

Anak Sastra

Issue 50

Issue 50 Contents

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Contributor Bios

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Randall Peffer is the author of twelve nonfiction books and ten romantic suspense novels. His book, [Watermen](#) (Johns Hopkins), is a documentary of the lives of the Chesapeake's fishermen. It won the *Baltimore Sun's* Critic's Choice award and was Maryland Book of the Year. His novel, [Provincetown Follies, Bangkok Blues](#), was a Lambda Award finalist. His recent book, [Where Divers Dare: The Hunt for the Last U-Boat](#) (Penguin Random House), debuted as one of Amazon's "Hot New Reads." He has published over 350 travel/lifestyle features in magazines, like *National Geographic*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Smithsonian*, *Reader's Digest*, *Travel Holiday*, *Islands*, *Yankee*, *Sail*, and *Wooden Boat*. His travel features have appeared in most U.S. major metro dailies, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Miami Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Denver Post*, *San Francisco Examiner*, and *Los Angeles Times*.



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N.K. Haydar  is a Malaysian-born educator, writer and TESL graduate with a niche in Southeast Asian literature. Outside of writing, they work freelance as an illustrator and teach English at a local secondary school.

Melanie Hobbs is an Australian writer with a complicated cultural heritage of Singaporean, Malaysian, Tamil Christian roots. She teaches high school English and lives in the Perth hills with her husband, two kids and dog. Her work has been published in *Westerly*, *Portside Review*, and *Kindling & Sage*.

[Lisa Changadveja](#) is the author and illustrator of [Chang's First Songkran](#) and [The Only Girl on a Motorcycle](#). She is the daughter of Thai immigrants and was raised in rural Georgia, USA. Her upbringing was only subtly Thai and, as an adult, she's been discovering her Thai heritage through writing and learning to illustrate.

[Dana Ravyn](#)  is a transfem poet, novelist, and educator. She has published online and print haiku and poetry internationally. Her recent series of poems will be published in the *Varied Spirits* anthology in early 2023. Dana works at her local public library on health literacy empowerment. Dana lives in the Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, USA area.

[Rueben Dass](#)   was born in Kuala Lumpur and spent most of his life in the bustling capital city of Malaysia. He is the author of the crime novel [The Number Four](#). He mostly writes crime fiction and, on occasion, dabbles in poetry. He currently works as a policy researcher based in Singapore.

[Pete Saigon](#) is a Vietnamese American artist living and working in Tokyo.

Elvis A. Galasinao Jr. lives and works in the Philippines. He is currently finishing his M.A. Language and Literature in the De La Salle University. He is a researcher and a poet whose works have appeared in various publications, including *Katitikan: Literary Journal of the Philippine South*, *ALPAS Journal: Arts and Literature E-Journal for Filipino Artists*, *Tint Journal*, and *Malate Literary Folio*.

Brian Lee is an aspiring writer and poet from Singapore. Having grown up in three different countries, he writes in an attempt to remember and recreate spaces of memory. He is inspired by our fundamental need to return and belong.

[Shaz Johar](#) (guest editor, issue 50) is an author, editor and translator. His fiction explores social anxieties in contemporary Malaysia, including identity issues; manipulation and dogmatic discourse; and interracial, interreligious and intergenerational relationships. In Malay, he has published eleven novels, a collection of short stories, and lots of other smaller works. His first published work in English appeared in *Anak Sastra's* first issue back in 2010.

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“The Perishable World”

by Michelle Chedjou

It was the day of days, it was her day. The girl stood rigid on the roofed court and watched as all the other participants departed for their designated rooms. She was surrounded by a familiar surge of electricity that coalesced from what felt and sounded like a million energies, a million voices. She relished in it. She knew she would be, as usual, operating on very little practice, mostly raw talent. Her supposed trainer-cum-school paper adviser, Ms. Rona, was useless. Talentless really. Just listen to her talk. And she’s supposed to help her— what was that?— hone her potential? It didn’t matter. This was her day after all.

Talent. That was how her teachers in her old school described what she had and, therefore, what she gave them. Talent. That was how her teachers in her new school described what she had and, therefore, what she was about to give them. It was, for all intents and purposes, magic. Quite a rare gift that made things happen, made people happy. By people, she meant her teachers. Who else?

Certainly not her father and mother and sister. There were more important things in life they needed to make happen. For example, her father needed to materialize a job. “You’re supposed to be the breadwinner!” her mother would say, and to him these words would sound like objective reality, condescension, or outright disrespect, depending on how many swigs he’d had that day. Each interpretation was dealt with accordingly. That’s the thing. He could get a job if he wanted to. He’d visit his buddies at the construction site (for beers, what else) and would, almost always, walk away employed. For the first three weeks the family ate well, slept well; life was kind, light, quiet. They weren’t exactly happy, but they weren’t miserable either. It was good enough, a little more than. No broken plates, bones, or egos.

And just like that the dream was over. Theirs was never a home because a home didn't expire. Her father would, once again, fall apart and hide; or be himself, his real self, sloughing off his pretend skin, leaving the rest of the family to pick up the pieces. Her mother would need to get it together, and her older sister too, what else could she do — to be fair they all needed to do just that. Life, perhaps, required a certain degree of talent to figure out, to survive. To thrive must be genius. Otherwise it's just a slow, pointless slog. A big dumb world peopled with dumb people peopling their own little dumb worlds. You could easily drown in it. Maybe losing was the only guarantee. Just look at her parents.

Then came the very dumb idea, this time from her mother, of living with her grandmother. The old woman was cranky and rheumatic, but at least she didn't starve. If there was any love in her for her two granddaughters, never mind her own *baghak* daughter, it didn't show and it didn't matter. At least she didn't starve. Which made the girl wonder, if this dark, rickety specimen managed to drag herself out of bed in the wee hours of the morning all the way to the wet market to haggle over *saba* and camote and brown sugar for her *turon* and banana cue— she even split individual bamboo sticks in half to maximize profit— why couldn't her own parents do anything remotely as productive? Her grandmother didn't thrive either, far from. But she didn't starve. Maybe in proximity that productivity was contagious and would rub off of her mother. It did drive her father away, the type allergic to work, so that's a start.

Living with the old woman made sense. The girl understood. One had to eat, and one could only take so much beating. What she didn't understand, or refused to (an otherwise solid intellect clouded by the characteristic myopia of youth) was why it had to be at her expense. So yes, this was a dumb idea. They had had to move. Far. Which meant for her a different school. Food on the table, but a different school. Now *she* had to start all over. Her new teachers (the ones who mattered) knew of her. She had been seen and heard and possibly adored in the tight-knit network of high achievers, that breed of Learner that defied the quicksand of a rotten education system, or at least hid it. Hid it by making everybody look good. What was that phrase parroted by the local officials at award ceremonies? "Poor but deserving." Deserving of what? Love? These students mattered here and now. They were bound to matter out there too, in the big, big world.

So far the girl hadn't mattered much in the new school. The school had said it was thrilled to have her, but what wasn't said, or wasn't said loud enough, was that it didn't have room for her. At junior year she was a tad too late, crashing a natural hierarchy that had long been solidified by the kids from the local elementary school. Everyone in his own place, sometimes by merit, often because people couldn't be bothered to budge. It didn't take the girl long to realize that. She had made friends, but she didn't win the class elections. Her chances at the student council didn't look golden either. Good luck getting valedictorian.

But this was her day. Hers and hers alone. Temporarily none of the losers, or losing in her life mattered.

Finally she heard the magic words: "Editorial Writing: English." That was her cue. Quickly she opened the main pocket of her imitation Adidas backpack to check for her favorite pen. The smaller pocket in front had a crooked zipper and wouldn't close. She understandably left it empty, but the gaping mouth looked wrong, ugly. Ms. Rona pointed it out one time, as if the girl needed reminding. Ms. Rona also suggested she got a new backpack, adding that the bottom was patched, the straps looked frayed—as if, as if.

The girl found the pen wedged between the pages of her favorite Nick Joaquin. It was a Parker, the cheapest most likely, gifted by her old principal. A reward for making her school proud. She always made them proud. She then zipped her bag up, hoisted it on one shoulder. She nodded at her trainer out of common courtesy; didn't wait for the teacher's sugary pep talk, and was off. A boy started walking beside her. She recognized him as the editor-in-chief from a rival school, a rival of her old school. He said "Hi" and she pretended not to hear, looking straight ahead. He was persistent, a valuable trait for a student journalist, but she found it invasive. He wore the gummy, frozen smile of an unscrupulous salesman. His voice annoyed her more.

"I remember you from last year. First place, regionals. I got third. Aren't you from San Carlos High?" His voice was uncomfortably upbeat and pitchy.

"Not anymore."

"Oh. Did you transfer?"

She glanced at him briefly. "What'd you think?" In a split second she took more of him in. He was a lot, like the human equivalent of a run-on sentence. She saw too many IDs,

including a large Student Press ID. His shirt pocket had three pens in it, red, black, and blue, even though the participants were required to use black ink only. In his right hand he carried three books. One of them was *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* with the cover facing outwards. All these extra trimmings just to prove a single, simplistic point.

“Wow. I was wondering why your uniform’s different. By the way, your old teammates were passing around their school paper entry. It was kind of cool. There’s this huge picture in front of the landslide in Payatas, kind of floating over the headline, if you know what I mean. Some say it could win best layout this year.”

She didn’t respond. She tried to walk faster, but his long legs effortlessly caught up.

“I would have included images of the victims, crying kids and mothers for... you know. But that’s just me. We decided to use the City Hall scandal indeed. Really cool. Good luck—uh, what’s your name again?”

Still no response.

“I’ll give you a copy of our paper, okay?” He proceeded to a different room. This time he didn’t walk. He jogged, each foot buoyed by an invisible spring every time it hit the gravelly ground, aligned in perfect choreography with the rest of his lanky frame. It amazed the girl how visually he signaled clutter and excess, but his movement was light. He must have even felt it.

When the girl entered her assigned room everything felt familiar. She was almost completely calm. She found a seat up front, telling herself she needed to hear what the proctor would have to say, even though she’d heard the same thing many times before. It’s funny how so many things never seemed to change. She took a quick glance at her immediate surroundings and was confronted with subdued chaos. The boy to her left was leafing through a newspaper. What for? The girl to her right made a quick sign of the cross. Again, what for? Her very own actions were automatic: favorite pen, yellow pad for the rough draft (a separate sheet was provided for the final), bag on the floor. That’s it. The competition itself only took an hour. The participants were given a prompt, some social issue they’re supposed to care or at least know about. As expected, the media’s obsession for the past couple of months came up. The girl was ready, she had written and memorized an essay beforehand.

It was the girl's idea. Ms. Rona... well. She would, once in a while, show up in the mutilated room that passed for the school paper "headquarters." It said so right there on the door, in glittery Styrofoam letters: "The Vanguard HQ." As if. It used to be a regular-sized classroom, until the chess club needed their own space for important meetings and such, when the wood paneling went up. Besides, it was compellingly argued, who else but by the chess club adviser, the school paper didn't have that many people anyway. There were enough for all the titles on the editorial board, but only three regularly showed up. The girl, who was automatic editor-in-chief upon her arrival thanks to her impressive track record in her old school; and two other kids whose diligence was overshadowed by their inability to win awards. They might have worked hard, they might even have talent, but what good was that if they didn't win awards. They certainly could use some training, this was a school after all. But Ms. Rona...well.

Ms. Rona occasionally showed up on their side of the partition to hand the girl newspapers and a journalism book for practice. Pretty much she left the kid alone, which made even her wonder which she hated more: being trainer, or being trainer to this kid. This kid who never talked. Or smiled. Or saw anything or anyone beyond the yellow rectangle of her ubiquitous note pad that housed words, very big words bereft of honest thought. Scribbling away in search of artificial wisdom to prove a single, simplistic point: *I am deserving*. It looked to Ms. Rona like the girl was sweet-talking her way to a sweet life. The question was who she was trying to convince. The trick, the con, whatever it was, it made her uncomfortable to see. Where was the wild joy, the artlessness, the unguarded stupidity for which youth deserved unconditional forgiveness? This was a school after all.

So Ms. Rona, what else could she do? She would linger in the room for a moment, realizing how bad it looked to leave right away; but she knew, the girl knew it was all empty ceremony. That's it.

When the girl won — for she most definitely would, that lead alone was a killer — she wouldn't be alone. That's the thing. This business of winning, how strange, almost nonsensical. Yet utterly predictable. When you won, everybody won with you. But if you lost, that's on you and no one else. Maybe that's why one detested losing. It wasn't just that you weren't good enough. After all, could one ever be good enough? Just look at her parents, her

trainer, possibly every adult ever. More than anything it had to be the exclusion, the invisible wall that erected itself around you and warped who and where you were in the world. Say you managed to chip a hole in the wall, the littlest of holes, and you shriveled up to fit through. Over and over you did that, so much so that if you shrank any further, you'd disappear altogether. Nobody'd ask where you went. There was always someone to fill that space you were sorry you left behind. Like an assembly line of fools they kept coming. It was a miserable way to be, to never actually be.

Still, she'd choose winning over anything else. Over anything else including what her parents were doing. Trying. Some well-meaning fool would come along and convince you it was good enough. But trying wasn't winning. Winning was winning, period.

The girl waited until there were ten minutes to spare before turning in her work. The proctor didn't even look up and merely held out his hand. Done, done, done. She was outside in a flash. Did she do it again this time of course she did. She knew it, she felt it. Of course, of course, of course. But she was nervous, now she's nervous. It was almost lunch time, and as she headed back to the roofed court, she caught the growing traffic of students coming in to recongregate with their trainers and one another. Friends and competition mixed and milled about. Above the lively chatter an announcement was heard on the PA system about the distribution of free lunches. How very generous of the host school. She was making her way across the maze of plastic chairs and warm bodies when a familiar voice called her name. She turned. It was her former trainer, Mrs. Alcalá.

She would have moved on, but that would have been rude, too obviously rude. Mrs. Alcalá knew she saw her. The old woman smiled; why, the girl didn't know. She didn't think she was happy to see her. Why would she be? The last time they spoke, the last time she was in San Carlos to get her report card and other records, when she told her about the transfer, Mrs. Alcalá didn't look happy. In fact, Mrs. Alcalá didn't look like Mrs. Alcalá at all. The delicately wrinkled face was gone and in its place was nothing. No one. If she had been wearing a mask she must have evaporated along with it. "Oh," she said in response to the girl's news. Another "Oh" when the girl, half-apologetically explained that it was a sudden decision by her parents. She didn't ask where the girl was going, or how she and her family were holding up. The "Oh" was a crisp, clean sound, but it communicated nothing.

“So you’re with that school now.” She sat on a chair with her legs crossed, quite regal and seemingly immune to the noise and activity around her. Beside her was another chair where her purse was. It was black leather with a gold buckle. The girl remembered that purse. It was the teacher’s favorite.

“Yes, Ma’am.” She looked around for an empty chair, and finding none, remained standing.

“That’s okay.” The girl marveled at the teacher’s (newfound?) ability to say nothing. She didn’t know what to say herself. She caught sight of the glinting buckle and was mesmerized for an instant.

“Have you seen our paper?” Mrs. Alcala took the copy resting on her lap and gave it to the girl who immediately rolled it up. “Thank you. I will read it later.”

“They say it could win best layout.”

“So I heard.”

“Good luck to us. God willing. We worked very hard on it. By the way, are you the only contestant from your school?”

“Yes.”

“What about your paper? Did it qualify?”

“No.”

“That’s okay. There’s always a next time.”

“Yes.”

“When you left, I made Mylene the editor-in-chief. You remember Mylene? She used to do features. You weren’t around so I tried her on editorial. I didn’t know she had the talent for it. Too bad she couldn’t come here.”

“Why?” The girl forced herself to ask the question. Not because she wanted to know. She wanted to know, but maybe not for the purest reasons. In her young dark heart she prayed some evil or bad luck had struck her former classmate, whom she secretly referred to as her “bridesmaid”; a tragedy that would redeem her, salvage her from the web of her parents’ miserable and costly stupidity. A broken leg, dengue, a dead parent—she would take anything! Was she nothing but a pawn, a clueless victim of nonsensical fate and cruel circumstance? Who was she, and where?

“Oh, you didn’t know. She’s in Japan now on an exchange program. She and that boy from — Anyway, when you left, you see, they had this program and Dr. Lera decided the school should join. Remember him, our principal? We chose Mylene and she made it. She’ll be staying in Japan for a year. Just recently she joined an essay contest in her school and won. I mean, the Japanese don’t know English. Not as well as we do. So of course, she won. And the prizes! She received cash, *lapad*, and a trip to Canada. All-expense paid.”

“Wow.”

“I get jealous too when I think about it. I emailed her to ask if she could bring me along. I was kidding, of course.”

“Of course.” And for sure they had a good laugh about it, just as loud as the one the girl now heard in her head. So loud, so obnoxiously loud. To her old teacher-trainer-school paper adviser, carefully undoing her expensive-looking bag-buckle for something important, or not — to her she must have politely said good-bye. Or not. Just walked away. Or bawled right there and then where she stood rigid, right in the thick of a curious human drama effectively concealed from the Eyes above by a massive aluminum roof.

* * * * *

“The Wailing Trees”

by Amanda Savira

They would come at night. But lives still moved in cycles.

Cicadas crooned from afar. A warning. Sing of the death. The rotten smell of giant rafflesia was soft compared to the scent of succulent vegetation and moist soil. Amidst the shivering leaves, a glow of emerald blue glimmered in the lake. The king of crows perched on the branch, its darkening eyes gazed upon a tapir whose mouth was sipping the water. A vehicle groaned, repelling a flock of birds under a pale full moon.

And when their ears perked to the blaring of a ferocious tool, it would be too late.

A series of laughs echoed. Syahrizal lowered his body close to the soil. He was small enough to disguise himself amidst the bushes. Once, the earth warmed his nostrils with lush vegetation, but now the air filled with white rice arrack, its smell sharp and sour as citrusy. The roaring saw pierced into a tree. It wailed as it fell.

"We must tell the others, Pan," whispered Syahrizal. The tiger beside him only brushed his head to the boy's arm. "These people are destroying our home."

Behind the pair, the fireflies gleamed under the sunless sky. They glided across the rustling trees, amber and gold. Slowly, the light of dawn swallowed them.

Then, it all stilled.

The cries of the dead trees remained unheard.

Until a boy came to the village headman, the uproar of the folks thundered across the village.

The folks' cry reached the outsiders. A newscast reported a question hanging in the air: Shouldn't the forest be protected to preserve the ecosystem in the area? None of them answered. The sun scorched down the village folks with no trees protecting them. And they would come again at night– the grim reapers of the forest.

“Teach me how to shift.”

Juru barked a sharp laugh. A mockery of Syahrizal's bravery. “You're too young, boy. The power will consume you.”

A shot of fire blared across Syahrizal's skin. His whole body shook out of fury. He wanted to spit out the words, but his tongue prevented it. Juru was merely a grandsire. He could barely even stand without a cane. It would be selfish to lash out at him. But Syahrizal was frustrated. It must've been the heat. Or the sweat that prickled on the back of his head. “I will not let them get away.”

“Then do it,” said Juru. It sounded like a challenge. “Do not let them roam in the forest. You have a tiger on your side.”

“No.”

Juru raised both of his eyebrows. “No?”

The flaming blaze across Syahrizal's skin slowly dissipated. He thought of Pan; his delicate patterned fur and amber eyes often widened whenever they met amidst the sighing trees. They had been together since newborns– a cub and a human child. A peculiar pair who grew old together as if they shared a bond by blood. Syahrizal was fond of Pan rather than his other peers, who often mocked him for spending time with a tiger rather than with boys his age.

They shared their most intimate moments; their first walk on earth, their first fallen tears, their first wounds. The tiger comforted him when Syahrizal distanced himself from the other folks on the day his parents were buried deep into the ground. Syahrizal would also be

the first human to repel the hunters who dared to hurt Pan. They would run and laugh against the cool breeze; each sound echoed over the branch, warming the earth. The soil would feel soft against their bodies as they lay, and the cicadas welcomed their presence as they went deep into the forest.

Pan was his family. And Syahrizal would be damned if he let the humans take him.

"I don't want them to hurt him," murmured Syahrizal.

Juru let out a sigh. "I cannot teach you, even if I want to."

"You can't?"

"Yes," said Juru, "You might have the blood of mantiger, but it is no magic. One must lay on the soil to turn into a beast. There's no other way."

Syahrizal scowled. "I've tried it a few times, but nothing changed."

"Then it's not time yet."

A crow perched on a branch, head tilting in curiosity. Far away, a tiger roared into the sky. The night would soon come.

The faint noise of roaring saw awakened Syahrizal. He would not let it go this time.

Syahrizal had to watch over his steps to not disturb those deep in slumber. The night breeze hissed into his ears. Under the gleaming moon, he found himself shivering against thin clothing. He stole Juru's old keris and sheathed it on his hip. He was no killer, but the weapon was only to instill fear.

As Syahrizal darted into the forest, he heard loud steps following him. He drew his keris, but it was only Pan, sitting above the soil and staring at him with eyes wide.

"Pan," Syahrizal heaved a sigh, "Why are you here?"

The tiger approached him. He snuggled under Syahrizal's touch. It made the inside of his stomach churn. "You shouldn't come with me. I don't want you to get hurt."

Syahrizal beckoned the tiger to leave him. "Go away." The tiger remained still near him. "Please, it's dangerous."

No matter how many times Syahrizal attempted to repel the tiger, he wouldn't leave his place. "Don't interfere," demanded Syahrizal, but the tiger only tilted his head.

The smoke of cigarettes reached his nostrils as he crept close to the men. There were four transporters and one truck to transport the felled trees. Syahrizal hid behind the bushes, hand trembling as he touched the hilt of his keris. Pan was far from his side, amber eyes watching him. Quiet and still as stone.

The men were startled as Syahrizal rose from his hiding. His trembling hand drew a keris and pointed it at them, but he steeled his expression as their eyes met. At the sight of Syahrizal, a few men held their breath. One barked a mocking laugh.

"What are you gonna do with it, boy?" snarled a man with crooked yellow teeth. He was enormous. Syahrizal was an ant compared to him. "No one even uses keris these days!"

The others seemed to ease. Even some of them shared a snicker. Syahrizal was shivering terribly. But he stood straight. Chin held high as he said, "You're not welcome here."

"And? What about it?"

Their laughs echoed. It sounded like a hive of bees in Syahrizal's ears. A pair of amber eyes still watched, irises darkened like the fall of dusk. The human skin finally met the earth. Fur grew, and canines sharpened. The crows flew away as the first scream deafened the forest.

No one would dare to step into the forest ever since. A folk would whisper tales about a boy and the tiger, but no one seemed to know the truth. Only a grandsire would smile as the story reached his ears.

Once barren, the forest was finally lush with vegetation after years had passed. And the lives of the forest remained undisturbed.

However, another would still appear at night. Three sweat-soaked figures this time. Unknown to the pair of flaming eyes watching them, their doom would soon come.

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“The Saigon Case”

by Randall Peffer

Jaco Dasilva has betrayal and Vietnam on his mind when he finally finds his old man.

His dad Manny is swearing over a Porsche engine at the back of what Manny calls the “chop shop.” It’s a garage for building racecars. The man in the grease-stained jumpsuit is sipping Brazilian cane liquor out of a coffee mug as he fights with a stuck fuel injector. The harmonies of *Earth, Wind & Fire* blare from a speaker somewhere in the shop. Except for a halogen work light where Manny is working, the shop is in shadows. It is a cold and violet November evening in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

“I’ve been thinking about Vietnam, Dad.” Jaco drops onto a stack of Dunlop racing slicks.

“You weren’t even born then.”

“But you were there.”

His father’s shoulders stiffen, his mustache twitches. “You hear me bragging about it?”

“No.”

Thin and wiry, Manny rubs the gray stubble on his chin, stares out across the dimly-lit shop where a half-dozen Porsches and BMWs sit in pieces. He grabs a pack of Merits from a workbench, taps out a cigarette, lights it with a Zippo. His hand is a little shaky.

“Dad?”

“Look, Kid, I didn’t massacre anyone, if that’s what you’re asking.” He’s defensive. He says he was just a dumb kid in a soldier suit who they told to watch out for the boys on liberty. “I was an MP, military police, for Christ’s sake. In Saigon. And not for all that long.”

Jaco looks at his father’s face. It’s a dark olive with the grooves of a man entering his seventies. The question that Jaco has been stifling most of his life tears at his vocal cords.

“I found some old pictures today.” He lays out the photos of a woman on the workbench next to a vice. “Did you have a girl over there?”

His father stares at the photos. Jaco can hear cars growling along the interstate two blocks away.

There’s a picture of a young Vietnamese woman dancing on a bar. She is wearing nothing but a G-string. She has a warm smile for the camera, bright eyes, flowing black hair, a golden body. In a second picture it’s dark. She’s in a yellow dress, standing in some kind of native boat, waving. In the third photo she’s swinging in a hammock in a room somewhere, wearing a Red Sox baseball shirt. She’s smiling that smile again with her eyes lit up and full of tenderness.

The pictures that Jaco has been trying to forget about for years reappeared today. They fell out of their hiding places this afternoon when he was thumbing through his father’s photo album of a tour in Saigon, 1970-71, with a military police battalion. His mother has been dead from lung cancer for more than six months, and his father has refused to sort through her things. He just works and drinks. He won’t face anything at all in the bedroom of the house on Alma St. where they slept together for about fifty years. He told his son to deal with her stuff if he could.

It has taken a while, but today Jaco has had enough of ghosts. This afternoon he started sorting and packing up some of the things haunting his dad. They are the hallmarks of memories sending his father into the cane liquor and what Brazilian Americans like Manny call *saudade*, inexpressible longing. During the cleanup, Jaco found the war album on a closet shelf, started leafing through it. He discovered the hidden pictures again. Felt the old horror.

“Well, Dad ... a girl?”

* * *

DISCOVERY

They had been hidden for decades, the three pictures of the woman that his father now holds in his right hand. Jaco had found them as a kid in his father’s photo album of Vietnam ... and tried to push them out of his mind until today. But knowing about the pictures of that Vietnamese woman have made him feel dirty and complicit for decades. They made him

think about sleazy sex, his father, and the betrayal of his mother every time someone mentioned Vietnam.

The photos of the woman were tucked behind other color prints with captions like “Ben Thanh Market stalls,” “Old mahjong players by Saigon Zoo,” “Chinese opium dealers in a Cholon alley.” There was a grainy picture of GIs swilling beer in the shade of a C-130’s wing. His father’s handwriting identified the scene. “Tan Son Nhat Airfield.”

Watching his father fumble with the old photos, Jaco feels his bowels freezing. He’s an assistant prosecutor for Bristol County on the south coast of Massachusetts. He always gets this tightening in the presence of evidence and the scent of crime. This one isn’t like the murder and drug cases he’s been prosecuting, maybe not even something illegal under the law. But his guts tell him there is a crime none-the-less. A Moral violation. A felony of the heart. It’s an offense that has sullied his hard-ass father, the Brazilian-born racecar mechanic. He senses a dereliction that might be key to his father’s night terrors and his own. His father has been drinking himself into a coma since his mother died.

And what about him, the veteran soldier’s son? Is he any less wounded, working on his law briefs until two in the morning most nights ... until he’s seeing double, guzzling cold coffee and Mylanta. Is it any wonder that his only friends are other prosecutors and the cops he works with? Is it surprising his idea of entertainment is listening to a crime blog on his phone while driving home from work? And what about his ex? Kara dumped him four months ago. She called him a train-wreck of a man and pronounced their relationship “The Case of the Missing Boyfriend.”

Maybe it’s because he found those pictures when he was eleven-years-old that they burn him. Before he found them, he couldn’t imagine his father loving anyone but his mother, couldn’t picture his father as anything except Manny the Brave. He couldn’t conceive of his dad having a secret life. Until the pictures. They made him feel ashamed of his father, ashamed of himself, too, for never confronting his old man or telling his mother.

He is feeling guilt by association and more than twenty-five years of holding an ugly secret inside. Now he’s over thirty-five with no home, but his father’s. He has no woman, but the ghost of his mother. He has no life beyond an obsessive search for justice that began in

sixth grade when he ratted out the kids gaming a soda machine at the YMCA for free Coke.
Yeah, no freaking life at all.

But a man can hope.

If only he didn't have this longing for the purity that was his mother, didn't have this anger at his father and himself. If only he didn't have the weird sense that with the airing of these photos he's putting them both on trial.

* * *

OPENING STATEMENTS

"Her name was Thien," his father says in a low voice. "She was a refugee from the fighting up north. She had been a school teacher. She had a place in Cholon. Up the Ben Nghe Channel in Chinatown."

"Oh."

"Just a kid. So was I. It was a different time. We thought any day we would be sitting in a bar or walking down the street and a bomb or a sniper would take us out. We wanted to live a little before we died. Can you understand that?"

"Were you in love?"

His father leans back against a silver Porsche, rubs his neck with the fingers from both his hands, smokes.

"She was poor and homeless when she got to Saigon. She wasn't there a week before the pimps were on her like flies and had her trussed up in a bra and G-string, hustling tricks in a bar."

"You were one of her johns?"

"I missed your mother. I wanted a woman to make me feel like everything was going to be okay again. And I wanted to take her off the street. That picture of the girl dancing on the bar. I took it the day I met Thien."

"Did you live with her?"

"A few months. She had a one-room flat. The army didn't feature that sort of thing. But they knew what was happening. There were a lot of couples like us in Cholon. It had been going on for so long when I got there, you could see many of the GIs' kids in the streets. They spoke English."

“What happened?” He keeps firing these questions like he has the old man on the stand.

“I got new orders. To the Philippines.”

The war was going badly. Someone up top decided GIs fraternizing with the locals was out of control. The press had started to write about the hooch girls and the Army didn't like the heat. They decided to pull the plug on all the love nests. Coming off duty one night, a sergeant major grabbed Manny and a bunch of other MPs who were “shacking up” with local women.

“He said, ‘You got orders. Go to the barracks, pack up your gear and get on the bus to the airport.’ Just like that, we were history. No chance to say goodbye.”

“You never saw her again?”

The mechanic gets a wet look in his eyes. “We always told each other live for today.”

He sent her his checks for a few months, but he never heard from her. He felt the loss, unbelievable *saudade*. He hoped she had found someone new. And then he never looked back.

“I don't believe that,” says Jaco. “You kept these pictures for a reason. You're not over Vietnam. Not over Thien.”

“Let me take you out for a big plate of *moqueca*....”

“Dad, *Cristo Salvador*, I don't want stew. I want to go to Vietnam ... with you.”

The father bolts up out of his slouch. “Are you crazy?”

“Don't you see?”

“See what?”

“This may be *our* chance.”

“For what?”

“To put the mistakes, the *saudade*, and the guilt behind us. From the war and everything else.”

“I love you, son. I'd throw myself in front of a bus for you. But ten fucking soccer teams couldn't drag me back to that country. It's the land of the dead.”

“And this isn't?”

* * *

THE PROSECUTION'S CASE

"How in hell did you ever get me to do this?" The old warrior's face is pale, leaking sweat as he emerges through the fog of air-conditioning fuming from the doorway of the Airbus into the evening heat and humidity of the jetway at Tan Son Nhat Airport. Ho Chi Minh City. Formerly Saigon.

He feels the tension in his father's voice. He wonders if threatening to move out of his father's house on Alma St. unless his dad came to Vietnam might possibly be the lowest, meanest stunt he has ever pulled. But then he remembers why he is here. The trial must go on. Hiding the crime has not worked. *Look at the two of us. We're a mess.*

At the immigration desk a young agent, who seems to be wearing a Red Army uniform, glares at Manny Dasilva for a full ten seconds before stamping his passport and visa. The soldier's look is nothing short of toxic.

"*Cho de, thang my,*" he says, mostly to himself, through clenched teeth as he waves the Dasilvas off toward customs.

"*Cho chet, Charlie.*" Manny tosses back.

The soldier bristles.

"What the hell was that about?" asks the son.

"He called me an American bastard."

Jaco is looking at his father, a little in wonder that the guy understands a bit of Vietnamese.

"Maybe we killed his father or bombed his mother." His father shrugs.

"What did you say to him, Dad?"

"Fuck you, Charlie."

Jaco winces.

"What's the matter?"

"Christ, Dad. You want to get us shot?"

"Something about this place always kind of punched my buttons."

* * *

On the cab ride from the airport to center city, he has a thousand questions for his father. Does Saigon look the same? Does he feel something knotting in his stomach, too? Did Thien live near here?

But he can't find his voice. And his father doesn't want to talk. He stares out the window. He watches waves of teenagers on motorbikes part around the taxi as it plows its way through the traffic on a boulevard lined with shop houses, street vendors, hundreds upon hundreds of billboards, and signs heralding deals on flat-screen TVs, diapers, cell phones, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. The air throbs with the constant honking of motorbike horns. It's as if all the drivers are signaling each other in some inscrutable code.

"I was just thinking," says his father. "We came here to bury some ghosts, right?"

"Where do you want to start?"

Manny hesitates. "How about the scene of the crime?"

* * *

Of all the rat holes in Saigon, he can't believe this one is where his father wants to start his search for a little peace of mind. It's a dark "lady bar" called Popeye's on Nguyen Trai St. in Cholon. The place that his father calls twenty-square blocks of street vendors, *can sa* dealers, chicken shit, and chaos.

"They used to call this place the Shady Baby," says his father, looking around. "It don't look all that different than it used to."

The bar's nearly empty except for four young women dressed in look-alike red vests and minis, playing pool to the rhythm of Lady Gaga's "Alejandro." A young man eyes the Americans from behind the bar. He's thick-chested, buzz cut, filling a bottle of Baileys Irish Cream with a blend of water, coffee, and milk. No doubt this is what the women order when the Johns buy them drinks.

* * *

THE DEFENSE'S CASE

It's after nine o'clock at night, and they still haven't checked into a hotel. He's jet-lagged, doesn't want even a sip from the third can of Tiger beer that his father has ordered for him. He doesn't see what his dad's getting out of this place. Three of the young women are fondling Japanese businessmen on couches in an alcove. Another young woman is playing pool by

herself, bending over the table and flashing her booty, in a way that someone has obvious told her looks provocative. The veteran's mind seems to be drifting as he listens to the stereo filling the room with riffs from Springsteen's "Dancing in the Dark."

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"I think we need to score someplace to sleep."

Manny has not stopped staring at the young woman playing pool.

"Earth to Dad?"

His father ignores him, motions to the bartender. "How much for that girl?"

"One hour, fifty dollars," the guy says in English.

"How much for the night?"

"One hundred US."

The pool player has been listening. She must understand English, because she puts down her cue stick and comes over to the bar. She presses a hand on the Manny's thigh.

Jaco looks at his father. *Where the hell's this going?*

"Unh uh, no. *Khong, nguoi dep,*" Manny says to her. "No. Okay?" He slides her hand off his leg. "What's your name?"

She's slender, with small hips. Her ruby lipstick, eye shadow, and liner can't mask her youth and inexperience. She can't be more than eighteen or twenty.

"Linh Hue."

"She give you good loving," says the bartender. "She fresh from country."

Manny spins away from the young woman. "Nobody fucking asked you, Charlie."

Three thugs at the door are watching, one has his hand in his jacket pocket, maybe fishing for a weapon.

Jaco grabs his father's elbow. "Come on, Dad."

Manny shakes off his son's hand, reaches into the pocket of his jeans, comes out with a wad of cash. He peels off five twenty-dollar bills, throws them down on the bar, one after the other. "I want the girl."

The bartender swipes up the money, laughs. "Fuck you, American."

"What?"

“Too bad. Change of plan. Girl no go.”

“Please ... take me out.” Her voice strains with stress.

The bartender sneers at the Americans and the young woman, says something harsh to her in Vietnamese. “You go now, old man.”

The bouncers from the door are starting to move in on the two Americans and the girl.

“We’ve got to get out of here.” Jaco feels something like a growl rising in his throat.

“Go now, American pigs.”

“*Cho chet*, Charlie.”

“Go.”

The thugs have the three of them surrounded. The young woman tightens her grip on Manny’s arm.

“Dad, come on.” He has never wanted so much to just bolt from a place.

But the racecar mechanic, the ex-MP, won’t let up. He grows erect, suddenly looking decades younger and fitter, as he points a finger into the bartender’s face. “This girl, she’s just a child. Someone ought to cut off your balls for what you’re doing to these children.”

“Please,” the young woman’s eyes flash between Manny and Jaco, “I go with you.”

“She stay here.” One of the muscle guys pulls a .45.

Jaco’s father looks at the weapon for a second, smiles, pushes it aside with the back of his hand. “Not on your life.” He shoulders past the tough guys and leads the young woman and his son out the door.

* * *

“Have you gone crazy, Dad? You could have gotten us shot in there.” There’s a shrill note to his voice as the three of them pile into the back of a cab. The sharp scent of the girl’s perfume parries the odor of smoke as his father lights up.

“Relax, kid, nobody was going to get hurt.”

“That guy had a gun in your face.”

“It wasn’t loaded.”

“What?”

“He was trying to cover the bottom of the grip with his hand. I could see his piece had no clip in it. These whoremongers know that if they really were to light up one of their cannons, no amount of bribes could stop the cops from shutting them down.”

“Damn.”

He looks at Linh Hue sitting between him and his father, can't recall when she started holding onto his arm with both hands.

“The question is,” asks his father, “what the hell are we going to do with Little Red Riding Hood?”

“Maybe you looking for friend,” she says.

You have no idea, thinks Jaco.

“We need a place to sleep,” says his father.

* * *

It's after eleven o'clock in the morning, the day dripping with heat, when the Dasilvas and Linh Hue emerge from their hotel on Dong Khoi, bleary-eyed, yawning but determined to face off with the center of Ho Chi Minh City that everyone still seems to call Saigon. She leads them to the garment vendor's stalls on one of the side streets surrounding the Ben Thanh Market because Manny is insisting on buying her some decent clothes. Jaco likes the easy way she has with the merchants as she plays with their stuffed animals. She barter and teases and coaxes them into letting her try on all manner of jeans and shirts and shoes.

“What you think?” she asks him after emerging from behind a six-foot-high stack of T-shirts with a huge smile on her face. She spreads her arms like “Tad ah, check out the new me.”

“Jesus,” he says.

She looks young and happy, standing there in a mango tank top and skinny jeans, clutching a stuffed panda bear to her chest. Her black hair glistens from her recent shower.

“Now we find old friend you looking for.” Without make-up and lipstick her face glows.

* * *

It's noon when she leads them into a used foreign-language bookstore that Manny half-remembers. Five minutes later sobs are tumbling from an old woman's throat, and she is

clutching Manny. She's squeezing him so hard that sweat stains bloom on their clothes where their bodies touch.

Unnerved by the display of emotion, the customers in the bookshop withdraw from their browsing nooks and bolt out into the heat of the city. Jaco stands in a corner of the store with Linh Hue, near the American crime novels. He tries not to look at her as his father's attempting to comfort the old woman in his arms.

But he peeks at her, if only out of the corner of his eye.

Linh Hue has her hands pressed palm-to-palm beneath her chin, eyes closed as if she's praying. He wonders if she's feeling as freaked out by this scene as he is. She has led him and his father to this person, helped them find her today. Her name is Hong. During the American War here, she was a young woman who assisted her mother running this bookshop. Manny and Thien were "regulars." Now she's an old lady. A bit heavy, with immense jade pendants dangling from her ears, a wrinkled cotton jersey, baggy skirt.

"I worry you dead," Hong says in English, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Maybe I should be." Manny breaks from his hug with her, looks around with wild eyes. "This country. We had no business I have no goddamn business"

She takes his hand, says something softly to him in Vietnamese and pulls him back into an embrace.

Manny's eyes start to tear up as he squeezes them shut.

Jaco feels Linh Hue's gaze trying to read him. He turns away to study the titles of novels on a nearby shelf, grabs a worn copy of *The Quiet American*, and starts reading the first page. He's trying to distract himself from the drama playing out between these war survivors, to distract himself from their whispers in Vietnamese, when he sees his father pulling back and looking into the old woman's eyes.

"I can't do it," he says. "Not that."

"Please," she says. "You try?"

* * *

THE DEFENDANT TESTIFIES

“What the hell just happened, Dad?” The harsh tone in his own voice surprises him. It makes Linh Hue take two steps backwards as they exit the bookshop into the afternoon sun. It’s not his prosecuting attorney’s voice. This is different. It sounds defensive, agitated. Criminal.

“Un-fucking-believable.”

“What?”

“Hong knows where Thien is. She still comes into the shop.”

“But how ...?”

“*Dem dem lam nho khong gian*”

“What?”

“It’s from a Vietnamese poem called ‘*Buon Dem Mua, Sad Rainy Night.*’” Manny closes his eyes, recites, “Night after night do you not remember the time ...”

“You’re losing me here.”

His father says that one day when he and Thien came into Hong’s bookshop in 1971, looking for something to read, Hong told Thien about this beautiful poem for lovers and gave her a copy.

“Thien fell for the poem. She translated it and taped it to the wall over our bed. She used to sing the poem softly in my ear as she rubbed my back during the rainy nights of the monsoon. I wish I could remember how it goes.”

Linh Hue, who has been standing in the shade of a building and listening intently has a far-away look on her face.

She says something in Vietnamese and Manny smiles.

“That’s it. She knows the poem,” he says.

“Many Vietnamese girl know.” She looks at Jaco with deep, black eyes and launches into the poem in her broken English. “Listen, you, to hear our heavy sky, heavy sorrow. Listen to hiding soul ...”

“Do you know the central post office?” his father asks her.

“It long walk.”

“We can take a cyclo.” Manny steps to the curb, hails a bicycle rickshaw.

“Jesus, Dad, now what?”

The veteran’s face is streaming sweat. “May your mother forgive me.”

* * *

CLOSING ARGUMENTS

“Holy Mary Mother of God,” he hears his father mutter. It’s mid-afternoon. He and his father have been sitting on a bench in the central Saigon post office for more than a half an hour. Now Manny bolts to his feet. He has a bouquet of roses in his hands.

Two women have just emerged from a doorway leading to the administrative offices. One is Linh Hue. The other looks like she could be her older sister. There is style, vigor, and primal beauty in this woman wearing the traditional Vietnamese tunic, a light pink *ao dai*. Both women approach with poise, confidence. But it is clear that they have been crying ... their hands brushing their cheeks as smiles begin to spread on their faces.

Still ten yards away, the older woman stretches out her arms to Manny. And he’s doing the same to her, offering her the roses, catching her smile, dropping his jaw like a teenager welcoming his prom date as she sails into his life.

“Holy Mary,” he says again.

“Holy goddamn Mary,” she says, still smiling, as if this phrase is some sort of private language they share. “Holy goddamn Mary, man.”

She takes the flowers, smelling them as she folds herself into his arms. Then they are hugging. Not desperate, fearful, embarrassed clutching like Jaco witnessed in the bookshop. This is a waltzing embrace. Complete with screaming and shrieking and howling joy. Patrons are stopping, staring. Someone starts clapping. Then hundreds of people are clapping. A few Westerners, many Vietnamese. They are bearing witness.

* * *

THE VERDICT

“She still love him,” says Linh Hue moving close to Jaco. She’s beaming that broad smile of hers again, front teeth perfectly formed, gleaming white. Her eyes crinkle with faith and hope the way his mother’s did. “She always waiting. Fifty year.”

He’s thinking about his mother and knows he should be having mixed feelings about his father’s faithlessness to the saint named Carol who waited back home during the war.

Carol, who later bore baby boy Jaco Francis Dasilva, who smiled at him and his father as if they were something more than works in progress. But all he can do is feel a shadow rising off the tough, old, racecar mechanic. Off himself. He imagines his mother in the crowd cheering for her boys ... for these women here, too. He wants to ask God and his mother if this person in his father's arms is the angel who can save his dad, heal that hole that his mother left in his own heart. And what about Linh Hue, the rescued who rescues?

* * *

SENTENCING

"Isn't there a church next door?" he asks.

"Cathedral of the Weeping Virgin," says Linh Hue.

"I don't understand."

She says that in 2005 thousands of people rallied around the statue of the virgin in front of the cathedral after reports that the statue was seen crying. "It was big deal."

"Why was she crying?" It's a dumb question. Like who knows? *It's a statue, pal.* But for some reason he has to ask.

"People say she cry for the dead."

He thinks of his mother, the virgin's crucified son, the Buddhist monks who burned themselves alive to protest the killing in this country. The more than five million soldiers and civilians who died before Vietnam could be free. And he thinks of the miracle of the woman breathing life into his father right now at the post office. The miracle of the young woman offering him a her smile.

"I really think I need to pray."

Linh Hue nods, presses her palms together as she had in the bookshop. She closes her eyes, bows her head as if she is asking Buddha or Jesus or both of them for direction.

"Then maybe we get ice cream, okay?" she asks at last. "You like coconut?"

The lilt in her voice sounds promising.

He hopes that a trial is coming to a close today. With a smile on a woman's face. A prayer for the dead. The taste of coconut ice cream.

* * * * *

“In Her Memories”

by Prathyush Devadas

The year was 1975. The Khmer Rouge had seized power in the Southeast Asian nation of Cambodia from the Khmer Republic in April, kickstarting the days of one of the most authoritarian and genocidal regimes known to mankind.

The sun loomed over the horizon in Kratié Province, receding as if hesitantly into oblivion as dusk embarked. Anchaly waved the sickle monotonously, beads of sweat profusely running down his temple. “Isn’t today’s harvest quota achieved, Akara?” he whispered in the ears of a lady wearing a *krama*, a traditional Cambodian bandanna. “Work is only over when our bosses say so. Stop talking. They notice,” she muttered, bringing her index finger to her lips. Anchaly slightly bobbed his head up while in his leaned in posture to survey his surroundings. Officials of the Khmer Rouge, the Angkar, were trotting up and down the paddy field, playfully wielding canes. Some time later, a shriek resounded over the field. The workers continued their labour without batting an eyelid like programmed humanoids as Anchaly wiggled on the ground, groaning in pain. His back had evidently been at the receiving end of a forceful blow from a short man with a twirled moustache and a cap with an embossed badge. “Are you born of a tortoise or is it that you were always this slow?” jeered the imposing figure. Anchaly woke up slowly, wincing, as he managed to weakly mumble, “sorry, sir.” When the officer walked away, Akara smiled at Anchaly, saying “Don’t worry. Newcomers never fare well. In no time, though, they learn to surf through the tide.” An hour later, the dinner bells went off. Almost each and every worker on the field straightened their backs and put on a smile. It was the happiest part of the day for most of them, relatively.

Anchaly wiped the sweat off his forehead and let out a sigh of relief. "I'll teach you how to cut properly tomorrow," mused Akara.

"Thanks," Anchaly replied, failing to hide his embarrassment.

"It's ok, my friend. No one is born a labourer."

* * *

That night, Anchaly found a spot between the roots of a huge banyan for resting.

"Damn," he swore as he tugged at his face and torso. "This is uncomfortable."

After some more efforts, a face mask and a skin dress that went all the way up to his neck came off.

"This was a mistake," Anchaly told himself, his blonde hair gleaming in the moonlight, "Ending up in these rotten times."

From a pocket within the inner surface of the skin dress, he took out an almost paper-thin mobile phone. As he opened an application, a dialog box popped up and displayed, "362 days, 20 hours, 5 minutes and 7 seconds."

* * *

The next morning, when daylight struck, the paddy field was again swarmed by teeming swathes of sickle-wielding workers. The melodious chirps of birds from afar and the rude growls of officers were superimposed. Anchaly scanned the landscape gravely, mentally preparing to face the day.

"Hey!" A man exclaimed after seeing Anchaly. He got an uneasy stare in response.

"My name is Acharya. I haven't seen you around here before," the man spoke again, breaking the silence. "Where are you from?"

"I hail from Krong Kampot."

"That explains it," the man remarked, before turning away and putting his sickle to work.

"Akara," Anchaly exclaimed, seeing her red *krama* from afar. "Good day."

“Good day,” Akara replied, panting, “I’m late.”

“You said you were going to teach me something.”

“Yes.”

Akara brought her sickle to the base of a crop and explained, “your thumb should be pointing upwards while holding the stem. Like...this,” Anchaly stood attentively, watching her demonstration.

* * *

Many hours later, Anchaly and Akara found themselves drinking a bowl of soup in the communal dining hall. “Come with me after you finish eating,” Akara muttered. Anchaly nodded slightly.

The two walked half a mile before reaching the banks of a river. Akara then beckoned Anchaly to sit.

“I’m sorry for the trouble. I just thought you’d appreciate this spot; you being from Krong Kampot.”

“Yep,” Anchaly replied uneasily, “it’s beautiful.”

“Your family?”

“I’m an orphan, Akara.”

“Sorry.”

“Never mind. I don’t really remember seeing them. What about yours?”

“Father, mother, brother. I see them only at night, since father and mother are breaking sweat all day at another rice field whereas my brother is digging a dam not far off from here,” Akara replied, before breaking into tears.

Anchaly inched close to her and whispered, “I will help you escape someday if you like. To some far-off land.”

Akara smiled, gravely remarking, "What a wonderful dream. "Come home tomorrow night. I'll introduce you to my family."

Anchaly grinned. "Coincidence. I was just going to ask you if I could meet them."

"Very well then. Good night." Akara greeted, as the two parted for the night.

"Good night."

* * *

The next night, Anchaly and Akara walked together down a poorly built road and then onto a suspension bridge, at the end of which there was a small, dusty-looking house.

"I feel so sticky," Anchaly complained, pointing to the sweat drenching his clothes.

"It's okay. If you need, you can have a bath at my place." Akara said, as they climbed a fleet of rocks leading up to her home.

Oil lamps lit up a shoddily painted brick house. Akara's parents appeared at the main door.

"Akara told us about you. My name is Dara," a grey-haired man spoke, "and this is Chea, my wife," as he pointed to a limping lady.

"Come in, children," Chea spoke with a wide-eyed smile.

They were led into a small living room where a bamboo sheet was laid on the floor, covered with a bedsheet.

"Sit, sit!" Dara exclaimed to Anchaly. Chea and Akara went to the kitchen. The clatter of utensils preceded the arrival of nom banh chok, a type of noodles. After a while, everybody was comfortably seated on the floor. "Where's Akara's brother?" Anchaly inquired.

"He is working away on an irrigation project. Mostly, he gets to come home only after ten," remarked Dara in a grave tone. "My wife and I get some considerations due to our age, which is why we arrive at half past five."

Anchaly nodded. "You're an outsider, right?" asked Chea, looking at him.

"Yes... actually... I was sent here by the Angkar."

“Very well. That is all what life amounts to these days. My husband and I were government employees during the times of the previous regime, that of the Khmer Republic. Since the regime change, we are one of the most-hunted groups in the nation,” said Chea with a sigh.

“We left our quarters because of the intimidation from the Khmer Rouge ... collecting all our belongings and packing them into a taxi. It was a horrible day. There were many items that simply had to be left behind. On the way here, many of our belongings were confiscated too,” recollected Dara, teary-eyed. “Using up all our ancestral wealth, we built this house. Yet, I hear rumours every day that soon, we will be shifted to communal barracks with a couple of families under a roof.”

Anchaly listened keenly, as the old couple went on and on detailing their bitter experiences. That night was one of never-ending stories.

* * *

A year passed, as mechanically as it ever could. A lot changed during its course.

“I can’t believe it’s been almost a year since I was removed from my family. What did the Angkar gain by sending the four of us to separate communal barracks? I don’t even know when I can see them again.” Akara reminisced. “Mother is really weak. She already had a stroke once. I don’t know how long she can hold up with the field labour.”

“Akara, can I ask you something?”

“Yep. Go on.”

“Will you come with me? I know of a place, or rather, of a time, where we humans are free to do things on our own accord. Free to live our lives as we wish; not as someone dictates. Where we are not sent to killing fields without a trial on the grounds of suspicion alone. Where we have access to all basic amenities and the right to maintain property.” Anchaly pleaded, sitting atop a cliff that overlooked a lush green valley.

“Where exactly is this utopia that I am unaware of?” Akara responded with a smirk.

“I know this sounds silly, but it’s in the future.”

“Are you mad? Crazy?” shouted Akara.

“No. Really. To be honest, I have been hiding a lot from you. I’m not an orphan. I’m not from Krong Kampot either. Hell, I’m not even from Cambodia,” Anchaly spoke.

“Then? What do you mean?”

Anchaly tugged at his face. A hard tug brought out his face mask and the skin dress covering his entire body, like a snake’s hide. Beneath it, an astonished Akara saw a blonde-haired blue-eyed foreigner.

“I’m not who you think I am. But I have never ever lied to you regarding... us... our relationship. I’ll marry you and take care of you. You will have nothing to fear. You will not have to endure any of this madness. That is, if you come with me.” Anchaly spoke.

“What do I have to fear now? In my own country?”

Anchaly looked gravely, as if taking time to measure his words.

“What is it, my love? Why are you so disturbed?” Akara asked, patting Anchaly on his shoulder. “Come with me.”

Anchaly took out a small object from within the socks that labourers wore while working away on the paddy fields. A button was clicked, which led to a projection appearing in thin air.

“What is this?” Akara screamed.

“Relax. It’s called a hologram. Now watch.”

Footage of the Cambodian genocide played. Akara watched, her eyes bulging at the sight of the killing fields. The thrashing of heads against trees. Poisonings. Drownings. Starvation.

“Who are y-you?” Stammered Akara.

“I am a researcher at an institute in the United States. My subject of interest is history. The Cambodian Khmer Rouge is one incident that moved and, at the same time, intrigued me deeply. To write a comprehensive analysis, a book explaining the hardships of the people at that time, I decided to do something adventurous. In the year that I live in, 2175, we have something called a time machine.”

There was a pause, as if to let it sink. A wide-eyed Akara questioned, “A time machine?”

“Yes. Equipment that can make the user go back and forth in time as he or she pleases. It is a rare commodity where I come from. The number of existing ones in the entire world can be counted on fingers. I decided to stay in Cambodia for a year to get a first-hand experience.”

“A year?”

“Er.. yes. I set my return date to... 21 November 1976.”

“Tomorrow,” Akara uttered.

“Yes,” nodded Anchaly, “Tomorrow. A halo will appear in front of me at any given time on the fixed day. That will be a portal, through which I can travel back to my original present. In other words, your future. If you want, I will take you along. The machine can handle an additional traveller.”

Akara looked tensed to the point that the vein in her forehead looked ready to pop.

She then slowly inquired. “What about my parents? My brother? Can you take my brother instead of me, to this haven which promises safety?”

Anchaly did not reply, his eyes suspiciously lingering on the ground, never meeting Akara’s.

“You’re hiding something from me, Anchaly. I can sense it. What is the matter?”

Anchaly looked away for a minute. When he eventually spoke, his forehead had innumerable wrinkles.

“I have stored all the necessary information to facilitate my stay in Cambodia... in a chip embedded in my brain. The trove of data available includes, but is not limited to, the death archives during the period of 1975-1979 in Phnom Penh. What I’m about to say may be disturbing. Brace yourself. But I need to tell you this because I expect at least this piece of information to bring out the seriousness of the situation in your eyes and influence your eventual decision.

“Your brother, Atith Soth, already succumbed to starvation in April this year. Your parents, well... they will be sent to the killing fields in two and a half years from now for having been

government employees under the Khmer Republic. Whereas you... your life will be taken by an untreated malarial infection on 3rd December 1978. Untreated probably because Western medication has been almost completely eradicated from this nation according to the historical records I have compiled. Only traditional remedies persist. So I guess you can agree with me that every passing day will be a step closer towards imminent tragedy.”

Akara exploded in tears. “Bong pros!” She exclaimed, which in Khmer stood for brother. “I never knew, dear! I couldn’t even give you a fitting farewell!”

She wept profusely before Anchaly patted on her shoulder and spoke. “What I’m offering you is the choice between life and death. If you come with me, you will be saved from the ensuing madness. If not...”

“I won’t leave my parents and people to run away with you into your comforting future!” Akara screamed, adamantly, “you played me. If you were going to leave me someday, you should never have been involved with me. You knew all this from the start, didn’t you? About my family and its fate? But you hid it from me.” Anchaly stood silently with his head bent in shame.

Akara pushed away Anchaly’s hand violently. After some time, when the outburst had tempered down, she walked up to him and planted a kiss on his forehead before turning towards the sunset. She sat down, seemingly dwelling on its every detail in an attempt to get over the mental trauma. Anchaly went over, hugged her and gave her company. After a while, Akara’s head rested on his shoulder.

“You’re going to go, tomorrow,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“Will you come back again?”

“The travel through time leads to accelerated aging and bone degeneration in a human to the extent that effectively, it can only be done once.”

“Oh. So it’s a no then.”

Anchaly nodded.

“So I have to cling on down here, waiting for my death sentence.”

“Or come along.”

“This is my land. I haven’t seen my parents for so long, but it is comforting to think that at least somewhere far away, they are standing on the same soil.”

“Fine,” said Anchaly with tears rolling down his eyes, “I love you.”

* * *

Years passed by. The Khmer Rouge fell. Normalcy prevailed over Cambodia again. It was the year 2219.

A frail old man with a cane walked up to a two-storey, magnificent-looking house, adorned by an extensive lawn and pots filled with flowering plants.

“Please be seated, sir,” exclaimed a young girl to the guest, before running into a room, shouting “Mom!” Muffled exchanges followed. The old man hesitantly slouched onto an armchair and ran his eyes up and down the room. He then woke up, inching towards a wall which had several beautiful paintings hung. “Good morning. May I know who you are?” interrupted a puzzled-looking lady. She held a cooking spoon in her left hand and sported a spot of Amok on her apron. “Sorry to disturb your cooking,” the old man spoke, smiling. He continued, “I am a researcher from the US working on the history of Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge. I read accounts of a woman named Akara who succumbed to a malarial infection; my research traced her roots to this neighbourhood. But I couldn’t pinpoint where to find her descendants.”

The lady smiled. “Then you are in the right place,” she mumbled, before disappearing into a bedroom. Five minutes later, she appeared with a photo album and hurriedly turned to the sixth page. The old man adjusted his spectacles and stared at where her index finger directed before erupting in tears.

“What happened? The photo is distorted due to aging which is why it is difficult to make out her features.” The lady exclaimed, concernedly.

“It’s nothing. I just... never mind.”

“I’ll get you a cup of coffee.” The lady looked empathetically.

The old man nodded slightly.

When she was back with a cup and saucer, the old man had disappeared.

“Where did that grandpa go, Mom?” the young girl who had welcomed the old man inquired curiously.

On the armchair on which he had previously slouched was a drenched note. Almost illegibly scribbled on it were the words, “You look just like her, only ten generations apart.”

* * * * *

“The Star Shaman”

by N.K. Haydar

Chahya cradled the wooden block in her hands, thumbing its worn edges.

Thunder rumbled as Chahya watched the droplets of rain fall over the mouth of the hollow, tucking her feet snug under her thighs to keep them dry from the spray, though droplets still dampened the skin of her bare arms and face, and seeped through her tattered clothes. She nestled closer against the rocky wall of the crevice where she and her brothers now took shelter.

Tirta sat hugging his knees beside her, his furrowed brows and dark-rimmed eyes aging his boyish face.

Between them, five-year-old Kurnia slept soundly, curled into a ball as he cuddled into Chahya’s side.

Chahya closed her fingers gently over the child’s toy in her hands and took a shaky breath. “Do you think he’s real?” she said, her hushed voice almost swallowed by the downpour.

“He’d better be,” Tirta said, his voice hoarse. “We’ve come all this way.”

Chahya nodded slowly. Then, in the corner of her eye, she spotted a shadowy figure looming in the forest beyond their tiny shelter, standing between the trees, completely dry. It stared at her with the false, beady eyes carved into its red mask.

Tearing her eyes away from its empty gaze, she breathed deep and held Kurnia close, pocketing the wooden block and hoping for the rain to stop soon.

* * *

Chahya stretched her arm as far as it could go, straining her muscles as she reached for the rambutan fruit that dangled from the branch above.

“Higher, Tirta,” she said.

“I’m already on my tip toes,” Tirta said between gritted teeth. “Unless you want *Kurnia* to lift me up.”

“I can lift you up!” said Kurnia excitedly somewhere below. “I’m super strong!”

Sweat trickled down Chahya’s forehead as her fingers continued to grasp air. A growl rose up in her throat, frustration bubbling within her. *So close*. She then pushed herself up off of Tirta’s shoulders, ever so slightly. *Just a little bit higher and I can—*

“Chahya!” Tirta cried.

The fruit soared higher up above her head as the world turned over sideways and she hit the ground with a loud thud.

Everything hurt. All she could see was that ripe red bobbing up and down from its tall branch, mocking her as nothing but leaves fell from the impact.

Tirta groaned, the sound then transforming into a roar as he kicked and stomped at a pile of leaves and sticks. Then as quickly as his tantrum came, it left, leaving tears in its wake. He sank to the ground, curling into himself like a pangolin hoping to shield itself from the world.

Chahya sat up. She brushed the dirt off her arms and sighed. “I know,” she said. “I want to go home too.”

The words hung in the silence that came after, echoing in it a truth left unspoken: that there was no home to return to, and there never was. The house they’d lived in had been nothing but bare bones, as hollow as the makeshift shelters offering only temporary refuge on their journey.

Sunlight had poked through its windows and food had filled their bellies there, but that house was a place full of ghosts, and if they had stayed they’d have quickly turned into ghosts themselves.

But out here where the sunshine kissed their skin and birds soared in the clouds stretching endlessly above, where the tigers stalked between the trees and snakes slithered through the undergrowth of weeds and buttress roots, home and freedom remained like the rambutan shining ruby-red over her head: so close, yet just out of reach.

All the while, the ghosts she'd sought to leave still haunted her. A few metres away, unseen by her brothers, was Sang Topeng—the ghost in the red mask. All it knew was to stare and watch. Perhaps it was waiting. But for what, Chahya did not know, and she did not dare to know.

* * *

They passed by a small village by the riverside, where they met an old man named Pak Mat with a bent back and a milky eye, who gave them a portion of the fish he'd caught accompanied by hot rice and stories about the days before the Old Kingdom fell.

Afterwards, he gave them one of the sampans from his shed, and so Chahya and Tirta now rowed it together along the river as Kurnia sat between them, pointing out every little thing they passed, inventing funny names for each. Chahya laughed, playing along; even Tirta cracked a half-smile.

As the sun sank closer to the horizon, they opened up the banana leaf-wrapped rice, egg and fish. They ate to the chorus of frogs and crickets as tiny floating lights came to life in the darkness of the forest.

Kurnia let out a loud gasp as he stood up on his chubby legs, and Tirta's eyes twinkled with the reflection of a warm glow in his eyes.

"Fireflies," Chahya said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Putting aside their leftovers and washing their curry-stained hands in the cool water of the river, they basked in the dancing lights.

She then looked to Sang Topeng, who sat at the far edge of the boat behind Tirta. To her surprise, it faced away from her, looking at the fireflies as they flew up to join the blinking lights in the night sky.

* * *

The following day, a great dockyard downriver signalled the time to disembark. There, big junks and smaller vessels sat anchored on the water, littered with sailors and fishermen hurling words and laughter at each other as they criss-crossed the decks and pier, hauling with them a variety of cargo from fabrics to fish to sweet-smelling fruits.

Chahya and Tirta rowed their sampan to the shallow edge of the river before reaching the docks to avoid the crowds. Tirta stepped out into the water, huffing and puffing as he pulled the sampan onto the muddy soil of the bank.

The three then went past the trees until they reached the bustling port city on the other side. The air filled with the cries of hawkers selling their wares and the chatter of townsfolk as they walked along the streets. Among them were also the fair-haired officers in their crisp olive uniforms, whom Chahya and her brothers were careful to avoid.

Catching a savoury aroma in the air, Chahya hurried to its source, hand-in-hand with Kurnia who giggled in glee.

They met with a stall selling satay, its skewered meat grilled to a juicy golden hue with coal-black speckles. Her hand reached out for one.

And then a firm grip stopped it mid-air. She blinked, broken out of her trance as she turned to look at Tirta, who had a frown set on his face.

“We don’t have money,” he said in a low voice, then let go of her hand. He walked off, taking Kurnia with him.

Chahya continued to stare at the food on display, captivated. She hadn’t tasted chicken in so long, and her stomach growled at the very sight of it.

A figure then stepped up beside her; Sang Topeng. Just like on the boat last night, its gaze was directed away from her, but this time it didn’t seem to be looking at anything in particular. She wondered what it was looking at, and if it could even see.

Then reality crashed down, and she gasped as she whirled around in search for Tirta and Kurnia, but they were gone.

Her heart pounded as she hurried away from the stall. She went in the direction she saw Tirta going, but found no one but strangers, their faces painted with odd expressions, their bodies walls closing in on her. Her blood thumped in her ears as she walked in circles.

She found her voice after a few minutes. “Tirta! Kurnia!” she called out, but her cries were washed away by the tide of the crowd.

Her mind buzzed as panic boiled over and she found herself drowning in a sea of strange faces.

“Are you okay?”

Her senses returned to her, and she realised she'd bumped into someone.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, and moved to walk out of the person's way.

"It's okay," said the stranger. "Are you lost?"

She blinked, then looked up, finding a fair-skinned woman with kind eyes and painted lips, her greying hair tied back with a scarf.

"I— I'm looking for— for..." she stammered, pausing to search for words.

"For what, dear?" said the woman.

"Um, my brothers," said Chahya.

"Oh, you poor thing. Come. Let's go look for them then."

True to her word, the woman helped Chahya scour the streets for her brothers, and when that didn't work, the woman still accompanied Chahya as she stood by the sidewalk, waiting for her brothers to come find her.

They waited until the sky grew dark, but still the search came out empty. The woman—Sara—stood by her side for all those hours, her presence like an anchor keeping Chahya's mind afloat.

Sara talked Chahya through it, asking about her brothers' names, how they looked, and where the three of them came from.

When the moon reached its peak in the starless sky, Chahya's eyes were dry and tired, her feet sore.

"Maybe we should resume the search tomorrow," said Sara. "Do you have anywhere to stay the night, dear?"

Chahya shook her head.

"Would you like to stay at my place? I can make us some dinner."

At that, Chahya's stomach rumbled. All the rations and leftovers were in the pack with Tirta.

So she accepted Sara's offer and followed her back to her apartment.

It was a cosy place, offering a good amount of space for one person, and just enough for two. The oil lamps cast a warm light on its ivory-painted walls and rug-covered floors. Shelves lined with all sorts of colourful baubles filled the space, and a three-seater couch seated with plush embroidered cushions stood in the centre of the living room.

“Make yourself at home,” Sara said with a smile as she headed for the kitchen.

Chahya trailed her fingers over the back of the couch and looked around the honey-coloured room, traipsing around and observing the knick-knacks decorating the walls as Sara brought the kettle out to boil.

“You know,” Sara said from the kitchen, “it’s been so long since I’ve had anyone over. I’m sorry if the place is a mess.”

“Oh! No, no. It’s perfect.”

Sara gave a sad smile. “My husband and I always wanted children,” she said softly. “But then, alas...”

“I’m sorry,” said Chahya.

Sara shook her head, her cheerful face returning. “Hey. Once we find your brothers, you’re all welcome to stay here. It’s not much, but it’s home if you’d like.”

Chahya smiled, tears finding their way to her eyes. Perhaps their journey had come to its end. Tomorrow she’d find Tirta and Kurnia and then they’d finally have what they’ve been looking for all this time. Her mind flashed with images of a future here with Sara in the city. The friends they’d make. The new adventures they’d have.

“I— I’d like that,” Chahya said, her voice thick in her throat.

Sara beamed at her. “Please, take a seat. I’ll have some soup and tea ready in a minute.”

Chahya nodded and sat on the couch, quickly finding herself engulfed in its softness. She took out the wooden block from her pocket and traced her finger over its grain.

Home.

Her eyes grew heavy, sleep luring her in as the smell of tea and hot soup wafted from the kitchen.

Then Sang Topeng appeared before her.

Chahya sat straight, her eyes wide awake at once.

Sang Topeng let out a soft growl, alarming her. The ghost had never made so much as a sound before.

Fear gripped her, and then anger. Her whole life, the ghost had merely stood in the periphery and watched her suffer. As she’d tried and tried to grasp the red-ripe fruit that

hung just out of reach. But now, *now* of all times, it wanted to stand in her way and spoil the slice of home she'd barely even gotten to touch.

"Leave me alone," she hissed.

Again, it growled, louder this time.

"Leave me *alone!*" she cried.

The kettle screeched.

Chahya breathed in and out, glaring at the ghost.

"Stop haunting me," she said, pleading now.

The kettle's whistling stopped.

"What is it, dear?" came Sara's voice from the kitchen. "Is everything alright?"

"I—" Chahya stopped herself. She swallowed, then shook her head. "I'm okay," she croaked. "Just... Not feeling well."

"Oh, you poor thing. If you'd like, you may use my bathroom. It's just down the hall, to the right."

Chahya nodded and mumbled her thanks. She turned her back to Sang Topeng and went down the hallway.

Just as she reached for the door handle, a foul stench pierced her nostrils, eliciting a gag.

With shaky fingers, she turned the handle, but found nothing of note inside. The bathroom was clean. The mirror directly faced the door. In its reflection, Sang Topeng stood behind her. It growled.

Chahya yelped and spun around, but found Sang Topeng was gone.

The stench still thick in the air, her eyes wandered to the door across her. She tip-toed towards it, the smell growing more intense.

On the hinge of the door, she spotted a streak of a dull red-brown. Her fingers trembled as she reached for the handle, turning it with white knuckles until a gust of air came from within, the awful reek assaulting her senses before her eyes could even make sense of the scene before her.

The dull rust-like stains trailed towards a greater heap of crimson: the source. In a blink, Sang Topeng appeared before her again, shielding her from the sight.

“Go!” he thundered.

The pieces fell together.

And she ran.

“Chahya?” Sara called.

Chahya bolted to the front door.

She clutched its handle and shook it for the life of her but it refused to open. *Locked*, she realised.

The horror set in, ice gripping her every bone and muscle as a footstep echoed from behind.

“What’s wrong, dear?” came Sara’s voice, right at her ear.

Chahya wanted to scream. To cry. But she couldn’t. She stood, frozen, a tumultuous storm raging in her mind.

Then a great roar resounded behind her.

The door blasted off its hinges. She flew forward, the skin of her bare arm knees scraping against wet gravel. Her ears rang. Absently her mind registered the cold rain soaking straight through her and a blazing heat over her shoulder.

Flames burst through the windows of the apartment, shattering the glass as its fiery tendrils writhed to escape. Screams pierced through the sound of gushing rain.

Sang Topeng’s figure in the doorway—a dark shadow slicing through the blazing orange of the flames—was the last thing Chahya saw before her vision faded and everything turned to black.

* * *

When Chahya opened her eyes, she found herself in a dark alleyway, freezing in her damp clothes. Soft rhythmic tapping came from above, where drizzling remnants of rain met the lid of the roof that sheltered her. To her back was a metal fence and a heap of rotting crates. A few metres before her, Sang Topeng crouched by the opening of the alley, its unnatural stare fixed on her as she struggled to sit up.

Her throat was sore as she forced words out. “Was it you?” she said.

But Sang Topeng said nothing.

“You... You knew she was dangerous,” she said. “You protected me.”

Sang Topeng stood then, but kept its back turned to her. A hand then snaked out from under the ghost's cloak, wan bony fingers pointing down the street.

She pushed herself to her feet with great effort, shambling forward to see where it pointed.

Her breath hitched.

Tirta and Kurnia stood at the end of the street, their eyes wide and full of concern as they spoke to one of the officers patrolling the docks.

Tears spilled through her lashes as joy overcame her.

Chahya sprinted towards them, crying out their names as she ran through the street, caring not for any strange looks the passers-by cast her way. None of it mattered. At that moment there was no one in the world but her and her brothers.

They noticed her at the last minute, mere seconds before she collided into them. She tackled them into an embrace as she cried in their arms.

"Chahya!" said Tirta. "Where were you? We were looking everywhere for you!"

"We were so scared," Kurnia wept.

Chahya could only nuzzle closer into the embrace, her body wrought with sobs. "Promise me," she choked out. "Promise me we'll never get separated again."

Tirta was silent for a moment before he returned the embrace. "I promise," he said.

* * *

The three of them moved to leave the city as quickly as possible after that.

Along the way, they met a young couple named Yi Ling and Budi. Hearing their story, the couple offered to pay for passage out of the city, even giving them some food for the journey.

Once aboard the bullock cart that the couple had hired, Chahya waved goodbye as Yi Ling and Budi's faces disappeared into the distance along with the rest of the port city and the burning house that Chahya had escaped from.

What had become of the strange woman who'd taken her in?

Was it a mere accident that had caused the house to be set on fire? Had Sara left the stove on unattended? Or had it been something else? *Someone* else?

Sang Topeng.

The cart shook as they drove over a rocky path, snapping her out of her thoughts. She turned back around to face the road ahead of them.

“Sorry about that, kids,” said Pak Li as he pulled on the reins of the bullock cart. “This old thing hasn’t had many passengers lately. Long overdue for repairs I’m afraid.”

“It’s okay, *pak cik*,” said Kurnia with a big smile. “When we finally meet the Star Shaman, we’ll ask him to give you a brand-new cart and lots and lots of cows!”

Pak Li gave a hearty laugh. “The Star Shaman, huh? I haven’t heard that name in a long time.” He hummed a wistful tune. “You”—his voice shook before he cleared his throat—“You kids sure you know how to find him?”

“Chahya said she knows the way,” said Tirta.

Pak Li rubbed his chin. “You’re her older brother, right?”

Tirta nodded.

“W-Well, what do you think?” said Pak Li.

Tirta then turned to face Chahya. The hands resting on her skirt picked at the skin of her fingers. She waited, and then finally Tirta turned to face the old cart driver again.

“I trust Chahya,” he said.

Pak Li smiled and nodded. “Well... Alright. But you know, if you kids change your mind, my village isn’t far from here. It isn’t much. But we can offer a roof over your heads, warm food and beds to sleep in.”

“Thank you, *pak cik*,” said Chahya softly. Her eyes wandered to Sang Topeng, who stood further ahead by the side of the dirt road they rode on. It stared at her as it always did. Just days ago, she’d almost been lured to her doom.

She looked at the road ahead, and wondered if she was doing it again.

* * *

The Star Shaman was a figure of fable, whose name had cemented itself into the folk stories of their people, passed down from generation to generation.

The story went that he could grant wishes and make your wildest dreams come true, that you could ask him anything in the world and he would know the answer.

But while ghosts roamed their lands and shamans wielded their magic to ward off spirits and cure a myriad of ailments, the Star Shaman remained merely that: a story. For no

one had ever successfully found him, and his existence hung in the air as a perpetual mystery which soon faded into myth.

But then the impossible happened.

It had come from the woods just outside their old house.

Tirta had only gone in there to fetch Kurnia's takraw ball that he'd kicked too far, but what he'd found instead was an ink-black stone half-buried in the dirt, glistening with stars.

The takraw ball forgotten, Tirta had gone to unearth the stone, only to find it was no stone at all, but a book.

Its cover and contents as dark as midnight, it was soft like fresh cotton, and his fingers seemed to disappear in its blackness upon touching it, like he was dipping his hand into a pool of ink.

Flipping it open had revealed a tapestry of stars in its pages. They blinked and sparkled in rhythm, whispering in a language of enigma, the meaning of it lost to his ears.

He'd then brought it with him, showing it to his siblings, who'd scrambled to their feet to inspect it, the awe evident in their gasps and wide eyes.

And then Chahya had touched it. And the book had come alive.

An unseen wind had ruffled the pages in a frenzy before finally landing on a spread that emanated a bright glow. The stars from its mystic leaves floated upwards into the air, forming a map before their very eyes.

From their house, the path crossed the great forest, following the waters of Sungai Besar downriver before taking a turn left into the wet plains of the Burung Delta until reaching a hill where a lone tree stood.

As the map had unravelled itself, Tirta had heard only the same indecipherable whispers, but Chahya had told them both later that she'd understood the book's words, that it had spoken to her with crisp clarity: *Find me*.

He would have never believed it had he not seen the strange book's magic himself. But even still, he'd been reluctant at first. Afraid to leave everything behind for something so vague and uncertain. For despite all that haunted that old house, it was still all he knew. It was real. How could they know that the Star Shaman was everything they believed him to be, if the map even led to him at all.

But the house had grown colder and colder each day, and desperation had a way of turning sceptics into believers, and so Tirta had agreed to follow Chahya's lead on this journey of theirs.

Now, as Pak Li slowed the cart to a stop upon reaching the next village, Tirta and Kurnia jumped off and gave their thanks to the man. All the while, Chahya remained in her seat.

Tirta frowned. "What's wrong, Chahya?"

"Is everything okay, miss?" said Pak Li, turning around to face her.

Chahya was quiet for a while as she sat rigid and unmoving, staring at the hands folded in her lap. When she spoke at last, her voice was as small as a mouse. "What if," she said, "the Star Shaman isn't real?"

Pak Li's eyes widened. "W-Well..."

"Chahya," said Tirta, "what are you saying?"

"I'm saying," she said, her voice shaking, "maybe we should just turn back. M-Maybe we're making a mistake. What if the Star Shaman *is* real but he's bad? What if the book was lying to us?"

"Wait, what?" said Tirta. "Chahya, you want to turn *back*? And go *where*?"

"To the city?!" Kurnia exclaimed.

"N-No!" said Chahya. "Back... home."

Tirta froze. *Home*. The house of ghosts, of Mother and Father, where joys had been scarce and where the first wounds of childhood had embedded themselves into their skin and bones, carving hollows into their chests.

"But we've come all this way," he said, his voice distant to his own ears.

"It's still not too late to turn back," said Chahya. "We haven't reached him yet. If we keep going, w-we... We won't know *what* we'll find."

A surge of emotions hit him at once. Disappointment. Relief. Anger. Grief. They all battled in the torrents that flooded his mind.

But once it settled, the sky cleared and he came ashore with new clarity.

Perhaps it *had* been mere desperation that spurred him to embark on this journey. But after everything, was it still? They had encountered danger and starvation certainly, but had that been it?

Most of their lives they had been sheltered from the rain and hail, and when they'd left they'd become vulnerable to all.

But despite the thunderstorms and howling winds, there were times when they did abate: when the sky would clear and reveal a shining sun and the vibrant arch of a rainbow, or a bright silver moon and its black sea of glittering gold.

No, what bound him to this journey was no longer his desperation to escape. It was faith. Not in fate, not in the divine, and not even the Star Shaman, but in Chahya, and Kurnia, and every instance of laughter and song they shared.

"You're right," Tirta said. "We don't know what lies ahead of us. But I know that it doesn't matter. Because whatever it is, we'll face it all. *Together.*"

Chahya stared at him, her mouth agape.

And then she burst out into laughter.

Hotness rose to his cheeks and ears, the laughter growing louder as Kurnia joined along.

"*What?*" Tirta fumed. "What's so funny?!"

Chahya jumped off the cart and whisked Tirta and Kurnia up into a hug. "Nothing," Chahya said, laughter still lingering in her voice.

Tirta wanted to argue, wanted to scold her for laughing at him and push her away. But what fell from his lips was no protest, but the unbidden sound of laughter.

* * *

One morning, Chahya awoke to the sight of freshly picked langsat fruit by her bedroll. She sat up and looked around, finding Tirta and Kurnia still sound asleep.

Chahya stood up then, looking around the forest clearing to find the one who'd picked these fruits. *Maybe a monkey? A squirrel? But why leave them here?*

It was then she noticed Sang Topeng sitting with its back facing her by the edge of the clearing where a small stream ran past.

She walked towards it with cautious steps, then sat beside it. She turned to face it, but it remained as still as a statue as it stared into the clear water of the stream where tiny fish swam.

“Were you the one who picked the fruits for me?” she asked.

Silence.

She sighed. “When I meet the Star Shaman, I’ll ask him to tell me about you.”

More silence.

“Are we really going to the Star Shaman? Will he really help us?”

Nothing.

She nodded. “It’s okay,” she said. “I used to be scared of you, you know. Like I was scared of all the ghosts in Mother and Father’s house. But I’m not scared of you anymore.” She rested her chin on her knees. “Thank you for saving me,” she whispered.

As always, no reply came.

* * *

Months after they’d started their journey, they finally arrived at the hill with the lone tree.

According to the book’s map, their destination would be just on the other side.

Hope bloomed in Chahya’s chest as she raced up that grassy hill, the rambai tree atop it swaying gently as if pleased to see their arrival at long last. Its branches spread wide, forming a large, bulbous crown of emerald green with clusters of bright yellow flowers dangling down from its branches like beads.

Her heart swelled as she reached the hilltop, her breath catching in her throat as she took in the sight of what lay below.

“Chahya!” Tirta called from behind her. “What is it? Did you find it?”

“What does he look like?” Kurnia said in an attempt at a bellowing voice.

“It looks like...” She took a deep breath. With each one that came next, her breathing steadied back to normal. “It looks like an ordinary village.”

The two of them reached her side just in time to echo in chorus.

“*What?!*”

Chahya didn't say another word, and neither did they as they took a moment to digest the sight before them:

Just another sleepy, seaside village on stilts.

"We came all this way for nothing?" Kurnia cried, flopping down onto the grass.

Tirta glanced at Chahya and chuckled. "Well," he said, "it doesn't look like a bad place to be."

Chahya attempted a smile despite the small knot growing deep in her stomach. She then spared a glance towards Sang Topeng, who stood a few metres from them, its focus fixed on the village below.

* * *

They went down to investigate. Maybe, just maybe, the Star Shaman lived in one of these thatch-roofed houses.

Sang Topeng wandered ahead of them, which was quite unusual. Typically, the ghost would merely appear in Chahya's vision at a fixed place. She'd never seen it move around like this before, its long enveloping cloak billowing as it glided just a few inches off the ground.

It moved this way and that, going in circles and checking each path twice, thrice.

Are you lost? Chahya wondered. Or perhaps afraid? Are you trying to warn me of something again? Do you sense the Star Shaman?

"Chahya."

She turned to see Tirta looking at her as if expecting an answer.

"There's a lady over there," he said, pointing his chin towards one of the houses up ahead. "Do you think we should ask her? About the Star Shaman?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," she said without much thought, her thoughts still lingering on Sang Topeng on the other side of the road.

Absently, she followed Tirta and Kurnia as they walked up to the aforementioned house. It was a house on stilts much like the others that occupied the village; it had a swing, a picnic table and a small gazebo on its trimmed front lawn, alongside various flowers and plants growing in mismatched pots.

A middle-aged woman stood on the porch, sweeping with her broom of dried palm.

“Good morning,” Tirta called out as they approached.

The woman lifted her head, squinting through the morning sun to look at them. “Good morning,” she said. “How can I help you kids?”

Tirta exchanged a look with Chahya before speaking. “Do you, um, happen to know anything about the Star Shaman?”

The woman looked taken aback. She then looked the three of them up and down. “The Star Shaman, you say? How curious. You children travelled here on your own, did you?”

“That’s right, ma’am,” said Tirta.

“Well!” she said. “I’m sure it’s a long story. And I would love to hear all about it, as my curiosity has surely been piqued! Come on in. Take a seat over there. I’ll go in and fetch you children something to eat. By the looks of it, you haven’t eaten a proper meal in too long a time.”

Chahya gave a slight bow. “Thank you, *mak cik*.”

She waved her hand in dismissal. “Bah!” she said. “Call me Aunty Nadia, please.”

Chahya gave a small laugh and went to sit down with her brothers on the steps of the gazebo. While they waited in anxious silence, small footsteps approached.

A little girl around Kurnia’s age came up to them, her brown eyes large and shining as she held a spinning top in her hands.

“Uh,” said Tirta. “Hello there.”

The girl grinned, wide and toothy. “Hi!” she said in a shout. “I’m Bunga.”

Chahya blinked, stunned at the girl’s brashness. “Um. Hi there, Bunga. Nice to meet you.”

“What’s your names?” said Bunga, tilting her head a little.

“I’m Chahya. This is Tirta, and this is Kurnia.”

Bunga beamed. She looked to Kurnia and offered him the toy in her hands. “Wanna play *gasing* with me?”

“Yeah!” said Kurnia, jumping to his feet.

Just like that, the two began to play with the top, giggling and *ooh*-ing and *ah*-ing as they watched it spin, challenging each other to see who can spin it for a longer time.

After a few rounds, Bunga stood up and gasped.

Chahya jolted to her feet. "What is it?"

"Cikgu Bulan!" Bunga yelled at the top of her lungs, jumping up and down and waving. At the gate, someone approached with a covered basket in hand.

"Who's that?" said Tirta.

"That's my neighbour," said Bunga. "She also teaches me and some of the other children."

The newcomer—Bulan—had a sharp face, fair and radiant like the princes and princesses of legend, wore a men's *samping* over a pair of loose pants, and kept her black hair short. She gave a curt wave before opening the small metal gate and entering Aunty Nadia's house compound. "Good morning, Bunga," she said, her stiff voice mirroring her posture. "Is your mother home?"

"Mhmm," said Bunga. "She's inside."

"I see," said Bulan. She then glanced at Chahya and her brothers. "New friends?"

"Yup!" said Bunga. "They're travellers. They came here to see Mama."

Bulan nodded. "Welcome to Bintang Village then."

Before Chahya could respond, Bulan left to enter the house, taking off her sandals before heading up the steps.

Once she entered, Chahya strained to listen to their muffled conversation, but her ears could not discern it. Some time passed before Aunty Nadia returned, coming out of the house with a tray of rice and an assortment of side dishes, Bulan following suit with another tray with drinks and plates.

Bulan's stony countenance remained even as she helped set everything onto the picnic table, while Aunty Nadia ushered Chahya and the others to wash their hands before sitting down to eat.

As they dug into the food, Aunty Nadia sat across Chahya and her brothers and folded her arms on the table.

"Now," she said, "tell me everything."

And so they did.

Then once they finished the last bits of it and caught up to the present, the three waited quietly as Aunty Nadia pursed her lips, her gaze fixed on something far away; little

Bunga's attention had long since drifted elsewhere; and all the while, Bulan's face remained unchanged and unreadable.

At last, Aunty Nadia nodded and laced her fingers together.

"That's quite a story," she said, then shook her head, sucking in a breath. "My, to have survived as long as you three did... That is no small feat." She then turned to Bulan and cleared her throat. "And you, Cikgu Bulan? What do you think of this?"

Bulan folded her arms on the table. "No small feat is an understatement," she muttered.

"But what about the Star Shaman?" said Tirta. "Do you know anything about him? Th—The map was supposed to..." He trailed off.

"May I see this book?" said Aunty Nadia.

Chahya exchanged glances with Tirta. *What if they steal it? What if this is just another ploy?* Tirta seemed equally as uncertain. She then searched her surroundings for Sang Topeng, though he was still off wandering somewhere. Tirta's words then echoed in her mind. *Together*, he'd said. So she took a deep breath and drew the book out from their pack, placing it onto the table.

They did nothing to hide their shock as Chahya opened the book, revealing the map of stars in its pages.

"Incredible," Aunty Nadia breathed. "It's *real*."

"You know about this book?" said Tirta. "We'd never heard anything about a book in the stories."

"The stories are varied," said Aunty Nadia. "Some of them do contain mention of what they called the Celestial Code, an ancient language now lost, spoken only by the Star Shaman himself. In some legends, the Star Shaman used to engrave the night sky with this Code so those who looked up could read it and follow his wisdom. Others say that the Code only presents itself to those who need its guidance."

"I don't understand," said Tirta. "So what about this map? Why bring us here?"

"Who knows what the Shaman's wisdom pertains to?" said Aunty Nadia, reverence in her words. She examined the book for a long time, simply admiring the look and feel of its pages and the stars that twinkled within them. Then she closed it and pushed it back towards

Chahya. “I must apologise. I do not have the answers you wish for. My knowledge of the Star Shaman is just as based in myth and hearsay as yours is.”

Both relief and remorse stirred in Chahya’s chest. “What shall we do now?” she said to Tirta, who looked just as lost.

Aunty Nadia gave a sad smile. “I suppose you three will need a place to stay for now. Though I’m afraid my house is quite full at the moment.” She then turned to look at Bulan. “What about you, Cikgu Bulan? Why don’t you let the children stay at your—?”

“No!” exclaimed Chahya, Tirta and Bulan at once.

“Nadia, *please*,” said Bulan. “I’m sure these children would rather not sleep under a stranger’s roof after all that happened to them. *Besides*, my house is not fit to receive guests of any kind”—she lowered her voice and leaned in towards Nadia—“let alone some children we’ve just met.”

“Hey, we heard that!” said Tirta.

“Yeah!” Kurnia chimed in. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Bulan frowned and huffed. “*Nothing*, I simply—”

“Yeah,” Tirta cut in. “My apologies, but I’d rather not stay with her, Aunty Nadia. Is there any inn nearby where we can stay?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Aunty Nadia. “Our village doesn’t often get travellers.”

“Where’s the next town?” said Tirta.

As the discussion continued, Chahya began to tune it out, her attention fixed on the thoughts popping up one after another, questions and confusion clouding her mind. *What now? Do we give up and go home? Or do we come up with a new plan? What if, what if, what if?*

And then her eyes caught sight of Sang Topeng.

It drifted closer towards them, but did not heed Chahya’s presence, its focus glued on Bulan instead. It stood close to her, craning its neck as if inspecting her.

Bulan stopped mid-sentence to turn and look over her shoulder, but presumably saw nothing but thin air as she turned around to resume the discussion.

What is it? Do you find her suspicious? Like you did the woman from the port city with her seemingly kind eyes and honey-coloured room?

“Okay,” said Tirta, snapping Chahya out of her thoughts. “Sounds like a plan. We leave now for the next town and then—”

A plate flew off the table, hurtling towards the ground and breaking.

Everyone startled.

“What in God’s name?” Aunty Nadia exclaimed.

Chahya looked up at Sang Topeng who stood hunched beside Bulan, its shoulders rising and falling, and its nigh-skeletal hand reaching out from under its cloak, lifeless fingers trembling as it stretched out towards the oblivious teacher, who merely looked about in similar confusion to the others. The ghost then emitted a strangled whine, like a cry almost.

As the others tried to reason the strange occurrence, speaking in hushed voices layered in panic, Chahya simply stared at the ghost as it grew more and more distressed.

Her breath hitched then. It clicked. *You don’t want to leave*, she realised. The way Sang Topeng stared at Bulan—it was not out of suspicion or hatred, but something else, something born of grief.

She shot up from her seat. “Tirta,” she said loudly, bringing everyone to silence, “I have changed my mind. I think we should stay.”

“What?” Tirta and Bulan said at once.

“There’s nowhere to stay around here!” said Tirta.

“Yes there is,” Kurnia chimed in cheerily. “Cikgu Bulan’s house!”

Bulan’s jaw fell as she fumbled to respond.

“I do apologise greatly for the intrusion it would impose on you,” said Chahya, “but I must beg you to have some mercy on us. We have travelled a long way from home, and I’m afraid my heart has grown too weary from this journey, as it has come to an abrupt disappointment! We have nowhere else to go, and I’m so tired that I may collapse!”

“Chahya!” Tirta stuttered. “Tell me you’re joking?”

“Of course not!” said Chahya, stumbling back into her seat with exhaustion. “We have left home and endured so much! I’m afraid I don’t have the will to continue this meandering.”

Tirta opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again, pointless babble sputtering out all the while as concern and confusion knitted his brows together.

“Oh, poor dear,” said Aunty Nadia. “If you are truly unwell, you may take shelter here. I suppose we can find some space to—”

Bulan rolled her head back and heaved a sigh. “*Very well,*” she said. “You may stay with me.” With another sigh, she added, “Just until you are better.”

* * *

Throughout the short walk to Cikgu Bulan’s house, Chahya watched as Sang Topeng followed the teacher closely, its gaze never once abandoning her even upon stepping foot inside the humble abode; it was a wooden house on stilts, much like Aunty Nadia’s, but slightly bigger and more polished in make.

Within, dust and fabrics covered what little furnishing there were within, and pushed into one corner, stood a pile of boxes.

Tirta sniffed and brushed his hand over his nose. “Do you... live here still?” he asked.

“Not really,” Bulan muttered. With striding steps, she made a beeline to the back of the house towards a short hallway with closed wooden doors on either side, each with white embroidered curtains hanging over its frame, save for one at the very end of the hallway. “I mostly stay at my sister’s house these days. I only come back to teach the children and then...” She trailed off, taking out a set of keys to unlock one of the doors closer to the hallway entrance.

As she fumbled to open the door, Sang Topeng at last wandered from her side, only to stray deeper into the hallway towards the naked door at its end. There the ghost stayed, and Chahya—so fixated on what it could possibly be thinking (if ghosts can think, and surely Sang Topeng was one who could)—neglected to hear Bulan’s invitation to enter the room.

“Chahya!” Tirta called, finally snapping her out of her thoughts, bringing her attention to the room within; it contained very little, and the beddings were laid out on the floor atop a thin kapok mattress. Unlike the rest of the house, its minimal furnishings were uncovered by white cloth and clean of dust.

“My,” said Bulan, “you must truly be fatigued, child, for your mind does wander often.” She turned to Tirta then to ask, “Is she always like this?”

Tirta gave a shrug of his shoulders. “Sometimes, especially throughout our journey, but not often before.”

Bulan nodded, her face still stoic as stone. She then pointed her chin to the room. "You three may rest here. This is where I would usually stay, should something keep me from leaving the village some days, so you should be kept from any sneezing fits in here. Should you need anything else, tell me and I'll rummage for it."

"It's quite alright," said Tirta, then hesitantly he ducked his head. "Thank you very much."

"Yes," Chahya said, "thank you. Truly."

"Are you moving away?" Kurnia blurted then, tilting his head to the side as he looked up at Bulan with those doe-eyes of his.

"*Kurnia*," Chahya chastised.

Bulan folded her arms and responded with a grunt. "Listen to your sister. It's none of your business, child." She cleared her throat, looking askance. "Now, if there is nothing else, I leave you in Nadia's hands. She'll come by soon to check up on you. Do *not*, in any circumstance, touch *anything*, do you understand?"

Tirta and Kurnia nodded, though Chahya made no such promise.

"Good," she said. "Then I'll be off."

* * *

Despite initially believing her words an act, Chahya quickly felt the weariness she'd described to be true, as contrary to her wish to investigate her host's abode, no sooner had Bulan left than Chahya collapsed into the mattress, sleep taking her almost as deep as comatose.

It was Tirta who roused her at last, the light of day now faded as night fell upon them. Outside their door, she heard the clamour of pots and pans. Aunty Nadia had arrived, Tirta explained to her, and she was now cooking dinner.

Groggily, Chahya rose from her slumber and exited out the door of their room. To her left, Sang Topeng remained unmoving at his station at the end of the hallway. Supposing that the ghost's disregard for Aunty Nadia's presence meant no need to fear, and any inspection she could do later, so she forced her eyes away and, with Tirta at her heels, made her way to the kitchen downstairs where Aunty Nadia flitted about the small kitchen, her little daughter

Bunga sitting on a countertop swinging her calves as she and Kurnia, who stood below holding a bowl of boiled okra, laughed gleefully together.

“Aunty Nadia,” Chahya greeted.

“I see you’re finally up, dear!” said Aunty Nadia, who then reached down to Kurnia’s height as he passed her the okra. “Thank you, *sayang*,” she said, pinching his cheek with fondness.

“We really do appreciate your help,” said Tirta, “and I’m very sorry to keep you from your family during dinnertime.”

“Not to worry, my dear,” said Aunty Nadia with a smile as she scooped up the contents of her wok into three separate bowls of steaming rice. “I will be returning there shortly, and my husband, too, voiced concern for you children when I conveyed your story.” She pushed one bowl over to Chahya, revealing the food she’d cooked as *asam pedas*, a spicy-sour fish stew, its soup a vibrant chilli-red.

Chahya breathed in the spicy aroma and sighed wistfully, her stomach cooing along. “This looks delicious,” she said, unable to contain the awe in her voice.

Aunty Nadia beamed as she regarded them dig into the meal with haste, all courtesy flung out the window. Upon hearing them groan at the first flavourful bite, she chuckled heartily, likely amused by their eagerness. After a while, her eyes left them to look about the kitchen, at the darkwood walls and high ceiling, a sadness filling her gaze the longer she stared.

“Aunty Nadia?” said Chahya after swallowing a spoonful of rice. “Is everything alright?”

There was a bead of wetness upon Aunty Nadia’s lower lash that she wiped away as soon as Chahya spoke. “I’m alright, dear,” she said with a prompt nod. “This house brings back many memories. That’s all.”

Indeed, Chahya thought, as mystery seemed to wrap around the house’s every nook as she recalled Sang Topeng’s strange behaviour.

“Have you known Cikgu Bulan for a long time, Aunty Nadia?” said Chahya.

"I have," she said. "I helped build this house with her, all those years back. *Oh!* How long it's been. It aches me to remember how much time has passed. We were so young. *So young.*"

Chahya nibbled on her lip as she tried to string her words together. Then at last she asked, "Did Cikgu Bulan live here alone?"

A gasp passed unheard through Aunty Nadia's lips as she stiffened, her brows shooting up to her hairline. "What inspires such a question, child?"

"It's rather big for just one person," Chahya lied.

"Ah," said Aunty Nadia, her posture relaxing. "Yes. Yes, it is rather. But..." She sighed deeply. "This is not my story to tell, I'm afraid. I cannot give you the answers. I am sorry."

"Why?" Chahya exclaimed before she could help it. It came again, the knot deep in the recesses of her stomach, now starting to unravel itself and spread to the tips of her fingers and toes. She rose to her feet, fists clenched tightly at her sides, nails digging into her palms. "Who was it? *Please!* Tell me!"

Aunty Nadia flinched, stepping back. "Excuse me! And why does it concern you to demand it so rudely?"

Her excuses fizzled out on her tongue. She could not speak of Sang Topeng. No one could know of the ghost that haunted her, for they'd wish to send it away, to exorcise it, to—
to—

She couldn't finish her thought. Her mind was too fuddled, her own desires becoming unknown to her. Tripping for words, she at last pleaded, "Why won't you tell me?"

"Why, you are an insolent girl!" said Aunty Nadia. "If you must know, ask Cikgu Bulan yourself tomorrow!" With a scoff, she shook her head and walked away, Bunga in tow, despite the little girl's protests to stay.

Once the front door slammed shut, Tirta turned to her and scowled. "Why would you do that?" he cried. "She was so nice to us, and you sent her away! None of what you asked is your business!"

"I don't care," said Chahya, speaking more truthfully now than she ever has throughout this entire journey.

All she wanted was to know the truth; even now, at journey's end, the answers were dangled right at her nose, yet concealed themselves ever still.

That night, with her brothers asleep, Chahya crept out the room, burning a candle and casting its light onto the room at the end of the hallway, where Sang Topeng still stood. Huffing, her free arm hugged the other for warmth as she tread across the floorboards towards the ghost. It did not move as she approached, so she stepped through its phantom form and rattled the door handle, to no avail.

With a frustrated growl, she persisted and slammed her side against the door but it did not yield.

Cursing her own weakness, she whirled back around and headed for the main living area, towards the pile of boxes where she crouched and began to ransack its contents. Within, she found all sorts of ornaments, trinkets and books, all of little significance until—

Her hands found a frame with the initials *S.* and *B.* scribbled on its yellowed paper. Flipping it over, she found a photograph of two figures, their features obscured by the stark shadows inherent to the image. But a closer look uncovered the shorter of the pair as Cikgu Bulan, though her companion was unfamiliar. She traced her hands over the stranger's face. *Who are you?* she wondered. *And who are you to me?*

Dawn did not come soon enough. When the sun's first rays filtered in through the wooden shuttered windows, Chahya still sat among the various things she unearthed from the boxes. The sun must've risen fully above the horizon when the front door rattled and revealed Bulan entering the threshold.

Her jaw hung agape as she took in the mess before her. "What in God's name!" she bellowed. "This is how you repay my hospitality? By breaking my trust and digging through my things? You conniving *thief!*"

Chahya stood at once, her shoulders squared and her chest puffed out. "I am no thief," she said, unwavering. "I seek answers! Who are you? And who is this man in this picture?" She held the photograph up for Bulan to see. "What is your connection to me? I am gravely tired of wondering and hoping! Should the Star Shaman remain a fable, I beg you to answer me instead! Please!"

“What are you rambling on about?” Bulan said, striding forward to snatch the photograph from Chahya’s hand. Then, as her eyes settled on its contents, her shoulders froze, then sagged as her gaze turned forlorn for a brief moment before collecting herself and resuming her former fury. “You have no place to intrude and demand such things of me! You must be a child possessed. Begone with you! And take your rascal brothers with you! Out of my sight and never show your face here again!”

Tears fell down Chahya’s cheeks unbeckoned, and she stormed out the house as every emotion she’d kept locked within her heart now came surging out. She could hardly breathe as she felt the world choke the air from her lungs.

Why had she embarked on this journey at all? She lamented, *what a fool I’ve been*. She wept and wept, her tears blurring her eyes to the world, her short legs running without direction until she tripped on a stone, her body flung forward until she caught herself on a trunk of a tree.

Forcing herself to calm down, she blinked her tears away and looked around, finding herself in a marshy wood, the village not far behind her. Daylight shone brightly still, and her nerves kept her from returning to find her brothers, so she slipped out her sandals, hiked up her skirt and trudged through the brackish waters.

She wandered listlessly through the wetlands; for the first time in a long time, she was really, *truly* alone, with not even a ghost to haunt her. Terror gripped her, though it washed away the longer she walked, peace settling in its place. Soon, her senses returned, the birdsong in the air and chirping of crickets reaching her ears with new clarity, her eyes now finally taking notice of the lush greenery of the mangroves and the schools of fish circling her calves and tall prop roots.

A smile pulled on her lips as the fish tickled her skin, and then as she took a step forward—

She fell.

The waters engulfed her, surrounding her with darkness as black as the starless night. She closed her eyes.

Has my journey finally reached its end? She wondered. Lost and alone. A fitting close to a foolish dream. Soon I will have many more foolish dreams, until the sun sets in the east and swallows the last of them.

And then, so bright that she saw it through her lids, a light flashed before her. Her eyes shot open to behold it, and she reached for it, clutching it like a firefly in her palms.

The light's rays shot through her laced fingers, burning brighter and brighter and brighter until all was white-hot around her.

She awoke, floating, in an empty and colourless void.

In the distance, she caught sight of a silhouette as small as an ant, growing in size as it approached, until it unveiled a man in a cloak, with long hair in soft curls, his brown skin aged and wrinkled, and a whiskered smile upon his face.

"Hello, Chahya," he said. "I'm sorry to meet you like this."

She blinked, once, twice. "Am I dead?"

He looked up, but when she followed his gaze, she found nothing there. "Not yet," he said simply.

"Who are you?" she said. Then a gasp escaped her. "Are you the Star Shaman?"

He cocked his head to one side. "I'm flattered, but I'm afraid not." He laughed, and the sound warmed her. "Ah yes. I suppose you don't recognize my face."

Her eyes widened, and gooseflesh pricked her skin as realisation dawned upon her. "You're... *Sang Topeng*?" she said breathlessly, tears stinging her eyes.

A smile was his only response.

Her chest grew tight with elatedness, though another revelation dashed it away. "So I really *am* dead?" she said.

He shook his head. "I told you: not yet."

"I don't understand," she croaked. "Why? Who are you, really? What about the book? I have so many questions."

"And we have little time for them all, I fear," he said. He approached her, his hand reaching out to cradle her cheek ever so softly. "I am so proud to have watched you grow."

She blinked up through her tears. "Please," she begged, "tell me the truth. Who are you to me? Who am I?"

His hand fell from her face as he turned away, and his eyes began to see something far beyond the void they stood upon. "Once upon a time," he said, "there was a boy."

The emptiness shifted; colour dripped into the white, painting a scene around them of a shoddy thatched house by the beach.

"His name was Suria," he said, and so appeared a boy sitting at the steps of the house, who moved along to the words of the story; "As his mother ailed and his father drank, he lived in a house of ghosts.

"Suria left the ghosts behind, and soon transformed from boy to man. But still, somehow, the ghosts continue to lurk over his shoulder. He thought he would forever remain haunted, fated to live half-dead in endless black night.

"But then the moon appeared. She was so wonderful, so bright, that she inspired Suria to burn as bright as she, but in his love for her he shone twice as vividly; so boldly he declared daylight, vanquishing the night that terrorized him, but in so doing, forfeited his moonlight too.

"But it was too late. Time drew a divide between them, but Suria still ached to see his beloved, that in his torment he grew reckless, drawing enemies near and far, though his hubris knew no bounds, so he welcomed each fight.

"He remained undefeated, until a cunning foe decided to strike by stealing the moon and all their stars. Suria's fury was that of hellfire itself; he swore to the Heavens that he'd have his vengeance, and..."

His words trailed off. Chahya gripped his arm. "And what?" she demanded. "What happened?"

"He did have it," he said, softer than a whisper, "but not without its price. All the stars fell out of the sky. His anguish was so great that—"

Flames swallowed the entire scene, and it burned and burned and burned until all that remained was the white-hot void once more.

"—his own fire consumed him."

Chahya sucked in haggard breaths, her eyes blinking rapidly as she struggled to grasp the tale.

“But a flame leaves behind ashes,” he continued, looking straight into her eyes now, “and these ashes... They’re you, Chahya. When I died, my fury forbade me a peaceful departure, so a part of my soul went on to create you, while the other remained a ghost lingering on earth. That is the Sang Topeng you know, whom you’ve now set free.

“And who are *you*, Chahya? You are me, in a sense. But more importantly, you are simply *you*.

“Know that the book did not deceive you. It led you here.

“As for the home you’ve long sought, why, it cannot be found. You must go now, and *build it*.”

He smiled, one last warm and kind smile.

And then he faded.

* * *

When Chahya awakened, she found herself among the mangroves once more, in the arms of her brothers, her eyes blinking to meet Bulan’s.

Chahya coughed, choking out briny water. “Tirta, Kurnia,” she said, squeezing their names out her lungs, folding one arm around them both. She then looked to Bulan and reached out her free hand. “I’m so sorry.”

Bulan took it, her face still unmoving stone. “It’s alright, child. I should be the one who’s sorry. I knew you were troubled, and still I...” She took a deep breath. “I didn’t mean to push you so.”

“It’s okay,” said Chahya. “I know now. I know everything.”

And so she conveyed everything she’d just witnessed in her half-death, leaving no detail, and when she concluded her story, they all met her with incredulousness as she held her breath.

Then Bulan began to break down and weep, wrapping them all in her arms.

As Chahya settled into the embrace, she peered over their huddled heads to find the wooden block clutched in one hand as the sun sank bright and low in the clear sky.

With her heart heavy and full, she smiled.

Thank you.

* * * * *

“Crocodile Farm”

by Melanie Hobbs

He'd walked past it many times. Samuel believed that even in retirement, a man must remain active. From the outside, it looked like a single-storey house with a yard, a rare sight in Singapore, let alone a single-storey house on a busy shop-lined street like Upper Serangoon Road. Yet it had been there forever, since just after the war, apparently. The sign was faded and peeling; it depicted a crocodile grinning under the words Tan Moh Hong Reptile Skin & Crocodile Farm written in English, Chinese and Japanese. Samuel wondered if, beyond the fence, he would find crocodiles lounging around grinning like the one in the sign. It was hard to comprehend beyond that fence, in what looked like a suburban yard was a crocodile farm. He was curious. But why would a grown man want to look around a crocodile farm, a local at that.

The boy was full of questions. Samuel had never heard him talk this much. He couldn't remember any child talking this much. Certainly, he couldn't remember a time *he'd* spoken so freely to his elders. It must be the boy's Australian upbringing. How many crocodiles would he see. How big would they be. Would he get to see them feeding. Before Samuel could think of how to answer him, he would be onto asking the next question. Eventually, Samuel stopped attempting to answer his questions and just enjoyed the chatter, feeling buoyed by his grandson's excitement.

They walked past the once bustling Upper Serangoon Shopping Centre, its facade stained dark grey from pollution. Samuel remembered how bustling the area used to be. It didn't feel that long ago. Ten, twenty years perhaps. All the shophouses, hawker stalls and push carts,

how you could emerge from your monthly haircut at the saloon in the centre to find many delicacies at the adjacent market stalls to take home for tea. Now it was all sleepy offices and apartments. Such a shame. He would have loved to take the boy to buy fresh durians and kuehs. He felt sad the boy had missed the simple joys of this spot in its heyday. It struck him then that this spot was, in fact, past its prime. The swarming traffic remained.

Samuel was surprised at how ordinary it looked inside. It was true, a man had converted his house into a crocodile farm at the end of the war. Built some pits, bought some crocodiles. Even from the outside, apart from the pits and what looked like giant dumpsters towards the back of the property, it looked like any other bungalow house from those days. Samuel wondered if he'd bought the crocodiles live or hatched them from eggs. Either seemed possible. Those post-war days were crazy. Food was scarce because of all the damage to the harbour and the black market was thriving. He remembered his mother urging him to hurry home because the streets were full of criminals. Samuel was sure a man would have been able to get some crocodiles without too much trouble back in those days.

Samuel peered into the first pit and stepped back immediately. They appeared to be sleeping. But there were so many of them all piled into that crowded pit. They were all on top of each other, it was hard to tell how deep the pit went and how many crocodiles lay sleeping beneath their peers. The boy was too short to see so Samuel wrapped his arms around the boy's ribcage and lifted him up as one of the workers warned the boy that the crocodiles can jump high so he ought not to wave his fingers above the pit. He was heavy. Samuel saw an eye open and a tail slowly flick to the side. The boy gasped and Samuel felt him start to slip from his fingers, he felt the boy's body tense with fright as he gripped him more tightly and stepped away from the pit. The boy thought it was a great joke by his thatha, pretending to drop him into the crocodile pit. They viewed the other pits, which housed increasingly large crocodiles. The dumpster-like containers housed their biggest species, they had to be about 15-feet long. Terrifying. Samuel felt grateful for wire mesh over those containers as he lifted the boy for the fifth time. What if there was a flood, the boy asked. He'd been thinking the same thing. Well, at least the giants would be contained.

They spent some time in the shop which was in the original building. They sold handbags and shoes made from crocodile leather. Very expensive. Samuel was glad his wife was not interested in any of this. They were well-matched, practical sort of people. He supposed it was the times they'd grown up in. His own children had grown up in an era of peace and abundance, of shopping malls and hawker stalls. So much progress since those war days. When his children were young, he felt grateful for that progress. But now that he had grandchildren, Samuel couldn't help but wonder if they were missing out. The boy went home, and they returned to stilted phone conversations where Samuel would ask him what he'd eaten and the boy would say rice and Samuel would ask him how school was and the boy would say good.

He told himself he'd find an excuse to go back again. He'd continue to pass by on his walks and wonder if it was still the same, if crocodiles still squirmed in those pits as if frozen in time. The North East MRT line was built and more of the old shophouses closed. The hawker stalls were long gone. Upper Serangoon Shopping Centre was like a ghost town. Even the Ah Bengs didn't hang around. One day he walked by, and the gates to the crocodile farm were chained and padlocked, a handwritten sign said 'closed.' Above, the crocodile on the old red sign, more faded than ever, continued to grin.

"They're survivors, you know," said the hairdresser. "Been around since dinosaur times." This was not his usual guy who was long gone, but one of the many rotating young ones at the sleepy shopping centre. Samuel had asked how long ago the crocodile farm had closed. "They say the handlers released the hatchlings into the drains." Samuel snorted sceptically. "The big, big crocodiles they slaughtered for the skins. The small, small ones were no use so these fools just threw them in the drains."

* * * * *

“Treasure Hunting in a Foreclosed Home”

by Lisa Changadveja

I found out I was officially Thai when I was 25 years old. Did I know both my parents were from Thailand before then? Yes, I did. Did I know I was legally Thai? Absolutely not.

Until then, I thought my connection to Thailand was more of a hurdle to jump through in an Olympic-style race than anything. When a stranger would try to make small talk about Thailand, I had very little to contribute to the conversation and worked hard to pivot the conversation.

Nothing about my childhood was very Thai. My single mom moved us to a fake Bavarian-themed tourist town called Helen, which was situated at the base of the Appalachian mountains trail. The Appalachian Trail is a famous trail where hikers would spend months walking. They would pass by repetitive green scenery until they eventually reached Maine. Then they could pat themselves on the back for the free time, stamina, and patience for the long hike.

Helen was located in White County. The county name is an accurate depiction of my very white neighbors. I didn't meet another Asian kid until I was in middle school.

I didn't know much about being Thai. My mom moved to the USA in her early teens, and she never talked about Thailand when I was growing up. All I knew about Thailand was that it was the reason older ladies at Walmart would stop me when I was ten years old and ask, "Darling, how did you get such a beautiful tan?" It was the reason older men would ask me,

"Where in China is Thailand?" As a child, I never knew how to answer these questions. I would default to a cute shrug and smile. Looking back now, I'm still amazed at how dumb those people were.

Food was my only real connection to Thailand. I remember hopping in my mom's white Toyota minivan and her driving us two hours away into Atlanta, where there was a Thai temple. You'd think my mom was very Buddhist with how often she took me to the Thai temple. But in adulthood, I realized it was food that brought her there. At the Thai temple, they set up cheap folding tables and offered food. Some of the food would be free, and some would be for sale. Food is why my mom drove two hours to the Thai temple. I do not know much about Thai culture, but I do know a decent amount about Thai food. At least enough to order at a Thai restaurant in the US and enough to make small talk about my favorite dishes.

So when my mom told me she and grandma were moving to Thailand, I didn't understand why. I understand it now, though. See, it's expensive in America to be sick or have any long-term illness. But in Thailand, healthcare is universal to Thai citizens. I learned that all my mom's bills were piling up, including my grandma's medical bills. Understandably my mom moved to Thailand, where healthcare was free, and the cost of living was immensely cheaper.

I was living in DC when she told me on the phone about her plans to move to Thailand. To be honest, I'm not actually sure if she told me before she moved to Thailand and let her house go into foreclosure. All I know is that she was already in Thailand when the 25-year-old lightbulb turned on in my brain, and I realized the bank was about to throw all the stuff I had stored at my mom's house in the trash.

I channeled my inner Lara Croft and bought a plane ticket for the next day to Atlanta. I was eager to tackle this treasure-hunting mission before the bank seized everything. The last time I lived in the house was four years prior. I don't know what I left in that house, but what if it was something I needed in the future?

It was freezing cold when I arrived outside my mom's old house. The cold air gave the dark house an extra element of creepiness. I turned the key to the front door. I was amazed the key still worked. I switched the lights on, and again, I was amazed the electricity was still on. I set my empty luggage down in the living room. My mom must have sold all the large furniture because there wasn't a bed or couch available to sleep on. I found blankets and made a basecamp in the living room. Now, real treasure hunting can begin.

Eventually, I formed a pile of things I would check into my luggage for my flight back to DC. The pile was stacked between family photos, sentimental shirts, and mixed CDs. Then, I found it. The treasure I didn't even know I was hunting. It would have been hovering above a golden platform in the distance if this was a movie. I would have had to battle shadow monsters and poison arrows to get to it. But in reality, the treasure was just buried under a stack of documents in a dresser drawer in my mom's closet. The treasure was a little tan book with "Thailand Passport" etched on the cover of it.

Two pages in, it had my name on it! Well, sort of my name on it. It did have a misspelling in my first name, but it was me in the baby picture. It had my name written in Thai, which I still can't read or write. It had my correct birthdate and location of birth, and it was issued when I was only two years old. Until now, I had no idea I had a Thai passport or any legal documents connecting me to Thailand.

On the last pages of the Thai passport, it said I entered Thailand when I was two years old and left when I was four years old. I was too young to remember much beyond living there with my biological dad, attending a Thai school briefly, and having to go to a Thai hospital once.

I didn't know what time it was in Thailand, but I called my mom anyways and bombarded her with many questions.

Did she know this existed?

Am I allowed to have this if I don't speak, read or write Thai?

Does this mean I'm a Thai citizen?

Can I renew this and travel with it?

Why didn't she tell me about it?

She said my biological dad had it made when he took me to Thailand when I was young and, in her usual default, said she forgot about it. She didn't know any answers to my other questions, unfortunately.

Luckily, I lived in DC at the time and was just steps away from the Thai embassy, so I ventured over. Of course, they told me I needed to go to a consulate office, not the embassy. Whoops. At the consulate office, a woman asked me what I was there for. I showed her my Thai passport from when I was a baby and asked her if I could renew it. After some back and forth, she realized I couldn't do anything in Thai and told me to wait in the lobby. There was a part of me that worried she would call someone to have me escorted out of the building to try to renew the passport of this Thai baby. I couldn't possibly be the Thai baby. The first name was misspelled, and I didn't know how to read, write or speak Thai. I clearly walked in with stolen goods asking to be compensated. Lara Croft would never pull such an amateur move.

After nervously waiting for what felt like an hour, the lady eventually came over with a form and asked me a series of questions. As I answered, she filled out the form in Thai for me. She took my picture and said they'll call me when the new passport was ready for pickup. I was stunned that I was getting a new Thai passport. I quickly left, fearing they'd soon realize their mistake and change their mind. Over the following weeks, I kept expecting a call to tell me I was in trouble for trying to get a Thai passport. They eventually called, but it was to tell me the passport was ready, just like they said they would. I walked out of the consulate that day with a brand-new Thai passport.

It's been a decade since that day, and I still feel like an imposter every time I use my Thai passport. However, a massive door in my life opened that day. I used it to visit my mom

and grandma in Thailand. I've used it to travel to other nearby countries with ease. Now, it's allowing me to move to Thailand to help me discover more about my Thai heritage. It's funny to think that I wouldn't have been able to have this opportunity if I didn't decide to go treasure hunting in a foreclosed home.

* * * * *

“The Way Home”

by Dana Ravyn

I wander aimlessly,
 a child scuffling
 through the streets
of Chiang Rai.

Sounds and aromas
 move through me
 like woven bamboo
passing this way and that.

A stray dog appears
 I trade my lunch
 for a smile,
wagging hairless tail.

Even the sun must yield;
 the restless heat
 begins to fade
as if saying ‘enough done.’

Luckily,
 my sandals
 know the way home.

* * * * *

“Pa moop”

by Dana Ravyn

Tonight, I sleep in a Lahu hut,
outside a thousand sounds
for every listener. The moon
is beautiful but it has no self-nature.
I have no place to go in this universe,
but I will stay a while.
Time neither passes nor endures,
tomorrow will come without my help.
The rooster crackles at dawn
but no sound comes forth.
After all have spoken,
only silence remains.

* * * * *

“As I Look Out the Window”

by Rueben Dass

As I look out the window,
I see my parents waving goodbye,
What must be going through their minds, I wonder,
Yet again, my heart feels heavy, my eyes begin to tear,
How I wish I could stay just a little longer.

As I look out the window,
I admire the beautiful hills, grass, and greens,
So much potential my land has,
I think to myself,
If only I had a chance,
To contribute to its advance.

As I look out the window,
The words of many ring in my ears,
“Don’t ever come back”,
“The grass is greener on the other side”,
Little do they know,
The pain, the suffering, the daily struggle,
That I go through in silence, without a mumble.

As I look out the window,
My destination approaches,

Slogging in a foreign land,
Was never a willful decision,
How I wish I could come home for good,
And be united with friends and family,
And most of all, exercise my filial duties.

As I look out the window,
Green turns to blue, land turns to sea,
I, like many others,
Returned to exercise our democratic rights,
Our hearts filled with hope,
For a better life, a better future,
For us and for our children,
But once again, our fate hangs in the balance,
In the hands of our political masters,
Some honest, some treacherous,
Playing their game of tug-of-war,
With the innocent people as their rope.

As I look out the window,
I see my land in the distance,
A sliver of hope remains etched in my heart,
That one day I will be able to return to my land,
And never have to part with it again.

* * * * *

“lotties”

by Pete Saigon

neighborhood rumor says she was made up
like concrete ganglia gathered for a morning coffee
third pulse on the third sunday, shibuya bridge - she appears
haunting unbothered by the counted soles of
poorly arched feet - she opens her mouth
7 years ago could fit inside a plastic bottle
for all the trying to bees i saw- she keeps the goodness of a
blue hour plastic tarp, immaculate against bad weather
cold ground and the curious merri-go-round eyes of after hour schedule
still, neighborhood all claims to be there
on the dawn of the anti rush era - she stands up
pats her golden dress and explodes into space confetti,
her grand outline as something to see
finally they tear the building down
the appearance of another hour of sunlight

* * * * *

“tokyo story”

by Pete Saigon

my shoes lace up in the same knot that
I put there months ago, still holding shape
on sunday we all run the circuit down to see
the matsuri, a block party making its appearance
after a 2 year hiatus, I had wanted to see
everything I had heard about, like a wish come true
after i decided in that kitchen to set the wish free already

neighborhood all know each other, even me, the strange face,
the funny interloper, i look like you, but i am not your history,
a consequence of a week long traffic jam here I finally exit
the centerpiece of it all were rice paper beings cut out in
the shape of a younger self, so i do as everyone else does
and write down all the soft parts that hurt me,
set it into the river watch a body dissolve in the distance

it turns the evening rose like an ancient love returning
yet we see the 1st hiding in the super’s giveaway calendar
lurch forward to grab me, fistful of borrowed time, just look
how she stands there with her mountain of strawberry ice
a flake can melt before our words have a chance to meet
we realize these shoe prints kicking up dust is just history making
at the matsuri, we take extra long, thinking about what comes next

* * * * *

“How We Use Water”

by Elvis A. Galasinao Jr.

Impound

Between the rains and the river rose
a sky wall. We laid down its thick
concrete scaffolding and planted steel
gates that open and close, and amid
the machines and the laborers, we impound
the waters solely for our own comfort.

Wash

We read the river like fortune-tellers
reading the lines on our palms hoping
for riches. We soak our feet in mercury
in the process of sifting gold from the
waters of the river, while we wash the
sand and stones in panning gold deposits.

Float

We cut down tree trunks and scout for
a nearby river. We make sure the waterway
channels are cleared of rocks and trees that might
create a dreaded jam, then logs had to be
floated from forest to pup mills and sawmills
downstream using the current of the river.

Drown

Heavy downpour washes over our brown skin.
We watch the muddy river carry much earth,
as it was supposed to bring rich silt for our fields
before harvest. But all we did was exploit the
waters of rain and river, sketch our community anew,
carve it with strong waters and drown our homes.

Dilute

We cross the vast body of water where first life
was brought forth. I forgot the Filipino word
for kite and the Ilocano for rice. They say my tongue
is a love message from my mother, but my tongue
can barely stretch enough to remember
words and names. The ocean got my tongue.

Swim

I want to go back home.

* * * * *

“Imagining Isabela”

by Elvis A. Galasinao Jr.

in memory of Carolina Antolin (1942-2016)

Aurora, Isabela.

Summer of 2016, we went home
for coffee and poetry and sleep.

We scribbled a few lines;

We told some good bad jokes;

You forgot a few faces.

“No Maysaakon a Sangsangaili”

or “If I Have Become a Stranger”

was my favorite poem in Ilokano.

And you taught me this.

That line, that rhyme, that tone

that carried the map of your soul.

I forgot a recent ghost.

My scribbles were the ghost unseen,

but always in attendance. And

every word felt like a good cry

preparing us for a bigger cry.

On the dinner table, I pretended

to laugh at a terrible joke. I laughed
with the rest like it was funny
as a ghost. And as you return
to the earth's embrace –
amid the gently bowing branches,
amid the bonny kin of flowers,

I wonder now what they have
all been for: the words; the terrible
jokes that followed. So many ghosts.
Let the forgotten faces end the lines.
Let Carolina rest.

– Years ago, there was Isabela.

* * * * *

“Where the Banyan Tree Once Stood”

by Brian Lee

Bishan Campus

That is a smile I have
yet to see: the left hand
of darkness; bright is the night,
the sun illumines our cheeks
and stows away the plight.
There shall be no drama,

but this is, must, and will
be a reverent affair, with steps
surely caressing the concrete
on a path determined to
outpace the rain. But I digress,

diverge from the path
where the banyan tree once stood.
It watched over, with the
constancy of a totem or
monarch, the gaiety of many
girls and boys. Lulled them
in their tears, its swaying leaves

firmer than the fluttering papers

astray from school bags.
But duty compels my
documentation of its absence:
varnished planks now lie
where the banyan tree once stood.

But this

lushness

must all be

a

mere

ruse, and

I must speak plainly:

not

prevaricate.

Make no mistake: almost
every fine food tastes better
when salted. And if memories
are a surefire way to feed
the mind, then why shall we not

season them with brine,

even if they form puddles
at our feet, commending
themselves unto unsightliness?

* * * * *

“Pale Views”

by Brian Lee

Journeys of decades
have brought us this conclusion:
there is inherently no magic
present in trickling fountains
and their sparkling glass veneers;
accordingly, that is why
the wrinkled ones betray
no wonder.

Delightful mayhem dawns
in the clear and teary-eyed,
perhaps that is why
weeping takes us hurtling back
into the vaunted analogue
of reams, long dusted
with the experience of aging eyes.

There is no magic in them.
Not in the miraculous flight
of unwinged horses
through a hundred and twenty frames
in the pinhole, nor in
the veiled curtains which part

to reveal the pollen-dusted fairies
who twinkle amidst the flowers.

The wrinkles make us sigh,
the cataracts move us on.
Only the unclouded can marvel.
That is why our tears
must show us the way—

the path skirting across the
star-adorned surface
of the flickering river,
wrapped in the warmth
of mother's arms, a chimney.

* * * * *

“Firefly Valley”

by Brian Lee

A road trip a couple of hours away from home
past winding dirt paths, mangroves and
palm oil plantations would take us there.
During the day it was all calm and still.
The windmill turned in silence, and
the trees curved over the fields.

When dusk came, so did they,
glowing lamps, fluorescent dots darting about
in the dimming silhouettes of corn plants.
They courted the leaves as nightfall came.
And we would, unable to restrain ourselves,
run amongst them with squeals and laughter.

If you were quick enough with your hands,
you might catch a beam of illumined happiness—
and widen your eyes in wonder as rays peered out.
First the folds in the knuckles, then a halo.
They would go forth, hopefully unscathed,
lighting up the water wheel, their neon signboard.

They come, nestling, scattering in the foliage.
They go, fluttering, charting an uncertain path

amidst a clear night sky, the moon smiling on them.

And wherever I may be today,

no matter how far apart,

I'll go look up into the starry sky,

and watch them dance with my heart.

* * * * *

“The Birds”

by Brian Lee

They come, all of them,
perching on the rooftop
before sunrise—

They are free.

We watch, as the steel birds
soar past us
into the sky
one by one—

They are also free.

We sit and we squat,
making peace
with the island’s true natives—
for we are not colonisers.
We are prisoners.
Frogs hop. Crickets chirp.
Grasshoppers twitch—

They too are birds, for they are free.

And just before sundown,
the birds congregate once more—
as if to remind us—

We are birds, and you are not.