic zone and sixty casinos over there ... maybe PLA military ... lotta workers, lotta money. They'll pay. Government has mandate. Should be stability for three to five years ... can sell it for triple, buy a house in Amsterdam ... If she doesn't like that deal ... they're going to build a mall in Krong Kampot ... maybe buy a rice paddy over there."

"If I get some money, can I play?"

"Only if you can afford to lose it, man."

We hear the crack of breaking plastic as two motorbikes crash and a screaming boy, blood streaming from his ear, sprawls in the center of the beach road. As the riders shout blame at each other, idle tuk-tuk drivers and gawkers hope for a fight or something they can take home to entertain their families with so that the day hadn't been a complete waste.

"Scoop'n run emergency medical on the way," laughs Otto.

"Dreamt of going back to desert money at Gulf Technical College last night." The Gulf sticks like penance, leaves me squirming inside my skin most nights.

"What were you doing there anyway?"

"Loved working with those guys — Tobin, Niki, Atkinson, Sammy G. They were the best."

"You hated it ... nobody liked you." says Otto. "What were you hoping to find there?"

"Teacher once called me 'a natural.' Another disliked my white board handwriting. And when admin criticizes, leave. Quit before you're sacked. '*In sha'allah* you teach my sister next year,' says Fatima Al Shehhi. '*In sha'allah*,' I say. Reckon on Dharma teaching, Otto."

"Oppah ... don't be talking that silly shit."

"Buddhist country here ... now I can say that."

Hoped to remember my Dharma ... they say it's been with me all along ... but I'm cynical on that news. Still ... listen to the waves.

"Everything ... and nothing. Like all things in this country," says Otto.

"How'd you get here, man?"

"Dharma ... Oppa ... hahaha ... whatta you think?"

I tuk-tuk to Kep Wharf with the Aussie creative director of TK Marketing. He's been in country for eight years with Sophea, his Khmer partner. They're going for hi-gloss inshore drone tourist footage of the island.

“In those days,” Sophea says, pointing to stretch of dry creek bed, “there was always water, there was fish – *All for fish, fish for all* – they said. Commune leader sent my father to river every day. He always have full stomach – two fish a day. His brother was close to border – no fish. He took off his black uniform, met refugees to Thailand, and went to United States. All Khmer people over there are Khmer Rouge.”

TK Marketing is also in the early stages of surveying for a casino and hotel complex on the island’s south side.

“After Vietnamese leave ... UK support Khmer Rouge. SAS train them. Give guns. Some in jungle still now.”

The whaleboat is about eight meters and powered by a long tail 10-horsepower outboard. A wooden framework provides tarp-shade, but this morning the boatman opts for no cover. After 25 minutes, we glide into the shallows of Rabbit Island. The boat doesn’t dock but leaves us to wade ashore.

Koh Tunsay (Rabbit Island) is thatched-roof bungalows with mosquito nets, no aircon, squat toilets, no wifi, no power after 9 pm – as if you’d parachuted into a *Discovery* rustic.

I leave the beach to follow a jungle path out of earshot of the generators and laughing children and walk to three towering coconut palms and turn left along a deserted beach loaded with all of the Indian Ocean’s plastic waste. There is a jagged hole in the rock at the other end that leads to a smaller, water bottle and rope strewn beach. I stand for a long time on sharp black volcanic rock and listen to the water and watch the wind and smell something I can’t name. I feel absolute joy, until a *who do you think you are to feel this good?* angst drives me off the beach and onto the trail around the island. I come across a frail madman living alone in a tin hut with his chickens and a one-family settlement of about 20 people and hire a boat from one of the boys as I can’t navigate the island’s final third at high tide.

On the return to the mainland Ek Sam the monk says, “I study international relations. I want to be a diplomat for my country. I do this for three months to respect my parents. We can be monk for a day, week, month, year, a lifetime – whatever we want. Me? ... Three months. Monk time optional. We lucky. A Chinese proverb I like is ‘tension is who you think you should be ... relaxation is who you are.’ Do you know that one?”

“No.”

“Sure. Now you do. Know you’re blessed.”

The German father asks: “There are Lexuses everywhere. How do they make their money?”

“Women, property flips, logging Siamese rosewood,” I say, “ ... sapphires, emeralds; Chinese money laundering in real estate – used to be Russians; government contracts. The Forestry Minister believes the nation’s forests are for his personal use, so he approves clear-cutting teak, pockets a percentage of sales, buys a Range Rover every second year, and sends his children to the \$20,000-a-year international school – resource stewardship isn’t in his lexicon.”

“As it should be.”

Ek Sam adds, “Norodom Sihanouk used to say, ‘I am not the king; US dollar is.’ Still true – no ideology here, just money; no justice, just Lexus.”

I open the classroom door to a snake, half a meter long and as thick as my little finger, squirming across the floor. Sokly can’t identify if it’s poisonous and with the students around, the snake finds a place to hide, and we lose him. To keep snakes away, cut kaffir-lime in half and leave it and the leaves around on the floor. They don’t like the smell.

Turns out kaffir-lime is the most racist fruit in the world: *kaffir* in South Africa means ‘nigger’ and *kafir* in Arabic means non-believer or ‘infidel’. So now there’s a social media

campaign to use the less common term ‘makrut lime’” instead. How is that? I am introducing a new English language to the locals.

A rooster crows in the afternoon as Vichaka sits on the other side of the desk practicing for her Saturday speaking test:

“We like flooding ... fertilize soil ... As childhood we like flooding I go swimming ... We prepare for flood in dry season – rice and food for people and cow ... In 2002 flood three meter ... China dam break we have problem here ... even in November ... My house on stilt and eight meter wide and safe ... My grandmother on island in Mekong ... every year maybe she flood ... maybe she no so safe. I walk seven kilometer to school before I get bicycle ... The teacher are violent and angry because of Pol Pot and Vietnamese ... and they no treat us well. The Khmer Rouge kill all the teacher ... kill us like chicken ... maybe new teacher don’t know how to teach ... Teacher, you know TikTok? I be famous TikTok dancer.”

I ask Sunvandeth if she thinks Cambodia is democratic and she says, “No way.”

“Why don’t people demand democracy?” and she says, “Things okay ... after Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese ... it okay.”

“But not democratic.”

“It’s what people used to.”

HS’s family and the Cambodia People’s Party are hostage takers. The vice president of Norton University says the CPP will remain in power, “As long as our life gets better.”

We're doing presentations — speak about a countryside location — and I demonstrate by describing Kep as a place to visit.

Kimhak takes us through Kampot pepper politics: “With prisoner and slave villager, Khmer Rouge built irrigation dam and under reservoir was grave of thousands killed in construction which was secret of Secret Lake. It was cease-fire line: government have coastal road and town; Khmer Rouge stay in jungle and mountain to destroy pepper farm of colonial French bourgeoisie. I like word, ‘bourgeoisie.’ Nowadays, blogger advertise Secret Lake: ‘Tubing, swimming and even water peddle cycle are the leisure activity on offer. Snack, food and drink are available.’ Nice. Any question? Thanks you.” We clap and Kimhak sits down smiling like a cat.

The smiles of the four-faced Bayon seem the same but these expressions of serenity and sorrow appear on Khmer faces every day. Bayon Temple has 216 faces. And there are 30 more Khmer smiles: thank you, I like you, I don't like you, give me money, sorry for your loss, I know, I don't know, we agree, we disagree, I am embarrassed, I am sad, I am happy, I am lost, I am found, I am confused, I am angry, I am ashamed, I know you, I don't know you, I see, I understand, I am waiting, Can I help you? What do you want? Do you like this? Do you want this? Tuk-tuk? Moto? ... I don't know what to say, and I don't care – and all the smiles look the same. The 31st smile is the one Kimhak wears when she hits you with her Lexus.

Sokly floats on you like beads of sweat, trickles down your back and settles in your waistband ... Asian fever ... like ants biting your body.

Otto sits head in hands, rubbing his temples, the Americano cooling in front of him. He's got no interest. Sokly sits beside him.

"Mother's got spots on her lungs."

"Oh God. How old is she?" I ask.

"Seventy-seven."

"Anything conclusive?"

"Not yet. Uncle wants me home."

"And she says?"

"Not to worry, but she's like that. You never know with her."

"It's clear, Otto."

He stares out across the water at the palm trees on Rabbit Island. "Time?" he asks.

"You wonder when's the right time. Have you made enough money? Is there work? Do you have any friends left? There's never the right time ... there's just going home and dealing with it."

"Time ... maybe."

Sokly says, "I most wish to go to the pagoda because I can do good things through contributing money to the Buddhist monks. They will send good words to the Lord Buddha for your good activities."

For a college graduation gift, Dwayne Petry takes his two sons on a 26-day Southeast Asia junket — "I took them across the States the summer they graduated high school," he smiles. They'd arrived at the Saravoan the previous day and join us in the coffee shop for the \$5 omelette breakfast.

"And what do you want them to see now?" Otto asks.

“That the world’s different. That they’re lucky, damn lucky to live in America.”

“That’s all?”

“Everything’s interesting, right? Food’s different. Women exotic. Babies cute. But the poverty. It’s so hard. I want the boys to know they don’t want to live here. Nobody wants to live here unless they have to.”

“Really?”

“Yes, sir. America, there’s no other place.”

“You shouldn’t have said that.” I say.

“Why?”

“Otto’s going to tell you.”

“But that’s why people want into America, right? It’s not here.”

“Hey, you know Greece?” says Otto, “Flatland around Iaonnina ... it’s 90K by road to Igoumenitsa and the ferry to Corfu ... Yeah? ... you know Greece? ... You there were you? ... Yeah? ... Good ... Everybody goes there ... so you know where I am ... Good ... By car or bus about an hour thirty to the water. Me? ... I cycled uphill for a day ... to a snow covered saddle at about 2,500 meters, top of the Pindus, south of Mount Athamanika ... Yeah ... you know Greece ... yeah ... sure ... in a field, I drape a tarp over my bike ... make a tent ... yeah ... and sleep the night. Next morning is Sunday and I drink black taverna coffee and eat bread and eggs looking at a high speed glide down the switch-back to the coast ... but at the top ... yeah ... at the top ... a cold onshore wind pushes me back ... flies up from the sea ... yeah ... and suddenly I know ... I’d met this before ... now ... I’d have to peddle downhill all day ... and if I don’t ... the wind knocks me over ... that’s it ... I fall down ... and there’s nothing like wind ... you can’t see it or taste it except dust ... can’t hide from it. Wind howls in your head, whistles in your ears, fills your nostrils with grit, blows flies in your mouth. You curse it but wind doesn’t stop. You hate it when it forces you to peddle nonstop downhill to Adriatic ... Fight your way to the water ... I lock my bike to a fence by Igoumenitsa main wharf and walk and rant and yell ... Yeah? ... I hadn’t spoken to anyone in days ... maybe days ... maybe not days ... in a while ... and was so wild I had to talk to somebody ... and I walk by a taverna window and I see a girl inside ... and she looks like a traveler: ‘Do you talk to her? Will she talk to me? Dunno ... dunno ... have to ask.’

“I walked by the window again and looked at her and wondered if she’d speak: ‘Dunno. What are you waiting for? Idiot. Go.’

“I sit down at her table and spill: ‘Please ... I haven’t spoken to anyone in three days, and I’ve just come from Ioannina ... and you know Ioannina, Byron started *Childe Harold* there ... about a sad traveler but not really ... disillusioned by life he was and ... when I crossed the mountains I had to cycle downhill or I’d fall over. All the way here ... I mean ... can you imagine that? ... it makes you crazy, but I’m not crazy I just haven’t spoken, and I’m talking like this because I don’t know what to say ... yeah ... and there are times when your calf muscles seize up like rope and you pound them with your fist hoping to unknot them ... pounding ... trying for relief. And it drives you absolutely fucking insane ... I’m sorry ... I’m sorry my name’s Otto. What’s yours?’

“She stood, fake smiled and said she had a ferry to catch, so I sat there ... with my cramped calf ... wind hatred ... and cursed my freedom and *Childe Harold* and *Childe Roland* and whatever other ‘childes’ were floating around Greece that day ... yeah? Travel’s not slum education, Mr. *Barang*, travel beats you like tin with an intensity someone like you can’t even begin to imagine.”

Petry and sons leave the next day for Vientiane, and Kep Sur Mer is lost to memory.

A driver shouts, “Tuk-tuk. Five dollar. Okay.” The thunder cracks so low to the ground and threatening, your teeth ache. Distant clumps. This is not a desert rain where the clouds leak – these are Buddha’s tears, where good luck follows bad. Once you’ve soaked dancing in a warm tropical storm, you’ll never stop aching for Kep beach.

Rain comes down in a burst, a roar, in slanting torrents, hammering the roofs. The Chinese are on their balconies yelling into their phones; dogs bark; car alarms screech. The fan stops and we lose all power and wifi, then just as quickly the clouds clear, the dogs quiet, and the road steams. The children chant: “*yī ... èr ... sān ... sì ... wǔ ... liù ... qī ... bā ...*”

My broker floats down the Mekong on a two-week Avalon VIP cruise from Siem Reap to Ho Chi Minh City. We meet by the Titanic as Jeremy and his clients sail through an authoritarian regime in one of the world’s poorest countries, dropping thousands of dollars, none of which trickles to the people living in the stilt shanties on the shores of the river they photograph. “At home I worry about income inequality; here I’m on vacation,” Jeremy says. “The Regency Hyatt is six-star. These Cambodians have really figured out service. You tell them your name once, and they remember. And everyone smiles. Are they really this happy?”

Odd meeting folks from home — the women aren’t interested in HS’s 33+ years in power and drift to the bar’s cultural gamelan music; the men are mildly curious as to how I’d ended up here, and I come away wondering, “how did I do?” as Jeremy’s local curiosity — nice people, but I’m not one of them anymore.

They offer little of themselves, which is why the government builds a tourism sector – foreigners bingeing on prawns and elephant pants. It’s the Aussie drinking beer with a tuk-tuk driver who says, “Don’t you wanna drink? Reckon it’s *cul-char*,” as if staggering down 33A were some Khmer artifact. And he goes home after two months of backpacking culture hunting and tells his friends about the time in the street ... “True story, mate” ... when absolutely nothing happened. Travel is extravagance if you don’t contribute.

... and it's troubling ... as how I've lived seems to have nothing to do with choices, but with genetics: *You don't become an adventurer; you are one* – Sarah Marquis. And I'm neither adventurer nor explorer, not even a *flaneur*, only a drifter who's lost ... a reluctant traveller who can't help it ... neither fabulous nor brave ... on most days ... just lonely.

You shrug again ... tired of being you ... "It's quiz time" ... almost home.

"I don't know what they did at your high school, but we don't do that here." You take her quiz, scrunch it into a ball and throw it under your desk.

Vichaka has cheated; she's shown her paper to Sunvandeth; they've spoken during the quiz — and you've overreacted. These moments are adding up, and you recognize that you'd better find something else — trouble is you don't know what else; unlike your students, you lack imagination.

You expect outrage — storming out of the class — but she's calm. You've lost face ... anger achieves nothing ... wins nobody's respect. And Khmer people are about respect. When all the heads are down, you pick up the girl's mangled quiz and put it in your pocket. You'll mark and return it. For years you've thought the desert made you crazy but now understand that you're committing suicide by not moving. Change doesn't have to be sudden and upside down; change can be evolutionary.

I woke up to a tiny red ant biting into my armpit.

Otto sits with the Kampot manager of ABA Bank financing a \$290,000 loan when he receives Sokly's call. During the night the S'ville villa had collapsed killing the nine workers who lived in the partially-completed building. The police arrested the site supervisor and were investigating the Cambodian husband and wife owners for malfeasance, with bail set at \$80,000 USD. Otto thanks the manager for his assistance.

"They have a million dollars to build the building, but nothing for workers' housing," says Otto ripping up the partially completed mortgage forms.

"It's how we do, sir."

Rural schools are two-floor, three-sided squares with a dusty play area in the center and further out, parking for the hundreds of bicycles and motorbikes. The new school was donated purpose-built and rent-free by a Kampot "big man." I attend the building blessing with dignitaries and eight monks. I am the only Westerner offered a look into the jasmine throwing and lotus flower Buddhist ritual and am overwhelmed by all I don't know about this place's Theravada and its people.

"Do no evil. Be good. Purify mind," Sokly abruptly whispers in English. "It rare to be human, rare to hear Buddha teaching."

Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom are massive ... impossible to visualize ... the bridge of faces too marvelous ... the Bayon, cryptic. You need drone perspective. No matter how many times you temple walk, you can't penetrate the mystery of those ancients.

You set them to brainstorm the topic "... in English. I know it's hard but try." And they do, shyly at first and then with more confidence.

"Can I use dictionary?" asks Kimhak.

"Sure," and she digs out her phone and punches in the letters. In groups of three, they talk haltingly, but do generate enough ideas in a mix of English and Khmer when after 15 minutes Sunvandeth asks, "Can we write?" And for the next 30 minutes they express in broken English their love for Angkor Wat and what the temple complex means to their country.

Otto and I are parked beside the Mad Monkey Hostel waiting for the police to arrive. We're watching Sokly's second cousin, Vattny, working at her building site. She wears a huge, wide-brimmed hat that she ties at the back of her neck, and she perches a yellow hard hat on top. She should be in school but works seven days a week, a 14-year-old trapped in family debt. She's forged her age on her national ID so that she can work construction. She covers her nose and mouth with a red bandana and wears what looks like mismatched flannel pyjamas and flip-flops. She loads red bricks into a 50kg VietCement bag and carries it to the elevator attached to the outside of the Chinese-financed hotel. Her infant son sits on a stack of rebar watching and screams when she disappears 10 floors out of sight hauling the bricks to the penthouse.

"Chinese made an offer to buy the Saravoan. Twelve months left on my contract with this owner," says Otto. "But now ... don't know what happens. Could be gone in a week. OK. Do you know what happens in this country? What next?"

"Wish I knew."

"Sokly? ... don't know what to do with ... she likes you ... lazy loris too."

"Back to Amsterdam?"

"Stay or go. Dunno. Ready for either."

A UK backpacker leaving the hostel, his arm around a girl, stops and leans into Otto's driver-side window:

"I'm super excited about being here, eating Khmer red curry with chicken, coconut milk, sweet potato, long beans, garlic, turmeric, and lemon grass ... love it ... and this is Laitheam ... she loves me and I believe it, and outside town is Secret Lake and jungle ... We'll get out and about and offer a ton of amazing stories and pictures on our Instagram!! Check us out, dudes. We'll be there."

"Piss off."

"Ciao."

We'd driven into Kampot to identify the bodies of two Western girls who'd stopped at the Saravoan on their way to Kampot.

"Officially," says Otto, "the two girls suffered projectile diarrhea, dehydration, and stomach cramps and found that green banana tea didn't solve salmonella ... Ha! ... They stagger across the street to the pharmacy, but the 'fake' norfloxacin the pharmacist recommends kills them in their dorm beds. Dylan at Nomad Working Space, 'a hostel but not a hostel' ... Ha! ... says it was bad meth and there are also two dead Khmer girls. Rules for Cambodian health care are simple:

If you have lots of money, go to Singapore;

A lot of money, go to China;

If you have some money, go to Thailand;

No money ... die in your bed at the Mad Monkey."

"Don't want to die here, man."

"Six hundred million USD leaves Cambodia for overseas medical."

"So ... stay or go?"

"What to do?"

Otto tells the officers that the girls had spent a night at the Saravoan but wasn't aware of any

drugs.

“Dunno what to tell you, man.”

Jeremy emails:

Jeremy Watson

July 8, 2019 at 7:33 pm

Re: Thanks

Cambodia was a truly wonderful place to visit. Thanks for seeing us. I know living there provides unique challenges, but as a visitor it was extraordinary. All the best.

Sipping hot Americano with Otto when two young guys wearing white shirts and pink ties cycle by and you know they're creating a teaching myth – making the world a better place – the noble bogus narrative.

“Mormons.”

“We're Buddhists here. What are they thinking?”

“I believe whatever you want as long as my daughter get education' ... 21st century rice-bowl missionary work. Then there's the Jewish Lightmans who spent \$20,000 building a mosque for 200 barefoot Sunni faithful.”

“When do you leave?”

“Nobody tells me anything. Chinese. The owner.”

“No deal to be worked?”

“Poof!”

“Mother?”

Otto shrugs, "I think I might miss this place."

Otto looks beaten. He can't focus his eyes, his gaze swivels on a stick. He fiercely rubs his thumbs and forefingers together.

"To get away on Saturday afternoons ... yeah ... used to buy a tram ticket for fifteen guilders and ask for a paper transfer and going south transfer onto the next bus going further south and press against the window looking at the stream of sidewalk people. New passengers staggered down the bus's center aisle ... OK ... and I went to the edge of Amstelpark then transferred the rest of the way home ... traveled the world for three hours and fifteen guilders. But climbing my apartment stairs, I'm lonelier than when on the bus."

"I know. That's how we know each other, Otto."

"EU slaps tariffs on Cambodian rice, and China buys two thirds of the loss ... EU reconsiders the 'everything but arms' deal and Beijing offers \$600 million in loans ... Cambodians always say "play Facebook." It's irritating ... like 'he was driving and playing Facebook,' but they don't get that Facebook and the regime play them."

"And?"

"Arrived with nothing, leave here with nothing."

"Bad news?"

"A bad news day? ... yeah. In between lose everything. OK."

"Wish your mother gets better."

"Khmer believe that the royals' spirits continue living. I wonder if I could believe that too."

"Hello salary?" ... \$200 USD deposited into my account.

“Enough years,” says Otto. The hotel staff line the steps down to the road. They clap and squeal ‘bye-bye.’ Sokly waits at the bottom of the steps. She hugs Otto; Otto places lazy loris on her shoulder. He shakes my hand, says, “Fuck this place,” and gets into the airport limousine. “When you’re in Amsterdam, find Xaviera Hollander’s BnB. I’m around the corner. My mother’s flat. Email first.”

You smile and nod, but you won’t see Otto again. You both know.

“Good luck with your mum.”

The taxi departs.

“Are you going to manage the hotel?”

“I don’t think so.”

“*Ja bong.*”

Sokly hands me the loris and asks,

“Why Otto leave?”

“Hotel sold. Mother sick.”

“He no like Cambodia anymore?”

“Time to go home.”

“He no have Cambodian girlfriend.”

“I thought you were his girlfriend.”

“Me? No. Me, like sister.”

“Really?”

“Maybe.”

“If he has a girlfriend, he stays?”

“It happen that way. Foreigners need woman.”

Early Saturday morning I start the National Park walking trail. To the right, beyond the corner with the Kep look-off, in a leafy-covered stretch of jungle just before the trail's highest point, I let lazy loris go. Motionless he looks at me with shocked round eyes; he's not interested in freedom. "Get going ... or the Khmer will make wine out of you." Sloth-like he shifts into the brittle brown undergrowth, looking for a vine. "Think of Otto sometime."

Hotel's closing and salary's behind, so I'll meet with the director to resign, thank him for his support, and ask if he can pay me the money the school owes me. Sad-eyed Kimhak, a relative, says:

"He's more formal with foreign teachers than with Khmer, so he'll do something about money. Don't threaten him — he doesn't react well. Make him feel sympathy, and he'll solve the problem. He wants to make things right."

In old-style Khmer classrooms, there's a map of the world. You live in the names of the places you've been, a small boy looking at the world, pronouncing countries, making them yours — places you'd explore, yellow China, the Italian boot, the New Hebrides. The map became your future — you smelled those places — the map became your past. You walked the Hajar Mountains, sailed to Paxos. These were places not much different from other places you might have visited ... you wanted freedom where everything was magical and the names were mythic.

Now ... standing before that map ... pitched up in Kep ... there's no more desire ... there's no more map.

Wandering without purpose ... that's the story ... millions of "how did I get here?" moments. There's nothing more to do ... just tired ... tried hard and no sound. Home where contemporaries are dying is final D and what began as grand adventure will end like a spawning spring salmon: gasping for life in too shallow water.

Sokly says, "I want to travel and experience other cultures" ... you smile ... all you've lived is confusion and what you've learned can't even buy you a map.

"Good luck with that."

* * * * *

Review: Eileen R. Tabios' *Pagpag: The Dictator's Aftermath in the Diaspora*

by Neil Leadbeater

"Pagpag" is a Tagalog word meaning "to shake off dust or dirt" in the sense of fluffing up bedding to get rid of dust or shaking off crumbs that have landed in your lap. More recently it has come to refer to the scavenging of leftover food from garbage cans. Beggars or scavengers shake the food to remove the dirt that may have become attached to it. People who scavenge for leftovers in the Philippines will frequently cook what they find to make it less dangerous to eat.

In this collection of eleven protest stories, written between 1995 and 2001, Eileen Tabios rakes through the debris of "the continuing past" of a ruthless dictatorship to register her offence at having been forced to join the Philippine diaspora. For her, pagpag "heart-wrenchingly symbolizes like no other the effects of a corrupt government unable to take care of – indeed, abusing – its people."

In her introduction she says: "A writer writes, and here I write in protest – I know writing by itself is not adequate, even as I humbly offer this collection to readers. But I do believe in the ultimate power of the written word and this book would be among those I'd send back from the diaspora to the Philippines."

Throughout this collection, poverty is described in all its forms and not just in terms of lack of money. It is also seen with reference to a lack of opportunity and, more importantly, a lack of being able to make one's voice heard and a lack of being able to do anything about it. There are old men and women sleeping on hard surfaces, small farmers forced out of

business, companies stripped of their assets and a displaced population from Calauit who end up dying of starvation.

There are also many things that have been discarded, broken or inadvertently left behind: a diamond ring and a pair of earrings, halved coconut husks, the broken fragments of a crystal vase, the mountainous trash heaps of wasted food in the foothills of Manila. All of these have consequences for the poor.

There is plenty of variety too, ranging from the politically charged 'Force Majeure' and 'Redeeming Memory' to the politically correct 'Homeland' and the comic 'Pork' and 'Tapey'. Ghosts are present in at least three of these stories, but there is a sense in which they haunt every one of them as Tabios confronts her past.

The cover image, 'Self-Contained' (2009) by Rea Lynn de Guzman, an interdisciplinary artist working in painting, print media, and sculpture is the perfect fit to this collection since, like Tabios, she also immigrated from the Philippines to the United States at an early age sharing that common bond of displacement and exile. This is a powerful collection of stories that illustrates the extent to which the legacy of dictatorship is still being felt today within the Filipino diaspora.

* * * * *

“Kretek”

by John C. Mannone

The first archeological evidence for clove is at a trading port in Sri Lanka (900-1100 AD). Until modern times, it was only found growing in the Moluccas, where the oldest clove tree known still lives (named ‘Afo’ in Ternate; it’s 400 years old). [“The world’s oldest clove tree” by Simon Worrall (BBC News, 23 June 2012)]

There’s something appealing about the pale flower buds of a clove tree—that large-leaf evergreen with crimson flowers.

Its long calyx terminates in four sepals spreading out and four petals pointing into themselves to form a small tight ball, bright

red when ready for harvest. The miniature ball-n-spike cloves dry in the Indonesian sun before they’re minced, measured,

and combined one-third by weight with resin, cumin, nutmeg, and different tobaccos, wrapped into thin scrolls of banana leaves.

When fire is put to the mixture of tobacco, the crackling sound of burning cloves is what is heard when the word *kretek* is spoken

—like the sizzle of pine needles or the static hiss, snap and pop of flame devouring paper. Hot smoke, drawn through the sugar

coated tip, spirals into throat (and innocent lungs), the harshness tamed by the numbing of clove’s essential oil, eugenol, also

responsible for its alluring aroma. Unlike “white cigarettes” that might soothe with menthol, or macho-ness, the appeal of clove cigarettes to the coming-of-age crowd is the promise of no harm. After all, despite its doubling of tar and nicotine, kreteks don’t kill rats any more than regular cigarettes.

* * * * *

“Perhentianings”

by Salman Akhtar

We walk
out of the
bluegreen swells
hair sunruined
skin sunwracked

the dark within
at odds with
the blindglare
drench of
a rampant sun.

A man
boulderheaded
belly spilt
over his trunks
wades into

the darker
cooler recess
his arms
fanned, balancing
his bulk.

The jetty –
blue plastic barrels
bearing stencilled planks –
bobs and bucks
to a rhythm its own.

A tottering
burnt boy
wavebuffeted
snatches down
his mother’s shorts.

Shrieks resound –
a slap. She rights
her wronged pride
with a sharp
gasp and stoop.

Sounds of
the swirls
sucking to and fro
the coralstrewn sand
resume. Darkneses

within contained
by laughter,
the keen of gulls,
the stoic liting
of a salthoared sea.

* * * * *

“Cameron Highlands”

by Kelly Kaur

I float in the foggy cool mist
in the undulating altitudes
of Tanah Rata
calloused nimble fingers
gingerly pluck flimsy tea leaves
from the pungent
blossoming bushes
on meandering paths
my basket fills
with hopes and dreams
the sweet fragrance
of tea steeps
rambling lives

* * * * *

“Robertson Rose Garden”

by Kelly Kaur

I dance my childhood reveries
twirl amidst hypnotic hues
in the garden of roses
that fiercely bloom
mesmeric scents
storm my senses
till thorns prick
my nomadic fingers
blood spills from
my rebellious heart

* * * * *

“Another Morning Has Broken”

by Malachi Edwin Vethamani

I have awoken.
The morning alarm is silent.
My body doesn't understand
these lockdown days.

My phone lights up.
Good morning greetings arrive
as do Facebook notifications.

I leave my bed
walk away from my cool bedroom.
The morning sun is warming my hall,
soon an oppressing heat
will awaken the air-conditioner.

The dogs have heard my movements.
As I raise the kitchen blinds
Duke walks to the side grilled door
expecting the first of his many treats
Princesse follows his lead.

The morning twenty-minute exercise
I promised myself is about to happen.
I move in sync
with the bodies on the TV screen.

A voice rings out:
Walk, walk, walk, walk
stay healthy, you'll stay young.

I want to stay healthy.
Stay young?
These virus-ridden days,
staying alive seems hard enough.

My T-shirt is drenched.
Saltwater flows over my lips
slips into my mouth.
I taste the burnt calories
accumulated the night before.

As I sip my first coffee of the day.
I have crossed the first nine hours
of another day.
The remaining hours scream out:
What are we going to do today?

The same as we did yesterday
and the day before.
What day was it?
I barely remember
or care to know.

* * * * *

“All Over the Sea of Blue”

by Ku Ezriq Raif bin Ku Besry

All over the sea of blue,
There is no sun, no light, it's true

With nothing else to say,
This sailor hopes away,
At the dawn of a brand new day.

In the darkness, he sees,
No land, no man, no trees.

Oh, he could only hope,
For a help, for something to cope,
To see a shine in this life of slope.

His ship creaks,
His ship creaks.

There's land,
He thought.
There's land,
There's not.

When will he cut this Gordian knot?

No man can say for certain,
Of future that has not yet raised its curtain.

His ship creaks;
His ship creaks.

All over the sea of blue,
There is no sun, no light, it's true.

* * * * *

“I See Crownless Kings with Eyes of Green”

by Ku Ezriq Raif bin Ku Besry

I see crownless kings with eyes of green,
Committing many acts of atrocities,
But if us simple folk were to do a thing,
All that awaits us is a guillotine.

There are many things I'd like to change;
In hopes of a world without any pain,
But I have yet the power to arrange;
There are more things that I have yet to ascertain.

I see crownless kings with eyes of green,
Huffing and puffing from their seats,
Kicking and bashing us, their playthings,
Spitting on the law during the quarantine.

Using races, positions and religion,
They lavish at the chaos they stew;
Unaware that we are the legion,
And they are the few.

I care not for another breakdown;
The time for change is now;
Heavy is the head that wears the crown,
Heavier the heads of those who bow.

I see crownless kings with eyes of green.
They mock us, don't you see?
They want us divided, don't you see?
How do I make your eyes be seen?

My people, don't you see?
What they've done is sacrilege,
Treasons of the highest degree;
Yet why do you not acknowledge?

They gained our trust;
They broke it;
Deposing them is a must;
We must make them submit.

Crownless kings with eyes of green,
I do not know when, I do not know where,
But as history often tells us,
Sooner or later, there will be a scene.