

A n a k S a s t r a

Issue 32

Issue 32 Contents

short fiction

"Coming Home" by Lindsay Boyd

"Scene with a Boy and a Plane" by Mark Knego

"The Soil Has No Sons" by Elsa Mattson

nonfiction

"Wild Ride" by Katacha Díaz

poems

"Impromptu" by Dahlia Zailani

"Mang Mon" by John Charles Ryan

"A Monk's Love" and "Like Water" by Steve Haberlin

"Ordinary Day" by Arlene Yandug

"Tsunami" by John C. Mannone

* * * * *

Contributor Bios

Lindsay Boyd is a writer, personal carer and traveller still waiting for his boat to come in. When not emulating his poetic heroes, among them Dostoyevsky, Hesse, Kazantzakis and Cavafy, he likes to rub shoulders with marginalised people and look after gardens, pets and houses he does not own. With no reflection on his attention span in maths classes at school, he long ago lost count of his publications and the number of countries he has been in.

Mark Knego lives in San Francisco. He is a published playwright and theater director. In the past he worked with Cambodian refugees in San Francisco in a very well-received art project for almost a decade. He was accepted by the refugees and became an integral and important part of their community. A trilogy of plays he wrote and directed about the Cambodian experience was published by San Francisco's Exit Press in 2011. A few years ago he traveled to Cambodia as a tourist. Currently he is writing short story fiction based on his many travels.

Elsa Mattson is a college student currently living in the United States. She was born in Singapore and is half-Chinese Malaysian. She has always loved to read and write. When she was a high school student, she published 24 of her writings in *Teen Ink Magazine*, 4 of which gained recognition by the editors for literary excellence. She has written everything from movie reviews to poems.

Wanderlust and the love of travel have taken **Katacha Díaz** all over the world to gather material for her stories and articles. She earned her BA and MPA from University of Washington. She was a research associate at the University of California, Davis. Among the children's books she has authored is *Badger at Sandy Ridge Road* for the Smithsonian Institution's Backyard series. Her work appears or is forthcoming with *Barely South Review*, *Westview*, *Visual Verse*, *Medical Literary Messenger*, *MacGuffin*, *Cecile's Writers'*, *Peacock Journal*, *Flash Frontier*, *Galway Review*, *New Mexico Review*, *Gravel*, *Foliate Oak*, and elsewhere. She lives and writes up in her perch with a wide view of the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest.

Notorious for zoning out mid-conversation, **Dahlia Zailani** is often thinking up creative ways to re-imagine the world, from how life would be like if the bystander effect was dead, to what could've happened if she decided to keep her mouth shut. You will often find her curled up around her laptop like a cat around a radiator.

[John Charles Ryan](#) is a poet, ecocritic and botanist who lives between Chiang Mai, Thailand, and Armidale, Australia. His recent non-fiction books are *Southeast Asian Ecocriticism* (Lexington, 2017) and *The Language of Plants* (Minnesota, 2017). His forthcoming *Forest Family* (Brill, 2018) is a study of the old-growth forests of Southwest Australia. His poetry includes *Two With Nature* (Fremantle Press, 2012) and *Primavariants* (ICLL Press, 2017).

Steve Haberlin's poetry has been published in the *Journal of Poetry Therapy* as well as recently accepted by the *Asian Signature* literary journal. He is a Ph.D. student at the University of South Florida in the United States, who uses poetry at times in research and writes it personally.

[Arlene Yandug](#) teaches literature and creative writing at Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, where she also serves as editor of *Carayan*, an online journal of literary work and criticism. Her recent interests include translation, regional writings and ecocriticism.

[John C. Mannone](#) has work in *Artemis*, *Poetry South*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Peacock Journal*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pedestal*, *Pirene's Fountain*, and others. He's the winner of the 2017 Jean Ritchie Fellowship in Appalachian literature and the recipient of two Weymouth writing residencies. He has three poetry collections: *Apocalypse* (Alban Lake Publishing) won 3rd place for the 2017 Elgin Book Award; *Disabled Monsters* (The Linnet's Wings Press) featured at the 2016 Southern Festival of Books; and *Flux Lines* (Celtic Cat Publishing) —love-related poems using science metaphors due out in 2018. He's been awarded the 2017 Horror Writers Association Scholarship, two Joy Margrave Awards for Nonfiction, and nominated for several Pushcart, Rhysling, and Best of the Net awards. He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex*, *Silver Blade*, and *Liquid Imagination*. He's a professor of physics near Knoxville, TN.

* * * * *

"Coming Home"

by Lindsay Boyd

The city perched on the northern coast of the country. It had found its niche on the narrowed plains between the central core of mountains, ranges that ran the length of the nation, and the Ombai Strait. Waiting for her delayed flight in Bali, in a lounge inauspiciously quiet even when the indication on the sign at the boarding gate was amended from 'delayed' to read a categorical departure time, she ruminated on how the old colonial backwater would have changed since her visit of fourteen years before, when the nation was teething, its hopes for the future optimistic.

Where once there had been few flights and carriers, now there were several daily, and three airlines offered access from Bali and other points in Southeast Asia, dramatic reflection of the fact that the territory had disposed of the anachronistic status the outside world conferred for decades. Where had it stood then? The answer was crude in its simplicity: nowhere.

As the time of the late departure inched nearer and the numbers in the holding area around the gate increased, she ascertained the facial characteristics of her fellow travellers. Through the years of her all-embracing travels, she had nurtured the ability to place the 'look' of a nation's inhabitants once she familiarised herself with that look, usually after spelling there for a time, long or not so long.

Her time in Timor-Leste years ago, however, had been too brief for her to achieve the same with the Timorese. The strangers assembling about her, boarding passes, passports and other documentation at the ready, were well-defined, like no other Southeast Asian races—and she knew them all—that came to mind.

That a former occupying nation, a bear with a sore head, years down the road, should run flights to the country—to the very city—it once trampled underfoot. Were she not her father's daughter, she would not have been able to tally it. And the big, bad bear

alleged affinity on historical, religious and cultural grounds in partial justification of their takeover. Affinity without even a remote physical similarity? She, for one, had never heard of such a thing.

She had done her homework. Renewed study of the demographics—largely forgotten over the fourteen-year-gap—reminded her that the natives consisted of multiple ethnic groups. In the main the descent was Austronesian and Melanesian/Papuan.

The Malayo-Polynesian groups included the Tetum, the Mambai, the Tukudede, the Galole, the Kemak, and the Baikeno. The Babak, the Fataluku and the Makasae were the larger groups in the mostly Papuan tribes. Besides these groups there existed a population of mixed East Timorese and Portuguese origin, and a small Chinese minority. Small wonder they could not be slotted alongside any other ethnicity she knew of.

* * *

In their email correspondence, the woman who had offered to host her in Dili, TJ, stated that flights to Dili out of Bali were commonly held up hours, a claim one of the guide books she consulted confirmed. To have escaped with a pause of just the two hours then would have sat well with her had it not been for the fact that even this lesser delay would likely result in her missing her host at the meeting place the two had agreed on.

She crossed the tarmac at Nicolau Lobato Airport, her daypack strapped to her shoulders, sun beating down on her hatless head. For her the arrivals building was more like an airport hangar than a terminal of a capital city airport. Inside, she handed the on duty immigration official her passport, visa application form, and the fee of thirty American dollars.

“First time in Timor?”

As if doubting the indicant of her own past, she paused before answering. “No. I was here before. Years ago.”

“Welcome back,” the man said, returning her visaed and stamped passport.

In the same email in which she posited the flight situation, TJ had written: *Can I suggest you get a taxi \$5 (no buses from airport, very small place) to Timor Plaza, everyone knows it, and I will meet you in the ground floor food court—don't worry it is very small, Timor size, then after we get you set up at plaza with a local phone card and internet*

connection if you want them, not expensive, you can pick up any grocery items you want, then I will take you to the house. Cheers, TJ.

Her progress through the arrivals lounge was unhindered after she left the immigration checkpoint. She wheeled her bag out into the sun, past a clutter of blue taxis, and over to a young man, one of several who offered rides east to the centre for rates competitive with if not better than those of the official taxis.

She took the front passenger seat of a beat-up vehicle that would have been declared unroadworthy in most parts of the world. Both she and the driver sank so low on the spring-less front seat upholstery that it was pointless trying to see much above the base of the windscreen. The one payoff was that it allowed her to feel the full force of the breeze in her window. It coursed through her hair and blow-dried the beads of sweat on her brow and cheeks.

It had become clear to her from their written contact that TJ was an extremely busy woman. Entering the shopping emporium and going down the stairs, this was one of the reasons she was quite convinced her host would have long gone on her way. It was two hours after the time she stipulated.

Hers was a conscientious scouting, but there was no sign of a Caucasian face among the patrons partaking of food and beverage. Bringing her luggage close, she sidled into a hard plastic chair at a vacant table, resolved to wait a few minutes in spite of her doubts.

But when the hour of two came and went she knew she would have to rely on a bridging taxi ride to the address that she had scribbled down on a piece of notepaper. Before moving, she treated herself to a late lunch. Timorese cuisine, with its variegated influences, had become a stranger too, so she played safe and ordered a plate of *gado-gado* from one of the retailers. The tangy peanut ingredient of the sauce weighed uncharacteristically heavy on her tongue.

* * *

“Is Ramirez your middle name?”

It was around four o'clock. TJ had met her newest guest on the corner closest to the house and now led the way to the property. At the last moment, the driver of the taxi from Timor Plaza had needed to call her number to clarify the exact placement.

“No, it’s not,” Alicia answered, trying to match strides with her host. “It’s the first part of my surname Ramirez-Duryea. Ramirez is my mother’s name, Duryea my father’s.”

TJ half-slowed in her walk. She had heard the name Duryea before. Where and when? But before she could conjecture in any depth they were inside a spacious lounge area. Three of the rooms earmarked for guests faced on it, as did the solitary bathroom. There was a table with chairs, a sofa, and the available cooking apparatus, two hot points on a three-foot-high steel bench.

“You’re welcome to cook. It’s basic, but you should find everything you need. If you’re missing something let me know.”

“Which room is yours?”

“It’s the other side of the path,” TJ said, stepping down off the concrete floor and showing the way to the space set aside for the new guest. “This is where you’ll be. These fans will keep you cool—and keep the mosquitoes away.”

In lieu of air-con, there were two fans. A colourful bed sheet doubled as a curtain on the only window. Alicia rolled her bag into a corner and ran an eye over the titles of the books shelved near the bed. An eclectic range of fiction and nonfiction, they were the kinds of publications one might have expected of a person rapt in cultures leagues apart from their native one.

“Feel free,” TJ said, watching her.

They went back to the palm-fringed common area. “How often do you have volunteers staying?”

“Nonstop. These three rooms are taken. Two of them are medical students. Then there’s Dave. He’s doing something a bit complicated. He’ll explain it to you.”

“Where are they from?”

“Australia. Kyu’s from Melbourne. Hayley and Dave are from Sydney.”

“Sydney’s your hometown too, isn’t it?”

TJ studied her curiously while confirming that she was from East Sydney. Her look became more obtrusive when Alicia said Sydney was her birthplace too, but that her Catalonian mother had soon after decided to leave Australia and return home to Spain.

“You’ve come to do the run?”

Alicia became sheepish. “I’m not the world’s greatest athlete, but I’m aiming to do it.”

TJ excused herself on the grounds that she needed to be somewhere in half an hour. Before hurrying out of the house, she appended some kitchen basics, including where to find filtered water. She also gave Alicia a rough idea of the route into the heart of town, a short distance away on foot. There were, she added, shops close by where she would be able to purchase food and basic items.

With the heat of the day abating, Alicia headed out. Two long blocks to the east, she passed the Church of San Antonio de Motael, the oldest Catholic church in the country. Sculptures in its front yard of a lantern-holding Joseph, the Madonna, and the baby Jesus juxtaposed with the old Portuguese style, according to which the church had been rebuilt in the mid-1950s. She remembered having read that in 1991 members of the Timorese resistance had sought haven within.

A noteworthy statue across the street, on the waterfront side of the road, served as a memorial of a more recent occupation. Erected upon a cobblestone enclosure, it portrayed a man on his haunches supporting another in his arms, a man lying with his legs fully outstretched, face contorted, eyes shut as he drifted in limbo. His comforter’s gaze was fixed skyward, as if to question the sense or justice of the other’s decline.

From the pathway behind the statue, she saw clear across to the hills that formed a ring around Dili on the other side of the central city. The iconic Jesus Statue stood out. Before her, locals bent at the waist, or down on their haunches, fossicked in an expanse of water uncovered at the low tide. Rounding a bend, up from the church, she passed a lighthouse, an old white structure with a spiral staircase.

The descending sun in her eyes nullified her vision, but the long stretch of ocean road was abuzz with activity—cars, microlets, small trucks, utes and motorcycles. Two passing joggers—young men both, one in all black, the other in a red shirt and black shorts—were a timely reminder of one of the purposes of her journey and the importance of her abiding by a training schedule until the day of the run, eight days hence.

Strollers, mothers with young children, young couples, friends of the same sex, equalled, if not bested, the number of joggers. Others, boys mostly, frolicked in the shallows at a short length of black sand beach. The plenitude of exercisers lent the whole an

energetic feel. Looking on, Alicia imagined she would have plenty of company on the morning of the run.

* * *

TJ was explaining the idea behind the support group she had founded. It was aimed at needy Timorese women, and she was its mainstay and director.

“We’re about empowering the women, teaching them skills they’ll use for the rest of their lives,” she told Alicia in the lounge area on the first morning of the younger woman’s stay.

“There must be a great call for that here.”

TJ gave her a truculent stare—quite a statement from one fresh off the plane—but bit her tongue.

“You’ve been here a long time then?” Alicia asked, aware of the aggression stewing in the other.

“Since just before independence.”

TJ was out of audible range, gone to retrieve a container of shampoo and a bar of soap she had promised her guest, before Alicia could praise her for her dedication.

“When was the last time you visited home?” Alicia asked, accepting the toiletries.

“Years ago. Home is a luxury I can’t afford.”

“Hosting foreigners would be a help, I guess? In terms of money?”

Again, the testy look. But she went on accommodating the new arrival in practical ways. She was the same with her longer-term visitors, the forestry students, the medical students from near and far who interned at the Bairo Pite clinic for weeks or longer. She tried to be a strong mother figure for every single one.

She knew they could have lodged elsewhere in the capital and therefore was grateful they chose her. It *did* help her and her foundation financially, but there was the added bonus of providing for fascinating young people who cared about the young nation’s development. Her other guests, those who came solely as tourists, all had their stories too.

In straying this far east in the Lesser Sundas and exploring a city not cut out for tourism, they were different. The nation as a whole was not set up for tourism. To think, certain elements in the present administration wanted to transform a swathe of land on the

northern coast into a tourist mecca along south Balinese lines. TJ did not know whether to laugh or burst into outraged tears at the idea.

Spanish-Irish Alicia was out of the ordinary too. Her commitment to the following week's run had the trademark of an individualist streak admirable to TJ, though this cannot have been all there was to her week and a half in town. That 'mystery' might resolve only if TJ cut the woman some slack, she concluded. She regretted having been short with her in that inimitable way of hers. But there were some things she had never been able to suffer lightly.

She worked long days in the stifling heat and on many an evening had insufficient energy left to let her hair down and socialise. But when in the spirit she doctored her routine and joined friends at her number one watering hole, a bar on the coast road, for a couple of hours drinking and a pub quiz. On those nights, she liked to invite one or more of her guests along too, those whom she felt to be on her wavelength.

The third night of Alicia's stay at the house coincided with such an evening of revelry. TJ intended to ask her along, but Alicia kept busy the whole day. Neither her host nor any of the other guests saw her. She had begun her day with an early jog by the water in temperate air that augured well for her upcoming run. She pulled up at the point where she started, by the high wall of a building housing the offices of two nongovernment organisations.

After a bout of stretching, she straightened for a closer look at the photos on the walls. All featured Caucasians interacting with members of the local population, clearly in the guises of benefactors to benefited. There were also listings of the amounts of aid currently pouring into the country.

Similar data was on display in the centre of town, at a small museum beside the Xanana Reading Room, which she dropped into that afternoon. It was an ignominious saga of nations who had collectively, out of expediency, turned their backs at one point in time, falling over themselves to pump in aid years later. The dyad pigmentation of existence, the duplexity of mankind, was an oft-raised talking point of her roving news correspondent father. Everything she read on the displays validated his theory that it was the nature of this world.

In the reading room, until closing time, she thumbed the shelves. Many of the nonfiction titles were by or about dissidents, Asian and non-Asian, who had fought injustice. A browse of a selection showed that the fictional works were geared to the same themes.

On one side of the room, a TV monitor played a medley of interviews with and speeches by a Timorese, another central figure in the nation's struggle. They ended only to begin playing again, as if the tape automatically rewound on stopping. The face was that of the man who had become president subsequent to the rebel leader Xanana.

Rotating her gaze to the screen, Alicia listened to the words of reconciliation. There was room for all, he said, to exist side by side in the post-conflict era. TJ had told her she was a good friend of this forgiving man, that he had helped more than she could say her assimilation into the culture.

* * *

Driving dance rhythms that carried on until well after the midnight hour fractured her sleep on two consecutive nights in the middle of the week. After the evening quietness of the first days of her stay, the overload came as a rude imposition. Ear plugs were no help and the conjoined noise of her two fans on their highest settings was ineffective in blocking out the racket.

But she trained on regardless. Back from an effort of eight kilometres early on Wednesday morning, filling her bottle at the water dispenser in the lounge area, she turned on hearing a door open behind her. It was Kyu, the Chinese-Australian medical student, on her way to work. They greeted one another.

Alicia disclosed how she had been passing the time. "I'd like to see the Santa Cruz Cemetery," she mentioned. "When I was here years ago, the Timorese I was with didn't want to go."

Kyu related to that unwillingness and owned that it was somewhere she had no desire to visit either.

"I have my reasons," Alicia added, quietly.

She went on to say a few words about her father, someone she had been closemouthed about up to then. Everyone else was busy with their daily duties. Given that,

she believed talking about him at any length would have been tantamount to offering something to people not in a position to receive it.

“He would’ve said we need to look at everything in life, the ugly and the beautiful, not shrink from it.”

Kyu began her walk to the clinic, leaving Alicia alone with Lucia, the cleaning lady TJ hired to come in daily. She attended to her chores, which included sewing, efficiently, and was rarely to be heard. Whenever, padding about the space, she came upon Alicia she addressed her in mellow Portuguese.

* * *

She was having a bite of lunch that afternoon when TJ appeared with a bundle of her guest’s clean and neatly folded laundry. It was another free perk she offered those who stayed. Alicia thanked her and set the pile on one of the chairs near the table.

“I’ve worked in community development on my travels.”

TJ wheeled round to face her. The term got her dander, as did the aid groups who coined it in their job descriptions. Their claims that *this* was her field too cast aspersions on the efforts of someone like her, a woman was on a commitment to the cause of the rookie nation likely to last until she had no breath left.

“I don’t like the phrase much either,” Alicia said, self-effacing. “If you’re living in a community, you’re helping to develop it.”

TJ had enough time to give her guest a hearing.

“I’ve been in intentional communities,” Alicia added. “I know that’s a world away from setting up something in a place where the people are totally at sea.”

TJ’s eyes upon the other were now softer. “Major change can take years. That’s why I felt it was important to stay.”

“But your hard work’s borne fruit?”

TJ pursed her lips. “Timor was shrouded in secrecy for a long time. In any case, I wasn’t an activist. I was a primary school teacher. I thought I’d be a teacher for the rest of my life, if only because there wasn’t anything else I was that good at.

“But a close friend *was* an activist. She’d worked with women’s groups in Mexico and Central America. We talked about East Timor when it became big. At the time of the

post-referendum violence, there were rallies in most of the capital cities at home. I went along with her to the one in Sydney.

“The feeling was of something about to give, that had to give on a governmental and grassroots level. It didn’t take much nudging from my friend, who went back to Latin America to live, for me to put up my hand. I quit my job at the end of the year, made plans, and travelled here months later.”

“What do you teach the women?”

“Textile-making skills and how to market their work for fair prices. But that isn’t the end of it. A lot of our members are unschooled. There isn’t an area of life we don’t touch on.”

* * *

Alicia reached Lecidare, a block or so from the Reading Room, and consulted the city centre map she kept in her shoulder bag. Bizarrely, Santa Cruz Cemetery was not in the place where by rights it ought to have been if her reading of the map and navigational skills were on song.

Over the next sixty minutes she meandered one way, beared west and/or east at intersecting streets, doubled back three or four times, but with the identical outcome. Too leg weary after her morning workout to carry her search into the twilight, she returned to Lecidare. Some things were not meant to be. Her travels, and life in general, had taught her this. She accepted that, as in 2002, she was not meant to perform vigil at the cemetery.

Young people, heads bent over the screens of portable devices, reclined on the sloping bases of the odd constructions that dotted the area. Alicia assumed a seat and reached for the book she had borrowed from TJ’s library. She resumed her reading of a lucid account of one of the massacres that occurred early in the occupation; one that would never have come to light had its lone survivor, a man called Tonino, not been coaxed into speaking up.

As the story went, one morning Indonesian soldiers herded him and his fellow villagers together on the pretext that they were to collect food. In reality they were marched to a river at a distance from their homes. A gravelly spit on one of the banks provided ample beach. The other side’s treeless, steep bank formed a wall. To the north stood a small mountain.

The soldiers lined them up in the water, Tonino reported. Others with automatic weapons took up positions on the other side of the river. The river's arc placed them in a semi-circle around the villagers. Those who had led them there covered their rear, and behind them was the precipitous bank, adding another layer of deterrence to would-be fleers.

The armed men to the front mounted machine guns at the centremost point. Together with their cohorts, they then beseeched the villagers to embrace each other and parody in song the bloodletting about to commence. But the proud villagers refused, incensing their drunken captors.

Next came the soldiers' three-count and the firing of the guns. Sprays of water, blood and dust in the air. And as those around him barrelled into death, Tonino swam slowly, industriously. Attempting to camouflage himself in elephant grass by the water, a bullet grazed his elbow. He mimed death as others tumbled on top of him.

And then the silence when the guns stopped, when all were believed slain. But a few, like Tonino, copycatted death, lay supine in the heat and malodour, while the water and sand reddened with the spilt life blood of the victims. He and the other ones still living were too scared to move lest the troops standing by brought the cudgel down on them too. They were unaware that in their village bedridden elderly lay dead too, gunned down mercilessly.

Hours later—how many was it?—sounded the steps of the boot wearing assassins, who poked and prodded bodies to rubber-stamp their work. And a voice. "Hey, whoever's still alive can join us as a TBO."

And two gumptious boys disencumbered themselves from the wreckage of human remains and were sliced with bullets. Face down in his pantomime, Tonino wept. He would make his break with dusk on the horizon, careering into the bush. Not for days would the villagers downstream receive permission to bury the bodies of the dead that flowed into their midst. They chose a shallow, sandy hole.

Many years later, as another dusk fell, Alicia closed the book with a heavy heart and began the walk back to TJ's. Early evening joggers and walkers eased past her on the coastal path, lineated against the setting sun. It glowed yellow in a crimson bed.

* * *

Dave was a lawyer by profession. TJ had touted him to Alicia as a potential source of helpful information, practical and otherwise, about Dili and the country broadly speaking. His three-month-long residency had led him to gain an indisputable sense of how things sat in the land fourteen years after independence.

His practical know-how was of use to her, but their chats were confined until the Thursday after her arrival, when TJ let her know that he was about to end his fact-finding tour and fly home. When they met in the middle of the evening, he was back from a farewell drinking session with TJ and the two medical students. He had an early flight in the morning, he said. On landing in Sydney he was due to make a presentation to those who financed his trip.

“Has it been a success?”

“I wish I could say yes,” he answered. “An NGO that’s operated here for a decade decided months ago this would be their last year. I was sent to look into the practicality of setting up a replacement.”

He paused before going on. “The last word will be theirs, but I’m going to advise them to think hard. Maybe now isn’t the best time, maybe not even the foreseeable future.”

“Why?”

His reasons were manifold. The abysmal literacy rate was one of them. A significant percentage of adults could neither read nor write. In the colonial era, the rate of illiteracy had stood at almost one hundred percent. To add insult to injury, the instruction in the schools in the occupation smacked of indoctrination rather than education and had been conducted in Indonesian, not Tetum.

“What language is used in the schools now?”

“Portuguese.” Dave, browned off, went on. “This country—and remember its GDP has it sitting around 150th place in the world, and its human development index rates are about as bad—will outlay huge dollars to Portugal when they have major bushfires over there. It happened recently.”

Poverty was endemic but worse in the rural areas, where most households were without electricity. Having made trips to villages inland of the capital, he knew first-hand that revenue from the sale of the nation’s petroleum and natural gas deposits never flowed down to the general populace. With poor education, inept health services and dismal living

standards in general came disinterest in foreign based nongovernment organisations, if not a blanket lack of knowledge as to the purpose of such groups.

“A lot of the people I met had no idea their lives could be better.”

“But wouldn’t that change if they saw them at work?”

Dave was unsure.

In talking to the locals, villagers like those Alicia had been reading about, he often detected festering hatred for the oppressor who departed seventeen years earlier, the soldiers who stated they would never abandon Timor, that too much blood had been shed for them to turn tail. Had they answered for the killings? Would they only ever answer to God, a God who would forgive, as He forgave all His errant ones?

“It might flare up one day,” Dave said. “Watch out if and when it does.”

Alicia told the lawyer what she had told Kyu, that she was not new to the country. But this time she spoke in depth of the deeply personal side of her return. They had been together three quarters of an hour when Dave cited tiredness and a wish to catch some shut eye before TJ shuttled him to the airport for his Darwin flight. She wished him a smooth flight home.

“Thanks, mate. When’s your run?”

“Early Sunday.”

“Good luck. And your other plan?”

“I’ll figure that out after the run.”

He unlocked the door of his room. “TJ would know of somewhere suitable.” She nodded thanks. He opened his door but turned around at the threshold. “You’re sure about your dad, are you?”

“I don’t think there’s any doubt,” she answered. “The books I’ve read speak of victims never accounted for, and who may never be accounted for. There’d be foreigners among them, wouldn’t you say? They couldn’t all be Timorese.”

Dave did not dispute the contention. Bidding her goodnight, he entered his room and closed the door softly behind him.

* * *

She would be unaware of the fact until early Sunday, as she prepared to walk to the starting point of her run in the waterfront park area close to the Government Palace

building, but Dave shared a good deal of what she opened up to him about with TJ as she conveyed him to the airport for his flight home.

Far from regarding this as a breach of confidence, Alicia welcomed the fact that TJ now knew all there was to know about the rationale of her postscript visit. Without the conversation with Dave, come the day of her departure—depending on TJ’s busyness—there was every chance the air might not have been cleared between host and guest.

“You should’ve told me all that,” TJ said.

“I meant to.”

TJ sighed. “I try to be available to my guests, but I’m not always successful.”

“You heard of my dad?”

“Yes. It takes courage to pitch in with any weaker side when everything’s going against them. I know he wasn’t the only one among the media men.”

Alicia backed into a chair and slipped on her running shoes. “I’ve a hunch he not only crossed the line this time but made up his mind to stay with the locals once he saw for himself what they were going through.”

TJ required no explanation of the journalistic turn of phrase, which referred to the quest of some reporters to obtain the view of both sides in a conflict, in their search for balance.

“His work was his life long before this. I understood that about him when I was still in nappies. I couldn’t have had a more loving father, though the love was conducted from afar.” She paused. “Coming here in 2002 I didn’t know what to think. This time there hasn’t been the same doubt. I wanted to make a gesture.”

She checked the time.

“Do you want a ride to the Esplanade?” TJ asked.

“I’ll be fine. The walk will be a good warm-up.”

“Dave said you want to plant something?”

“I’d like to, but I’m not sure where.”

“Leave that to me. And I’ll find someone to tend the spot for you.”

Ordinarily, TJ bagged Sundays, her only free day of the week, for rudimentary non-work related personal concerns. She often drove to Timor Plaza and hooked up her laptop in the food court, spotty as the connection could be. But she pledged this Sunday afternoon

to Alicia, driving to the headland east of the township dominated by the imposing twenty-seven-metre-high Jesus Statue. Feeling the effects of her run, Alicia made do with baby treads on the steps leading up from the beach. Recesses passed on the way represented the stations of the cross.

Close by one, off the path, the two women lighted on what TJ believed would be an ideal place. Exposed to moderate wind, rain and sun, the sapling honouring Rory Duryea would bloom and grow. Stared at by exercising Westerners and local fishermen, Alicia dug and planted lovingly until satisfied.

She then knelt and, chant-like, spoke some words in a voice barely above a whisper: *Be content with whatever comes. Poised above the dualities. Free of jealousy, envy and enmity. Look equally on gain and loss.*

* * * * *

“Scene with a Boy and a Plane”

by Mark Knego

Everywhere in this world, people are on the move. They are migrating. This wave of humanity is like the globe’s foliage itself, a vast green carpet, surging, shifting, pushing across the surface of our planet. East, West, North, South, the tide never stops. Of course, most people are sedentary, having put down their roots; but those on the move are refugees, or immigrants, heading to greener pastures.

They are fording rivers, hiding in trucks, and getting on planes.

I live in a gleaming, shrink-wrapped, vinyl-plexi-plastica-surfaced-enormitean-cityscape on one side of the planet. I am one of the sedentary ones, conducting my life in Cartesian squares. Wanting better lives, the refugees are coming here, they are pushing into the city, seeds, plants, farm tools. And they bring incense, bells and dragon myths. And I want to know – what is the mystery of their origin? Do they have a different creation myth than we do? How difficult is it to get here? What do they have to leave behind? My curiosity at their advent eats at me. So I think perhaps I should travel to their fabled land. The guys at the local noodle shop around the corner think I should, so I do.

Now I am standing on the other side of the Earth looking at a river which tumbles down from the mountains forming a border, a refugee crossing point. I flew over that surging green mass for hours to get here. It seemed like seaweed. The air here is filled with the sound of water over stone, bubbling and splashing, forming nascent eddies and pools. It is a few kilometers from the main town, you can get here by tuk-tuk if you want, or if you really need AC, take a taxi. It’s only about 200 baht.

Bursting boats ferry folks across the river to our side on an hourly basis. In fact, a boat has just crossed, exhausted families carrying baskets containing everything that exists in the world including hope disembark. Rice sacks, electric fans, dogs. Tricycle. Chickens.

Wedding dress. Laptop. Buddha statue. People climb up the bank. An old, muddy green river could be Everest.

I look carefully at the scene. The river is the focus. There are some around, hangers-on watching expressionlessly. However, there are two more important elements here. They are overlooked by most, but I can see them, for I choose to.

High in the air, a passenger jet has started to line its' contrail into the acid blue sky.

And a child sits alone on a wooden bench, on a hillock, over the river.

This is what I see. I observe.

The jet contrail, a spider's first shooting strand, has etched a line one third of the way across the sky.

The child is a boy, maybe eight years old, in blue shorts and an old tank top. He needs a haircut because he looks like a sheep. He is kicking around a rock wrapped in rubber bands like a soccer ball.

Allowing his gaze to slip from his football, he glances furtively at me. Then he looks back to the ball. He is shy, so I soften my smile and try to glow for him. Can you feel my warmth? He kicks his ball from one foot to the other as our eyes meet. Finally, after some coaxing, he stops dribbling his ball and smiles.

Above, the jet contrail continues to spin its silver bead across the sky. It is work from the hand of God.

The boy is a quiet, seated angel.

The airplane is a salient, silver arrow.

Is it filled with the global wanderers pushing across the planet? Families, dreams and child dolls?

Maybe one day the boy and his family will be on a plane just like that one.

He's going to need a lot of luck. The area is a conduit for human trafficking, as police work with international criminal syndicates to move and control refugees across the border, set them up in camps and put them to work in industries whose products are destined for the West. Shrimp. Toys. Electronics. It can get really nasty. In some countries in the regional authorities routinely break up demonstrations of garment workers protesting for a living wage. Activists disappear, only to be found bleeding lifelessly in the

market around noon as shoppers crowd around them, hole in the head, seemingly having found a peace that had been unattainable.

I silently ask the boy if I can imagine his life, and he winks OK.

He has been waiting in the camp for months with his grandfather. The rest of his family is still across the border. They were separated when his village bolted en masse for the river after the army attack. Granddad won't allow him to work in the factories because if he started working there the family would be trapped on the border and never be able to get out, and his parents want to go to Bangkok because they have the number of a guy who says they can get jobs in a hotel that pay well. From there, they can move on to the States and the good life.

The jet contrail has now finished etching its bead across the glass sky. It bisects the blue canopy into two halves, the present and the future. One side is blurry, and the other is clear.

Another boat chugs over, disgorging more people. Cat in a cage, children's plastic stool. White doll, blender, Asian doll.

The jet gone, the plane contrail is now spread across the blue, dissipating into the mother universe.

The boy, whom I have momentarily neglected, tilts his head up. Raising his hand like a saint, he points at the glass sky.

Although dirty, his soft hand looks like porcelain, exquisite, shining, fluid.

Porcelain and glass. He leaves it in the air and turns his eyes to me. He smiles again.

Does he dream of being on the plane? And is the dream enough for him, or does he really need a ticket?

Then his porcelain hand gestures to his rough mouth.

He wants something to eat, so I go to a roadside stall and get noodles for both of us and return to the bench. He slides over so we can eat together.

We eat slowly. People still cross the river, some jump out of the boat near the landing, their splashing exploding stars.

The boy finishes his meal then tosses his plate on the ground with everything else. I do the same.

I raise my head. The contrail is now leaching into the universe. The present and future have become one.

Soon dusk descends in its velvet comfort, and I get up to go. The boy kicks his ball.

“Ronaldo?” I say, and he grins and returns with “Ronaldo.”

He gives me the thumbs up, kicks the ball hard down the embankment and chases after it.

As I turn to leave he says something, a small shout. I turn and look at him.

“I’m going to be a doctor,” he says.

Then he flaps his arms like a chicken and laughs.

I smile then give him the thumbs up. “Ronaldo Number One.”

“Ronaldo Number One.”

Back in the hotel that night, I have a dream of him walking into the noodle place around the corner in some years with his wife and two children, a boy and a girl. The boy is wearing a handsome blue shirt, and the girl is wearing a bright pink dress. All it takes is a boat ride and a plane ticket; right.

* * * * *

“The Soil Has No Sons”

by Elsa Mattson

The problem with young people is that they think the old cannot understand or flow with change. The problem with old people is that they've seen so much change that they believe all change is equal.

But Petra's problem was not a conflict with age and other people, as it may so often be for a woman of twenty years, but a conflict within herself.

She was tired of being known for her relationships to other people. She was always someone's friend, or daughter, or cousin. Lately she had been a wife. For once she was tired of living for other people, for being careful with *their* expectations. She would achieve greatness, and if she could not have it, she would act as if she did.

It was that attitude of hers that caused her to write a searing letter that later she would regret writing, not because the words were untrue but because it brought her true feelings into the light. She left the note by her absent husband's nightstand, knowing he would come back the next morning.

My dearest Sebastian,

Well, perhaps I shall not call you dearest, because you have been anything but dear to me these past two years. Your absences would have made me sad had I cared for you, but I do not. My pride has been hurt, but that is all. You forget that broken prides can and do repair, and in a year's time I shall hardly remember you. You are a man with no heart, but that is alright, for I am a woman with no heart. Still, I have a brain and some money in my possession, and at least the former is more than you will ever have. Do have fun with your tarts and your hard nights at "work," for when I am away, you will see none of it ever did you well. My grandfather once said he hoped I would never become the shadow of any man, and that is exactly what you wanted me to become. I am not your shadow. I am my own person and shadow, and you are the ground that my shadow renders invisible. I hope you choke on

your own liver. You call yourself a man and delight in the fact that you can have hairy legs without being ostracized, but I have often thought otherwise. Real men do not have to mention their sensitive masculinities as often as you do. They do not mess around with countless women just to prove they are superior. Even in my current condition, I could still find more lovers than you, if I wanted to. In conclusion, I spit on you, I spit on your mistress, and I spit on the children you have likely fathered. No, I take that back. I pity them too much for having a father like you. Poor things.

Love,

Petra Rynsburger (I'm taking back my maiden name too, you poisonous imbecile)

She left her husband that night, which considering the man's emotional abuses should have wrought in her the purest joy, but she departed cheerlessly.

* * *

It certainly would be easy for people in their twilight years, with love and children and accomplishments already tangible in their lives, to look upon her and say she was overly sensitive, hasty even. But a brat she was not. She was a scared young woman who daily acted as if she was strong, only to find that in her weakest moments there was no one by her side to lift her up.

Petra's marriage had been one of convenience. After an extended childhood living between Amboina and the Federated Malay States, rather over-coddled by her parents, she had reached marriageable age without any good prospects for education. Finding that marriage was her only option, she started an awkward flirtation with an Englishman, an overseer of rubber plantations in the South. He had been offered a position in Singapore shortly after they first met. Their flirtation was encouraged by Petra's parents and by no means turned into genuine love, but the man needed a wife to protect his reputation, and he was not repulsed by Petra, at the very least. Within six months they were married. Their wedding would have been adorable had it not been so forced, for the newlyweds were incredibly attractive, albeit in opposing ways. Petra with her auburn hair and Indo eyes seemed a pretty little companion to the taller, more sunburnt Sebastian.

But she hated him. Hate was too minor a word to describe the way she abhorred him. He smelled like gin and when he kissed her she ended up smelling like a bottle of jenever. He was very handsome, but had not much personality besides his selfishness. Such

men cease to be enticing after no time at all. And they had barely slept in the same bed for three nights in a row before he turned to other women, a fact which mortified Petra, but would have mortified her more if she did not relish his absence. The bedroom was peaceful without him, and when he was gone she could forget the overbearing smell of gin and instead focus on the lavender smell of her own hair.

As a friend she could have handled him; he would still have been selfish, but at least she could have kept him at a distance. It was not even entirely his personality that promoted her disdain. Had he been kinder and more open, she still would have had the same amorous attraction for him as she would have a soggy towel. He was lifeless regardless of personality, but his cruelty solidified him in her mind as someone worthy of disgust. His face alone was remarkably delightful upon first viewing, but Petra could see from the way he contorted those features that beyond general business knowledge, he was quite stupid. His interests were simple and she knew it, but they could still have been friends. As a lover, he was not worth mentioning.

It was appalling, that infidelity of his, but Petra did not mind so much until he sold his coat in exchange for a necklace to give his mistress. It was the coat she had given him during their short engagement, at a strange point when they had almost appeared to be in love, their attraction mutual and simmering. She still had fond memories of buying that coat and of him receiving it, but not a year and a half later he gave it up for an ephemeral affair.

Thus, the lady left him. By the time she walked out of the door of their villa, she had already forgotten him. First, she was unsure of her destination but did recall a modest island off the coast of Singapore, not far from Pulau Ubin, where as a child she had spent carefree holidays. That would be her beacon of freedom.

Petra asked an old acquaintance, Everett Ong, to be her guide. Everett lived a mile from the villa as Sebastian's right-hand man, and while he had not spoken to her in ages, he was the best person to contact. They almost became friends at one point, a year before, when Sebastian had gone to Siam for business ventures. They were farther in age than Petra was with Sebastian, but they were both young and alone, and a genuine connection had been made. It was hard not to like Everett, with his defined features and his silly

reading glasses and attentive voice. He was approachable whenever Sebastian was not around. Oh, he could be so agreeable! What had happened to their friendship?

The last time Petra spoke to Everett, she had stopped by in the late morning to ask if he could help her with her English. At the time, her English was stilted and undeveloped, and Everett could converse far better than she. Though she was embarrassed to ask, Everett had agreed, not being able to resist the kind request of his blushing neighbor. They had studied for thirty minutes in the dim room, resting under the lampshade of their reciprocal admiration, but he had made her leave early. He did not invite her again. Petra was disappointed, yet in the end Sebastian hired a new maid who helped Petra learn English.

But no matter, that was in the past. Surely, Everett could not avoid her all the time, and it had been so long since they had run into each other, let alone spoken to each other.

“You’re leaving your husband, Petra?” Everett said, shocked out of his slumber.

“I’ve already left him, Everett. And I need your help. You’re my one friend who knows this territory well enough to direct me. Could you come along?”

“Mr. Ainsworth would be angry with me, if he found out I was the one who helped you.”

“Sebastian will be angry, but he will probably not think of you. It will seem as if I left of my own accord, which I did, and that is what will destroy him. I have destroyed his reputation. That is all he cares about.”

Everett shook his head. “I understand your predicament, but it is still a risk.”

“It is a risk I have to take to be away from a terrible man. Do you understand? I am leaving anyway, with or without your help, but I would prefer your support. Please, Everett. Once you wouldn’t deny me such a simple request. Now that I am separate from my husband, don’t look at me differently.”

Everett hesitated for a moment. “Just wait in the office for a little bit while I get my things together.”

* * *

It was not to be expected that a woman would leave her husband for an unpopulated island. It was unimaginable. Preposterous. For at that time even an unfaithful husband was better than no husband at all. But her future critics did not realize that Petra

did not want protection from a useless man, not even financial. If she'd wanted that, she'd have chosen it for herself and called it a happy ending.

That being considered, Sebastian was not the sort to divorce easily, but she tried not to think about this as Everett drove her northwest through dense trees and settlements. It was a lovely place, but Petra had too much weighing on her mind to care.

"Everett, how does one stand it? Staying on an island far away from people, I mean."

"There will be some people there, I'm sure. But you know, you didn't have to pick an island. You could have just stayed somewhere in the main part of the city."

"I want to be as far away from him as possible. I don't want to return to my parents, either. I married Sebastian for them, in a way, because they didn't wish me to be alone. I was also bored, and that is why I got myself into this marriage. I shouldn't have done any of it. I should have found a job somewhere and got myself a small space to sleep and to write and entertain. None of this would have happened otherwise."

"But perhaps if you had not married Sebastian you would have not known all that. You would have thought you were missing out, even when entertaining and sleeping in that small space of yours."

Petra turned to look at the outline of Everett's handsome face. "Oh, yes. If only marrying him didn't take so much of my soul from me, then it would've been fine."

* * *

There was a boat, more like a mini tree trunk, that took Everett and Petra out into the strait. Muddy and silver, like a dragon's swimming pool, the water bobbed the boat until Petra had to cover her mouth to stop the hallucinatory vomit that possessed her throat. Everett was comfortable with taking control of the boat. Everett wasn't afraid. Everett could do anything. Everett was lovely. Petra tried to think to prevent herself from throwing up, until the thoughts controlled her mind completely and she no longer worried about the dog-breath odor of stale ocean water. How quickly solitude could breed funny thoughts, even with dead fish bobbing underneath!

"I forgot to give this to you," Everett said. He passed her a newspaper from that morning.

In gigantic letters it said Ainsworth's wife, twenty, Missing!

“How silly it is! They could talk about politics. They could talk about concerts. But then they decide to focus on me.”

Everett was amused. “They do talk about all those things. But it seems that your husband wanted to cover up the truth. Can’t do that forever though. I don’t think Mr. Ainsworth is enough of a liar to waste the police’s time. And what of that note you told me you left him? Surely that is good enough evidence that you left willingly.”

Petra read more closely.

Young wife of English plantation owner was not at home last night. Petra Ainsworth, née Rynsburger, is suspected to have been abducted. There were signs of a struggle in her living quarters. An investigation is underway.

“What struggle? If they are talking about a mental struggle, they are at least partly right.”

“It looks as if I’ll have to go back right away after we reach the island. I don’t want to be caught up in this more than I need to be. At least, I don’t want to be questioned over your whereabouts. I did notify the Ainsworth Estate that I would be gone for a few days to attend to some private family business, but that excuse can only account for a few days at most.”

“I’m sorry, Everett. I know this must be devastatingly inconvenient for you.”

“Not ‘devastatingly,’ but I suppose it could get me in trouble. Oh, well. I’m glad to be of assistance.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you by my side. Well, maybe that’s not true, but you’ve been a great help to me. It’s hard to imagine making such a decision without anyone to talk to. It would drive me crazy! I can handle being alone, but if I go without human contact for too long, I am utterly miserable. Though I don’t know what I’m predicting, going far away from humanity like this.”

“Don’t regret your decision yet. But to be honest, I was in the same predicament. My days by the villa have been anything but interesting as of late. Sebastian hired me to help him in times of need, and for a long time we were working together very well. But lately I haven’t had as much to do, and it seems that your husband is thinking of hiring someone else. I don’t know what made him change. We were chummy for a long time. We made a good profit.”

“Sebastian is faulty through and through. I highly doubt it was your fault, the way everything turned out. Oh! I can see it! That island over there! I remember, yes, yes, it was directly that way. Just like in my memories!”

It was an island deteriorated by time and the ocean. If there were people on the island, they were deeply hidden within the dark green, for neither Everett nor Petra saw much evidence of a human mark. There were some side roads and a couple wooden houses, but even those were clearly uninhabited. It was extraordinary, how the quietness matched the emerald and white and blue of the place. It represented what life could be, what for centuries it had been. It was devoid of human melodrama and pettiness. It was not grand enough to be called Heaven on Earth, but Petra was not looking for grandeur. She desired a place to be herself, to lay against the dirt and sand as if she was made of it. It made her hysterical almost, to be separated from the untainted soil and trees as often as she had been. She did not count the plantations of her parents or the grounds around the Ainsworth villa as much, because she had associated those grounds with her own turmoil to the point where the earth in those places had lost much of its luster. There was something reviving about these islands, and peculiar. On the island next to this one was a temple with the remains of a German girl who had died a decade before, and though Petra did not know it, the land on which she was standing had once seen a young Betawi prince mauled to death by a tiger.

Petra could already feel her spirit mounting. “How beautiful it all is. Everett, thank you so much for taking me here,” she said sweetly, as if a little girl had taken possession of her woman’s body. Her almond eyes radiated her appreciation. She took his hand. It was obvious from the soft way she held it that she was fond of him. Everett let their fingers touch for a few seconds before gently pulling his hand away.

“It was nothing, ma’am.” He would have called her Mrs. Ainsworth for the sake of respectability, but he knew how much she detested being associated with the man in the villa. He secretly hated Mr. Ainsworth too, not so much for the man’s infidelity as for his pomposity and lack of tenderness, and thus he sympathized with Petra. He sympathized with her so much that the year before, whenever she would take walks around the full radius of the villa and its adjoining properties, he would find himself staring at her from his office window.

Petra, unable to take much with her the night before, had planned on a strictly back-to-nature experience on the island, but Everett wouldn't hear of it. He brought some canned food, including condensed milk, and some blankets. Luckily there were some abandoned houses that were not too weathered to prevent them from staying the night.

The first night Everett slept outside while Petra slept inside the one-room shack they found. Everett had offered to sleep outside to get a feel of what dangers might lurk for Petra's extended stay, though he fell asleep right away and never got a chance to stand watch. Although he would never hint of such emotion to Petra, Everett was also uncomfortable in her presence. She was pretty in several tiny ways, not ruinously beautiful in the traditional sense, but she had a warmth of expression that he noticed, and noticed often. Petra, not accustomed to finding herself beautiful, did not care about how she moved her face when speaking, which made her profile sweeter, more genuine. The squareness of her face turned into dozens of different shapes with her different smiles, and he noticed fearfully how she seemed to carry the beauty of many women within the contours of her face. It was a bizarre phenomenon, one only heightened with the copper of her hair, which seemed to war with the rest of her appearance.

The more he thought of her, the guiltier he felt. She was still the wife of Mr. Ainsworth.

The next evening, he returned to the land of his employer. Petra was not yet adjusted to staying by herself, but Everett had found a safer house for her to move to, isolated and yet not a place that would attract so many wild animals. He would return to see how she was doing, he said, "within three days." In three days was his weekly holiday, a one-day escape from the awkwardness of dealing with Mr. Ainsworth's requests. Lately the one-day had turned into two-days or three-days.

He did not come back for two weeks. Petra's nerves bothered her greatly. It was desolate with no one to talk to. She felt betrayed to a degree, but was also too obsessed with the thought of her canned food running out and her own annoyance at how the days dragged to really think much of Everett's absence. Undoubtedly, he was busy.

Everett did come back. He did not explain his time away, and Petra did not ask. It seemed almost as if he had forgotten entirely about her. But he had brought back several newspapers and more food, even some clothes.

“The papers are still mentioning your supposed kidnapping,” Everett said. “But in private I have heard your Sebastian whisper about finding a way to make you come back. I think he said he would divorce you only *if* you came back. Of course, he has no idea where you are, and he was not talking to me when he said those things. He has never asked me about you, except once, when he asked me if I had seen you at all the days preceding that on which you left him.”

“What did you say?”

“No, of course. I did not see you for many months, it seems, except perhaps from a far distance. It was an absurd question to ask. I am almost surprised he did not think to ask me if I knew where you were, considering he asked so many members of the staff.”

“Well, I am glad that he is a stupid man. Stupid and senseless.”

“He must care for you somewhat, if he goes around asking everyone about you.”

“Don’t be deceived. He only cares because he wants to have possession of me. But he can’t have me. I won’t let him. Not after what he’s done. Forgiveness is one thing, self-respect is another. Had he been a more likeable man, I would’ve given myself back to him more easily, but he has lost all sparkle for me. One can’t consider a puddle when one has the ocean.”

“Hmm... I see what you mean. He never impressed me much. He seems the jealous, selfish sort. Have you ever met your mother-in-law?”

“Yes. She is one of those horrible ladies who, after giving birth, only cares about her children and her husband, and forgets that everyone else even exists. Nothing matters to her more than that her husband’s stomach is filled to the brim and that her children marry well and her children’s children marry well.”

“You must not have had a good time in her presence,” Everett said, stifling a smile.

“Certainly not. I don’t wish to become like her. Please, Everett, if you ever see me becoming a woman like that, drown me on the spot. Strangle me into oblivion. I would rather die young than become cold and uncaring to all but what is in my own life.”

“I will do none of those things. Perhaps if you do become like that one day, it won’t seem so bad to you,” he patted her hand.

“Don’t talk to me like a child. You’re not much older than me, you know. When I was born you had soiled pants and you were still struggling to use the bathroom properly.”

They got along well. Before long they were good friends, much closer than they would have ever been on the Ainsworth villa. Everett continued to leave for his responsibilities, but he always returned, and he returned more frequently the more they warmed up to each other. He saw to it that she was comfortable and not eaten by wild animals, few of which they had actually seen. Soon he was making excuses to see her, though he knew she was fine all by herself. Her clothes were dirty, she needed new ones suitable for the environment. She had run out of basic food supplies; he had to find a way to bring them to her. Then there was the fact that Petra always enjoyed his company, though she sometimes teased him miserably. A month had passed since Petra had left Sebastian, and during that one month it seemed to Everett that he must have seen her dozens of times.

* * *

It was her birthday before she thought twice about it. "Everett, I'm twenty-one!" she mentioned.

"Really? Why did you not tell me about it before? I would have brought some more food today had I known."

"Because I've lost all track of time out here. I didn't remember myself until about five minutes ago. And it's alright, I'm not that picky. I chose to live on a lonely island, remember, away from the folly of human beings."

"I think I may have some cookies. Pineapple tarts? Yes, I have them. We can have some sort of celebration with these."

The treats were delicious, but Petra and Everett appreciated their conversation more than the sugar that rested in their bellies. They spoke of things they never thought of mentioning before. Petra found out that Everett had been educated in England, a fact that did not surprise her, and of his parents' death in Bristol. It brought her nearly to tears. He was a crafter of words, that Everett, and he never ceased to awe her with his stories. He had traveled Europe as a child, and the age of twenty-four, after years of travel and work, still preferred his homeland above all else. Petra was startling, too. She wrote poetry in Dutch and had brought with her a small notebook of her experiments with language. She read them aloud to Everett, translating them as she went along. Her poetry was often humorous, sometimes frighteningly dark for a woman so young, but always endearing.

It was late by the time she finished. Her neck was suffering from cramps, she claimed, from leaning over the notebook for too long. Everett, his admiration stronger than ever, sat closer to her.

He was often shy, but tonight he was not so. Perhaps he was blinded by his own confusion. "I must tell you, how great of a person you are. Your face contains not even a quarter of the person you are. It would be a pity for you to be limited to only what people see."

"Thank you," Petra said. She was suddenly bashful. And he had called her *person*. Not *woman*. Not *child*. Not *girl*. Even her parents did not offer her that privilege.

"It's been an honor talking to you, this past month. You know, twenty-one years. That's a goal some people never reach. It's brought you some pain, I can see, but you've reached it, and I'm happy for you. I'm glad I got to know you so well."

"I am...very happy to have met you, Everett. We did not know each other much before. This journey of mine has taken away some of the barriers to our friendship. I'm glad. S-so glad." She noticed him squeeze her shoulder reassuringly, kindly.

"I think so too. Social respectability dictates so much of what goes on, when you leave nature and let yourself become surrounded by people."

"Yes, it does." She stared at his thoughtful eyes.

"Before now I would never have admitted to you how fascinating you've always been to me. How I loved your kindness, and your banter. I loved all your qualities before I discovered I loved you. And I do, Petra, I do. I am almost surprised to hear myself say it. It's been buried inside me for so long."

"I thought so," she said, shyer than ever. "I'm very fond of you, too."

And then he told her things that most people in love save for after the wedding, but he was so overwhelmed with emotion that he stopped and leaned over to kiss her.

She clasped him to her heart and told herself she would never, never let go.

* * *

The common knowledge of the universe is that women wait for life to happen to them, instead of changing what is around them to control their own futures. At least it has been so for centuries, and when history is the dictator, it is common doctrine to follow it.

Everett was not one to follow history, typically, as he never read on it. But he insisted that Petra wait on the island for him. He had too many responsibilities to stay around with her, although he wished it. He was busy, he said. Busy with his work and Mr. Ainsworth's growing agitation.

"Petra, you know I have responsibilities. How can I take care of myself, or you for that matter, without going back?"

"Yes, I suppose you have your duties," Petra said coldly. But the way she massaged her right wrist with her left hand betrayed her vulnerability and her sadness.

"I don't want to leave, but I must. And Sebastian will suspect things if I am gone too often."

"Yes, Everett. I understand. Stop yammering on. You know, Everett, things would be much easier if you proposed to me after all this mess is over with."

"I thought you didn't want a marriage of convenience."

"I don't want a marriage of convenience with just *anyone*. But I've grown rather fond of you. You're a sweet, cultured, sophisticated sort of fellow, regardless of your attitude. You're someone I wouldn't mind being buried next to, or murdered next to, whichever comes first. In short, I think I could fall in love with you quite easily, if I haven't already. I never know when it comes to this kind of thing."

Everett smiled. She could be so delightfully sarcastic. "We'll see. But back to our conversation! As I've already said, I should go back again. I've visited you many times secretly these past months, but I must go back now. It may be longer than normal."

"How dare you leave me!" Petra said mockingly, though it was clear to Everett, if not to her, that she was unhappy.

"I won't forget you, but I have to be gone quite some time. When I return, it will be once I'm comfortable with my own situation. When I can resign from my position. Then we can live happily, maybe even move to the city. My current departure will be like my previous ones. It's all to keep up appearances."

Petra gazed at her feet, which were completely submerged in sand, then up at the sea's horizon. She could almost feel her womb widening with the child inside. The thought of another life inside her made her queasy. "You can come back, but don't expect me to be waiting for you."

Everett flinched. "But Petra, why not?"

"I will come back with you. I'm going to return to my husband. By insisting that I never left him of my own accord, he has publicly shamed me far too many times. I must deal with him myself. Besides, I am going to have his baby. I'd like him to see it, though perhaps he doesn't deserve to."

They returned to the villa. Sebastian was surprised to see them together, though Everett made it seem that he had picked up Petra after catching her walking casually around the neighborhood. Sebastian was unsuspecting of Everett but was angry with Petra. He would have choked her into submission then and there had he not seen the roundness of her belly.

"You've been gone for many months, Petra. Where?"

"I have been off trying to regather my nerves. Doesn't matter where I was. You read my letter, undoubtedly. Anyway, I thought it was time to come back, now that I'm having your child." Petra grinned.

"Well, I suppose I can't stay mad at you for long, though you've given my reputation quite a roasting. The public eye is unforgiving, Petra, my stupid little girl," Sebastian said softly.

"I'm sure the public eye has recognized the many women you've spent time with."

Sebastian laughed. "Indeed. Well, they can't expect a man to be chaste forever, not with his wife away."

"Or when his wife is present," Petra said to herself. The arteries in Sebastian's neck bulged, yet he could not deny the truth of the statement.

But Petra would have her revenge, weeks later. By then she had not seen Everett in over a month; he felt nervous about their affair and had stayed away to avoid further possibilities of being found out. He often imagined Sebastian's suspicion where it did not exist. He conducted all business with Sebastian outside of the villa, as before. Then one afternoon there was quite a commotion at the villa, and Everett drove over to the white building to see what the fuss was about. The press was well-aware that the young Mrs. Ainsworth was expecting a child anytime soon, and due to the recent surge in Mr. Ainsworth's wealth and power and public interest in the 'kidnapping,' the topic was highly publicized. Everett was nearly smashed by the newspapermen standing outside the door.

He ran inside the villa and found the room where he was told “Miss Petra is with her baby.” On the floor was Sebastian. The man had fainted and fell face down on the ground, after hitting his face against the bedpost. His mouth was bloodied.

Yet most outrageous was the sight of Petra in bed. Her face was glowing with maternal love and with disgust for the man on the floor. Her glorious auburn hair spread out over her pillowcase, she was wearing not much more than a negligee and a robe. In her arms was a brunette baby. Everette glanced at the child and fantasized for a moment that he was peering into a pool of water, before realizing that the child reflected his face exactly.

* * *

Ernst was ten, and in his one decade of existence he had only been with his mother for three years. He had not seen her since.

He was taken from her at a young age. All he knew of the issue was that she had been once married to a rich man, who had divorced and publicly shamed her around the time of Ernst’s birth, and that for some time his parents were together, then separated. He knew not why. He was still too young, or maybe too innocent, to put the times together and find something strange. He knew nothing of the nature of birth, but his father knew that soon would change. Soon there would be questions, unforgiving glances. And it could all happen overnight. Everett had kept the boy, not because Petra did not care for her son, but because she knew that Everett could care for him better. Before their marriage, Petra had lost most of her inheritance, and once they separated she went out into the world to support herself, transitioning from jobs whenever her integrity or body were at risk of being compromised. Everett had better prospects than her, and now he had a regular, well-paying job working for the government. Petra was jealous of him, and he knew it, for despite her natural intelligence she would never be offered the same position. But they rarely talked as it was, and there was no communication besides her rare letters, and she had never requested to see her son, or ever showed up unannounced. It was not money or her previous husband that had destroyed them. Their shame had eaten them up, for even in the midst of their affection, even though both knew that Petra’s marriage with Sebastian had been caustic and unnerving, they still felt in their hearts a twinge of guilt at the adultery. It was more on Everett’s part than on Petra’s, for Petra was stubborn and she had been the direct target of Sebastian’s heartlessness, but Everett’s unstated remorse had

rubbed off on her. He could not love her completely without shame, and he pushed her away on more than one occasion.

“You used to be afraid of me, and now that you are not, you despise me,” Petra had said sadly to him one evening after Ernst was put to bed. She said it matter-of-factly, as if she thought it was impossible for her to be loved. It had broken his heart, and he contradicted her, but not convincingly enough. It still broke his heart, and since his heart was so easily bruised, even now he could not forget it.

And though they both agreed to separate, when she left him, he pleaded and pleaded with her to stay. But the pleading was all in his mind, for he had not the courage to beg to her face. And he had watched her leave, her figure still as beautiful as it was when she was nineteen, though slightly more matronly. He hated her as she left, hated her for putting him who she loved so much in the same position as she put the man she scorned. He was glad as well, for her leaving seemed to dissolve his guilt.

But in associating her with disgrace he was wrong, for Petra was not a siren come to destroy him, but a hurt woman who desired his devotion.

Ernst was all that she left him. Everett loved his son, who took after him almost disturbingly. It was humorous, though, that of the traits Ernst could have carried down from his mother, the only thing of the woman he possessed was the way she shrugged her shoulders. Petra and Ernst had the same body language, a fact that would have brought a smile to Everett’s face had it not agonized him.

Everett became involved with a couple of women after the divorce, but none of these affairs turned into relationships of substance. Only when he met Shirley Chiu, a school teacher, did he consider another marriage. Everett and Petra were no longer married, and there was no hope of them getting back together. Besides, Shirley was a pleasant woman to talk to. She was kind to Ernst, and even Ernst thought so. Everett would never consider marrying a woman who Ernst did not care for. The pain was lessened because Ernst did not remember having a mother; he had no notions on what one should be like.

The engagement was rather quick. Shirley had only been in his life five months before he asked her to marry him, but they got along well together.

He did love Shirley, romantically even, but it was not the same as it had been with Petra. Petra to him was all-consuming. Petra, who had always pulled him closer to her, but whose mind was always somewhere else, creating a gap between them. His rejection of her had been to blame, but so had her self-consciousness, how she hid herself from him. How many times had she smiled and kissed him, only to look off in the distance as if she was seeing something that was not truly there? He had married her thinking he would finally become one with a woman he was only beginning to understand, but found her even more confusing when he embraced her. It sent his mind into a fever just thinking of it.

Shirley was an open-book. Everything she thought, she said. He could be with her without wondering what she really thought of him.

The last letter from Petra that Everett had received bore painful news. Petra was working as a secretary for the Ainsworth Estate, albeit a lower position far from the pressures of the man she had once been married to, but it still cast him into a hostile rage. That she would be under the thumb of such a man! Did Persephone run to Hades? It was like a betrayal almost. Of course, he did not know that Petra did so only because of her financial troubles, that she accepted the job because it paid her much better than any other she had before, that for the most part she felt safe there.

Six months later, another letter came. The envelope smelled of her, Everett noticed. The letters she sent always smelled like her. Ever since she was young, Petra had rubbed perfume against the warm part of her neck, a scent which Everett had long since identified as hers, almost to the point that he thought she was born with it.

The ink on the paper, dried with smudges and tear marks, was still readable. It said, very clearly, "I am moving to the Netherlands. I am going there with my parents. They've desperately been wanting to go, and they've never been. They wish to see relatives. I will come visit you and Ernst within a month. Don't know when yet. Will say goodbye in person."

How cold of her. Everett's nerves froze. He sat the letter down and gulped water, his hand quivering. How just like her, to make such big decisions and only tell him at the last minute.

He would not admit it to himself, but he had long hoped deep inside himself that she would return. She loved Ernst, and in his mind Ernst was his one gateway to seeing her

again, to seizing her back. Now she would leave them forever. Her visit was a mere breadcrumb, and he and his son were dogs expected to eat it.

He could not deny her a visit though, and he did wish to see her face. It had been years, and her letters did not contain one word straight from her spirit, which he knew could often be so inviting. Perhaps upon seeing her his hope would be renewed.

* * *

She came three weeks later. Ernst did not know what to make of her, but it was apparent he felt very awkward. He did not know how to treat her; how does one treat a woman you are supposed to know, but have nothing in common with? A woman who left you?

Yet Petra was kind. "My son," she said, running to him. She hugged him tight, and Ernst could smell her perfume. Years later, he would remember it. She did not apologize, but she didn't necessarily have to. Her eyes were sincere enough, and he could almost see himself in them, in infant form. She had not been present in his life, but she was still a mother, and her pride in her son was one thing she could not contain inside her small body. "How you've grown!" she announced, as if she were afraid to comment on him at all.

But when she turned to Everett the excitement shattered, for there was a coldness between them that exists only between people who have loved intensely and misunderstood greatly.

"You are leaving. When do you leave?" Everett forced himself to ask. He held his arms behind his back to not betray the anxiety his fingers weaved. From the front he looked stern.

"Soon. Perhaps in a week." She took one step closer to him, but her face was frigid.

"That's very soon."

"Yes, it is."

The discomfort was palpable, so Ernst left the room to play outside.

After a long pause. "That's our son," Everett laughed forcefully.

"I do love him, Everett."

"Then why did you never come to see him? Why did you ask about him in letters that he would never see?"

“I was embarrassed to come back. Life has not been kind to me. Money has not been kind to me, though I’ve saved it to the best of my ability.”

“All excuses. I have taken care of him for years. Do you think I was never embarrassed to tell him that he had no mother? That his mother was not dead, simply too busy to see him? When we first met, I could see the temper and the passion that you hid behind your kindness, and I loved you for it. But it has been far too hard for me to see how that individuality of yours has impacted our son.”

“You act as if Ernst would have been happy to have a mother like me. One incapable of taking care of herself.”

“He needed a mother, that was all!”

“A mother? He did not need a woman whose own husband could not bear to look at her. Not for a mother, he didn’t.”

Everett was quiet. His anger made him tremble, but Petra’s eyes thickened his blood.

“You seem to think, Everett, that I have motherly instincts that I could’ve used to keep this family together. You were wrong to assume so. I love my son because he is my own child, because he is proof that we once belonged to each other. He is physical proof of that. But motherly instinct is not enough to make a good mother. One must have confidence, self-esteem, support. I could see in your eyes that you viewed me not as a human, but as your sin. You wanted to erase our mistake, and I admit we did the wrong thing, but in wanting it so badly you wished to erase me. I could not survive in such an atmosphere. I began to see Ernst as my sin, as well. He is not something to be ashamed of. I refused to learn that perspective from you, the perspective that children such as him are impure.”

“I never thought that of Ernst! He is my one joy! The one thing that reminded me of you, and yet kept me sane despite you.”

“Despite me, Everett? I did everything I could to make you love me again. I came to believe that you were never really in love with me, that you were just infatuated. Perhaps it was my fault. I worshipped you, ‘long as I can remember. But I was also wrathful. I wanted the love between you and me to be so strong, so obvious, that Sebastian would have to pay. I wanted proof that I was loved by someone better than him. Though unintentionally, Ernst’s birth was my freedom. But it seems it was the end of yours.”

Petra's face was cold. She had tried in vain to encourage warmth from him, but the more she remembered his coolness towards her, the more she couldn't stand him. Everett cried before he even realized it.

If he had looked up at that moment, he would have seen the lines of Petra's face quiver into softness and pity. But he didn't.

"I'm sorry, Petra," he said between sobs. "But how could you leave me for so long? Don't you know it kills me?"

"Does it kill your heart, or just your pride?" Petra hesitated.

He wanted to say *My heart! My heart!* But what was it about being confronted that makes one respond dully? "I don't know," he mumbled.

Petra wrapped her arms around herself, as if to keep herself closed off. "Then it must be your pride. That is why you have never fully loved me. That is why I was unable to talk to you or feel your affection. You are unmoving. Your heart is cold. I can never get at you." There it was again! The voice of an unloved woman. It was chilling.

She grabbed her purse from where she laid it on the parlor chair. Everett walked over to where she was and threw his arms around her. They were not much different in height, but his hold was tight, and she could not move.

"Everett," she whispered. "Let me go."

He held onto her tighter. Tight, tight, tight until he could smell the perfume, as if he could squeeze it into his very being and possess it forever.

"I must leave," she insisted.

He was tired of the emptiness that for years had existed between his arms. He did not budge.

"I will say bye to Ernst," she said. "But I have to go!"

He buried his face in her hair.

"Really, Everett. I am exhausted. I have had enough of your so-called love. I will continue to write letters to you and visit you again in a couple years, if only for Ernst. Release me."

"No! No!" He cried. "You can't go. I don't care if your duty to your parents calls for it. I can't lose you to wide-open places that I cannot see."

Petra went limp in his arms. She stared blankly at the ceiling, a woman dead in her own thoughts. Then she turned her head to face him.

“Release your guilt,” she said listlessly. He was so shocked that his grip loosened. He barely noticed when she left the room, walked out of the house, and kissed Ernst goodbye. It was strange hearing her call herself by the term he called her secretly in his mind.

* * *

The spot on the island that Petra had once lived on was washed away into the sea. Neither of them knew it, not until Everett had visited Pulau Ubin and realized on the journey that there was no longer a bar of sand in the distance where it once had been. It was a weak island, fragile and easily susceptible to the elements. He found it odd, though, for that area of land had been there for so many centuries before suddenly disappearing.

On the shores of Pulau Ubin he looked dismally in the direction of it. The green of the island was there, at least.

He was there to meet Shirley’s parents. The marriage was in the works, and it would be no time at all before Ernst had a mother. But even in his contentment he could not help feeling disappointment. He was responsible for what had happened, and he felt this truth sharply.

He loved Petra still, but he no longer wanted to have her. She was too much trouble, or rather her presence created trouble. He would be quite happy with Shirley. Petra was the gleam in the sea where land used to be. She was always there, yet always moving. Always captivating, yet never graspable in mere human hands.

That was alright, he thought, Love was nothing. Years from now, who would remember it? In the end he would just become two years with a dash in-between. People would think he loved without knowing for sure if he did, without caring who he adored or who adored him. Bitterly, he declared, what did it matter that he could not be with a woman he cared for in his youth? If he was buried next to his Shirley and his kid, at least there was that. He did genuinely care for Shirley, and people would assume that she had been the love of his life. People tended not to care about the complexity of the situation, as if the small line on the tombstone was a huge nothingness.

Indeed, it seemed very tragic to most people to see a tombstone without a companion, as if the corpse inside had never loved. He would be spared that. It is assumed

that such bodies never lived, but one never applied that same logic to tombstones that lay in groups, with family. Did it matter that some of the once-humans underneath the soil had once lied to themselves and to others about their happiness? Suddenly to Everett, it all seemed futile to be buried alone, with Petra, or with Shirley, for all turn into soil anyway. And of course, nobody cares about the love life of dirt.

“What is Earth but the leftovers of human beings? I too will become soil, and the son I fathered will become soil too,” he said aloud. He had a habit of speaking aloud ridiculous clichés to himself when he became depressed. But he stopped himself before he spouted more nonsense. Shirley’s parents were calling him from inside their house.

He was wakened from his stupor.

But looking at the sea had answered some questions for him, a clueless man though he sometimes was. He decided it did not matter that he could not have Petra, that their pain had separated them. It was terrible, all of it was, but he would start over. His life could not be defined by the one he could never have, the one he had refused himself. He would try to love perfectly again with Shirley, and if he failed, so be it. At least he tried, and this time he would not treat Shirley as a part of himself to be hated. He would give her chances he had denied Petra and himself. And it occurred to him that one cannot be bound by guilt forever.

* * * * *

“Wild Ride”

by Katacha Díaz

The year was 1973. The United States had unofficially declared the complicated and tragic war in Vietnam officially ended with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on January 27. By all accounts there was a reduction of American military personnel in the region.

Thailand’s military-dominated government, America’s staunch ally in the losing effort, hosted seven air bases that launched most of the USAF air strikes over strategic targets in Laos, North Vietnam and South Vietnam. My husband, DJ, was serving a tour of duty with the USAF 8th Tactical Fighter Wing hosted at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base in Ubon, Ratchathani, a rural northeastern province on the border with Laos and Cambodia. Out of the Ubon airfield, the F-4C/D Phantom fighter jets flew missions dropping bombs over target areas. By September 1974, well after DJ’s tour of duty ended, the F-4 Phantom wing would be deactivated, and the facilities and equipment turned over to Thailand.

During the Vietnam War, Bangkok was a popular get-away destination for rest and relaxation—R&R—for American servicemen stationed in Southeast Asia. DJ was authorized a week’s leave and would catch a military hop from Ubon for our romantic rendezvous in the capital of the ancient kingdom. Soon after the Royal Thai Embassy in Washington approved a thirty-day tourist visa and returned my passport, Pan American World Airways, the designated carrier for dependents’ R&R travel to Southeast Asia, issued my round-trip ticket.

On April 12, 1973, I flew out of New York’s JFK Airport to San Francisco, connecting with Pan Am’s weekly round-the-world Flight #1, stopping at Honolulu, Midway, Wake, Guam, Manila, and Bangkok, and continuing on to Calcutta and other stops. On a sunny Monday morning after flying halfway around the world, we landed at Don Muang Airport in Bangkok. Stepping out from the air-conditioned passenger jet into the heat and humidity

was stifling, a bit of a shock to the system.

Nevertheless, despite the tropical heat wave, I was excited to finally be in Bangkok, leaving the Pan Am jet behind and making my way through customs. “*Sawadee-Kah*, Hello!” said the woman greeting me with flowers. She was a gracious hostess, welcoming a U.S. *farang*, foreign visitor, to her country.

When I spotted DJ at the crowded airport, I ran and fell into his arms as he put a beautiful orchid garland on my shoulders.

“I missed you so much. I can’t believe I’m finally here in Siam with you!” I said, smiling. “It’s like a fairytale.”

“No, honey, this is real,” DJ said, kissing and hugging me even tighter.

It was a jubilant reunion, but there was a minor glitch—the canvas suitcase I’d checked-in at New York’s JFK was not aboard Flight #1. Pan Am airport personnel filed a missing luggage report and immediately sent a fax to Flight #1 airports around the world. In the meantime, the airlines issued a US\$300.00 voucher for me to purchase clothing and incidentals at a nearby PX, the military post exchange.

It was a half-hour taxi ride from Don Muang to our hotel. The traffic scene was utter chaos—motorized vehicles zipping by and pedestrians scattering out of the way like chickens. The taxi driver leaned heavily on the gas pedal and horn, and the good luck marigold garland hanging from the taxi’s rear-view mirror was swaying wildly back and forth. I was a nervous wreck and worried we were going to hit another vehicle, or moped, bicycle, or food cart, or run over somebody.

While I calmed my frayed nerves meditating and looking out the window at the fascinating architecture and shrines en route, DJ shared interesting tidbits about the US R&R travel office *modus operandi* in Bangkok. The office, he said, had a longstanding working relationship with a Thai general’s travel agency who booked luxury hotel accommodations for American servicemen at a special rate.

“Our hotel is US\$5 a night.”

We exchanged glances. “Really? What’s the catch?” I asked, smiling.

DJ laughed. “Bangkok’s newly built hotels are on New Petchburi Road, known as the American Strip, and it’s one stop shopping—small retail and souvenir stores, restaurants, coffee shops, food carts. And, for GIs looking for entertainment, there’s lots of options—

bars, massage parlors, nightclubs, strip clubs, and brothels.”

Wow, I thought to myself. Visiting GIs spending money with reckless abandon in the city of pleasure was a lucrative business for Thai entrepreneurs and Bangkok’s notorious brothels and massage parlors. Sadly, American soldiers left thousands of unacknowledged children behind from short-term liaisons with Thai women.

After our wild taxi ride, we arrived in one piece at the Prince Hotel on New Petchburi Road. The hotel was modern and offered luxurious resort amenities, as well as traditional Thai hospitality. The reception area and lobby were crowded, buzzing with voices of GIs in casual civilian clothes, American women in summer resort outfits, and pretty Thai women “escorts” in silk wrap-around sarong skirts, *prasin*, or wearing the latest tailor-made Western-style clothes, waiting to hook-up with GIs on pre-arranged dates. The atmosphere was festive with people bustling about.

That night DJ surprised me with a romantic dinner at a trendy, upscale restaurant with a river view and live music. When we arrived, the lobby and bar were crowded with Europeans and Americans waiting to be seated. The hostess greeted us with jasmine garlands, and we were shown to our table by the headwaiter. I watched the waitresses dressed in batik sarongs expertly glide from table to table, smiling shyly. DJ ordered a bottle of wine, papaya salad, fresh water prawn stir-fry with ginger, lemongrass and basil, and chocolate mousse for dessert. That night, we danced together under the gently swaying palm trees and moonlight, oblivious to everything but each other.

The next morning when I awoke, DJ was sitting out on the balcony reading. When I sat up in bed, he came inside and sat down on the bed next to me. He took my hand. “Did you sleep well, honey?” he asked, smiling.

“It was the best night’s sleep I’ve had in days. How about yourself?”

“I slept pretty good myself. And I’m so happy you’re here,” he replied. “Let’s go eat breakfast!”

It was mid-morning when we arrived at the recommended coffee shop, and DJ immediately ordered Bangkok’s popular street food cooked on a traditional charcoal stove—pad thai, spicy chicken stir-fry with pungent fish sauce, tamarind and served with rice noodles, and *kah-feh yen*, iced coffee with sweet condensed milk and cardamom. Breakfast was an exotic symphony of flavors and a treat for our adventurous palate.

When we left the coffee shop, DJ flagged a tuk-tuk and negotiated with the driver to take us on a neighborhood tour outside the hustle and bustle of the American Strip. We hopped into the three-wheel motorized rickshaw, settling into the snug but comfortable back seat. I marveled at the driver's heavy-handed blowing of the horn nonstop, while expertly weaving the tuk-tuk around traffic, and taking a sharp left turn into a narrow alley tucked away behind a bustling commercial street. The alley was packed with mopeds, bicycles and modest two-story houses built side-by-side, and every house had a miniature spirit house out in front laden with offerings to avoid misfortune and bring the residents good luck. Many had chirping tropical birds in bamboo bird cages in the open windows.

DJ asked if I wanted to walk or continue riding the tuk-tuk.

Even though it was hot and humid I said, "Let's walk." We spent the rest of the afternoon strolling down the narrow, winding market streets lined with tiny shops, past stalls selling fresh vegetables, fruit, flowers and more. We stopped at a stall selling herbs, spices, seeds, gnarly roots, bark, and dried lizards on bamboo sticks, used to prepare an array of fascinating remedies to cure all kinds of ailments.

The lottery ticket stand across the street was packed with people queuing to purchase winning tickets for the popular government-run lottery. We joined the queue and bought a pair of Buddhist lucky number combination tickets as recommended by the smiling vendor. The street food cart on the corner was doing a brisk business selling bags of freshly squeezed sugar cane juice and grilled bananas to uniformed children on their way home from school.

Meandering down the crowded alley was a unique opportunity to experience the neighborhood's vibrant street life and become immersed in the local culture.

Before returning to the hotel, we took a taxi to one of Bangkok's best known landmarks: the Oriental Hotel on the banks of the Chao Phraya River. The terrace of the posh nineteenth-century hotel beckoned, so we sat outside sipping wine, practicing our Thai language skills with the waiter, and taking in the late afternoon boat-filled river scene—river taxis, trawlers, and the multi-colored, canopied long-tail boats zipping by and darting across the river, dropping off or picking-up passengers and light cargo.

"Shall we go on a boat tour tomorrow?" DJ asked, taking my hand.

"I'd like that very much, honey," I answered, enthusiastically. "What time do you

have in mind?"

"Sunrise!"

I laughed. "Count me in!"

After we finished our wine and DJ had settled the bill, we went into the hotel lobby. The concierge booked a private tour for us on a long-tail boat, departing at sunrise from the Oriental's dock.

The next morning, with coffee and bottled water in hand, we arrived and checked-in with the concierge who escorted us to the dock and introduced us to the waterborne transport driver and English-speaking tour guide. "Jimmy," our guide, was decked out in casual preppy style—Hawaiian-print shirt and khaki pants. He was very polite, easy-going, and took copious notes. We soon agreed on the morning and afternoon activities. The sturdy wooden craft had the most amazing collection of scarves tied to the curved bow, and flower garlands for good luck and protection swinging in the gentle morning breeze.

It was sunrise on the Chao Phraya River. We sat side by side, and DJ put his arm around my shoulder. The boat headed upriver from the hotel, noisily chugging along the canals and gliding past rustic floating houses. It was a fascinating two-hour journey through the maze of canals in the "Venice of the East," and captured the daily life of the water people at work, rest and play in this hidden labyrinth.

Continuing upriver, the city's bustling Chinatown was one of our stops. The market was crammed with stalls and small shops, side-street restaurants and gold shops galore. So much was going on. I watched a young man balance with both feet on the ground while he maneuvered his moped, stacked with crates, through the crowded narrow alley while locals shopped and tourists gawked. Jimmy recommended a restaurant offering an excellent dim sum assortment prepared in bite-size portions and served in small steamer baskets. The dim sum was delicious.

Back on the long-tail boat—after our leisurely lunch and people-watching in Chinatown—we continued our journey of exploration along the river, sailing past the city's famous flower market, Pak Khlong Talat. This bustling wholesale market, favored by local residents, sold large bouquets of jasmine, orchids, lilies, roses, and traditional Thai flower garlands at surprisingly low prices.

Continuing north, our boat picked up speed en route to the opulent Grand Palace,

the official residence of the kings of Siam since 1782. Jimmy debriefed us about the strictly enforced dress code for men and women visiting Thai sacred sites—no sandals, no bare shoulders, no bare knees. Luckily, DJ and I were dressed appropriately.

Stepping ashore to visit the Royal Grand Palace was like being in a fairytale. The dazzling walled compound housed a series of pavilions, halls and other buildings and was interspersed with vast lawns, lavish gardens, ornate flower stupas, and courtyards. Wat Pho, the ancient temple of the 150-foot-long Reclining Buddha Statue, and Wat Phra Kaew, the temple that housed the Emerald Buddha—the most sacred Buddhist temple in Thailand, were mysterious and fascinating. Our last stop before the return boat ride was a visit to the Queen's Support Foundation craft stores, where we purchased family souvenirs handcrafted by local artists.

Exploring this charming city's riverside gems along the Chao Phraya River by long-tail boat, leisurely picking and choosing stops, was the ultimate adventure and the thrill of a lifetime, even when our boat was zipping along over late afternoon choppy waters.

Although I had no inkling at the time, these wild taxi, tuk-tuk and long-tail boat rides were but a prelude to the wild rides yet to come during my sojourn in the land of *Anna and the King of Siam*. And, my mistagged canvas suitcase was on a wild ride of its own around the globe courtesy of Pan American World Airways.

* * * * *

“Impromptu”

by Dahlia Zailani

running to no end, through crowds more elbow than breast.
she knows not to hold my hand, and I know not to offer.
but as the street performers complete another set with a
squeak and a screech, she catches the tail ends of my
question. she pretends that she didn't jolt when my shout
was suddenly too loud, but I know my answer after five
months of silence.

* * * * *

“Mang Mon”

by John Charles Ryan

after drenching rain, winged insects emerge from deep, dank burrows
knocking themselves

senseless on incandescent lamps

all night around Pabong village,

a chaotic conglomerate hungrily mobbing 7-11s, descending on vendors
laughing girls netting them,

men crouching with candles waiting

for luscious ones to pop up from nests,

termites enticed from grottos with the dim light and sharp hope that guide their short lives,
by morning

dead bodies are scattered like samara

in sinks, in toilets, on ceramic floor tiles,

gaping vacantly from insides of fridges or crisply from steel trays at markets
wondering what to do next

nearly as vexed as me about

the intensity of their genitive urges.

* * * * *

“A Monk’s Love”

by Steve Haberlin

I face you
Gripping my malas
White-knuckled
As you approach
Carrying your woven basket
Worn sandals
Meeting Angkor stones
I brush against you
My orange robes welcoming you
Smelling the water jasmine in your hair
I stare into your half-moon eyes
Seeing a thousand life times
Searching for our past love
And when we might meet again

“Like Water”

by Steve Haberlin

You stripped our jobs
But not our dignity
Raided our homes
But not our hearts
Enslaved our kids
But not our spirit

Oh, Khmer Rouge
You didn't know
We resisted
By not resisting
Like water, my friend
We flowed, shapeless
The Dragon's Way

We “smiled”
Plowing your fields
We “willingly”
Built your dams
But when it grew dark
We reunited with kin

And slipped away
Through dark jungles
Past the stench of death
And exploding mud
Past pirates and thieves

Giving them their gold

We were lucky
One with the Dao
Like water, my friend
We slipped through
The monster's grip
And to a new life

* * * * *

“Ordinary Day”

by Arlene Yandug

In the kitchen,
the smell
of roasted corn,
of lemon and ginger;
the plinking of
spoons and cups;
the low humming and
light-hearted chatter.

In the room,
the children’s soft
snores: whistling
teapots.
Their hair and skin
browned
by too much sun.

How lightly
we wear our age,
the ripples on our skin
gently widening,
the sun pushing
all shadows.

The years piled up
in a distance like
haystacks in the field.
No loose ends, no sign
of grief.

There is just this now
that holds all there is:
this waking
from a sound sleep;
this yawning before
the kitchen fire,

all of us trickling
beautifully unnoticed
like grains through
invisible fingers.

Today is Monday,
Tuesday, any day

on the calendar,
this day is gentleness,
coffee, ginger tea,
a lover whistling to
herself for no –
or for all – reasons.

* * * * *

“Tsunami”

by John C. Mannone

On Sunday, December 26, 2004, at 00:58:53 UTC, an undersea megathrust earthquake occurred in the Indian Ocean, with an epicenter off the west coast of Sumatra, Indonesia

The ocean floor convulsed that morning.

Its anger thrust up through millions of tons

of ocean displaced from mundane depths.

Sonic waves pulsed pressure through crests

of salt water, a silent intrusion of crushing
walls of water flooding distant lands,

scouring coastal sand,
pummeling homes, thatched huts,
dirt roads and grass,
cars, wagons & horses,
children

and their mothers
whose dreams had washed away
or swallowed up
in sleep, into nightmares.

Doesn't the goddess Nyai Loro Kidul
control
the violent waves? Or Indo' Ongon-Ongon,
the earthquakes?

Who else should we blame for the waves
of guilt? All the gods of superstition

or just the supreme God of creation?
We are far too rational for that. Yet

of course, we cannot blame ourselves
for this would say that we too are gods.