



BEME

LGBTQIA+ STORIES
OF BELONGING

JOEL DONATO CHING JACOB
& DAPHNE LEE
EDITORS

BE me

LGBTQIA+ STORIES
OF BELONGING

AS PART OF THE
SOUTH EAST ASIAN QUEER CULTURAL FESTIVAL 2021
PRESENTED BY THE ASEAN SOGIE CAUCUS

JOEL DONATO CHING JACOB
DAPHNE LEE
EDITORS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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<https://aseansogiecaucus.org/>

*This collection is a tribute to pioneers in securing spaces
or the LGBTQIA+ community within society at large.*



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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for picking up this anthology of fantasy short stories of LGBTQIA+ belonging. In this collection of short stories you will find stories of diverse backgrounds. Some stories are literary, others are deeply personal, but each one is written in defiance.

In the South East Asian societies where the love and desire between certain individuals are taboo, loving is defiance. This is a theme in many of the stories.

But how about feeling safe among heterosexual cis men? How about peeing in a public restroom? How about choosing where to spend time on holidays? Many of us might brush off these acts as mundane, but for many of our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQIA+ community these actions demand bravery and even the support of allies!

The anthology is named Be Me after the stories have been collected. The name is taken from the first story in the collection. In this story, “Be Me” is a statement asking the reader to empathize. But reading through the collection, this act shifts from the reader to the self. Eventually the

narratives demand a becoming. “Be me” becomes a statement rejoicing in the act of defiance that enables living one’s own genuine truth.

Fantasy is not escapist in these narratives. Instead, the fantastical elements in many stories herein confront the impositions of the colonizers on our inclusive pasts. In some stories, the narrative is iconoclastic, seeking to demolish biases by featuring the datedness of the superstitions. In both cases, fantasy is an emancipative feature, so in a way it is an escape, but not in the way of denying the cruel prejudices that dominate our society. It is an escape that corrects misconceptions that bind us to systemic injustice.

Finally, these stories may be angry, these stories can be sad, but most importantly, these stories are victorious. Social realism can attempt to overthrow the status quo in fiction. Reactionist realism is worse as it makes a spectacle of oppression for those who have the privilege of living beyond injustice (e.g. poverty porn from the third world to be presented in western film festivals). Fantasy has the liberty to dig deep into the past to speculate a future where being one’s authentic self is safe and satisfying.

Once again, thank you for deciding to read Be Me: LGBTQIA+ Stories of Belonging.

- Joel “Cupkeyk” Ching Jacob



THIS STORY IS ABOUT A STARTUP THAT ISN'T EVIL WHICH CAN'T BE BOUGHT OVER BY A VC FIRM

SH FOO

Be me. 2020 sad gay poor and internet-poisoned, stay in an apartment with three other boys and we all hate our lives, worked for three weeks as a cashier at a sundry shop in Bukit Baharu owned by a pair of mom-and-pop resisting the upcoming gentrification projects by attending resident protests until, surprise! The Malaysian government swoops in with the Covid-19 Movement Control Order and carpetbombs revenue to a halt and two months later no more shop no more job, and if your motorbike can't even be repaired at the workshops that aren't open, you can't deliver food to condos lived in by people who receive their McDs in their yoga sweats and a phone to instastory you and hashtag

#socialdistancing. Be me, zero skill set because I came from a *kampung* 270 miles away from Kuala Lumpur and the only thing I have is some trainee *bomoh* knowledge I inherited from my grandpa, which is great for blessing paddy fields for bountiful harvests, but virtually useless in a metropolitan city. The only time people consult you is when they want their dick hard for more than 3 minutes.

Be me, so desperate I actually add to my grindr profile "I read a twitter thread that us *bomohs* are supposed to be called *shamans* not *witchdoctors* hit me up if u need freelance bomoh therapy p.s. yes i also do massages" and then block every dickpic or whoever asks "dick massage can?" Until one day at 2am this guy, kinda hunky kinda straight-acting and also actually has a face pic, texts:

>> can you summon ghosts
<< like white ppl?
>> lol no
>> real ghosts like djinn la
>> gathering a team to capture
<< ghostbusters?
>> gen x ref much?
>> \$1000 first job
>> now
>> in?

In.

THIS STORY IS ABOUT A STARTUP THAT ISN'T EVIL WHICH CAN'T BE BOUGHT OVER BY A VC FIRM

SH FOO

>> cool. plus txt me massage prices. dick?

<< 😞

>> lol nw

I “borrow” one of the motorbikes of my housemates and drive out to the GPS coordinates he sent, and it turns out to be in one of those in-city suburb *tamans* where the playground sets have already rusted and the house walls are off-yellow but not in a hipster way. I stop in front of a two-storey house, Number 16. Nothing exceptional to it other than it’s obviously empty but there are no banners advertising a realtor’s services with their phone number. “Huh,” I say and then I find myself illuminated by headlights from a Beemer parked across the street.

Out he comes and, of course he turns out to be a catfish. The photo on his profile is obviously a decade and paunch ago. Still cute though. Sigh. “Mohd Hugs?” he asks, because calling someone’s profile name is a real thing people do, and I just say, yeah that’s me.

“So whose house is this?” I ask Big Love Wong 🌀🌀🌀.

“Who knows? It’s just a place where about a few families died horrible deaths and shit-tier tabloids like *worldofbuzz.com* claim there are ghosts.”

“Is this in any way legal?” I say as I reach into my bag, taking out my dusty old *kompang* hand drum and tiger skin rugs.

“As legal as having a penal code punishable crime profile on a gay app.

We’re outlawing in the most outlaw way possible, Hugs.” He knocks the back-passenger door of his car. “Junny?”

And then there’s Junny, who I never knew is my type but, apparently it is now? Junny slumps out of the car rather than walk and has that whole I’m-too-lazy-for-this-shit-but-whatever-I’m-good-and-I’ll-complain-and-moan-but-get-it-done-anyway swagger with hips swaying despite doing only one step, dressed in a hoodie one size too large and with a mop of blue hair over bifocal glasses. Looks at me and go, “sup, pronouns he slash him k,” then takes a long drag of his cigarette, flicking it at Big Love’s direction.

In his hands is a laptop with decals all over which he sets on the floor, and then one, two, three brandless android phones beside. “Stealing some wi-fi”, he says when I stare. “You don’t have a *Quran* to read from?”

“Uh,” I say, and Big Love must be giving a look because I feel my cheeks redden and then I say, “the *Quran* is performative because the clients need to tie everything to the religion even though being a *Bomoh* or a *Pawang* is an animistic practice that has existed for centuries, way before Islam was introduced to Malaya, and it’s really just to make clients feel safer about their insecurities because then they aren’t doing something unIslamic and –” and then Big Love is now really giving a look and I stop, and then say, “what are you doing?”

Junny is turning on a portable floodlight and plugging it to his laptop then tells me, “Magic as you *Bomoh* and *Pawang* call it is in fact just a kind of rewriting of information in reality to suit it as you need, but in

THIS STORY IS ABOUT A STARTUP THAT ISN'T EVIL WHICH CAN'T BE BOUGHT OVER BY A VC FIRM

SH FOO

modern non-animistic circumstances we call that *Science* and *Technology*, where we use machines whilst you use rituals and sacrifices; in some sense both magicians and scientists are just using appliances or methods to write a 'cheat code' to alter reality; so when it comes to ghosts, imagine a human being which has a body and a soul, and that both body and soul are different types of information and data presented in varying ways, so what a ghost is: is that they are humans whose data got corrupted by their deaths or whatever, and when you have data, you can process it to a form of your liking, like a 'rewriting' - so once you retrieve the ghost i.e. corrupted information from the house, I will use the floodlight which I have programmed to capture the data then store it into this computer, which I anticipate will take about 2 - 5GB although I am now talking to the demo code-cruncher scene who're going to help me figure out how we can use more computer processing power to procedurally-generate the storing mechanism with less need to apply raw data storage, so I can keep a ghost at 256kb or less, allowing for more capacity efficiency and also storage between cloud services, and -"

"Holy shit, nerds," Big Love says. "You summon ghost, he catches ghost, I pay you. Can we get on with it?"

We get on with it. I put the tigers rugs on myself and Junny and Big Love as wards against ghosts and *syaitans* which Big Love protested because "leceh and also tacky af" but kinda works on Junny for some reason and he looks even cuter and more my type when he's fumbling with trying to put the rug into his hoodie, which is both very good but also very terrible? So I have to quickly do the whole setting up of the *Pagar Ghaib* where

according to some super spiritual user on the Something Mystical forums (which somehow still runs on vBulletin 2.29) claims is "the levying of a metaphysical quantum by channeling the magnetic quantum energy of the astral planes" but honestly as far as I am concerned just means reading out a bunch of pre-written words of protection and circling the house beating a kompang drum while pouring a flask of mineral water. Also I'm fairly sure that user is now into QAnon, so fuck that noise.

Then the ghost gets summoned and turns out it's not really that interesting, really, because we were expecting some lady murdered by some shitty adulterous husband to become a Ju-On and be like, "uwu indiscriminate cursing begins now until eternity owo," but no, it's just some *djinn* who floats out of the house wailing and shaking a lot of leaves off trees, acting like they are a rare drop on your mobile gacha game. Which is cool but they look like some dudebro's vape mist, a typical common collectible nobody really wants tradeable for one extra hour of playtime, so basically weird flex but ok, *djinn*.

Then they wail again and try to do a jumpscare like they are in James Wan's Conjuring Cinematic Universe (Malaysia represents), but get caught in Junny's floodlights instead, lol. Then Junny presses a few buttons on his laptop and before the CIA can run a coup to replace the government of another country the *djinn* is gone.

Junny types a few things on his laptop and looks at me and says, "Hey do ghosts usually have digital signatures, because check this out." I go to his screen and he starts trying to explain what metadata is but Big Love is

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SH FOO

giving his now very trademark look again, so he shuts up and part of the data of the *djinn* does show someone's name, address, cell phone and even their last-used time. As it turns out, some *bomoh* must have de-possessed someone, then dumped the *djinn* in the house randomly like nbd just being an asshole pretending not to understand paranatural pollution is a thing which kills random people, ok. I go on Something Mystical and write a meltdown.txt attaching pics and vids which hopefully gets sent to the National Board of *Bomohs*, and maybe they'll do a little denouncing and title-stripping or whatever.

Then we pack up and we drive out to a South Indian Muslim mamak place that's secretly 24/7 against the mandatory pre-midnight only operating hours during the lockdown. The mamak place also serves charcoal-grilled pork on briyani rice which I didn't even know was a thing but, that's a thing all right.

The red packet Big Love gives me has an extra \$1000. "Eh," I say in between chomping down extremely haram tandoori, but he pushes the money back to me.

"Thought it would be one whole hour but 5 minutes, extra for efficiency," he says.

"So why are you storing ghosts?" I ask.

"The rampant and rapid gentrification of Kuala Lumpur -" Junny starts and Big Love kisses him on the cheek and shuts him up.

"We're releasing this in Bukit Baharu."

Where I had my old job. The old, undeveloped area in the city where a ton of cultural heritage of old Kuala Lumpur reside, hidden away with all its many generations of residents and undocumented migrants, fighting against the government against flattening their houses to build yet another condo suburbia for shithole foreign investors to pretend we are Singapore. Recent power shifts and political coups in the government meant an abandoned project was resurfacing, and an acre of Kampung Bharu has already been razed since. "You're going to curse a construction site."

"Multiple sites," Big Love says.

I think about it. "This isn't a gig economy thing, right?"

"You wanna join our startup?"

"We decided on Ghoster because it sounds like Friendster where we met and that social media platform is dead also one of the few which were not created and administered by white supremacists, plus-" Junny starts then stops. "We are looking for a third."

I think about it more.

Be me. 2020 sad gay poor and internet-poisoned, no boyfriend no income and faced with paying prospects of dealing shitload of damage to an asshole government who hates you because you dare to like boys and be Muslim

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and also be *pagan* and also the guys asking you to join are cute. Also you are guessing that Junny owns the tiger rug/scarf he's really comfortable with now.

"I *do* do dick massages btw."



EMIL MAKES THEIR CHOICE

EK GONZALES

Emil tied the hair at the neck, hiding the amulet in the hair. To be found with an amulet was dangerous; the militia and Guardia Civil actively checked for them at every major building, every gate, every tower, every church. But Emil needed the amulet for the work they needed to do. Emil's affinity was for wood and steel. Their amulet was rectangular and small, the wood surrounding the bit of steel, easy to hide.

Emil wore a tunic over trousers that they rolled up to avoid mud, slid their feet into farmer's shoes, completing the look of a house servant. Emil was most comfortable attired this way, most true to them. It was a little

hard to explain this to others, and Emil was grateful to still be accepted by their parents.

Emil went to their parents' bedroom, conveniently hidden from the street. Their father was ready for them. He sighed as he looked at them. "I love you, my dear," he said. He presented the woven-bamboo knapsack. Emil knew this to be filled with supplies, some requested, some added, all from their general store. Usually it was foodstuff, all for the Cause. "Please head to Manang Conchita. The message: The great hawk must fly far." He patted a shoulder. "Be safe."

Emil nodded, hefting the knapsack onto their back. It was well filled and thus rather heavy, but Emil was used to it.

The sun had set, and the gas lamps were being lit on the main streets of Quirino. People headed home with some hurry; with the darkness came the curfew, the Guardia Civil, and forest creatures like wild boars and wolves.

Manang Conchita was nice and gave Emil white rice suman, their favorite, whenever they came over, so this was a welcome errand. However, Manang Conchita lived at the edge of town. This had advantages in getting information and packages in and out, but it was also a rather long run in the early evening. The route was familiar, but the Guardia Civil were on higher alert. The steam coaches were out on the main town streets. Soldiers, combing through the smaller uncobbled streets, mounted both real horses and steam horses.

"Suman, Emil," they grinned as slipped out the shadowy part of their house. "And you're doing a good thing. Always you are doing a good thing. You can do this."

Emil had friends everywhere in the town, and maybe some even just outside of town. Emil did not make friends just because of the advantages, of course, but always having friends helped. Always Emil needed to be careful of traitors, but that was being friends with as many people as possible.

Emil took the quickest route to Manang's house. A risky route that meant they might be seen by others in the early evening. But there was a package that needed to be delivered. Those who received the packages from within the Society came deeper in the night, thus the packages needed to be ready at Manang's house by then. Emil just hoped the people they would run into were friendly, so Emil could just wave at those townspeople and move on.

The streets kept clearing of people. Their town of Quirino was not the main one of the province, it was just one of the major market towns with a train station. People were more afraid of the forest creatures than the Guardia Civil, and tended to head home early for the night. All the same, there were still a few people around, and Emil had to be careful. Emil wove in and out of the lanes, all of them packed soil from feet, hooves, and wheels. Only the main avenues were cobbled. They kept diving into corners that had ample darkness, stopping when they heard footsteps, especially heavy ones. The Guardia for the night were beginning to deploy.

Dashing through several more lanes, Emil finally reached the house at

the edge of town. They hid in the bushes just behind the house, checking if it was safe to enter. They touched one of the wooden pillars of Manang's house.

Emil paused. They felt the power of the amulet pass through them, the wood part of the amulet. There was added movement in the wood flooring of Manang Conchita's house.

There were people in the house, more than the usual number. The vibrations were heavy. Men, probably soldiers, probably Guardia Civil. Members of the Society, even usual citizens of the nation who were not in the Society, they did not tread this heavily. Emil kept to the darkness, hoping Manang would stay safe.

Emil soon heard a stern voice, coming from the living room part of the house.

"Señora Morales," the voice said, "we have come for a visit."

"So I see, good sergeant," Manang Conchita said. "Would you like some dinner?"

"Thank you, good lady, but we have eaten. We only wish to ask you some questions."

Emil gulped, made sure they were completely hidden, placed an ear to the wall, making sure the amulet made them able to hear everything. They

patted the back of their head, activating the steel part of their amulet as well. It worked to Emil's advantage, and the disadvantage of the Guardia, that they wore so much steel in their armor. All the better for Emil to hear what they said to Manang Conchita.

"We have ... observed ... that many people come and go from your house, at all hours of the day," the guards immediately asked. "The crown requests to know why."

There was silence for a few moments. "What?" came the confident voice of Manang Conchita. "I do not have the right to accept parcels and packages for the house, for my needs? I am an older woman; the market is quite far from me!"

"Even if that is true, many strangers have been seen coming to your house, Señora."

Emil sensed the vibrations of many boots, steel-tipped and steel-lined boots on wooden panels, walking through the entire house, opening and closing things, slamming open and shut cabinets, chests, and desks. Some stomped on the wooden panels, checking for hollow portions. Emil kept himself hidden well. Some Guardia were roaming the premises outside the house.

Manang Conchita grumbled. Emil sensed her cross the living room. "So I have many friends who want to visit an old woman — what business is it of the crown? Also, some have been sent by the market to me!"

Emil heard another voice. “There is an accusation that you have been assisting the resistance movement, against the crown.”

Manang Conchita spoke again. “I am an old woman, I want to live a peaceful life, gentlemen. Now, if you please, the night is not getting younger, and neither am I, it is better that we all retire, yes?”

The heavy stomping of boots ended at the living room again. “Captain, the house is clean. Nothing suspicious found.”

“See, gentlemen?” Manang bravely said. “I am a worthy subject of the crown, like anyone else in this town! Now let us all take our rest? Unless you want some snacks?”

Emil heard some grumbling. “Know this, Señora. The resistance will be crushed. It is best to tell those who dare fight the crown.”

“They shall be told. Good evening, gentlemen!”

The heavy steel boots marched out of the house, and into the lane in front of Manang’s house.

Emil waited several moments, looking everywhere, checking with their amulet for any remaining Guardia. There was one, maybe two, still getting instructions from their captain.

Emil silently entered through the back door, climbed up the stairs,

entered the kitchen.

Someone was already waiting. “Ah, Emil! I am so glad you are well,” Manang Conchita said, with controlled relief.

“As am I, Manang, as am I,” Emil said.

Emil removed the knapsack and presented it to her. “Here is the sugar you wanted, Manang,” they said, as a precaution. It contained more than sugar, but Emil was never told the exact contents, for safety. “Also, my father said the great hawk must fly far.”

Manang Conchita looked at Emil carefully, accepting the knapsack, placing it on the table. She nodded that she heard. She removed the carefully wrapped parcel within. “Here is the suman, as usual, my dear,” Manang Conchita said, handing over a parcel artfully wrapped in banana leaf. She put the parcel in the knapsack.

“Thank you so much, Manang, your suman is always the best.” Emil wrapped their arms around Manang Conchita.

Manang hugged her back. “This will be very helpful.”

“I’m glad.” This was why Emil did it.

This was Emil’s work for the Cause: sending and receiving messages from various members of the Society, avoiding suspicion from the Guardia Civil.

The Cause was the freedom of the whole nation from the colonizers. It was therefore dangerous work. To be caught meant arrest, even death. But Emil had not been caught yet, and the freedom of the nation was more important. It was not a really big task, compared to the work of the Supremo, the leader of the Society, or any of the Supremo's deputies, but it was still important.

"Now, off you go, my young friend, may Bathala be with you," Manang Conchita said.

"As with you!" Emil took up Manang Conchita's hand, placed it on her forehead along with a bow. They then slung the knapsack on their arm and headed to the back of Manang's house.

Emil kept to the shadows, keeping away from the main lanes and streets as much as possible, going through several lanes to avoid heading straight home.

As a market town, the central portion of Quirino had been arranged and divided into orderly squares by alcalde assigned over the many years of Regena dominion. The church was besides the seminary; the government offices some distance away from the train station; the main market square not far from the church; the market a very short walk away from the train station, the main square, and the main streets. Emil's house had a general store on the first floor; it was midway between the market and the main square but hidden from the government offices. However, past the orderly squares established by the colonists, the outer bounds of Quirino still had wooden huts and houses like Manang Conchita's, an uneven border that

eventually extended into farmlands and roads toward the other provinces and towns.

Emil had more or less explored most of the streets and lanes of Quirino, running here and there, first as a child, then as they delivered goods for their father. Emil knew most houses and generally who lived where. They had a good idea who was loyal to the crown, who was devoutly loyal to the church. They had some good suspicions of families and people who were neither. And Emil knew a good number of those like Manang Conchita, who felt like Emil did about the Cause.

To be safe, Emil decided on a different, longer route. There were several routes that Emil knew all around the town, and from this house to theirs. Emil had a good idea of all the lanes, all the streets, all the major avenues, all the streets from the train station. There were short, fast routes when Emil needed to get to a lot of places. There were also long, winding routes that Emil used to deflect and shake off unnecessary followers and spies. They would need to shake off the Guardia, as soon as possible.

Emil took a deep breath and ran into the night.

There was a way to go through the unofficial boundaries of the town, where the forest touched the houses of the most distant, then go through the shadowy streets of the more central part of town, avoiding notice as much as possible. This was not their usual route from Manang Conchita's house, but they need to appear like they came from elsewhere.

Emil weaved into the lanes that blended with the forest, hiding in the trees as much as possible, keeping an eye left and right, back and forth, stopping often, only moving when the Guardia looked the other way. Emil did not dare run into the light, all the way home. Emil made sure the steel of the amulet was working; they needed to make sure of where the Guardia was at any point. The steel of the armor was picked up by the affinity with the amulet.

“Dinner, Emil, dinner, you haven’t had dinner,” they said, trying to calm their pounding heart. “You need to get home.”

They patted the amulet again, evaluating with it where was the wood and steel from the houses and the trees, where was the steel from the Guardia Civil. The steel from houses felt different from steel in armor, steam coaches, and steel horses. Those always felt punishing and terrible to them. The wood from various kinds of houses also felt different, as well, making Emil able to sense the rough outlines of houses.

The sensations from the amulet gave them the familiar feel of the houses surrounding theirs. Not too long now.

But they paused again.

A pair of Guardia Civil emerged from a corner. They were making their rounds.

An old man started running, but he was too slow, the Guardia caught up

with him.

“I am innocent!” the man immediately declared.

“A guilty man does not run from the law,” one of the Guardia declared. “Besides, it is curfew, and you are still out of doors.”

Emil began to step farther and farther from the scene.

“I was detained where I was visiting and could only leave now!” the old man said. “I was merely visiting an old friend in town.”

“A common lie, traitor.”

“I am not a traitor to the crown!”

“Explain yourself tomorrow morning, señor. You spend the night in the jail.”

“Please, no!”

But the man had been lifted off his feet and dragged to a steam coach.

Emil had no choice but to cringe and quickly run.

They grew even more careful, fully keeping to the shadows, not even daring to dash through the lamplights. If they could do that to an old man,

the Guardia would not hold back in harming someone like them.

Emil remembered to breathe when they sensed the distinct signature of their own house.

Emil hid in the shadows, made a final dash, and slid in, through the back door at last.

Emil quickly headed to the kitchen. They quickly changed into a house skirt. Always they were uncomfortable in a skirt, but this was a necessary sacrifice. Still, they wished every day that they did not have to wear them at all. They pumped the water into the pot, then washed the dishes found on the sink. They could do at least that much when they did not stay for dinner.

Emil heard a sigh of deep relief from behind. “Good. You are back. Your father is worried.”

Emil came and wrapped arms around their mother’s waist. “Good evening, Mother. There were ... people at Manang Conchita’s house. I had to wait for them to leave. It’s why I took a while.”

“So Manang may be compromised.” Mother sighed.

“Not yet, Mother. Thankfully.”

“All the same, we must rethink, your father and me. Go, eat, my dear, you

left so quickly. There is tinola.”

“Oh, that’s good!” Emil said. They always loved the tinola.

“Hush, go eat, I’ll get your father.” Emil’s mother set wood for the stove and put the clay pot over it.

Emil eagerly sat at the small kitchen table, the one they reserved for just themselves and the occasional guest from the Society. The main dining room and its table they always had ready for Guardia Civil or other guests from the government. But Emil loved the kitchen table more — it was always home and good food to them, since they were small.

But as their father entered the kitchen, a gust of wind came through their window, upending the curtains and the tablecloths.

Suddenly they were joined by a woman, her hair tied back, similar to Emil, wearing a farmer’s tunic and trousers. But this woman was regal beyond her appearance. Emil’s parents found themselves bowing to her. On her chest, proudly strung with leather, was a large circular amulet. It had just stopped glowing as she fully manifested. Only one other person, a man, also in a tunic, accompanied her. He stayed behind the woman and bowed to her as well.

“Supremo. We are ... beyond honored by your presence,” Emil’s father said, kneeling with a deep bow.

“Please, get up, fellow owners of the land,” the Supremo said, gesturing for them to stand. “We are all equals in this fight. Your message is received. We start leaving tonight. I personally leave at dawn.”

Emil’s mother hastily brought out another plate, brought it onto the kitchen table to join Emil’s plate. She also brought out a bowl of rice.

“Thank you, Supremo. But to what do we owe this honor?” Emil’s father asked in the meantime.

The Supremo looked at them both carefully, before also looking toward Emil. “I shall give you time to consider my request, and you are free to refuse. But Ginoong and Ginang Soriano, I have a very heavy and important favor to ask.”

Emil’s father bowed deeply. He spoke softly, in case they were heard, but spoke clearly. “Anything, anything for the Cause.”

Emil’s mother stopped moving. She turned to the Supremo, to her husband, to Emil. She gasped. Emil looked at all of them, both excited and worried. It was Mother who spoke first. “You are taking Emiliana. For the Cause.”

The Supremo sighed as she lowered her head. “I have heard that the name is Emil. I have also heard many good things about their skill in sending messages and packages. I kindly request the chance to use Emil’s skills beyond your town, to serve under my direction.”

The mother kept looking at the father, and at Emil.

“All the same,” the Supremo said. “Your child, the only child. You are free to refuse, and to protect your child. This work is dangerous, and often deadly. Emil can continue to help us the way they are doing now, if you desire. But I feel that their skills could be used beyond this town. They could help us as we go to the capital.”

Emil’s parents looked again at each other.

“My dearest,” Mother said to Emil. “I ... think you know what I feel about this, and what your father thinks. I would rather that you not leave us.”

The father ruefully looked at Emil. “I want to keep helping. I know you want to keep helping. But like the Supremo has said, this may be dangerous. You may not come back to us. I would rather that any revenge against our family for the Cause, that it be done to me, than to my dearest, to my loves.”

Emil did not know where to look. These were all people who were special to them. The woman who stood in their kitchen did not deserve to be in their kitchen, she deserved to be ruling the nation from the capitol. Emil wanted to help put her there, of course, but did they want to do this and leave their parents, possibly never to return?

The Supremo rapidly discussed the details of the arrangement with Emil’s parents, as Emil silently ate dinner. Whereas Emil had been delivering packages and messages only for one town, Emil would now be

personally assigned to assist the central leadership in delivering messages in and out of the towns they would be passing. They would also help in spy work; checking villages and towns prior to their passing, checking for the presence of the Guardia in these towns.

It was exciting to hear but felt like an immense responsibility.

The Supremo finally stood, having eaten only one of the suman Emil brought. “Thank you for your time. I shall give you the night to decide. It is all right to refuse. The Cause is grateful for all your support.” She placed a hand over her heart. “May Bathala be with us all.”

Emil and their parents saluted back. “And so with you, Supremo.”

The Supremo gave a quick bow, tapped her amulet, then disappeared in a flurry of wind.

Emil then looked down at their own heart, wondering what they should do.

It was still very early in the morning, still with chill in the air. Emil was not able to sleep. They had packed the very few possessions they wanted to bring along and put them in the knapsack. Their favorite two kerchiefs, embroidered with their initials at the corners by their mother. A change of trousers, a change of tunic, a leather belt they sometimes brought along

for running errands, made by their father. They bound their hair with the amulet. They slid their feet into shoes that they bought themselves, made to order with money from tips during daytime errands. They took a good look at their bedroom. It would be the last time they would have a comfortable bed, a comfortable bedroom, a comfortable house. After this, it would be a tough life of hardship. All for the Cause. They did not have to do this, Emil and their family. They could stay living comfortably, bending to the Regena government in their town, ignoring the hardships of their fellow countrymen. But Emil had learned from their parents, who could not do that. They all needed to do something. This was what Emil could do.

Both their parents were already awake, already waiting at the door, waiting for Emil. Their parents were not able to sleep either.

Emil immediately took both them into a long warm embrace.

“I will pray every day to Bathala, to bring you back alive,” their mother said.

“So will I, my dearest,” added their father.

“Do not forget to eat. Do not forget to boil the water before you drink it, my dear. Do not get angry at people so quickly, you always do. Always wash your face, as much as you can while you are there. Make friends with the people there.”

“I will,” Emil promised.

EMIL MAKES THEIR CHOICE

“Help this country, as best you can, my dear. Just do your best. Help us win,” their father said.

“Please stay safe, both of you. I love you both. So very much,” Emil said, giving their parents one last hug.

They all reluctantly parted. Time was ticking by. Some of the roosters were already crowing. Soon the sun would rise. Things would be even more dangerous soon. With a final holding of their hands, with a final bow of hand to forehead, Emil gave their mother and father one last smile, and ducked out of the house.

Already there was a man outside, wearing the farmer’s garb, and the red sash of the Society. Emil was familiar with him; he was the one with the Supremo last night.

They both went into the woods, without looking back, as tears slowly flowed down Emil’s cheeks.



MAH-GIK



MOCHI

WHEN WE WERE IN THE LIGHT

Ue always pronounce it as magic but I train my tongue to say mah-gik. It isn’t a word that should be deemed wrong or even taboo. It is just a word that describes the unknown beauty that hides beyond our lines of our sights.

Coming from a long line of warriors that sought to protect the king, my blood oozes with warrior spirit and mystical curiosity.

While looking up our family tree, I discovered that we were islanders once nestled in a small nook at the tip of the Indonesian coast. There, our family brought in riches from both land and sea as we prayed to the gods and goddesses that protected us from those who intend to harm us.

These beings were always hidden, somewhat far and yet close enough for us to feel their presence. We thanked them when they would sometimes reveal themselves through us. The bissu were their vessels, neither man nor woman but both. With that they channel the energy and harness the strength to carry the spirits within them just as we celebrated the spirits around us.

Mah-gik is accepting of unseen, from hidden allies that lay in the mountains to inherited gifts among the children. It was everywhere. We celebrated life through those who have passed on and to those who arrived. We welcomed them with open arms and respected them completely because they have journeyed far to bless us with their presence.

But like all mah-gik, it too shall die. But the remains of what once was lingers.

TO LEAVE WHAT ONCE WAS

As the years went by, we cultivated the land with the protection from the spirits who promised to make the land fertile for as long as our women remain fertile. The spirits let the bloodline stream down the river of time until it came to my grandfather who sought out a new life for his family, not

knowing the dangers of the oppression that we would face.

He braved the leap from his home to a new beginning; he landed here in Malaysia. He hoped to start a new life and to bring riches as it was promised. He then found love and through this love planted his seed on this land and it grew into his legacy.

I carry the bloodline of my grandfather but I did not take on the burden of oppression on my shoulders. As the years here brought him progress, the unknown became less of a fantasy but more a nightmare as he faced the fear of poverty with greed.

Greed engulfed the human mind like a raging sea. There, it brings out the bestial side of one's fear, letting go of what once was in favor of what is present now.

My grandfather shrouded us with the veil of the Islam, he whispered to us that this is the true religion and nothing outside it is safe.

I laid within this shroud for years, believing that my only purpose in life is to continue this bloodline. I believed that I am only to love those who follow the rules of the shroud.

The mah-gik was away but never gone, I could still feel it coursing through my veins, each blood vessel carried the whispers of the old and the promises of the new.

Every now and then the wind made the shroud sway, these were instances when I saw the outside world. Blinding and hurtful, but at the same time it was warm and welcoming. Many times, I wanted to step out. But I was held back by those who say that the shroud is good and that nothing outside shall be better than within.

A HIDDEN SECRET

I've learned to acknowledge the sides that make up humanity. Where one side is always put against another, walls are built. But with time, the walls have become as thin as a veil on a bride.

The image of life—blurry and pixelated on the outside, like a neon world full of life promises a new journey.

The fears that once whispered in my ears have become echoes that lead nowhere. I step outside the shroud and into the blinding light. I can feel the essence of my ancestors to my core. They were there once and they are still here now.

I begin to question if this body is the one that I am destined to be in forever. To understand my sexuality and to understand the range of my will to love and to understand what is love truly.

As I reach the peak of my life, I see where I was rooted and yet these branches stretch farther and higher than intended.

To stand out means to be exiled. To step outside the shroud is a crime, a sin so bad it is deemed to deserve death by the hands that share the sinner's blood. Thus I have to keep this a secret, to keep who I am and who I am meant to be inside a closet for the sake of safety.

TO LEARN FROM THE DEVIL IS TO DIE LIKE THE DEVIL

It has been years since I realised who I was, neither man nor woman but both in one. I do not love only one but rather all. Equality has disappeared from within the veil. The shroud that once hid me from the world is as distant as the land that I came from.

I now trace the world on a piece of paper. I map out the world that I no longer belong in but I thank that world for my struggle to understand it and where I came from. To grasp the forgotten magic that once laid its love around us.

But being Bisexual and loving all genders might become the death of me, as those in the shroud extend their grasp towards me, leaving marks black and blue on my skin as they chant away my being gay.

The devil inside me might once and for all be broken and I shall come back within the shroud, never to fight to be who I am again, and I will be forced to let the magic of what once was disappear from my life.

The light that once had me must be dimmed or I might never live to see another day. My skin is bruised and my back marked as target by those who

MAH-GIH

claim that they love me but would never accept me as I am. Because they say I am a syaitan.

Syaitan, I am the devil that my family no longer wants. I shall be ostracised but can I keep this up if the magic that once protected us has come to be considered the devil's key to hell.



THE SEA SPIRITS

ISMIM PUTERA

mari was pensive as she leaned by the window, absorbed in the pouring rain. Wavy hair flowed down like a waterfall from the back of her head and covered the most of her back in blackness.

“Thank you, my Queen,” she murmured, clasping both her hands tight against her anaemic lips. Inwardly, she was glad that the sea goddess had been so generous to prolong her time.

This month, she had met her spirit sisters; perhaps, for the hundredth time. Her spirit sisters were always in their truest form.

“We need you, my beloved,” said one of the spirit sisters, standing in front of her.

“You’re one of us, beautiful sister,” commented another, winding her transparent arms around Mari’s waist from behind like a child missed her mother.

“Your eyes are the essence of pearls. They’ve missed the sea too. You must join us. Your time has come.”

“I’m afraid that I’m not ready yet. I can’t leave him.”

Mari rejected their offer, again and again, both in dreams and in realities. She wanted to be with them, but she had lost most of her astral form. She had forgotten the ritual. The magic had left her body. She was bound to the earth and her body will harden like bricks in a kiln.

The season of rain stretched that year far longer than its wont. It had not stopped raining since mid-September, and it was already the 15th day of November. Meteorological reports predicted that the uncanny rain would last at least several more weeks. And then the hot and dry season would crawl in like snails. She had little affection for the tropical heat, which brought the images of sun-curled grass, crunchy leaves and windblown evening ghosts. For her these were the symbols of disease, sterility, impotence.

But weather patterns, like pretty much anything else in the world, were no longer predictable; increasingly so, she noticed, over the past few decades.

Hence, she relied more on astrological signs. Sometimes, the stars did purvey unexpected rewards. Last night she was thankful for an alignment of stars that promised her a glorious downpour come early in the morning.

The misty rain came like sheets of white selendang. Strong gusts of wind seemed to lift them lightly on invisible arms, spritzing her neck with celestial cologne. The dampness innervated every fibre in her body, merging with the rivulets of warm consciousness within.

The bouts of thunder against the lightning sent shudders to her marrows. Her body felt light, she was prepared to exchange almost anything for such an offering from heaven. The living rains and the raging tides of blood in her body were choreographed to the same infinite tune, the tune sung by her spirit sisters.

When her mother married a Melanau businessman, Mari was moved to Pulau Bruit in Sarawak at the age of ten. Pulau Bruit is an island, bounded by the western coast of Sarawak and the South China Sea. Kampung Tekajong was a serene fishing village. But the villagers did not celebrate the annual monsoon flood. They would rather stay indoors making sgmong and wishing the rain to end soon.

Since childhood, Mari had a special affection for the rain, as if she was the raindrop born from the womb of clouds. In her hometown Bantul in Yogyakarta, she remembered that the floods were welcomed by both the living and the dead. The youthful maidens would descend in rows from their houses into the floodwaters, clinging to their colourful batik sarong

when these would snap in the wind, briefly parachuting. They splashed the water upon each other, exchanging childish greetings. The floods provided opportunities for the young and the old to meet. Many a romance blossomed like mushrooms during such occasions. Yes, she remembered the floods of her youth with fondness. There were pantuns in them; mantras in them.

She remembered how the villagers in riparian areas in Kretek would gather on the paddy field to pray for more rain despite the downpour:

*O Spirit of the Rain,
shower upon us abundant rain,
widespread, beneficial not harmful, swiftly and not delayed.
O Spirit of the Rain, send rain for Your slaves
and Your crops and livestock,
and spread Your mercy, and revive Your dead lands.*

They would pray for hours while drenching in the rain. Then they stripped off their clothes and danced nude, exposing their body as the ultimate offering. She had watched them, each one of them. Her mouth gaped so wide that she could even swallow them entirely, along with their prayers.

#

She yearned for the sea. She felt that the many ancient gods and goddesses of Central Java were adorning her. She was confident that the divines had developed the secret urges within her; condoning her god-like behaviour,

for was she not one of them too?

In her dreams, she had seen herself tossed upon the endless waters of the ocean. Columns of waves swirled upward and clawed a portion of the sky. She saw her physical self torn to elemental pieces in the seemingly conscious vortex by simultaneous streaks of lightning and the clashes of thunder. She was dissolved in shades of blue and green water and the white foamy crests of the waves. She could still hear the love-call of the ocean, like the whispers from a thousand tinkling conch shells.

Mari told no one of her growing obsession, not even her husband, Kazarul. There were times when he came perilously close to finding out, but she was able to keep the secret. In her consternation, she told him that she had a dream that she was drowning.

One morning, Kazarul suggested that she should consider seeing a psychiatrist.

“You shouted many times last night.”

“No, I didn’t shout, I was...praying.”

“Maybe you should see a doctor. You might need medication to help you sleep better.”

“I’ve no trouble sleeping.”

“Trust me. Dr. Roy Chieng is a new friend of mine. He’s the psychiatrist in Hospital Sibuluan. Maybe he can have a look.”

Could he even look into the mind of a goddess? She didn’t think so.

#

That entire week was the peak of the monsoon season, infamously known as the jantung tengkujuh, or the heart of monsoon. The rain turned the house into an islet. As Mari relished every moment, her reverie intensified. Her breath was hefty, her bosom rising and falling as if she had one hundred hearts beating within her ribcage.

The idea of going into the rain began to take control of her. Mari, mesmerised, dropped her sarong. She loosened her hair, and it reached the curve of her lower back, appearing blacker than usual.

Entranced, she walked out into the garden, letting the water lick her ankles and parts of her calves. She was like a goddess prancing on the altars of Borobudur. She stretched her arms upwards in homage. Excited, she began to dance, round and round, encircling the twin frangipani trees by turn at an increasing pace.

Beneath the zombie palms, Mari rolled over and over on the grass, allowing herself to be soaked through. Orchids scented the air. Ixora expressed their redness against the evergreen freshness of the bushes. Yellow-white jasmine flowers were equally crisp and radiant. Rows of

potted bird’s nest ferns extended their stiff fronds to collect the rain like pearls.

She was on her knees, kneeling, prostrating, and wiping herself with both hands as if to ensure the rain did not miss even a square millimetre of her skin. Not wanting the rain to freeze her limbs, she performed an ulik mayang to appease the semangat laut. She began to sing:

Ulek mayang ku ulek,
ulek dengan jala jemala,
ulek mayang diulek,
ulek dengan tuannya puteri,
Ku tahu asal usul mu,
yang laut balik ke laut,
yang darat balik ke darat.

(I entreat the mayang,
entreat with shining nets,
entreat the mayang,
singing with her highness the princess)
I know your origins,
let those from the sea return to the sea,
let those from the land return to the land.)

Seven semangat laut sisters appeared before Mari. Once royal princesses from an old maritime kingdom reigning over the Nusantara archipelago, the kingdom collapsed into the sea turning the princesses into sea spirits.

They danced with her with their hands twirling in the air. They were all completely unclothed, depicting what Mari saw in her dreams.

The downpour had diminished into a drizzle. The wind sent a shiver through her, and she heard the rustle of frangipani leaves. The fresh aroma was unmistakable and exhilarating after the downpour. While lying on the ground, she placed her palms over her face and body as if to confirm her existence. The sky became a tapestry of grey, orange and red as the sun succumbed behind blue hills.

“Sister, we’re waiting for you,” said a princess after pecking Mari’s left earlobe. Another princess combed Mari’s hair with her fingers. The other semangat laut lay next to her with their arms and legs entwined with her body.

“The Queen is waiting. You’ll be her most precious princess,” enticed another princess.

“This earth weakens you. We do not belong here. You know that you can’t be up here for too long.”

Mari closed her eyes and her tears flowed like a string of silver beads. She prophesied intense miseries her husband might have to endure in the future. Then, more than ever before, she knew that she must go with them. Her time to reside on the land had ended at that moment.

“Let those from the sea, return to the sea; and those from the land, return

to the land.” She warned herself for an uncountable time. Blanketed by the drizzle, Mari abandoned her bones and flesh, and followed the princesses into the wilderness of the sea.

She submitted herself willingly to Nyai Roro Kidul, goddess of the Southern Sea, the leader of all Semangat Laut. When her astral form touched the shoreline, she uttered the sibylline Mantra Kejawen, in ancient Javanese to greet her:

Bapa kuwasa, ibu partiw
 Kulo nyuwun sih pitulungan
 Sedulurku kang tuwa, kang ana wetan putih rupane
 Kedadean getih putih
 Sedulurku karig ana kidul, abang rupane
 Keadean getih kuning
 Sedulurku kang anal or, ireng rupane
 Keadean puser
 Aku njaluk derajat lan rejeki agung...

(Father of the Sky, Mother of the Earth
 I am asking for your guidance
 My old ancestors from the East, they are white
 They inherited the White Blood
 My old ancestors from the South, they are red
 They are linked to each other
 I adjure thy most gracious bounty...)

#

“How are you today?” asked Dr. Chieng while drawing the curtain and opening the window.

A gust of cold wind rushed into the gloomy room. The sudden chill woke Kazarul up by nipping on his bare spine. The lurid sun hammered down on his thighs as midday approached. In only his boxer briefs, he opened his eyes, frowned, yawned and stretched his arms and legs like a starfish, looking tense but carefree.

“Roy?” Kazarul squinted for a second. “You said you’ll come by next week.”

“I’ve called you twenty times and you didn’t pick up. Sorry if I walked into your house without your permission. I just want to make sure you’re still breathing.” Dr. Chieng stood by the windowsill, peeking at the world of the living through the thin fogged up glass.

“Sorry. I’m fine. Thanks for coming.”

“Can you sleep? Does the pill work?”

“Yeah. A bit. The headache is getting better.” Kazarul lifted both his arms up while stretching his spine. “Is it still raining?”

“No. It has stopped for a few hours. It will rain again.”

Dr. Chieng scanned the room. The atmosphere was musty and damp. In one corner, a pile of boxes was neatly taped and arranged. The contents were mostly Mari’s, he assumed. The make-up table had been relocated, the drawers were emptied, and a piece of cloth was draped over the mirror.

“That’s her stuff?”

“Her mother came and helped me two days ago. She took some of her clothes, jewellery and then she left.”

“Did she say anything?” Dr. Chieng found himself a chair near the make-up table. He flipped the drape covering the left half off the ornamental mirror. He remembered when Puan Marika, Mari’s mother, was hysterical on the day Mari went missing. She travelled all the way from Pulau Brait to Bintulu to shout at everyone. She blamed Kazarul for being reckless and threw a tantrum in front of relatives and the police officers.

“She didn’t say anything. She came to take some of her belongings and—” Kazarul stopped abruptly to yawn.

“And?”

“She went back to Yogyakarta with her husband. She apologised to me and left in a hurry. She wanted me to start looking for a new wife and start a new life. That’s the funniest thing I’ve heard after scolding and mocking me for the last eight months.”

“Well... That’s good then. That woman is really scary. Remember when she screamed and ran to the kitchen and grabbed a knife to threaten the police officer?” Dr. Chieng chuckled. He tried to suppress the laugh by turning his face to the mirror.

“Gosh, that was the worst day ever! She was lucky the inspector didn’t shoot,” Kazarul giggled and rubbed his eyes.

“How did the meeting with the police go that day?”

“The police have concluded their findings. No evidence. Nothing. They’ve terminated the search and rescue mission but they welcomed any information about her whereabouts. They said maybe she ran away and—” Kazarul sighed. He hugged his knees and rested his chin on his knee cap. “It’s over.”

“Sorry to hear that. They worked hard to find her. It’s been eight months.”

“Thanks, Roy, for coming. I’ve troubled you many times.”

“It’s okay. I know you’ve tried your best to look for her.”

“I should have taken her to see you sooner. She needed help. She needed treatment. She had problems.”

“We’ve talked about that. It’s not your fault. I’ve seen her before. It’s difficult to tell if she did have any mental disorder. Sometimes things do

get very complicated. I’m hungry. Have you eaten? Can I use the kitchen?” requested Dr. Chieng.

“Do whatever you want here. This house is yours now.”

#

Dr. Chieng opened the refrigerator and planned a simple dish from whatever leftovers in it. He had become innovative after helping Kazarul to swim through his hardships.

He knew the details of the incident more than anyone else. He managed to see Mari once in his clinic. She was a thin, frail young lady in her mid-thirties. From her history session, she showed subtle signs of sleeping disorders. But before he could rule out other possible organic pathology and start the medication, she defaulted on subsequent appointments.

Kazarul called him first when Mari went missing that afternoon. It was raining cats and dogs. They tried to call her, went through every room and got drenched in the rain to search around the neighborhood. 24 hours later, the police came. They interrogated Kazarul, examined the two-storey house and took photographs.

Mari did not leave them with anything. Not even a drop of memories.

The next day, he accompanied Kazarul to lodge a police report, print out flyers and pamphlets, and schedule announcements via the radio. Kazarul

had to break the bad news to his in-laws.

For months, they waited for calls hoping to hear news. No one demanded ransom. There was no positive feedback other than lengthy messages of sincere prayers and comforting wishes from distant relatives. Occasionally, Puan Marika would shout curses through the phone.

Two months later, Mari was presumed dead. A funeral prayer was done in the nearby surau. A tombstone was erected for her in the Islamic cemetery. Since that day, the house had become as silent as the graveyard.

At night, Kazarul tossed and turned with insomnia. He had recurring dreams of watching himself plummet into a rampaging vortex, exactly a Mari had described. The dreams were bad omens, according to an ustaz. He wanted Kazarul to repent religiously in the mosque but he thought it was pointless. Instead, he consumed cans of beer to let him doze off most of the day. At night, he was too drunk to feed himself. Afflicted with headaches, stomach pain, and worsening yellowing of his eyes, he closed down his shop and decided to seek help.

Kazarul was admitted to the Bintulu Hospital. He had his brain scanned and an endoscopy done. They found neither bleeding vessels nor malignant lesions. He was then referred to the psychiatry unit for his sleeping disturbances.

“Roy! Nice to see you again,” Kazarul greeted him coyly in the ward.

Dr. Chieng was stunned by his condition. Kazarul’s ribs made hills and valleys of his skin when he looked at his chest. Skin as white as limestone. Veins bulged around his neck like snakes. His eyes were parched as if he was just resurrected from a sandy grave.

Apart from treating Kazarul’s persistent low mood, high-risk suicidal ideation, migraine, GERD, transaminitis, chronic alcoholism and insomnia with medications, he deliberately drove all the way from the hospital and stayed with him over the weekend. He nursed him with nutritious meals and ensured that he had his life sorted out the best way possible.

#

Dr. Chieng brought the food into the room. Two large bowls of Maggi curry noodles with scrambled eggs.

“Thanks. You always manage to scrape something from the kitchen floor. Sorry, I didn’t refill the fridge.”

“Well...I’ve been babysitting a 35-year-old baby for the past six months. Luckily no cockroaches or rats in there, otherwise I’d have put them into the noodles too!”

“Yuck!” Kazarul stirred the steaming soup in the bowl. The gravy swirled into a reddish vortex, untangling the stringy noodles.

“Roy, you know what?”

“Yes?”

“Maybe she has gone to the sea.”

“The sea? Where? Why?”

“Beyond the woods. She likes the sea very much but I never allowed her to go. She wanted to go there since we bought this house.”

“But I thought the police and the bomba searched that area as well.”

“She did tell me about semangat laut. She told me that she was one of them. And I warned her that it was just a dream.”

“Semangat laut?”

“A folk religion still being practiced by the locals in Sumatera. Some called them as semangat laut. Mari’s family still practices it.”

Dr. Chieng slurped the noodle slowly, eyes wide, demanding an explanation.

“I don’t know. She might have been doing some ritual or something. I don’t know. It’s difficult to explain.”

Dr. Chieng lifted the bowl and finished the soup.

“Let’s go to the sea after you finish eating. I want to see it for myself. Is it far?”

Kazarul was adamant with the plan. Dr. Chieng then rose from the chair.

“Please, let’s go there and look for her again. Maybe we can pray to the spirits and ask her to return.”

#

Their feet squelched in the mangrove woods. They were guided by the slanted beams from the afternoon sunlight. Birds twittered and frogs croaked incessantly as if to tell them to turn back. Mosquitoes swarmed around their necks trying to stab them with their sharp nozzles. After an hour of roving through the bakau branches and vines, they came to the fringe of a muddy beach. The sea greeted the men with susurrations of its salty spray. A strong breeze brushed their hair and kissed their sweaty cheeks.

“I didn’t know how close the sea was behind here!” Dr. Chieng stretched his arms wide as if trying to gather the breeze into his chest.

“This is the South China Sea. What you see is just a part of it.” Kazarul sat cross-legged on the bank while facing the sea. He appreciated the vague lines of the horizon. Black clouds rolled on the sky, obscuring where the sea met heaven even further.

“This place is stunning!”

“She has gone to the sea and become a sea goddess,” admitted Kazarul, faint wrinkles etched onto his brow.

“Why is that?” Dr. Chieng sat next to Kazarul, shoulder to shoulder.
“Because that’s all she ever wanted to.”

“You must miss her.”

“I feel bad about her. All these years we were just pretending to love each other.”

“Pretending?”

Kazarul shut his eyes tightly. He hung his head low. He was unsure of what he meant.

“Yes. We’ve been trying for eight years. The doctor said that she could never conceive. She knew that one day my heart will eventually sink into the sea. She has become a sea goddess now, swimming deep into the sea to save it.”

“Sorry... to hear about... that.”

“She wanted to be free and wanted me to be free too. Free from everything. Free like the semangat laut. She wanted me to remarry. But I didn’t want

to. We’ve gone through many difficult times together. I can’t just leave her for another.”

“She’s a strong woman and I can see you still love her.”

Kazarul nodded after breathing in the salty air deeply.

“We argued a lot and she would cry after. I thought I’d have given her everything. I was too blind to see that she begged to be free. I was such a useless husband. I always made her cry. Then I let her go.”

“You let her go?”

“Yes. Just a month before I sent her to see you.”

Dr. Chieng rummaged through his pockets. “Nah! I found this in your room. This is hers, right?”

Kazarul opened the box. Under the metal lid he saw a phrase inscribed: untuk suamiku. He clutched the necklace dedicated to him tightly. Mari bought the heart-shaped pendant on their sixth anniversary two years ago. She must have left it for him to keep. The gemstone shimmered as blue as the sea.

“Stand up, Kazarul! Tell her that you miss her. Tell her that you want her to be free. That will help!”

Kazarul felt the tug on his left arm. Dr. Chieng pulled him up and they stood bravely against the sea.

Kazarul gasped and hesitated for a second. He wobbled to the edge of the ebbing waves. His foot sank into the mud. Sea water seeped into his shoes and doused his toes. The strong breeze choked his throat and tightened his windpipe.

“Tell her now.” Dr. Chieng patted his back to ease him into it.

With one deep breath, Kazarul yelled at the tops of his lungs, “Sayang! Sayang! Forgive me! Be free! Be free like the sea!”

Kazarul’s voice split the violent waves and echoed deep into the trenches in the abyss. He then coiled the necklace around a stone before tossing it into the sea.

Dr. Chieng brought Kazarul into an embrace. Kazarul sobbed into his chest, hands clutching his shirt. The pain came like tides, waves of sobbing between gasps to catch his breath. The sea mourned with him. His grief was washed away into those salty tears. Kazarul raised his face to smile. A burden was lifted from his body. His eyes seemed to have regained sight. He could see the horizon now.

Dr. Chieng learned about their livelihood that evening. They talked for hours. Kazarul owned a shop that sold appliances and furniture, and Mari was a full-time housewife. Their marriage had been arranged and did not

turn out how their families had hoped. The couple bought a house near the sea, isolated themselves from gossip and only had a limited circle of friends.

“Roy, can you stay with me, tonight?” Kazarul begged him with his gaze.

“Sure, no problem! I just—”

The end of the phrase was silenced as Kazarul moved in to kiss Dr. Chieng. Red-faced, Kazarul squeezed his eyes shut and let the warmth of the kiss take over his lips. It was a kiss that he had always wanted to give. The gesture was accepted and reciprocated.

The sun disappeared. Above, lightning flashed brilliantly, then the rain began. A flurry of raindrops pattered on the ground at their feet...

#

Kazarul opened his eyes and found Dr. Chieng sleeping next to him. Earlier, he heard the pounding of their hearts as their chests rubbed together. The sound of their kisses was a frenzy, more intense than the crash of the waves. Kazarul expressed his affections that had been entombed since his adolescence.

Mari pursed her lips as she ambled through the garden. Delighted, she entered the room in her astral form, elegantly robed with silken mantle embroidered with crushed lapis lazuli. She paused to look at Kazarul who

THE SEA SPIRITS

slept with his lover with their hands clasped.

“Be free. Be free like the sea.” She chanted. She opened her hands and placed the necklace slowly next to Kazarul. “This is your heart, my beloved. Let those from the sea, return to the sea; and those from the land, return to the land.”

The gem exuded a bright turquoise glow.

Mari drifted towards Kazarul and planted a kiss on his forehead before leaving the home to climb atop a seven-headed cerulean naga that awaited her return to the sea.



AVASI

M_s DEE CHAR

Uhy? My grandchildren are strong. What is the need for all this?

Those people will be here any minute now. Those people accuse me of my strange beliefs and yet, they do not realise how they are such hypocrites. My grandchildren look nervous. But their parents think it right to do this. It is progress they told me.

Opod om iso’.

Eleven. He has eleven grandchildren.

Kusai ... Vahu' Boys ... Eight.

Tondu' ... Tohu. Girls ... Three.

They tell me I must give up the Old Ways. How can I? The Old Ways protect us. The Old Ways feed us. The Old Ways bring us no harm. The Old Ways are a part of me and I, a part of Them. As I've grown, Their presence too has grown. They have made me strong. My heart feels so heavy today, it is like lead being dropped again and again into a river and drowned over again and again. Each time, the suffering grows stronger. But I cannot show my sadness or defeat today. There is no dignity in that. I must hold my head high.

His eyes showed a weariness, as if a warrior knowing that the end is near. The end of a time they once knew. Now, the old dawn was going, and a new claim ushered in the promised Opportunities, Education and Wealth. Those people had claimed the lands and today they would claim his grandchildren. Everyone had to be documented. Their day of birth recorded. Their faces claimed by a machine that would capture their soul and put it on paper. The old warrior sighed and vowed he would not go easily. He alone could not turn the tide, but maybe his grandchildren would see one last glimpse of the Old Ways. Maybe today.

Finally, the nurses arrived, huffing and puffing up the slope in their white uniforms. They were extremely hot and bothered, sweating in the tropics'

humidity. Immediately the house dogs barked, outraged by the sight of such intruders.

Ooowww Owwww wowwww wowwww Owwwwwww!!!

“Nieceeh! Sssshhhhhh! Niiiiiehhh! Niehh!” someone yelled for the dogs to stop.

The old warrior said nothing as the nurses were greeted graciously by his son. His beloved son had gone to learn how to read and write the white man's language. It would give them opportunities he said. Many things were changing fast and they needed to keep up. It had taken his son only eight months to master the white man's art. The old warrior was proud of that. His son could read advertisements and notices in town now. The papers had so much news that his son updated them every week. But when his son came back telling him that the old ways must be stopped, it felt like his heart had stopped too. And now his son and grandchildren prayed to a picture of a white man in robes.

Songkuo no umul diti tanak? How old is the child?

The child fidgeted.

The nurses had set up their table, lining up the vaccines and syringes, with attached needles, and doing a registrar of all of his grandchildren. The needles looked fragile atop the glass syringes, but it scared the hell out of the children. The old warrior was scared too.

This will change my grandchildren forever. What do they put in those things?

Iisai gia ngaan nu dii? What is your name again?

Ikodon ko nangku? Do you have a cough?

The child shook his head. No.

Hongoon ko nangku? Do you have a cold?

The child shook his head again.

Avasi? Good.

These people, they want to live longer and more safely. They claim that they make my grandchildren safer with these medicines. They are indeed smart, but they do not know everything. Sometimes there is a time to stop being smart, a time to stop going after the answer and just leave it to fate. Don't fight what is meant to be. Who are we? We are just walkers on this Earth for a short time.

While a nurse lined up all the children from the eldest to the youngest, another nurse was busy checking a needle and giving the barrel of the syringe a gentle flick as she observed it through the sunlight. The old warrior saw the fear in his eldest grandchild's eyes, the child's chest drew shallow breaths, his body tensed, bracing for the pain that was to come.

Ahhh, I shall stop it now.

The old warrior raised his hand slightly, inhaled and murmured his sacred words. Words that only he knew. Words that could not be flung around. It was an honour to carry such words, heavy with both pride and age.

The nurse shuffled up to the child and hastily swabbed some ointment on his arm before aiming the needle at it. Her hand angled the needle and her thumb pushed firmly down on the plunger.

It stopped. Her thumb stopped.

“What? What is wrong with this syringe, Anna?”

“What do you mean?”

“It cannot go through ... look here ... I cannot push it through.”

“Don't be foolish, Jane. We've got five more houses to do today — let me try.”

The nurse called Anna took over and the needle was tried on the child's arm again. Sister Jane was obviously getting flustered now, waving her palm at her face, pink with the heat.

“I told you, it cannot go through. My word, what is going on?”

The children's eyes grew wide and smiles broke out on their faces. Their mothers started talking quietly. The old warrior smirked and caught the eye of his eldest grandchild. The boy's eyes reciprocated amusement and delight. Shirtless and only clad in shorts, the boy's skinny frame would soon change to be atagap like a man's. The old warrior wished he would live long enough to see that day.

The children were laughing now, and one waved at the old warrior.

"Aki! Aki!"

They call me now. Oh, how my grandchildren know me. Ahhahaaa! We got the last laugh, didn't we? Those people come here, to my land, to my family, to my house, and claim my grandchildren? I have showed them.

"Aki! Akiiii!"

The children were now dancing barefoot around the nurses. Sister Anna looked overwhelmed and called out native words in attempt to calm the children down. Sister Jane was saying something serious to the parents and gestured towards the old warrior. It was not her place to tell him.

My son came up to me. He told me I had to stop this. If only he knew I wanted to tell him the same. Stop this, Son. But he told me it was for progress. We had to progress towards the future. Otherwise, there would be nothing for the children. They had to go to school eventually. They needed to do this today. So, I stopped it. At least my grandchildren had no more


fear in their eyes. They held their heads high as the needle went in.

The old warrior was alone and, being alone, he could not fight the tide. But his grandchildren had caught a glimpse of the old ways that day. They were grateful and remembered it long after he was gone. They thought it was Avasi'.



SIRKUS SETAN

RIZAL IWAN

 mereka sudah datang.”

Suara Ibu menyusul tiga ketukan di pintu. Aku mengerang dan menyahut sekenanya. Kulempar ponsel di tangan, lalu bangkit dari tempat tidur dengan ogah-ogahan. Kenapa sih mereka tidak bisa datang di waktu yang lebih sopan?

Ibu, Ayah, dan pemandangan yang sangat asing menyambutku di ruang tamu. Ruangan itu sudah berubah menjadi semacam arena. Semua perabotan dipinggirkan, menyisakan ruang kosong di tengah dengan

karpets yang menutupi lantai.

Di atas karpets duduk bersila dua lelaki yang tidak kukenal. Lelaki yang lebih tua mengenakan kaos gombrong, dengan celana bahan abu-abu. Kusebut dia Si Janggut saja. Lelaki yang lebih muda memakai kemeja dengan celana yang lebih cocok jadi piama. Sepertinya, Si Culun adalah nama yang pas untuknya.

Ayah mengulurkan tangan, menyuruhku mendekat. Ibu tersenyum, seolah mengatakan tidak ada yang perlu ditakuti. Tak sengaja aku mendengus. Siapa yang takut?

“Ini dia anaknya, Pak,” Ibu menyodorkanku pada Si Janggut, seperti korban yang mau disembelih.

“Fachrul ya?” Si Janggut menyeringai ke arahku. “Berapa umurmu?”

“Dua puluh,” Ibu yang menjawabkan untukku.

Si Janggut melirik ke Si Culun. “Oh, hampir sebaya dengan...”

“Bisa langsung mulai saja?” aku sedang tidak selera berbasa-basi.

Si Janggut mempersilakanku duduk di atas karpets. Aku menurut dan duduk bersila dengan wajah bosan. Ayo cepat, waktuku tak banyak!

Lelaki tua itu mengambil tempat di sampingku, berlutut sehingga ia

satu kepala lebih tinggi dariku. Si Culun beringsut agak menjauh, tapi tak sejauh Ibu dan Ayah yang berdiri merapat ke dinding dengan wajah cemas.

“Tutup matamu, Fachrul,” kata Si Janggut.

Lagi-lagi aku menurut. Apa saja supaya ini cepat selesai.

Si Janggut menepuk-nepuk punggungku pelan, lalu tangan lainnya diletakkan di dadaku. Tubuhnya dicondongkan semakin dekat ke arahku. Tak sengaja aku mendengus lagi. Sialan, sepertinya dia tidak pernah kenal deodoran.

Ditepuknya punggungku dengan lebih keras, lalu ia mulai menggumam dalam bahasa yang sama sekali tak kumengerti.

Aku membuka satu mata untuk mengintip. Mengira-ngira apa yang sedang terjadi, dan apa yang diharapkan terjadi dengan diriku. Matakku selintas menangkap wajah Ibu dan Ayah, mencoba menerka apa yang sedang mereka rasakan.

Ibu masih cemas. Ayah penuh harap. Sementara aku? Berusaha keras untuk tidak menguap.

Melihat aku tidak bereaksi, Si Janggut mengeraskan suaranya. Masih dalam bahasa yang tak kupahami. Aku merasakan ada yang bergerak-gerak di sekitarku, disusul dengan percikan air dingin mengenai wajahku.

Aku mengintip lagi dengan mata setengah terbuka. Ternyata Si Culun sedang berjalan mengitariku, dengan baskom kecil di tangannya. Ia mencipratkan air lagi ke arahku. Heh, monyet!

Matakku mengerjap. Rupanya Si Janggut senang melihat pergerakan ini. Tangannya naik dari dada ke leherku. Racauan asingnya semakin lantang dan cepat. Aku yang masih sebal karena cipratan air dari Si Culun semakin merasa terganggu.

Si Janggut kini berdiri, kedua tangannya masih mencengkeram tubuhku. Racuannya semakin cepat. Semakin asing. Sekarang badannya ikut berguncang-guncang. Keningnya dipenuhi keringat. Bau tubuhnya yang tengik makin menusuk hidungku. Tangannya menepuk-nepuk leherku. Sumpah, ini semakin mengesalkan saja!

Bulir keringat semakin banyak di keningnya. Mengalir menuruni wajahnya. Membasahi janggutnya. Lalu... satu tetes jatuh tepat di bawah lubang hidungku.

Oke, kesabaranku habis sudah!

“Aaaaaarrrrgh!” aku berteriak sampai leherku sakit, menyemburkan kekesalan yang sejak tadi kutahan.

Aku berdiri. Meronta dan menendang. Kalau aku ingin ini cepat selesai, lebih baik berikan saja apa yang ingin mereka lihat. Lagi pula, kata sebuah artikel yang pernah kubaca entah di mana, olah tubuh seperti ini baik juga

untuk melampiaskan kemarahan. Sekali tepuk, dapat dua lalat kan?

Ibu menangis. Ayah membaca doa. Si Janggut mencengkeram tubuhku lebih kuat. Si Culun mundur ketakutan, sambil tetap menciprat-cipratkan air ke arahku.

Aku menyikut Si Janggut sehingga berhasil melepaskan diri, tapi hentakannya membuatku terjerembap. Sedetik kemudian, aku bangkit dan merangkak di karpet, dengan kepala yang kuliuk-liukkan ke kanan dan ke kiri secara berlebihan. Gerakan ini kupelajari dari acara pemburu hantu yang entah berapa banyak jumlahnya di TV. Semoga cukup meyakinkan.

Aku memutar kepala ke arah Si Culun dengan lagak yang kuseram-seramkan. Kupasang seringai paling mengerikan yang bisa kuberikan, menggeram, lalu merangkak secepat kilat ke arahnya.

Wajah Si Culun pucat pasi, baskom kecil di tangannya terjatuh, menumpahkan air ke seluruh karpet.

Ibu menjerit lagi. Entah karena melihatku begitu, atau karena karpet kesayangannya ketumpahan air.

Sampai di hadapan Si Culun, aku berdiri dan menampar mukanya. Dua kali. Satu di pipi kiri, satu di pipi kanan. Ini balasan untuk air yang tadi kau ciprat-cipratkan ke mukaku, monyet! Si Culun meringkik. Aku tak kuasa menahan tawa. Ah, puas sekali rasanya!

Si Janggut bergerak ke arahku dengan takut-takut. Aku berbalik dan berhadapan dengannya. Waktunya acara utama.

Seringai mengerikan di wajahnya sudah hilang sama sekali. Sepertinya dia sendiri pun tidak mengerti apa yang sedang terjadi. Ia masih menceracaukan kata-kata asing, walau tak lagi secepat tadi, dan suaranya agak gemetar. Aku bisa sudahi semuanya sekarang, atau aku bisa main-main sebentar lagi.

Ah, sepertinya aku masih ingin bermain-main.

Tubuhku bergerak mengikuti irama serupa mantra dari mulutnya, dengan gerakan yang bahkan membuat diriku sendiri agak terkesima. Awalnya hanya gerakan tangan dan kaki gemulai serupa bisu yang hendak memulai upacara. Kemudian berangsur menghentak seperti warok yang menandak. Sesaat kemudian, gerakanku berubah-ubah antara trengginasnya penari perempuan yang menjelma Arjuna, dan genitnya lelaki dalam baju lenggernya.

Si Janggut terdiam sedetik, menganga memandang semuanya. Tapi, begitu matanya menangkap Ibu dan Ayah sedang melihat dengan segala harap, ia melanjutkan mantranya. Semakin cepat, semakin cepat. Aku pun bergerak lebih cepat, selaras dengan rentetan kata-katanya, hingga akhirnya aku memuncak dan melengking seperti sedang dilebur oleh orgasme paling nikmat yang pernah kurasakan seumur hidupku. Di saat yang sama, kutarik janggutnya dengan sekuat tenaga. Ia menjerit kesakitan. Sumpah, ini lebih memuaskan dari cinta!

Napasku tersengal. Ternyata gerakan melata seperti di acara-acara pemburu hantu itu membutuhkan banyak tenaga ya. Salut buat para aktor yang disewa untuk melakukannya.

Aku kelelahan. Sudah waktunya menyudahi acara sirkus yang menggelikan ini. Aku mengulainya di atas karpet. Mataku terpejam. Lemas, tapi puas.

Si Janggut datang menghampiri. Lagaknya kini kembali sok berani. Ia meletakkan satu telapak tangan di keningku, dan meracau lagi dalam bahasa asing.

Aku membuka mata dan melihat berkeliling. Ibu sedang menangis di pelukan Ayah. Si Culun masih gemetar, meringkuk di sudut.

“Sudah selesai, Fachrul,” Si Janggut mengenakan seringainya lagi.

Sirkus sudah usai. Ibu mengantarku kembali ke kamar. Dari dalam, aku masih bisa mendengar percakapan di luar.

“Jadi sudah keluar, Pak?” suara Ibu.

“Sudah. Bapak dan Ibu tidak perlu takut lagi. Fachrul sudah sembuh sekarang,” suara Si Janggut.

“Betul ada setan perempuan di dalam tubuhnya?” suara Ayah.

“Ya jelas. Makanya selama ini Fachrul begitu,” suara Si Janggut sok tahu. “Tapi setannya sudah saya keluarkan. Sekarang Fachrul sudah kembali normal.”

“Syukurlaaaaah,” suara Ayah dan Ibu bersamaan.

Aku mengangkat bahu dengan santai, menghempaskan diri di tempat tidur, dan meraih ponselku.

Kubuka aplikasi chatting untuk melanjutkan obrolan yang tadi terpotong oleh kunjungan kedua tamu ajaib itu.

+ Sori, tadi ada gangguan sebentar.

– No problem. Baik-baik saja?

+ Tidak masalah. Sudah beres.

– Nanti malam tetap jadi ketemuan kan?

+ Jadi dong. Tapi kita kencan di tempat yang aman ya. Kalau ada yang lihat, nanti aku dibilang kemasukan setan lagi.



CIRCUS OF DEMONS

RIZAL IWAN

hey're here."

My mother softly called out, following three knocks on the door. I gave her a dismissive groan for an answer. I tossed the phone in my hand, and dragged myself up from my bed. *Why can't they come at a more decent time?*

Mother, Father, and a peculiar tableau were waiting for me in the living room. The room had been transformed into some kind of an arena. All the furniture had been pushed to the side to give way for a carpet-covered

empty opening at the center.

On the carpet, two strange men were sitting cross-legged. The older one was wearing an oversized T-shirt and pleat-front pants. I'll just call him Beardy. The younger one was clad in a button-up shirt, with a pair of pajama-like pants. I think, Geeky will be a suitable name for him.

Father held his hand out to me, telling me to come closer. Mother smiled, as if telling me that there was nothing to be afraid of. I gave out an involuntary scoff. *Who's afraid?*

"This is the boy, sir," Mother pushed me gently toward Beardy, like a lamb ready for slaughter.

"Fachrul, is it?" Beardy gave me a smile that looked more like a terrifying smirk. "How old are you?"

"Twenty," Mother spoke for me.

Beardy turned his head to Geeky. "Oh, almost the same age as..."

"Can we just cut to the chase?" I was in no mood for small talk.

Beardy gestured for me to sit down on the carpet. I did as what he said, my legs crossed and my face bored. *Chop chop, I haven't got much time!*

The older man took his place next to me, on his knees so he seemed a bit

taller than me. Geeky discreetly shifted away, although nowhere as far as Mother and Father, who were standing so close up against a wall, looking worried.

“Close your eyes, Fachrul,” said Beardy.

Again, I did as I was told. Anything to get this over with as quickly as possible.

Beardy tapped on my back gently, then he ran his other hand down my chest. He leaned closer toward me. I gave out another involuntary scoff. *Damn it, I don't think he knows what a deodorant is.*

He tapped on my back a bit harder, and started muttering in a language I did not understand at all.

I opened one eye to take a peek, trying to guess what was happening, and what was expected to happen to me. I caught a brief glimpse of Mother and Father, and tried to guess what they were feeling.

Mother still looked worried. Father hopeful. And me? I was just trying hard not to yawn.

Seeing no reaction from me, Beardy spoke louder. Still in that incomprehensible language. I felt movement around me, followed by splashes of cold water on my face.

What the...?

I took another peek. Geeky was circling me with a small bowl in his hands. He splashed more water at me. *You little bitch!*

I flinched. Much to Beardy's delight, it seemed. His hand moved up from my chest to my neck. His foreign-sounding babbling grew louder and faster. He was so worked up that his body began to sway to his own voice. I, still pissed off by Geeky's water splashing, grew more irritated.

Beardy stood up, his claws still in my skin. His gibberish grew faster. More foreign to my ears. Now his body was shaking. Beads of sweat were running down his forehead. His foul stench was attacking my senses more ferociously. His hand kept tapping on my neck. I swear, this was annoying the hell out of me.

More sweat beaded on his forehead. Running and running down his face. Sogging his beard. Then... a drop fell and landed right under my nostrils.

That's it. That really did it!

“Aaaaaarrrrgh!” I screamed my lungs out – hurting my throat a little – and let out all the anger I had been quite successfully holding inside.

I got up, kicking and flailing. If I wanted this to be over soon, I might as well give them what they wanted to see. Besides, I read in an article somewhere, that this kind of physical exercise was actually good for anger management. Two flies with one swat. Right?

Mother was crying. Father was muttering a prayer. Beardy tried to tighten his grip on me. Geeky took a few steps back, terrified, while – you'd have to be kidding me! – still splashing water at me.

I elbowed myself free of Beardy's grip, but I landed on my face on the carpet from the jolt. Barely a second later, I got up and crawled on the carpet, bending my neck left and right. I learned the move from the countless ghost-hunting shows I'd seen on TV. I hoped it was convincing enough.

I turned my head toward Geeky and put on the most sinister grin I could muster. Then, I lunged at him on all four.

Geeky's face turned white, the small bowl fell from his hands, spilling water all over the carpet. Mother screamed again. I wasn't sure if it was because she saw me that way, or because there was water all over her favorite carpet.

I stood up erect and stared Geeky down. I looked him in the eye and gave him a good, hard slap on the face. Twice. One on his left cheek, one on his right. *That's for all the water you kept splashing at me, you bitch!*

Geeky let out a weird, horse-like yelp. I couldn't help responding with a little laugh. Gosh, this felt so good!

Beardy took a few cautious steps toward me. I turned around and we were face to face. Time for the main event.

The smirk on his face had vanished completely. I could see that he was himself unsure of what was happening. He was still speaking in tongues, although not as fast as before, and he seemed to be quavering now. I could have ended this right then, or I could have a little more fun.

Oh, but I do love a little fun.

I began to move to the rhythm of his chant-like words in ways that even surprised myself. At first, it was just a careful sway of limbs like a *bissu* getting ready to perform their solemn ceremony. Then it turned burly with abandon, like a *warok* dancing around his mystical lion. After a moment, my moves transformed into something more fluid, going back and forth between the grace of a lady dancer posing as the male warrior Arjuna, and the coquettish sensuality of a man in his full *lengger* drag.

Beardy stopped chanting for a second, fear in his eyes, entranced by what was happening. But as he caught sight of Mother and Father in the corner looking at him with all the hope in the world, he continued chanting. Faster and faster. I matched his accelerating words with my moves, until everything climaxed in my long, high-pitched wail like I was having the best orgasm in my entire life. As I did so, I pulled his beard so hard I swear it almost fell off his face. He screamed in excruciating pain. Oh man, this was better than sex!

I was out of breath. What do you know, doing all those dance moves really took it all out of you. Not to mention that crawling, possessed movement from the ghost-hunting shows. Hats off to all the actors hired to perform

the fake stunt on TV.

All right, I was exhausted. Time to end this ridiculous circus show. I collapsed, limp, on the carpet. My eyes were closed. Tired, but totally satisfied.

Beardy walked over to me. He had put on his brave face back. He placed his palm on my forehead, and started babbling again in the foreign tongue.

I opened my eyes and looked around. Mother was sobbing in Father's arms. Geeky was crouching in the corner, his whole body trembling.

"It's finished, Fachrul," Beardy put his smirk back on.

Mother walked me to my room. I could hear their conversation from inside.

"So, is it out of him, sir?" Mother's voice.

"Yes, of course. There is nothing to worry about anymore. Fachrul is cured now," Beardy's voice.

"So, it's true then? There was a female demon dwelling inside him?" Father's voice.

"Obviously. That's why he was like that," Beardy's holier-than-thou tone. "But I have successfully exorcised the demon. Now, Fachrul is back to his

normal self."

"Oh, thank God!" Father and Mother's voice, in unison.

I shrugged and shook my head, slumped on my bed, and reached for my phone.

I relaunched the dating app to continue the chat that got interrupted by those two ridiculous guests.

Fach4Fun: Sorry, something came up.

LookingNow: No problem. Is everything OK?

Fach4Fun: Don't worry. Handled it.

LookingNow: Cool, so we're still hooking up tonight?

Fach4Fun: Sure thing. You're hosting, right? I can't have guys over to my place right now. They'd think I'm possessed again.



VALENTINE'S DAY

THAM CHEE WAH

It's a sultry day and his well-ironed, taut and crisp dress shirt is soaked through, sticking to his back. Ah Chan feels uncomfortable when he gets sweaty.

He is not fat, he doesn't have a beer belly. He is just big and bulky. He is born, like some experts have said, with bigger bones and more flesh. Some friends say he is cute. If he could correct them, he would prefer chubby, not cute. Many friends tell Ah Chan that he looks like Bollywood star, Anil Kapoor, but less, much less hairy. Ah Chan couldn't even grow a moustache, a few stubble would take three days to grow. At 43, he still has a head full

of hair though. He pampers himself with a facial at the beauty salon once a month, his glowing skin makes him more attractive. Two of his proudest possessions are his dimples. When he takes a selfie, he makes sure he smiles wider so that his dimples seem deeper on his cheeks.

Ah Chan's friends wonder how a guy as chic and trendy, also financially stable as he is, could still be single, and never married. Ah Chan just shrugs it off by saying that he has not met the right one. Maybe Cupid is not helping, Ah Chan has dated a few girls in the past. Either Ah Chan is too picky about the girls' attitude or the girls are picky about him.

There was Betty, a girl who was more concerned about her green diet and kept reminding Ah Chan about the danger of too much pork in his dishes. Then, there was Xiao Tong, who only whispered no matter how much Ah Chan encouraged her to speak up. And there was this image consultant who kept telling Ah Chan what to wear and what not to wear.

Ah Chan is tired of girls. But he is not giving up. Maybe this year is the year to meet the right one.

After walking under the scorching sun, Ah Chan knows he smells. But it is ok, he knows he smells good. He wears his Coco Chanel, his favourite Bleu de Chanel which features Caledonian sandalwood with a cedar note. The scent is accentuated by the heat from his body. He will need his ice cold Negroni when he gets into the restaurant. That will cool him down. He is sure Dinesh, that charming and delightful head waiter, will get him one. Dinesh's little nuances in small talk and jokes make Ah Chan feel pampered,

another reason for Ah Chan's once-a-week visit to the restaurant.

The Italian restaurant Murano where Dinesh serves is only three blocks away from Ah Chan's office. He has to make sure he gets there to make a reservation for his annual match-making Valentine's Day meal with his potential spouse. Valentine's Day is just two days away and he forgot to get a table. He is afraid the restaurant would be fully booked by now.

"Hope Dinesh can do me a favour," he prays. He could just call but he likes to show up for the fresh pasta that the restaurant makes daily. His favourite is the squid ink pasta with charcoal prawns. He salivates as he thinks of it.

He likes to dine at Murano and he likes the way Dinesh treats him. Dinesh remembers his name and his must-have dessert—cannoli. He wants his to be sprinkled with orange zest. Murano is a family restaurant serving the finest Italian dishes in the affluent neighbourhood of Bangsar. The restaurant nestles in one of the shophouses in Jalan Bangkung. Pedestrians can't find it on the main road in Bangsar. It is hidden, as if only for people like Ah Chan who has a secret wish to fulfil.

This is the third year he is trying his luck. Uncle Lim, the Chan family shaman from China, has predicted that Ah Chan's spouse will be the one he brings to a date on Valentine's Day. But Valentine's Day of which year? According to Ah Chan's bazi, the bride-to-be can appear anytime within these three years. The only cue that she is the right one lies in Ah Chan's heart. When he feels the love, it will be the right one. Uncle Lim couldn't

even give him an exact date.

"You try lo, during Valentine's Day and see," Uncle Lim said when Ah Chan pressed for more information. "But one thing I can see, the right one has gold in her name."

Another clue, but still useless. Will it be Kam, gold in Cantonese, or Kim, in Hokkien. Really? Could it be so accurate? Even then, how many Kims or Kams can Ah Chan invite before the right one comes about?

If it is not for his ageing parents, Ah Chan wouldn't have bothered to spend so much time trying. Every year when he goes back to Gua Musang for the Chinese New Year reunion dinner, which he dreads, he will be asked the same question all over again.

"When are you going to get married- ah?" His mother demanded. "You already 43 liao, wait for what? You choose girls, girls also choose you wat. Don't be so selective, give people a chance lah."

As if he has to lower his standards to choose whoever turns up.

"Or you like boys ah?" Ah Chan's father sniggered. Ah Chan choked over his father's sudden burst of cynicism.

His father always comes up with totally outrageous ideas. Once, his father bought him a big bicycle where there was a metal rod fixed across the bicycle from the seat to the handle. As a kid, Ah Chan only saw this type

of bicycle used by the huge and hairy man with dark glistening skin who peddled cow's milk and made daily delivery to his house. But Ah Chan was a small boy then, how could he have ridden the big bicycle? The bicycle was taller than he was. His father must have been mad.

Even now, his father must be out of his mind to even suggest that Ah Chan likes boys. "No lah," Ah Chan smirked. "Give me some time. Uncle Lim said these three years mah. So, this is the last year."

Ah Chan didn't sound convinced. He doesn't believe Uncle Lim and the prediction from that little red book with golden dragon and phoenix. But he is not telling his father. "This time, I am sure it will be the right Kim."

Ah Chan packed his overnighter ready to get back to his own flat in KL where he will feel less threatened.

When Ah Chan stands outside the restaurant, looking at the half glass door etched with the traditional Italian pestle and mortar motif, he pulls and adjusts his Sacoor Brothers tailored knickers, then smoothes the little puff-out shirt so that he looks impeccable.

Before his hand could reach the knob, Dinesh sings his greetings while opening the door with one hand and swings his other arm above his head as if he is about to curtsy.

"Benvenuto, Mr Chan," Dinesh beams as he welcomes Ah Chan into the restaurant. Ah Chan has always told him to call him 'Ah Chan' but Dinesh

insists on addressing him as Mr. Chan. Dinesh claims that 'Mr. Chan' sounds more distinguished.

"How have you been, Mr. Chan?" Dinesh asks as he ushers Ah Chan to a table.

Ah Chan is amused by Dinesh's energy. There is a spring in Dinesh's footsteps, how does Dinesh keep with such joy?

"I'm doing great. I'm just wondering if you still have a table for me on Valentine's Day? I am bringing a date for dinner." Ah Chan asks as Dinesh sashays to a table.

Dinesh stops, turns around, looks at Ah Chan with a big grin, "Yes, of course. A table for two. I have actually reserved it for you."

How does he know? Ah Chan wonders.

"I guess you will bring your date again just like the past two Valentine's Days," Dinesh turns and keeps walking to show Ah Chan to his table for lunch. There are only three tables occupied as it is only half past eleven. Lunchtime is about one hour away. Ah Chan notices many tables have the 'Reserved' tag. "Mr. Chan, this is your table. You are our regular guest, how could I not anticipate your needs? Anyway, I have got a table for you. Don't you worry about it."

Ah Chan is relieved as he takes his seat.

There is a lone gentleman on the table next to where Ah Chan is seated. Ah Chan notices that the gentleman is in a Hawaiian shirt, like those people who frolic on the beach. The shirt is light blue, the colour of sky, and has several colourful surfboards on it. If he wears a sailor's hat, he could be mistaken as the skipper.

Dinesh takes the napkin, folds it in half and places it on top of Ah Chan's lap when he has settled in his seat.

"Thank you so much, Dinesh. What a relief, I forgot to make my reservation earlier." Ah Chan looks up and notices the crown of Ganesha peeking out from Dinesh's collar. Ah Chan bets that Ganesha's tusk will be hanging from his neck to his chest. That is sexy. 'Hmm, he has a tattoo on his neck,' Ah Chan feels the tinge, wishing Dinesh could show him. But he is getting married, well, if this time it is the correct Kim. Quickly, he stops his imagination.

"It's alright. It is done. Now, you relax and I will bring you your Negroni, ok?" Dinesh turns to the table next to Ah Chan's and checks with Skipper.

"Hi Sam, I will be serving your pasta after this," Dinesh updates the skipper. He is always caring, Ah Chan admires this.

Skipper nods and also smiles when he notices that Ah Chan looking at them. "He is really very attentive," Skipper tells Ah Chan.

"Oh, yes, he really makes the guests here feel very welcome," Ah Chan

picks up the fork and spoon on top of the serving plate and places them on the table. "I have been eating here regularly for a few years. I come here almost every week whenever I am in town."

Ah Chan tries to be nice, "I have never seen you here before. By the way, their squid ink pasta is fantastic. Almost equal the one I had in Venice some years back."

"Oh ya?" Skipper asks as he fishes his mobile phone from his pocket. Ah Chan feels that when someone holds a mobile phone in their hand, they are uninterested in the conversation. Just like Kim number two, the Kim who was his date last Valentine's Day. She constantly checked her phone, and she told Ah Chan that her boss contacts her on WhatsApp regularly, and she has to reply as quickly as she can. Ah Chan just nodded when she gave him that excuse. Ah Chan felt that it was crap. How could she say that when she knows they are out on a date? Can't she have some private time of her own? Ah Chan didn't tell her. He just smiled.

Dinesh comes to the skipper with his pasta. "Hope you are enjoying your drink. We cooked the pasta to be more tender as you have requested."

Skipper takes a look at his pasta, satisfied with the dish, looks up at Dinesh and shows his sunny, sparkling teeth, "Thank you so much, Kim."

Ah Chan's heart skips a beat when he overhears the skipper calling Dinesh Kim.

VALENTINE'S DAY

Dinesh smiles back, “Would you like some pepper?”

Dinesh produces a wooden pepper mill. Skipper nods and Dinesh twists the wooden pepper mill to finish the garnish. “Enjoy your meal.”

Just as Dinesh disappears into the kitchen, Ah Chan quickly turns to Skipper, “What name did you call him just now?” He knows he has raised his voice a bit, as the guests on other tables look up from their meals. He realizes he is holding his breath, he is excited at the name—Kim, who should be his spouse-to-be. And how Kim could be the name of a man.

Skipper laughs a little, as if he has been asked this question many times, why is Dinesh called Kim? “We were classmates in primary and secondary schools. Didn’t Dinesh tell you he is half-Korean? From his mother's side.”

Ah Chan eyes open wide, he gulps. Is he excited about the fact that Dinesh is Kim? Or is he thrilled that Kim is actually a guy? So, is that a yes to his father’s inquiry?

Dinesh walks up with his Negroni. This time Ah Chan takes a hard look at Dinesh’s Ganesha, the tusk is snaking right through his chest hair. “Is there anything wrong?” Dinesh touches the shirt button closest to his chest, suddenly conscious.



JUST FOR NOW

SHIFT

he warmth of her breath lingered in the air, contrasting the droplets of water shrouding her peripheral vision. It was getting dark and whatever light was left, reflected around the area.

She took a deep breath; And screamed. She cursed at the woods near where she grew up, the path she took on the way home, the abandoned bicycle that was found in the crash.

The fact that she was alone now.

“It’s time to go Kai. You can’t stay here forever.”

Kai looked at the figure in the raincoat, offering to share their umbrella. She let the sleeves of her soaked hoodie fall to the side.

“Aren’t you tired of telling me that, Raahil? You should know better than anyone. She was my everything.” Her shaky voice contrasted the absolute fire burning in her eyes.

“It’s been years. She wouldn’t want to see you like this. How about some hot tea, at my place?”

She paused for a moment before muttering, “Fine.”

~~~~~

“Now, what were you doing in the middle of the rain?”

“Just the usual,” Kai promptly replied as she continued sipping on the mug of tea in her hands.

“You’re a ghost of what you were, Kai.”

“And you’re a pain in the neck.”

“Yeah, the one who gave you a towel and soup.”

Kai looked to the side to avoid his gaze and towards the television.

“Seriously? I’m right here,” Raahil grumbled.

“Shh, the newsman is speaking. Tell me your wisdom, Mr Newsman.”

Both of them turned to the tv where the reporter stood in front of a village by the sea.

“And behind me, you’ll see the residents of Kampung Nusquam getting ready for the Ulek Mayang ritual-”

“Wait! Pause it.”

Raahil immediately fumbled with the remote, pausing the news on the tv screen.

“Look! Do you see that? ” She exclaimed, pointing at the screen.

Raahil squinted to the focus on Kai’s enthusiasm. A blurry figure in the background of the news report.

“Uhh, distant relative?” Raahil nonchalantly asked.

“No. That’s Aria, Raahil...”

“That’s kind of farfetched.”

Kai immediately stood up, grabbed her hoodie and started heading for the door.

“I have to go there, Raahil.”

Raahil blocked her path, arms outstretched.

“Oh no, you don’t. Kai, you have to stop it with your delusions. Ari has been dead for 6 years. Get a hold of yourself!”

“I know it’s her. I just know it. Come on, let me go.”

“In this weather? Alone? Absolutely not.”

“I have to do this Raahil. I need to know if she’s still alive. Please, you know how much she meant to me.”

He bit his lip and contemplated the choices in front of him before letting out a sigh.

“Fine, I’ll drive. You can sit in the back. I don’t think you can sit shotgun anyways.”

~~~~~

Kai was frustrated with herself, the past and practically everything else. She felt powerless, maybe that’s why she felt the need to trudge through

everything. She let her fingers dance on the palm of her other hand to continue trudging through. It became a habit, to ground herself.

“E,A,A,F#,A,G,F#,E,D,C#,D,E,” she muttered over and over again corresponding to the tapping of her fingers.

The feeling of nausea came over her in waves. Kai hated car rides and although the therapist appointments were helping, it felt more of a scar that couldn’t be scrubbed off no matter how much your skin was bleeding.

“Ok, we’re here.”

Kai scrambled to get herself out of the car.

“You’re forcing yourself,” Raahil remarked with concern in his voice.

“Stop stating the obvious and let’s go,” Kai spat back at him.

After parking, they didn’t have to walk too long before they could hear the waves crashing against the shores. Most of the villagers were running about due to the last few days of preparations for the ritual. Kai and Raahil blended right into the influx of tourists who came because of their unprecedented fame from television.

While Raahil arranged their accommodations at a nearby resort for the night, Kai was desperately shoving a picture of Aria in the face of whichever unsuspecting soul was sane enough to approach her.

“Are you ready to admit that you’re chasing a memory?” Raahil questioned, arms crossed.

Kai gritted her teeth, “Shut up, Raahil. She was here, I just know it. I’m not delirious. Please, Kai. I-”

“Excuse me, mister? Miss?”

Both of them turned around to see a teenager with brown hair with a camera in their hand.

“I’m sorry to disturb your lover’s quarrel but I heard from others that you were looking for someone.”

“I have a girlfriend,” Kai stated bluntly.

“Am not interested in a relationship,” Raahil said simultaneously, clicking his tongue in annoyance.

The brunette’s eyes widened and she started waving her hands in a frenzy, “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know... I’ll just get going now.”

“Wait!” Kai called out, grabbing on the brunette’s hand.

She fished out her phone to show her a picture of Aria and asked, “Have you seen her? She’s disappeared without a trace.”

Raahil cut in, “Of course not. You’re looking for a dead girl walking, Kai.”

The brunette’s face went slack as if remembering something.

“I think you should talk to my grandfather. I recall him ranting about something like that-”

Kai grabbed the poor girl by the shoulders and shook hard.

“Really? Ok, then. Lead the way.”

“Kai, let go. You’re scaring her,” Raahil remarked

Kai loosened her grip and backed away slightly, “Right, sorry.”

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A sole man looked towards the horizon with a mug on the porch table. His expression was solemn pairing well with the melancholy tune that escaped his lips.

“Tatta, I brought some friends over. They’d like to meet you.”

The spark in the man’s eyes seemed to shine just a little bit when he saw his granddaughter strolling towards him.

“Anit, you’ve come! We thought you would be late for dinner.”

Anit gave a sly smile.



“The evening is still young. Anyways, these are Kai and Raahil.”

“Sir, sorry to intrude but your granddaughter here said you knew about disappearances that can leave no trace?” Kai inquired, jumping immediately to the point.

“Can’t disappear if they’re dead.” Raahil intercepted.

Kai immediately elbowed Raahil in the ribs, glaring at him.

The old man’s face immediately turned into a scowl.

“That damned spirit. I…” The old man trailed off and shook his head as if remembering something painful before continuing, “She called herself a Spirit Princess. She held my soul hostage and forced me to make a contract with her. In return, she would bless the village catches for one cycle. I was her proxy for 10 years before she threw me away, said something about renewing every decade. Everyone thought I was dead, hah! After my contract was done however, I was able to go free. Perhaps the same could be said for that girlfriend of yours.”

Kai raised an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, you said…A spirit?”

The old man looked at her dead in the eye and asked, “Tell me girl, have you heard of the spirits of the sea?”

“That’s just a myth, atuk” Raahil scoffed.

“They are real more than ever, boy and you should know better.”

Raahil took a few steps back while the edges of his lips curled into a slight frown.

“Do you know where we can find her?”

“I can but you aren’t safe near her,” the elder stated.

“Will she kill us?”

“Maybe, who knows? Her whims have always put many in danger. Just three rules you need to follow. Don’t get tempted by what she offers, don’t give her your name because names have power and whatever you do, do not disrespect her. Looking at you, you’d probably do that without noticing,” he said, chuckling.

“I’ll make sure she won’t get into more trouble than she can afford,” Raahil remarked.

“I’ll take your word on that.”

~~~~~

Kai remembered her blood boiling under her skin. The argument started

with something trivial that escalated. She racked her brain trying to figure out what it was but it never resurfaced. Their voices only got louder, they were locked in; Kai's brown eyes to her honey ones.

She regrets it now, sure; But regrets come too late.

She recalls screaming for Aria to look at the road before hearing the screech of swerving tires and inhaling smoke from the melting rubber.

The crash played out like a movie. The feeling of her limbs being mangled stopped her scream from escaping her mouth. She could see the cliffside and its broken safety beams above her, the feeling of her blood flowing from her wounds, the sound of the waves washing against the sand and Aria's hand in hers. Maybe she held it as an instinct before they crashed, to protect her or as her last chance. Nobody knew, certainly not her.

The cold started to catch up to her. It started from the fingertips, working their way in. She felt trapped in her own mind, helpless to stop it. The void was cold and hell had truly frozen over.

~~~~~

"Wake up!"

Kai woke up in the backseat covered in sweat. The car had been parked at the side of the road.

"Are you ok? You were crying in your sleep. Was it a nightmare?" Raahil asked, concerned for her.

Kai instinctively swiped her hand across her face. It was moist, he was right. She let out a sigh.

"Some things can never be undone. At least, we're almost there."

"Look, about this trip... Are you sure you're going to do this?" Raahil asked, keeping his eyes on the road.

"I mean, worst comes to worst, you were right and he was just a senile old man." Kai said, stifling a yawn.

"No, that's the best case scenario! Worst case, we really do end up meeting her and end up dead."

"Geez, what has got you all worked up?"

"Look, I'm worried; Ok? You really don't want to give up on her, huh?"

"As long as there is even a shred of proof that she's alive. I'll follow her till the ends of the earth."

"That's not going to work," Raahil murmured under his breath, ruffling his hair.

Kai did not utter another word until they had reached their destination.

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“We’ve reached our destination, Kai.”

Both of them got out of the car and the sight before them was something to behold. The sand seemed to have been swirled in strange patterns and no litter or tourists for miles. The teal waters gleamed with a hint of orange under the setting sun and everything felt tranquil for this moment.

There stood a lone figure, wearing a draping yellow dress overlooking everything.

“Aria?”

The figure turned around in shock, blue eyes stared back at them.

“Kai Tian? Raahil?”

Kai stumbled a few steps backwards.

“Ari, your eyes. They’re…”

Kai thought she would be thrilled to see her. After all, Kai felt like she could hardly breathe. Aria was alive, breathing, standing right in front of her.

However, all she could see was anger in her eyes. Aria pinched the bridge of her nose.

“You had one job, Raahil.”

Kai turned to Raahil in confusion. He could not meet them in the eyes.

“You told me to look over her in case she did something stupid.”

“Well, Raahil. This is something stupid!”

Kai was in disbelief, she felt the ground beneath her crumble. Everything was spinning and she just wanted answers to the myriad of questions that kept adding every second.

“Ria, what’s going on?”

Aria gave a sad smile and embraced Kai.

“It’s still good to see you, Kai,” She whispered, comforting her in her arms.

“Why did you leave?” Kai asked, her questions becoming blurred as her throat filled up with tears. She felt her nails digging into the yellow cloth, never wanting to let go. “I didn’t know what to do.”

Kai shushed her, “It’s okay. I’m here for now. Don’t cry.”

“Where is your she?” Raahil asked.

“Never too far. You guys need to go soon or-”

“Or what?”

Aria and Raahil turned to the figure who stood above the waters. Black hair with blue eyes, silk draped over her silhouette and a spiked crown topping her figure. She was like the sun, bright, unforgiving and you could only look at her so long before you start burning your retinas. The figure tilted her head to the side and smiled, her teeth too white, too perfect, too many.

“Is she the one, Aria? The one you’ve made the deal for?” she asked, staring at Kai like a cat would to the mouse.

Kai looked up at her, tears pooled in her eyes like jewels.

“What deal, Aria? What did you do? Why-”

The spirit’s smile grew wider as her face turned into one of amusement.

“How did you find my proxy, little one?”

“She saw you in the back of the news. You loitered too long after collection,” Raahil explained.

“Ah, you’re the pawang’s son. A smart one, aren’t you?”

“I appreciate your praise,” Raahil said, letting the words seethe through the crevices of his teeth.

“Humans are really fickle creatures, aren’t they? Come on, Aria. Tell her about the deal you made with me,” she urged.

Aria gave Kai a sad look and held her face in her hands.

“I’m sorry, it was my fault. I was the one driving that day. She found us and said if I took the oath, she’ll bring you back to life.”

“I’ll wait for you. A cycle is 10 years right? I’ll-”

“Oh, Kai. Neither of us survived that night. Being a proxy is not going to prolong my life any more than those 10 years.”

She felt her heart drop to her stomach. Her throat tightened as if the noose around it was pulled.

“Please... You’re, you’re lying right? This can’t be real. Tell me it’s not! Tell me this won’t be the last time I’ll see you. I just found you, I don’t want to let you go... Not again,” Kai desperately pleaded.

“Oh, poor child. Life is fleeting isn’t it? That’s why you humans always want to make the most of it... I never understood the concept,” The spirit

chortled.

“I just lasted long enough for her to find me, that’s all. I’m too far gone,”
Aria explained.

“Why would you do this?”

“Sayang,” Aria said with tears pooling in her own eyes, “I’d do anything
for you. Now, you have to leave. Normal humans can’t stay here too long.”

“Wha-”

Before Kai could finish talking, faint whispering started to grow into a
crescendo.

“Raahil, bring her home.”

“I will.”

Kai stretched her arm towards Aria as Raahil heaved her over his
shoulder.

“Wait, please...” She tried to call out but everything was being drowned
out. Her eyelids grew heavy.

“If we ever meet again in the next life, let’s start over Kai. I’ll miss you.”

“Don’t go...”

“I love you Kai. I always will.”

Those were the last words Kai heard before she fell into sleep’s merciless
embrace.

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Aria rested her head against Kai’s shoulder as they watched other people  
go back and forward in front of them as in a never ending scene. Kai leaned  
her own head on top of Aria’s, taking in the faint smell of pomegranates.  
She could hear Aria humming a song while her legs swung to the beat.

“What are you singing?” She asked.

Aria chuckled, “Just something I made up in the shower one day and got  
stuck.”

“You were always the musically inclined one.”

“Come on lah! I’ll teach you the tune.”

Kai remembered the feeling of warmth when Aria placed her fingers over  
hers, tapping on each one to produce a melody that was unique to them.  
Kai knew she was dreaming, the rest of the details from the memory were  
blurred out, focusing only on the two of them; But if Kai could see her

smile again, she wouldn't mind it too much. The only thing she dreaded from this was the fact that dreams were meant to be woken up from.

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Kai woke up with a jolt. The heavy pangs on her chest all returned at once, keeping her cemented to the grass.

“Oh, you're awake.”

She moved her head towards the raven-haired figure sitting next to her.

“Where-”

“The woods, the one the three of us used to hang out all the time. God knows what will happen if the neighbours saw me dragging a dead body into your home.”

Raahil's attempt to lighten the mood failed. The air around them became still and stale. Kai still had a crestfallen expression.

“Are you okay?”

“I don't think I have been for a while now.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not now. Maybe one day...”

Raahil respected that and did not pester Kai. She stared back at him as if expecting him to do so but he kept his mouth shut. It was her turn to ask.

“So, you're-”

“Yeah. My dad's a pawang so I deal with crap like that on a usual basis.”

A pause came between them as if they were both struggling to keep down the plethora of questions and answers in order to not make the other uncomfortable.

Kai was again the first to break it.

“I hate myself. This is all my fault,” she said, tearing up again.

“Don't be. She decided to shoulder the consequences and made her own choices. You couldn't have stopped her anyways. She was her own person.”

“It's not fair.”

“No...It's not.”

They couldn't meet each other in the eyes anymore as if trying to hide the fear and pain from the incident. The fact that one of the trio was now gone forever had made them incomplete.

JUST FOR NOW

“I just... I don't want to feel the cold again. I don't want to be alone.”

“You're not alone Kai, that's a given.”

Kai gave a small comforting smile and started to hum. The song itself reminded her that even though Aria wasn't with her anymore, a part of her would always stay with Kai till the end of time.

The stars above them twinkled in the dark backdrop as her audience, a single form of mercy. The sound of crickets accompanied the aria as the warm night air enveloped them. At that moment they knew, the universe did not interfere with their pleading but watched silently and listened.

Only god knew if happiness would once again present themselves in front of their doorstep. Even though fate might be cruel, there would always be remainders left behind. Only a little bit of hope had stayed with them that day, but it was enough for them to keep moving forwards, even if it was just another day, another minute;

Even if it was just for now.



MELELA(NG) BUANA

A. XIAO WEI

It had been exactly two years since Kika committed to Ben, a cool man who has always been a friend to Kika and with whom she could talk about anything. Ben could keep up with Kika, telling random stories, and there were always endless words in this world for them to question, laugh at, and talk about.

Kika and Ben's involvement was peppered with various obstacles, starting from differences in their religious beliefs and reading tastes to differences in their preference in wine and in their sexual orientation. But all these differences did not prevent them from being together and accepting each

other. That was in the year 2011.

When they were together, the pair always discussed everything together just to get each other's opinion. They made all decisions together, so long as distance did not stop them from communicating.

Ben was the first man Kika had been with since she realised she also liked women. Before that, she had failed several times in relationships with men. This often happened because of religious differences. However, Kika never gave up. She had always been romantically and sexually attracted to Protestant or Buddhist men. Then she met a woman with a square face, long, brownish hair and bangs, neatly arranged teeth, and small eyes and nose. As for Ben, he had had a romantic relationship two year before he met Kika. Nevertheless, Kika was the first Muslim woman for Ben. Kika felt sure of Islam and believed that all religions were good. And Ben believed that all women were kind like Mother Mary, and that humans were social creatures interconnected beyond words. Kika couldn't agree more.

However, Kika had initially been worried that Ben would be disgusted if he knew that she was also sexually attracted to women. Nevertheless, she told him, and Ben was surprised but tried not to show it. The two of them were silent for a long time and stared at each other, but Ben finally said, "Love is not always neat and tidy but always has courage, Kika."

Kika was quite surprised and relieved even though she couldn't say anything.

"Kika, thank you for always being honest and being you. It's been fun being friends with you, but then I realized that I have more serious feelings for you. Still, humans do not have the right to anyone's feelings. Their duty is to respect and not harm," Ben continued in a relaxed tone. He had been sure of his feelings for Kika and said everything confidently.

Kika had felt relieved to be with a good friend who really accepted her as she was. "So, he still wants to be my boyfriend even though I like women too?" Kika had said to herself.

"Yes, what you admitted about yourself earlier, it doesn't cancel my feelings for you, Kika," said Ben.

Kika was surprised — it was as if Ben could read her mind! Kika started feeling embarrassed because she was nervous, but before long, Kika looked at Ben and smiled. They both felt very lucky to be with one another. Kika had had feelings for Ben since they first had sex. Their friendship was like a four-leaf clover — hard to find and lucky to have.

Kika was a typical Gemini — adaptable and an instinctive and habitual multi-tasker. Ben was able to ask her to push his motorcycle when it ran out of gas. She didn't mind. And Ben ... he was an Aquarius man who was loyal and affectionate. Unlike many other guys, he did not refuse when Kika asked him to buy sanitary pads. All things were done happily by both. They felt a spark of joy when together — although Kika thought Ben didn't have a similar sense of humor.

They had met when they were on their way for job training in Singapore. At that time, Kika was still in vocational school while Ben was in the third semester of tourism college, both feeling lucky to have been chosen to train abroad. Ben was impressed with her on first sight and secretly tried to get a seat next to Kika on the flight.

“Hey, let me help you,” said Ben to Kika as she was struggling to stow her bag in the overhead compartment. She accepted his offer and smiled at him. As Ben put her bag away, Kika took her seat, in the middle of a three-seat row.

“Err, if you don’t mind Ms. ...?”

“My name is Kika.”

“Sorry, I have to get to my seat,” said Ben, pointing to the window seat, next to Kika.

“Oh! No problem!” Kika moved her legs to the side so Ben could squeeze past her.

“Is this your first flight to the Lion City, Kika?” asked Ben.

“Yes, it is!” said Kika. “Umm ... sorry, what was your name again?”

“Actually, I haven’t told you yet ... but you can call me Ben,” said Ben with a grin.

“How about you? First time going to Singapore too?”

“Second time,” said Ben.

After that they continued talking and it was not at all awkward. They spent the flight sharing all kinds of stories — about their respective schools; about the journey from home to the gathering place for participants going for job training; even personal stories like how Kika was afraid of the sounds lizards make; and about the character Ozu being so loyal to Flatfish in Shusaku Endo's *When I Whistle* book.

There had been a bad storm during the flight. It usually took one hour and fifty minutes to get to Singapore, but they spent an extra twenty minutes in the air. It was uncomfortable and many passengers had to close their eyes because they felt nauseated.

“I like your style,” Ben had said, breaking their silence to distract Kika from the bumpy flight.

“You are not the first to say that and thank you. I like my style too,” answered Kika.

Ben continued to voice his admiration for the way Kika dressed — in a turban, vest, wide trousers, all the colors combining well.

“Is that hippie style, am I right?” asked Ben.

Kika smiled and answered the same thing she always did when other people asked similar questions: “I don’t think I like labels.”

That answer invited more questions from Ben. He was curious about Kika, so young but already self-confident and self-aware.

Kika told Ben about herself. She explained that she was born into a multicultural family. Her ancestors came from an area that highly valued diversity. Kika explained from A to Z about her Bugis ancestry and their belief that there were not only two genders.

“I suggest you listen carefully to my explanation. It will help you recognize the difference between sex and gender,” said the Gemini woman.

“OK, go on,” said Ben.

Kika told Ben seriously about the roles that existed in the Bugis tribe, such as Orowane or someone who was born male and chooses the role of a male person; Makkunrai or someone who was born female and chooses the role of a female; Calabai or someone who was born with a female biological features, but identified themselves as male; Calalai, which was the opposite; and Bissu, a person who combined themselves as a man and a woman.

Ben was surprised to hear for the first time about this community that had existed for a long time in Indonesia. “OMG, where have I been?” he said.

Kika just smiled and explained again that she shared the outlook of the

Bugis since she found out that her ancestors were from that tribe. “Even though my family has long abandoned those beliefs and became a modern family, my family mix from salad bowls to melting pots. HA HA HA. It turns out that I also have Chinese blood, although my family also have prejudice against that race,” said Kika.

“How about you, Ben?” she continued.

Ben was surprised and confused with Kika’s question because he didn’t really understand or know much about his family’s origins. All he knew was that he was someone who must submit to religion, Catholicism.

Then their conversation was interrupted when it was announced that the plane would be landing.

For their training program, all trainees would be assigned to various restaurants in Singapore. Their internship would last six months. This was determined by a local agency. All trainees would also be assigned to different residences that the agency had arranged with local landlords, usually married couples, in various parts of the island.

Before they had parted, Ben gave Kika his personal email address. Then Kika left to find her assigned room, at a flat in Yishun.

A week, three weeks, and then a month passed. Kika and Ben didn't give each other news or try to get news. They were busy adjusting to their new life.

Two months passed. Kika really enjoyed the training despite the many difficulties, primarily with language. At Kika's workplace, most of the customers spoke Mandarin instead of English. However, there were part-time workers who were university students, and Kika was often accompanied by these staff or store managers who were able to help her communicate with the customers. Most of the time, Kika was accompanied by a young Chinese shop manager called Karen. Karen had a square face, and long hair. She was an easygoing person — helpful, confident, and open-minded, a typical Leo.

Kika thought that Karen had a cool and straightforward style. She was open and friendly and did not seem to put up barriers between herself and Kika, compared to the other staff who tended to refer to Kika as 'the kid from Indonesia'. Although Karen was a manager, she was open to making friends with colleagues outside of work hours.

Often Kika and Karen spent time together at places frequented by young Singaporeans. Karen didn't hesitate or have any objections to asking Kika out, because she thought of Kika as both a guest and a friend: Karen thought she could help Kika get to know Singapore better.

One weekend night, Karen invited Kika to a college friend's birthday party. Kika accepted and they promised to meet at a train station so they could go to the event together. By chance, Kika and Karen were dressed in colors that went well together. Kika was wearing a knee-length brick-red dress with long sleeves, and Karen wore long navy-blue pants and a knee-length shirt. They were a perfect match.

On the way to the party, Kika said that she was nervous and couldn't imagine what she would do there. It was the first party she had attended since being in Singapore. Karen was very good at handling Kika's nervousness. She tried to calm Kika down with funny stories that had happened in the restaurants or that were commonly experienced by Singaporeans. Arriving at the venue, not far from their stop, Karen was greeted with great fanfare by her friends. Kika felt lucky because the event was held outdoors, so it is not difficult for her to find fresh air when she felt nervous.

Karen was very close to the birthday girl, May. Their friendship had started when they were in lower secondary school. Karen was constantly teased by her friends because she was with Kika. Even though they teased in Mandarin, Kika felt and knew very well that they were talking about her. It could be seen from their glances and body language. May also congratulated Kika and Karen on their new relationship and said that she prayed that it would last. May told Kika that Karen was a good person. Karen was embarrassed and Kika felt a little confused.

After the party, Karen escorted Kika back to Yishun. She tried to explain about the way her friends had acted. Because they were quite close, it was easy for Karen to tell Kika the truth. Karen apologized if her friends had made Kika uncomfortable. Kika said that she didn't mind at all. She thought it was all just a joke. But for Karen it wasn't a joke. Karen explained that the teasing from her friends was real. Manager Karen confessed that she was a lesbian. She hoped that Kika would not avoid her and that they could still be friends. Kika smiled and hugged Karen.

The next day was a day off for Kika. When she woke up, she recalled what had happened the night before. She smiled to herself and somehow, felt the urge to e-mail Ben. In her e-mail, she told Ben all the latest news about her training. She also told Ben about Karen.

Kika invited Ben to meet her if he was free. Fifteen minutes after she sent the e-mail, Kika got a reply from Ben. He was very happy to hear from Kika, having waited for her e-mail for a long time. He agreed to Kika's invitation to meet and suggested they attend an event that was being held to celebrate the anniversary of the agency that handled their training. They arranged to meet at the train station near where Kika lived. They would then go together to the Marina Bay.

That afternoon, the Sands SkyPark was set up for the party. The venue, which could fit five hundred people, was full of laughter and the sweet sound of jazz performed by the hired band. Various kinds of food and drinks were served.

There were so many people they didn't know, but it was easy to greet them because everyone came from Indonesia. While at the event, Ben held Kika's hand tight because the place was crowded, and they did not want to get separated.

After a few minutes of walking around, Ben and Kika headed to the drinks stand. Before ordering alcoholic drinks, Ben asked Kika if she was used to drinking. Kika said she didn't mind. While eating and drinking, Ben and Kika looked out for people they might know but couldn't see

anyone. However, they found it easy to chat with one another. The event ended quite late at night, and Kika and Ben missed the last train. There are no other public transport going to the area where Kika lived. Kika did not want to take a taxi because the fare would be too much. She and Ben laughed at their fate and sat for a moment while feeling the reaction of the alcohol in their bodies.

That night, Kika and Ben chose to rent a room for one night in a nearby budget hostel. Kika and Ben got a bed in a room meant for four, but when they checked in, they were the only ones in the room. Kika felt sick from the alcohol and wanted to vomit. She stumbled into the attached bathroom, took off all her clothes except for her bra and panties and called to Ben to help her. Ben too was drunk but tried to help Kika. He held her hair back from her face while she threw up in the toilet. After emptying her stomach, Kika felt much better even though she was still dizzy.

The two friends laughed together and Kika washed her mouth at the sink. Ben hugged her from the back, and she turned and hugged him in return. The two of them hugged for a long time. Ben began to run his hands all over Kika's body. The moments passed while they kissed, intimate like a pair of lovers who have long waited to meet. Every now and then they smiled, laughed, and then kissed again. Ben took off his shirt and then returned to kissing Kika's lips, neck, and shoulders while his hands stroked Kika's body. He unhooked Kika's bra and let it fall to the floor.

Holding Kika's body close, Ben fondled Kika's vulva through her underwear. Kika was half shocked but enjoyed the sensation. After a few

minutes, Ben led her into the bedroom and lifted her onto the small writing desk. Ben licked and kissed Kika's breasts and nipples, travelling down her stomach and then to her vulva, which was still covered in Kika's panties.

While kissing and licking the area, Ben observed that Kika was enjoying what he was doing. Presently, he stood up and kissed Kika's lips. Kika sighed, which made Ben really want to fuck her. While kissing Kika, he removed her panties. Then, he parted her legs and started stroking her tiny clitoris. Instantly Kika felt surprise as well as pleasure that she could not describe. Ben bent to kiss then lick her whole vulva until Kika felt a tremendous shock of pleasure.

After a while, Kika invited Ben to bed. She lay down and Ben took off his trousers. Lying next to Kika, Ben resumed kissing her. He couldn't wait to insert his penis into Kika's vagina. "May I?" asked Ben. Kika stifled laughter, but appreciated Ben asking permission first. Kika just smiled and nodded. Ben knelt and slowly opened Kika's legs. Instantly Kika laughed and Ben tried to cover Kika's mouth so she wouldn't be heard outside. Then they giggled together.

Ben tried to guide his penis into Kika. At that time, Kika was both beaming and impatient. Ben's penis was successfully inserted halfway, but then he saw Kika grimace in pain. "It hurts?" he asked. Kika just nodded but didn't want Ben to stop.

Missionary is the most common position for sexual intercourse and is usually done by every couple. Kika and Ben practiced it that night. Ben

began to release his body tension because from the start he had doubts about what they were doing. Once they both felt more relaxed, Ben managed to insert his penis fully into Kika. The two of them felt excited, drunk with passion so delicious, they forget to use safety. Their sexual activity that day was completely unplanned, but Ben knew not to release his sperm inside Kika. When he felt about to orgasm, he withdrew his penis and came on Kika's stomach. They both looked at each other and Ben immediately took a tissue to clean up his semen. It was 3:17 in the morning. It did not feel like they had been having sex for two hours.

The next morning, Kika woke up shortly after 10. Hurriedly she got up and freshened up. She had to return to her residence to prepare for the afternoon shift at the restaurant. It was Ben's day off that day, so he was quite relaxed. Before Kika left, Ben told her that he wanted to see her again one day. Kika says yes and kissed Ben's forehead.

On the way home, Kika read the text message she had received from Karen. The message had been sent the night before, but Kika hasn't paid attention to her cell phone since meeting Ben at the station. Karen had invited Kika to have lunch before their shift at the restaurant. Regretfully, Kika had to turn down the invitation because she didn't think she would have time to get to the place Karen suggested. Kika texted back that they could have dinner together after the restaurant closed. Karen agreed.

The days passed. Kika got closer to Karen. Karen openly admitted that she had feelings for Kika. One night, Kika and Karen went to a food centre near China Town. There were many types of food stalls arranged in rows.

They enjoyed various snacks while chatting together. Then, while sitting on a park bench enjoying the sight of a nearby fountain, Karen confessed her feelings to Kika. Kika wasn't surprised and smiled. Getting to know people with unusual sexual preferences was something Kika was used to. Some friends at school had same-sex relationships and also belonged to same-sex support groups. Everything was done quietly. At first Kika wondered why it was being done secretly. As she grew older, she understood that same-sex relationships were considered abnormal. Even though she didn't agree that it was wrong, Kika hasn't dared to oppose the people who thought that way.

To Kika, Karen was different, and Kika felt comfortable with her. The manager treated Kika very professionally at work. She didn't treat Kika in a special way even though they were close friends outside working hours.

When Karen shared her feelings, Kika felt absurdly happy, but she only smiled. Karen wanted Kika even though she would be in Singapore only temporarily. A few minutes later, she shared some satay sotong with Karen while saying that she cherished the day Karen had come into her life. They both felt shy. They had so much to talk about but, at the same time, were at loss for words. And so, their romance began, and they took it slow, day by day. They agreed that their relationship should be professional as before and the continuation of their love story when it was time for Kika go back to Indonesia would be discussed later. They agreed to have fun together. That night, it felt so warm even though it had been drizzling continuously since morning. They embraced each other and continued eating their purchased snacks.

One morning shortly after that, it rained heavily and although it was Kika's day off, she decided not to go out. She wanted to rest. Kika sat in silence in her room and thought about her feelings and what she experienced after three months in a foreign country. While she had a special relationship with Karen, her relationship with Ben had also deepened after the first time they had sex together.

Kika and Ben often met, and Karen didn't know about their relation. No, Kika didn't lie when she told Karen about going out with Ben. She always said that she was meeting with friends from Indonesia. Just like a typical Leo, Karen gave the best to her romantic partner. She never asked about the purpose of Kika's meetings with Ben. Kika also didn't lie to Ben that she already had a partner. She just didn't tell him because Ben never asked. Coincidentally, Kika and Ben always happened to meet when Karen was working. Kika and Ben always planned time for lovemaking each time they met. Lost in her thoughts, Kika smiled to herself.

Instead of taking a shower, she continued her daydreaming at the bedroom window. She felt amazed at herself, that she could enjoy and want to have a special or sexual relationship with the opposite as well as the same sex. After Kika and Karen had shared their feelings for each other, they had not hesitated to give into their sexual desire.

Kika smiled to herself as she recalled their first time together.

"Mmm, may I please kiss all your parts of body?" Karen had asked Kika in a voice that shook with desire.

That first time, they had both felt nervous, neither daring to make the first move. Kika's heart had beat so fast, her whole body warm. Nora Jones' song, *Turn Me On*, played on the radio, daring them to do something. They stared deep into each other's eyes, kissing, and exploring one another's bodies with their hands.

Kika's body trembled violently with emotions and sensations. Karen pushed her hand between Kika's legs, straight to Kika's most intimate spot. Then, Karen explored Kika with her tongue. What pleasure!

After that, they often met at Karen's place, where they would kiss each other and enjoy each other's bodies until they felt fully satisfied.

Karen lived alone in a flat that had belonged to her late grandmother. Her parents were in another block on the same avenue. It was not uncommon for Kika to stay at Karen's so that they could enjoy the day together, playing PlayStation games, cooking, making out, and forgetting the time. Every corner of the small flat was witness to amazing sexual adventures that Kika and Karen shared. From Karen, Kika learnt about the different types of sexual activities, from vanilla to kinky. Not infrequently, in one day, Kika would have sex with both Karen and Ben. Kika was amazed with herself.

After several months, it was time for Kika to return to Indonesia. A month before Kika left Singapore, she and Karen spent time together almost every day. Kika and Ben met very rarely. Kika gave various excuses for not meeting Ben, but the real reason was that she wanted to spend time with Karen. She reasoned that she would still get to see Ben in Indonesia.

However, occasionally Kika would agree to meet Ben to satisfy her sexual desires.

During her last days in Singapore, Kika and Karen discussed the romance they shared. They were emotional and sad. They didn't want to let each other go but they also didn't want to have a long-distance relationship. Both Kika and Karen felt that they couldn't promise each other anything. Finally, they mutually agreed that their relationship would end when Kika left Singapore. They would continue to be friends online. It was a tough decision, but they hoped for a long life and that fate would allow them to meet again in the future.

Back in Indonesia, Kika and Ben promised each other to continue their friendship. They met often, especially when Kika continued her studies at university level as Kika had a little more time than when she was in vocational school.

Nothing was different about Kika and Ben's relationship after they returned to their home country. Every meeting was always planned so that they could hook up. And then, one day, during Ben's birthday celebrations, he said he wanted Kika to be his girlfriend.

Still, it didn't feel like their five years of friendship was just about having fun. In front of Ben's family, Kika agreed to commit herself to a special and exclusive relationship with him. They agreed that the way things were between them would not change one bit. Kika didn't want Ben to be possessive, and she would not be possessive over him either. Kika

MELELA(NG) BUANA

wanted Ben as he was, and Ben also wanted Kika as she was. Kika also asked Ben to understand that she sometimes wanted to be with women. Kika's confession, her honesty, made Ben learn a lot about accepting the differences of others. Ben smiled and agreed without hesitation.

The relationship between Kika and Ben lasted for another few months after their second anniversary. Although they were happy together, Ben's family believed that Kika and Ben's religious differences would make life difficult for Ben. He had been unable to argue with his father, a devout Catholic. So, Ben and Kika ended their romance, but agreed that they had enjoyed every moment of their time together. Even so, while she had been with Ben, Kika had frequently missed Karen's touch, and she continued to do so.



THE CONSEQUENCE OF CROSSING GAZES

JOEL DONATO CHING JACOB

m when was collecting water striders while beams of light blinked and brightened with the breeze that blew through the canopy above. Dry leaves bobbed on the water like boats and crashed onto the rocks but they remained unharmed. The long-legged insects that skated over the waters of the crystal clear stream were useful for the mambabarang. They injected venom into their prey that digested the creature from within.

The effeminate man, in turmeric yellows, white cotton, embroidered bodices, red beadwork and gold jewelry on a scrubbed and soaped and

incense scented body, seemed to float between the rocks that made the stream babble. His slim form could be hinted at despite layers of fabrics that flowed from his frame. A large brown moth, a kakanog, hovered above his head.

Occasionally, it would perch on the long black hair that draped over half his face and trailed beyond his shoulders and flowed onto his back.

To the casual observer, one might surmise that Muhen was humming a tune as he worked.

Not that collecting insects was something a casual observer might consider work. But pambabarang involved the use of music and dance to bend the wills of the insects—their minds responded to patterns because their beings were like complicated little clockwork toys of habit and necessity. Just like people, Muhen thought.

Muhen then bent over the water and scooped up the venomous little bugs from the water with a gauzy basket and into a beautiful green bottle he had purchased from a Kafir bazaar some time ago.

As Muhen hummed his commands to the water striders, he was surprised to hear someone humming along. Or against, Muhen thought. It was distracting and it threw him off his own melody. He stood upright from where he crouched over the water which caused his kakanog to flit off and flutter about. He craned his neck so he could train his ear to the direction where the transgressing tune came from.

Muhen hopped from rock to rock and came upon a bend on the stream. He passed a large boulder where the water collected into a pool; and there Muhen found a young woman with her back turned to his direction, she was large at the hip and thick at the limbs. Not obese but the folds of her fat spilled over where her dress was cinched at the waist and rib. She hummed as she washed laundry. Muhen was shocked, almost insulted. No one ventured this far into the jungle from the villages.

“Hello, girl... are you lost?” Muhen’s voice tinkled like bells and rustled like crumpling paper at the same time in that inhuman. The kakanog punctuated Muhen’s question by encircling a halo orbit about his head.

The young woman startled a little and turned to face Muhen but then it was Muhen’s turn to be surprised. She was cross-eyed in one eye. One of her eyes, the right one, looked straight at Muhen while the left one seemed to stare at a space beyond Muhen. It made Muhen feel conscious. He tried his best not to act like there was anything wrong so as to not hurt her feelings but it made him act all the more uneasy.

“Uhm... no,” the woman replied. “I followed the water upstream.”

“Why?” Muhen had wanted to say something longer than a single word but nothing came to mind.

“I guess I wanted some privacy.” The girl replied but Muhen heard some sadness about the word ‘privacy.’ Muhen understood how the village girls were. The cruelty of youth can be more frightening than witchcraft. Muhen

nodded but stopped just as the moth perched upon his brow.

“I am Marikit,” she chimed.

“Alright,” Muhen replied. He was unsure if he should introduce himself, it might frighten her. He also couldn’t find the polite words to say to someone whose beautiful name mismatched their unnatural ugliness. Muhen wanted to be polite, a reaction he himself found alien.

“What are you doing so far from the village?” Marikit asked.

Muhen was surprised at not having a right and ready answer. He cocked his head to the side with a jerk, as if some weight on his fringe pulled his head down. This made his kakanog flap its dusty brown wings. Its eyespots glared at Marikit but Muhen tried to smile.

“I am foraging,” Muhen said. He guessed that wasn’t a lie. Foraging in the jungles was a common activity in the many villages of Ma’I. Muhen worried though if Marikit would ask to see the contents of his basket and they would find it full of creepy crawling insects.

Muhen thought he should feel relief when Marikit asked about something else but she commented with a bit of boredom, “They say a mambabarang haunts these parts of the jungle, but so far you are the only person I have seen so far.”

The new direction of the conversation was even more awkward

“Is that so?” Muhen tried to giggle but ended up choking on a bit of phlegm. “I did not know that. Maybe we should be heading back to the village.”

Marikit’s wide lips narrowed. Her right eye looked down at the small pile of laundry at her feet. Her left eye stared at something just behind Muhen’s foot and the mambabarang resisted the urge to see if he had stepped on something.

Muhen wanted to be kind. She was less afraid of the possibility of a witch than the certainty of jokes aimed at her ugliness. Muhen understood that. We might control the situations we put ourselves in, but our looks we were born into, we can’t blame anyone for them. But people would make sure you know that there was something wrong with you anyway, Muhen knew.

“You know,” Muhen’s chime and rustle voice chirped and croaked. He wanted to be cheery and worried if he tried too hard. “We have something similar.”

Muhen pulled back his long fringe and put it behind his ear. He let Marikit see the empty socket underneath with its teary moist pink flesh.

“Oh,” Marikit gasped. “Did you hurt yourself?”

Muhen wondered at the way the question was asked. “Hmmm... No... Someone hurt me. But I let her. So I guess I hurt myself, yes.”

“You mean someone you loved did this to you?” Marikit asked. “But that looks like it hurt. Why did they do it?”

“I... it was a lesson.” Muhen knew that he could not say his eye was plucked out so that he could learn clairvoyance through a moth.

“It was some sort of punishment?” Marikit misunderstood.

“No, I didn’t do anything wrong,” Muhen started.

“Then why?” Marikit continued. Muhen felt awkward in his own jungle.

“Sometimes doing the right thing can hurt too,” Muhen struggled with an explanation. “I mean, say, if there was a way to correct your eye but it was going to hurt, wouldn’t you do it?”

“There is nothing wrong with my eye,” Marikit said. “Except with how it makes you feel. So something is wrong with you, not me.”

“I am sorry.” Muhen was surprised that he apologized. He could not recall feeling apologetic in a long time. Sorries were more of a polite reaction to him, now that he was a feared and respected mambabarang.

“It’s alright.” Marikit cheered up. “Most people don’t understand. This is how it works: you know how you can close one of your eyes and see something different from when you close the other eye and see through the other?”

Muhen understood. He would often close the good eye in his head so he could focus on what the moth was seeing. Even when he had both his eyes, he would toy with the image of his nose. How did that riddle go? Kaylapit mang burol sa bawat pagkindat, Sa kaliwa’t kanan ay palipat-lipat. (A hill quite near, but with every wink, from left to right, switches places.)

Marikit must have noticed him toying with his face so she interrupted his thoughts, “The riddle doesn’t work for me. When I close one eye, I see the tip of my nose, but when I close the other, I see the bridge. But when I have both of my eyes open, my mind knows how to put the images together, you know?”

“Like when you see pieces of a puzzle but you don’t have to do anything to know they belong together.”

“Right!” Marikit exclaimed. “So you can cross your eyes with an effort. Everyone can. But you won’t be able to see properly when you do. I can uncross my eyes. It will be tiring. It will give me headaches. I wouldn’t be able to see anything anyway.”

“So...” Muhen wanted to let Marikit know he understood. “There is nothing wrong with how you see; but rather with how others see you?”

Marikit nodded. “So you aren’t from Kalayaan, are you from Mabitak?”

Muhen blinked at the question until he realized that they were names of villages in Ma’I. He realized he wandered so far south. Those were adjacent

north-westernmost villages of the kingdom of Hanggan.

Marikit, by her manner of dress, was an alipin. By nature of her face, she was an Aliping sagigilid, slaves too ugly to be seen by Datu and must live in hallways hidden by walls and the silong, the gaps made by the stilts between the elevated homes and the ground. Muhen checked his decorum. The Aliping sagigilid were not supposed to engage conversation with people of Muhen's station. Muhen noted that he did in fact start the conversation and the girl was obligated to respond. Muhen wondered which eye was the right one because Alipin was not allowed to look at Datu. She should address him with her gaze at his feet. Her one crossed eye must have caused her trouble with the Datu in the past.

"Neither?" Marikit asked.

"What?" Muhen had forgotten about Marikit's inquiry. "Oh..."

There were other towns this far south but Muhen couldn't remember their names. If he said the truth that he was from Batong Malaki, she would wonder how he had ventured that far. Besides, Muhen had not lived in Batong Malaki in decades. There was a village with an interesting name in the area, "I am from Tala."

Muhen thought that was witty of him to say he came from a "star." Tala was named after a meteorite that had fallen there that no one alive still remembered.

"Oh... that's far," Marikit commented.

"Really?" Muhen responded. "I didn't notice."

"About three hours walk downstream. A bit faster if you took the road of course?"

Muhen patted his hair like there was a stray strand or lock that needed to be put in place. The entire jungle was his jungle after he inherited. Where it touches the villages had never been his concern. He realized that it was this cross-eyed girl that was trespassing into his domain and he was defending his presence in his own jungle. Instead, he decided on a bit of honesty. He answered, "I guess I lost track of myself because I enjoyed myself too much."

Muhen surprised himself when he sat down on a rock by the stream across where Marikit was doing her laundry, "Would you mind if I kept you company while you worked?"

"I would love that. But don't you have foraging to do?"

"I think I have collected enough."

"Alright..." Marikit started as Muhen settled into place. "What's your name?"

"Papar." The lie came easily to Muhen. He had always wanted to be

named something other than Muhen. Muhen was just so manly, so brusque. He felt more like a paparu, a butterfly.

The angle the sun broke through the canopy shifted and almost beyond the mind's grasp. Muhen and Marikit chatted for a good part of the day and into the afternoon. A more accurate measure of the time was the laundry Marikit had to finish. She scrubbed every other three sentences. She finished her basket load of sheets, blankets, curtains, white rags and colorful rugs but their chatter about the boys and girls in the village, none of whom Muhen knew, babbled on like the stream.

Muhen was starting to get hungry and wondered why Marikit was not bothered. Then Muhen remembered that alipin of her rank did not eat lunch. Meanwhile, it would take Muhen the rest of the day to get home. And he would have to prepare himself dinner. The realization made him look behind him.

“Oh, am I boring you?” Marikit asked.

“No, not at all,” Muhen said. “It’s just that...”

“You need to get going?”

“No need,” Muhen said. “It’s just that I am getting a bit hungry and I still have some ways to walk back.”

“Oh yes!” It was Marikit’s turn to apologize. “I am sorry, I didn’t notice.

Tala is still quite a bit far away. Would you like to come home with me? I am sure I can fix you up something from the kitchen that no one would notice is missing.”

Muhen was touched by Marikit’s willingness to steal considering it might get one of her fingers cut off if she were caught. Muhen rebutted, “Please don’t, I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble.”

“Well, it looks like I am already in trouble. I was supposed to be back before lunch.”

“Oh no. I am so sorry. Did I keep you?”

“It’s nothing. The other girls would often muddy my wash load anyway; so I would often have to redo everything. I’ll just say that it happened again.”

Muhen’s eyebrows furrowed that it had become some habit for Marikit to be ill-treated. Even among slaves, the pecking orders were established. The alipin needed someone to be cruel to, after receiving so much cruelty themselves, Muhen guessed.

Muhen felt that Marikit wanted to do him this service and sincerity was enough to make Muhen give in. “But let me do something for you.”

Muhen stood up and hopped from his rock to the bank where Marikit had been doing the laundry. He made a gesture of looking through the folds of his clothes when in truth he knew what he was looking for was.

From a pocket in his sleeve, he took out a sachet of paper. He unfolded it and took out something small and white. He placed it in Marikit's hair.

"An atay-biya?" Marikit was puzzled.

Muhen giggled, "Yes."

Both the small white flower and the little butterfly were named after some fish's liver.

Marikit had mistaken it, as intended, for the flower atay-biya. But it was the butterfly atay-biya, inert but waiting. Should Marikit find herself in danger, the butterfly will animate and report to Muhen.

They followed the stream downhill by hopping from rock to rock. Marikit was squat and bottom-heavy, which made her footing stable. Muhen floated.

"You are light on your feet." Marikit said.

Muhen accepted the compliment with a smile.

They walked for about half an hour until Muhen noticed a spot with plenty of large flat rocks. This must be where the village girls did their laundry, Muhen thought. It still smelled of herbs and flowers. Soapy scum and chalk could be seen clinging to some of the rocks. The girls themselves were nowhere to be seen having finished so they still had most of the day's

sunlight to dry their laundry out. Marikit turned left but Muhen stopped by the stream. Already, Muhen could smell the cooking fires and garbage of civilization. It made him feel uncomfortable.

"I think I will wait for you here," Muhen said. He didn't think anyone would be by the stream again for the rest of the day. It should be safe.

"Alright, please wait for me here," Marikit said with a bow. Then she turned towards the path to the village.

"Wait, Marikit," Muhen said with a bit of alarm. "Why did you bow to me?"

"A habit?" Marikit shrugged, continuing on her way, without turning back.

"Do you know who I am?" Muhen called out.

At this Marikit did turn, "Apo... I am already an ugly slave girl. If I were also naive and ignorant, that can only be my fault."

Marikit smiled and bowed again.

Muhen smiled back.

"Also, you have a moth on your hair. It's hard not to notice. I am cross-eyed, not blind."

“Oh,” Muhen patted his hair again and the kakanog hopped about, made an orbit about his head and settled on his fringe again. “But aren’t you afraid?”

“I know enough of what you do, you make sure the crops are successful, you help the sick when the doctors run out of ideas, the Datu trust your wisdom.”

“Is that all I do?” Muhen knew that Marikit was being kind. Muhen was more famous for making the enemies of the Datu incurably sick, spying on neighboring kingdoms, and ruining the crops of the trade partners of Ma’I so that they would depend on trade with Ma’I.

“I will be back, Apo Mambabarang,” Marikit interrupted Muhen’s musings. She turned again and seemed to double her pace to end the awkward discussion.

Muhen turned to the stream. He sat himself down on a flat rock. He smiled and noticed that he wasn’t as hungry as he thought he was but he was all the more eager for what Marikit might bring him when she returns.

Muhen distracted himself by listening to the cicada wail among the leaves and the beetle grubs grind in their tree bole holes. It was still bright for crickets but that would have made the music of the mambabarang perfect. Muhen hummed along, not in the manner of a master, but a bystander just enjoying the ambient music.

Then the atay-biya returned.

“Go!” Muhen said aloud even if he didn’t need to. His kakanog set off toward the direction Marikit went. Muhen followed, the toes of his sandals barely touching the packed earth, just enough to propel him forward. His one good eye showed him the path before him while his hollow eye socket received visions of what his kakanog saw as it flew ahead.

Moths had a way on the wing, bobbing up and down, and gliding; and it was always hard to tell at first but Muhen knew that it was not the kakanog’s fault.

Muhen clicked his tongue, he hissed, he rubbed his thumbs, he smacked his lips, he ground his teeth, he called on every insect that could hear his power and asked, “Who did this?”

He was standing over the body when they all replied in a legion of voices, “He is still here.”

“Oh...” Muhen whimpered when he understood the long gashes on Marikit’s back. A boar. Immensely large. It chased Marikit, and ran her down. Its tusks punctured her lungs and stomach. She couldn’t scream because the boar pushed her face into the ground for a few paces, scraping off most of the skin and breaking her neck. There was a bit of turf inside her mouth. Her laundry was set aside a few paces ahead. Marikit knew better than to run from the beast. She tried to walk away, masking her fear. But this was no ordinary boar. There were singed blades of grass. Black spots

on Marikit's dress showed where sparks had landed. The air smelled like a tinpot that was left over a fire with no water to boil nor food to cook. Muhen called out to it.

"Anak ng Lintik!" Muhen seethed with an anger that he was unsure he had ever felt before. He had lived the last few decades in demurred elegance but he remembered every injustice he had ever felt again. He called out to the Child of Lightning again, "Anak ng Lintik!"

His kakanog spotted him first. He stepped out of the tree line, sweaty, covered in gore and mud but already in the shape of a man. He was pot-bellied but his chest was shields, his thighs as thick as tree trunks, and his arms bulged with power. His face was plain. Dark wide lips and small beady eyes. He had an upturned nose. But the marker of his true nature was a large mound of hairy black flesh, a hirsute birthmark on his shoulder.

"I have no quarrel with you, young master," the Anak ng Lintik said, emphasizing young instead of master. Muhen could not tell which of them was older, mambabarang knew arts to slow the effects of time, but Anak ng Lintik did not age at all after reaching adulthood.

"And you had a quarrel with her?" Muhen demanded.

"I was just passing through," the Anak ng Lintik explained. "But then she looked at me wrong."

"She..." Muhen struggled with his temper. "looked... at you... wrong?"

Muhen knew of the arrogance of Anak ng Lintik, they were born of sky and soil, after all, emerging from the wet earth where lightning had struck.

"Yes," the Anak ng Lintik sneered. "She kept her face to the ground but I saw her and she was leering at me."

"She..." Muhen contemplated the necessity of an explanation. It was useless, Muhen knew. A tear fell down his one good eye. He brushed it off the tip of his nose with a forefinger and inspected it as he had never seen his own tears before.

"Was she yours?" the Anak ng Lintik asked.

Muhen looked at the man before him. The mambabarang knocked his head a bit to the side, incredulous.

"I can pay you back," the Anak ng Lintik said.

"Pay me?" Muhen all but whispered. The Anak ng Lintik wouldn't understand anyway. "She wasn't mine. But what was worse, she wasn't her own either. But she had her joy. She found it somehow."

"What?" The Anak ng Lintik strained to hear what Muhen was muttering. "Speak up. I can't hear you."

"I said," Muhen started with a different idea but was surprised when he finished. "That I will be killing you. For her."

The Anak ng Lintik laughed a deep thunderous belly roar of a laugh. “You? Your ilk is soft. You hide behind walls, you use insects and curses and poisons. But when it comes to a straight-up fight, what do you have against our kind?”

Muhen felt a calm wash over him like a twilight moment.

But the Anak ng Lintik continued, “I will crush your ribcage with a cloven hoof to get at your liver. I will crunch your thighbone with a canine jaw to suck out the marrow. I will peck out your eyes.”

“You should change into one of your beast forms now,” Muhen said, recovering the polite tinkle and rustle in his voice. “I would rather not hear you blabbering whilst I kill you.”

“I guess I will be spending my savings paying back the Datu for killing his pet,” The Anak ng Lintik said before leaping into the air as a crow, blood-red eyes and two arm-spans from wingtip to wingtip. Its beak was so black that it had a white sheen. Yellow sparks of lightning crackled and popped into the air with each beat of its wings.

Muhen lifted his arms to his sides as if he was about to take flight too. But instead, he jangled the bangles and beads about his wrists and with a clatter of bronze and ceramic he stretched his arms out towards the Anak ng Lintik. From within his sleeves dozens of wasps, onyx black and a whirl of gossamer wings flew out and toward the Anak ng Lintik as angry as their master.

But the Anak the Lintik was covered in feathers and those feathers sparked with lightning. Most of the wasps were hit by a spark and fell to the dirt smoking and smoldering. The few that did make it to the Anak ng Lintik could neither latch on nor find flesh to sting under the feathers. Still, many others were just buffeted away by the flap of massive wings. The barrage of wasps did not even slow the monstrous bird. And within the next heartbeat, beak and claw could shred Muhen’s flesh into ribbons.

Muhen clicked his tongue upon the roof of his palate and leaped back to dodge. The mambabarang felt a hundred pricks and pinches on his back as the ant princesses latched on his skin, flapped their wings to hold their master aloft. With the assistance of the ant princesses, a small skip became a mighty leap. Thus with their last bit of strength, the ants let Muhen fly back and land, fifteen paces away from the creature. Muhen dropped his basket in the process and he watched the crow rip it apart.

Muhen felt sad as the princesses rustled on his back and fell off, lives spent. Muhen reassured himself that one in a thousand ant princesses ever ascended to become a queen, but still, these ones gave him their lives and never had the chance.

But Muhen did not have time to mourn as the creature had shifted again, to a dog this time. Curved daggers of teeth were strung together by foamy saliva. The Anak ng Lintik snapped at the air and snarled. Then it was rushing at Muhen, jaws agape and ready to clench upon soft flesh.

Muhen reacted by dropping three coconut shells, each one split in half

and bound with a strip of red rice paper. Thousands of atangya, stinking beetles, swarmed out, filling the air with the smell of rancid fat and night soil. It was enough to make Muhen rumple his nose and hold his breath but the black dog stopped on its tracks and rolled once on the ground, clawing at its muzzle. Its senses were as sharp as its teeth and it allowed the Anak ng Lintik to smell the atangya all the worse. Muhen puckered his lips three times and made an almost imperceptible sucking noise. The atangya obeyed and flew towards the black dog rubbing its face on the soil. The little bugs got into its mouth, into its nostrils. It wretched and gagged as the stink was then also a taste.

The creature howled his rage which in turn became a squeal. The dog had turned into a boar and it shook and stamped in anger. The sparks from its dark hide burned the atangya and they popped as they died, smelling worse than ever. The boar was trying to muster the constitution for a charge but it shook on its legs with nausea.

Then it was human again. Silly, pot-bellied and dribbling sick on his own chin. The man with the black hairy birthmark wailed at the mambabarang, “Your tricks cannot kill me!”

Muhen unsheathed his stingray spine dagger. It was more ceremonial, sometimes surgical, the dagger was of no use in combat but it was all he had.

The Anak ng Lintik tried to laugh but he ended up throwing up instead. Frustrated, he said, “But first, a drink.”

He walked over to where Muhen’s basket lay ruined. He found Muhen’s drinking bottle and pushed the wire holding the stopper to the side. The gum and cork popped off and dangled to the side and the Anak ng Lintik guzzled down its contents of mostly spring water.

“Refreshing,” the Anak ng Lintik said but he gagged a little anyway. “I feel so much better. And now, you will die just like your cross-eyed slave.”

“You knew she was cross-eyed but you killed her anyway,” Muhen said. “She wasn’t looking at you wrong, she had no other way to look.”

“Are you questioning my motivation to make me realize that killing her was my fault?”

Muhen raised an eyebrow at the Anak ng Lintik. He said, “No, not really. I was just stalling until you started bleeding to death.”

The Anak ng Lintik took a step toward the mambabarang but he fell to his knees. He tried to stop his fall but when he used an elbow to prop up his torso, the elbow slipped and he fell onto his back. The Anak ng Lintik coughed and he was surprised that a shower of his own blood sprayed up and back down onto his face.

“Well, if you lie on your back,” Muhen mused. “You will drown in your own blood before you bleed out.”

Muhen walked towards his fallen opponent as it panted and gasped

THE CONSEQUENCE OF CROSSING GAZES

between dribbling gore.

“How?” The Anak ng Lintik burbled, his face was distorted by fear and confusion.

“I left my basket for you to mangle, so that you knew what I carried. I got you craving a drink of water with the stink beetles. So you did drink,” Muhen tried to giggle a bit to taunt the Anak ng Lintik but he was too sad to make it sound earnest. “And I had just been collecting water striders in the river with Marikit. That’s her name you know? Marikit.”

The Anak ng Lintik coughed and more blood choked him. He looked to the afternoon sky, his father, but as with most days, the sky had no response.

Marikit’s atay-biya flew towards the Anak ng Lintik’s face upon Muhen’s command and alighted upon the blood-spattered nose. The Anak ng Lintik looked at what had just landed on his face but he could see the pure, white butterfly. But what it did was cross his eye, just as Muhen blew him an ill wind. His face got stuck like that, cross-eyed and silly as he died.

“Oh, Marikit,” Muhen sighed, he shook his head, as his heart turned colder than ever.



THE WRITTEN BOND

RENZ CHRISTIAN TORRES

Under the shade of thick narra, Makahagad and I wait. It has been a listless morning. No game in sight. I lost my spear trying to fight a boar six days ago, and the boar won that battle, taking with it a hand carved trophy. I squat in the bush, bow in hand.

Sometimes being a hunter for the village has its perks. The gods give you a decent part of the deer; sometimes the village. A hunter, however, has to train, and one of these skills a hunter has to train is to wait.

My companion, Makahagad, has no qualms with this test of patience.

The occasional rodent or insect might be no rival to a bearcat's swipe of the paw, but Makahagad waits with me, prickly from the heat of the sun.

Beads of sweat trail down the muscles on my brow. The absence of mountain wind makes it harder to bear. But fortune smiles, and as I consider unstringing my still loaded bow, opportunity came from the canopy. A bird flew out. Instinct takes over.

I shoot that bird right out of the hands of Kaptan, the king of the sky, and it plummets into a nearby clearing, like a fallen star. I creep up to it, shooing the unseen away with my bow, swinging it, scaring those hiding in the grass off. The arrow stands out in the clearing like a reed, and Makahagad and I trot to it, dagger at hand.

What I find is not any animal I have been taught to skin and butcher. It has dark shadows for feathers, a sheen that reflects the forest when the sun hits it right. It has a beak as dark as its wing and a horn as tough as my arrowhead.

Makahagad takes a quick sniff at it as I remove the arrow from its wing, and I watch the bird's breast rise and fall, as it wonders whether I would bring it to Kaluwalhatian or not.

It stays docile, pumping air, amidst the tall, swaying cogon. It kicks and it kicks, and there I find a piece of abaca rope, tied to its left leg.

A spirit owned by the gods? I wonder. I detach the rope, and buried

amongst its dark brown tail feathers is a small bamboo slat, etched but unpolished. I slide my calloused thumb across the inscription.

To whoever finds my message, there is a village across the river. We are in need of your help. Cut off the beating heart of a banana tree. Have the hornbill deliver it.

I look at the bird on the ground, still panicking. It darts its head away from my face to focus on the sky. The sun sits halfway across Kanlaon, fenced by clouds. I hover my hand above its face, but the bird proved threatening, nearly pecking my index finger off with its sharp beak. I untie the twine from the message, and wrap it around on its beak. Makahagad and I bring the bird to the home of the maaram to nurse it back. There is no way it can it return to its village on a broken wing. The nearest banana tree is not too far away. My bearcat and I survey the edge of the plantations, in search for a stalk in bloom. Old, mature banana trees lose their fervor with age. It's the young ones that are still vital with passion.

The lone banana tree still pumping its heart is the tallest in the grove. I fasten a rope onto the green aorta of the pumping banana heart, expanding and contracting its crimson chambers. I unsheath my bolo and hack at the stalk, the rope coiled around my torso. The heart, once detached from its body, is agitated by irregular beats, swing incessantly, almost pulls me to the ground while I have a sharp blade in my hand.

Makahagad catches the heart as the coil unfastened; his sharp claws tease the flower with caution with a delicate tap. My chest pounds like the

hornbill's chest or the banana blossom as Makahagad climbs down and I lower myself down the banana trunk.

The maaram nurses the injured bird in a hut in the village. The steam from her katingan is the only indicator of her presence. We follow the odd purple vapor seeping out of the eaves. We pass through the beaded curtain of her doorway. Makahagad sniffs at the various pots and vases on the shelves on the walls; brass and earthen and glass, filled with cuttings and appendages and viscera of assorted fauna, flora, and the in-between.

The hornbill weeps on the maaram's wooden counter by the boiling pot at the back of the hut. We follow the peculiar stench and the croaked whimpering, pass the floor ornaments; blossom at hand, I meet with the maaram. She motions me to also pass her my dagger, and reluctantly I place them within her bony fingers. She cuts a sliver from the base of the heart and squeezes it over the injured bird. Very little juice escape her clenched hands and land on the wound of the hornbill.

Bound at the beak and the wings, the patient swings its powerful legs into the air, clawing at its captors albeit unsuccessfully. A few moments pass, the restlessness diminishes to occasional glances. The maaram undoes the bonds of the hornbill, and as soon as the twine is loosened, the bird shrugs it off, and with its claws, carries the still pumping heart away.

It wavers, unstable but unstoppable with its recently healed wing, and the bird slowly and stubbornly makes its way through the sky with every flap as if drunk.

"Follow it," I turn to Makahagad. "Follow it before it crashes in the forest. Be careful when you cross the river." The bearcat nods and chases the feathered messenger into the huddled trees.

It takes nine days before I receive any information from the village across the river. Makahagad and the hornbill space their evening cries once every few days, assuring me of their safety.

On a rainy morning, they return with a bamboo missive.

Informant,

We send gratitude from the gods for your help and generosity.

Our people have been healed by your selfless gift.

In seven nights we will return the gesture.

For this moment, a token of our appreciation.

Attached to the bamboo message is a necklace, decorated with agate and carnelian. It is strung with the roots of a dried orchid, spun and twisted. The end of the message is signed:

Maayuput

I am mesmerized by the necklace as it glistens in the silver daylight. I toss it around my neck and lean out the window, towards the direction of the village across the river.

After midnight of the seventh evening, when the maaram usually sorts and cleans her bowls and jars, a persistent flapping echoes in the dark hours before morning. According to the maaram, under the light of the moon, a small, chirping cloud carried a large object through the sky. It navigated through the thicket and into the banana plantation and dropped off the large gift. It took off without even leaving a footprint.

Come morning, a foreign presence could be felt in the way the dew quivered on the plantation, the alien thing is laid up on a very curious yet very familiar tree. The birds perch on all the trees, except for that one, for it emitted a strange kind of magic. Many people from my village, including myself, take every instance outside our daily chores and work to witness the banana tree's splendor. That night, under the sight of the moon, the tree produced a pumping heart.

That night, at the bonfire, I temper the tip of my arrow, with a slat of bamboo on my other hand.

Maayuput,

We accept the gift of the return of a new pumping heart.

We wish you health, harvest and prosperity until the moon ceases to shine. Give our sincerest compliments to the town jeweler.

Attached is a modest clay pot filled with orchid bulbs.

Magpanabang

I curl the twists of my Badlit for some reason. Makahagad and the hornbill have shed inhibitions, and have become good acquaintances. I tie the shoot to the hornbill and strap the pot to the bearcat, and they playfully travelled through the forest.

Through the correspondence between Maayuput and I, our villages have developed a relation based on business, trust and friendship. Every few days Makatagad, the hornbill of Maayuput, and Makahagad would return with pieces of jewelry, whole spices in abaca pouches, and cashews and pili nuts in handy stoneware; and in reciprocation, we would send the freshest saltwater catch, pearls and seedlings, all in small earthenware jars. The two animals have become great allies, and so have our villages.

Maayuput and I have also strengthened our bonds. As often as I would stash away some bulad on nights of delivery, I would wake to a spool of colorful handspun cotton thread. She has sent me a pair of golden cuffs, for she is her town's jeweler, amazingly so, and though they are a size smaller than anticipated, I treasure her gift. I made her a bow, carved from the sturdiest lauan, and arrows split with my sharpest blade, to aid her in her hunting. For I am also one of the village potters, I have crafted sturdy palayoks for her, with geometric patterns and decorative handles. It takes up a lot of my time, but when a man does a thing for love, the world can wait.

Makahagad and Makatagad are most affected by this sense of community. One harvest season, Makatagad did not join Makahagad in the frequent trade, and Makahagad often scurries into the night; his hollow tree abode

next to my window empty. After five days of absence, Makahagad returns.

Makatagad delivers a message and I smile in anticipation as I read the missive. Ten days later, the duo return from the village across the river, accompanied by four hornbill-bearcat hybrids flying around their parents.

Maayuput and I are greatly affected by this union, for Makatagad is like a family member to her, much as Makahagad is to me. We are brought closer together, somehow, even closer than before. I often dream that we would dance and chase each other through the cogon where I shot her bird out of the sky. We would take turns hiding in the grass, and I would sneak up on her and grab her by the ankle, strong yet delicate, bronze from the heat of Adlaw, and she would tickle me with her tiny fingers. Some days, I go about with a smile painted on my face, just dreaming of how we would jointly tend our pets' litter, and how we would make our own.

The only thing preventing us from ever seeing each other (and each other's village) is the river. It swells with every dainty shower, every rain, every trickle. Boulders that could outlive dynasties pepper the raging waters. Even the local crocodile, largest of scaled beasts, pray to the gods when the river is in sight; afraid of drowning in its banks. We try not to mention this longing to visit, distracting ourselves with the tiny trinkets, the numerous gifts and the healthy exchange of our villages.

When the moon has finished running its course across the sky, and the day threatens with a lighter shade of blue, and I caress the smooth buri strips of my banig, imagining Maayuput's hair sliding across the mat.

Then I hear a crash.

The village throbs in that moment, awake or asleep, an extra pump of blood like a wave of a heartbeat. The maaram has long gone to bed, and the day would come anyway, so I surrender to slumber, setting aside my inquisitiveness for the morning.

The children rock their parents to and fro on the bamboo mats.

The curious, myself included, hurry to the river, piqued by its sudden silence. Trees, large, thick-bodied coconut palms, have fallen across the river's course. The rapids shrunk into wading streams; the boulders and rocks submerged in the water took their first breath of air. The strong-gilled eels, once the conquerors of the river, reduced to begging beings, flopping around, barely breathing, dying.

I run back into my quarters to look for an arrow and a bamboo shoot. At last! A chance to see the village! A chance to see Makatagad in her nest! A chance to see my beloved.

I send the missive as the village ebb back into their daily activities, their mundane lives. Makahagad waits in anticipation as I craft my letter of inquiry and invitation.

Maayuput,

It seems the gods wish for us to bear separation no longer.

The river between our villages has receded.
I will visit you, Makatagad, her offspring and your people, with your agreement.
I cannot hold back my excitement.

Magpanabang

The binturong jumps up his tree, crossing the branches with gusto and agility. I can't help but sympathize with him, eager to play with his children and bump beak-to-nose with Makatagad.

Little did I know, at his nimble escape to the treetops, that I am seeing him running and able-bodied for the last time.

A sound goes off at the river in the afternoon. It is explosive and sharp, not unlike the crackling of a wood fire. Another tree has fallen on the bank, I would have guessed but then I heard crying. Loud, painful crying. Makahagad crying.

I grab my spear, a gift from the village across the river, and I hastily blunder to the banks. Makahagad is in trouble, and I have to save him.

I trace the crying to a ledge overlooking the river, calm. I swallow the lump on my throat as I see Makahagad, livid and breathing shallowly on a dry flat rock on the river. His calls are long and sharp, receding in volume.

I trot to his side, a large wound runs down his torso, leaking blood. I try to examine the injury, but then I hear rustling from the river's source, so I hide behind the rock, spear in hand.

Two figures gleam beyond the stream. They are unlike the depictions of gods that I've known before. They must be demonic creatures, wearing clouds where their arms are supposed to be, and silver where their torsos should be. They have heads of stone and they carry oddly shaped spears. I stay behind the rocks, cradling my beloved Makahagad.

I hear the demons talk, the pale creatures, in a language I can't decipher. I sit silently, the sound of splashing making its way towards me.

I have no time to think. I hold Makahagad down where he will see me for the last time. I place two of my fingers, covered in his blood of iron, quickly onto my lips, pressed them on his forehead, and I whisper to him that I will return. I slowly turn my head where the demons are. I spot one. But he spots me first.

I duck back behind cover. A loud, explosive bang goes off at the rock where I am hiding, narrowly missing my head. My left ear rings like the smallest of the kulintang. But I have no time to panic.

I listen to the water splashing close to my right. I clutch my spear.

Heartbeat. Heartbeat. Splash.

I thrust my spear. A flash of red hampers my vision. His eyes, bloodshot and blue, reflected the river that is stained by his blood. I retract my weapon from his side, and he plunges into the water.

Bang. Bang. I dodge the blows from the other demon's spear from Sulad, and I hide behind the boulders. I am outmatched by the demon, who cursed to Magwayen, in tongues. The splashing of water is drawing nearer and nearer.

I hear two strong plucks from a distance, then two gasps of breath. A large splash came from behind the boulder where I am, and I take a peek at my ankles, wading in scarlet waters.

From the periphery of my view, I check the surroundings from my hiding place. A tranquil scene of the river, the babbling of the water, devoid the monsters intending to kill me.

I stand up to find the demon face down in the water; two arrows had sprouted between the front and back halves of his silver shell. The gods seem to have watched over me. One of them has come down from the mountains, as a figure emerges from the lush thicket. He was bronzed like an eagle, his toes like talons that clip on the river stones with every step. He lowers his bow and arrow, and drew towards Makahagad.

This deity seems to have encountered my binturong in this life, for he grieves with heavy tears. I hold back my anguish, taken aback by the many things that happened; but my tears give way. Makahagad is gone.

The deity secures his bow back on his body and drops his dignified bearing; crouches down as have I. We grieve.

After sharing our agony, I find out that the deity was but an ordinary man. He is scarred and calloused, his hair disheveled, his presence shaken. He approaches me, still distressed, poorly hidden behind stoic composure. He clears his throat.

"My village has lost an ally."

"My village has lost family," I echo back. Silence.

The man looks me in the eyes, mouth tense.

"Do you know Magpanabang? My name is Maayuput."



DAUGHTERS OF YIG

STRALLE

July 2002

To my parents, friends, colleagues, and mentors,

I've given much thought to this final letter of mine. I hope it will assuage any resentment you might feel over my disappearance or my failure as both an academic and a filial "son of the Catangui family" — in abandoning my research, I abandon any hope of becoming "some kind of doctor" as befits our family lineage — though as you'll see, I'm coming into a much more remarkable inheritance.

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But I'm getting ahead of myself. Last November, having applied for LOA, I took the money meant for my tuition and opened a bank account with it. While maintaining the pretense of attending classes, I did academic mercenary-work: tutoring, transcription, etc. I heard a rumor, from other struggling researchers, of a doctoral candidate in the sociology department who'd made a major breakthrough researching in an online community. It wasn't the first rumor of its kind, but with time to spare, I decided to give it a shot.

Having found a computer shop near campus with student-friendly rates, I spent my afternoons scouring online forums for research material. Structuralist narratology in Asian myths is hardly a popular subject, so I took an indirect approach, diving into online interest groups for Asian mythology, superstition, and occultism. To establish rapport with other members, I posted a tale of my own: our family's own founding myth, that of "Doctor" Rafael Catangui and the so-called snake-woman of Albay.

Here's what I posted:

Hey, everyone! This is my first post, a tale from Bicol, my home province in the Philippines, where I spent many summers growing up. An old family there is said to have an ancestor who cured a woman who'd been turned into a snake.

The woman was from the outskirts of town and had been absent from market for weeks. Worried she'd fallen ill or died, some townsfolk went to investigate. They found the woman, Sofia, collapsed on the floor of her

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house. Her body was gaunt; her limbs, stick-thin; her skin, dry and scaly.

The townsfolk first consulted a priest. When he failed to exorcise her, he claimed her own wickedness kept her curse. Then they called an *albularyo* (shaman/herbalist), who asked if Sofia had harmed any snakes. When she said yes, the *albularyo* told her to offer a sacrifice of animal flesh and native liquor. But before she could, a young doctor came forward, opposing the bloody ritual

Rafael Catangui, newly returned from Europe, was eager to cure both sicknesses of the body and the plague of superstition. By curing Sofia, he hoped to win prestige for himself and other native doctors. He brought her to his estate as an in-patient, but her condition only worsened. Servants whispered that her skin had peeled off in a sheet, that she writhed feebly on the floor, that her voice had been reduced to a desperate hissing.

Worried the townsfolk would resort to superstitious rituals, Rafael returned to Sofia's cottage. He sought out the remains of the snake she killed, then ventured into the woods to find another like it, aiming to concoct a cure from its venom. What he found wasn't a snake, but the spirit that laid the curse — Oriol, a capricious spirit from Bicolano myth.

Oriol was captivated by the intrepid, handsome doctor and sought to seduce him. Overwhelmed though he was, Rafael knew he could yet save himself through quick thinking. Acting like she was a hallucination, he had her perform various tasks to prove herself: as material, as a creature, as a woman — he had her "kiss" him, probably a euphemism for the kids — and

finally as Oriol, by challenging her to undo the curse.

Promising he would return if Oriol had spoken true, Rafael went back to check on Sofia. Seeing her cured, he entreated the *albularyo* to perform a ritual to keep the spirit at bay. That, they say, is how Rafael Catangui used his cunning to save the snake-woman of Albay — one version, anyway. The Catanguis' version claims that when Rafael went looking to make a cure from a snake, that's exactly what he did; it was his medicinal skill that triumphed.

What's truly interesting, however, is that some documentation on the actual snake-woman case exists. Photographs of the patient exist, though badly damaged from when the provincial archives were flooded. A few accounts credit Rafael Catangui with such a cure, but none from medical doctors. Rafael himself never recorded the specifics, so the truth remains shrouded in mist.

I expected a few mildly enthusiastic responses at best but, like our ancient forebear from the tales, I got more than I was looking for. A few days after I'd posted the story, I was contacted through one group's direct messaging feature by a user named *kunlun_girl*. She said the story seemed familiar to her, right down to the names of Rafael and Sofia, but that the version she knew was significantly different — not the least because Sofia, she said, was a Catangui as well.

That the snake-woman story had reached someone outside our little town was surprising enough; the claim that Sofia was a Catangui was stranger still. I had, by then, extensively researched our family history, looking details to substantiate the tale. Suffice to say, no “Sofia” appears in any clan genealogies. Still, I figured that even if it were some prank, it would at least be a distraction from my boredom, so I pressed her for details.

kunlun_girl worked for a kind of private library and book dealer in Kowloon as a general assistant to the proprietor. Discerning the establishment's exact function took some time, partly because of my new acquaintance's idiosyncratic — though not limited — use of English. The work paid modestly but came with lodging in a room attached to the archive (she had another reason for taking the job, which I'll explain later). When not actively tracking down books, she tended to have a lot of free time to peruse the stacks herself. That's how she came across the journals of Ferran Suarez.

Suarez was born in the viceroyalty of Nueva España in the 1810s. His family fled the Mexican War of Independence when he was still a child, but the mementos they took with them instilled in him a lasting curiosity in American mythology. Unable to pursue this interest academically, due to Spanish resentment over the colony's loss, he departed for Asia. He found parallels to his study of Mesoamerican myths (e.g., Kukulkan, Quetzalcoatl, etc.) in legends from India and Indonesia (e.g., Vasuki, nagas, etc.), though these links were tenuous at best. Only later — driven by desperation to consult such esoteric sources as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the *Records of the Great Wilderness*, and the *Seven Cryptical Books of Hsan*

— did he uncover a promising lead: hints of an ancient, suppressed form of serpent-worship in China. Suarez intended to go there, but bureaucratic hurdles stranded him in Hong Kong. There, however, he heard an unlikely tale from a British medical officer of a woman in the Philippines who'd turned into a snake.

I would only learn of Suarez' background later on, however. Most of his writings were in Spanish and kunlun_girl had read only his few English publications, including the case of the snake-woman. She was kind enough to transcribe a digital copy and send it to me. The account's contents, though sanitized for an anthropological conference, nonetheless intrigued me: Suarez, it claimed, had accompanied Rafael Catangui on an expedition into the “wilderness of Bikol”, where they “observed a native homeopathic ritual ... appeasing the spirits” that “relieved the patient of all apparent signs of ophidification”. I wrote to kunlun_girl asking to request copies of Suarez' other works but, with no way to discern the relevant Spanish texts from superfluous ones, she instead proposed I go to Kowloon and peruse them in person.

Compared to the preceding two months of drudgery, the thought of doing proper research in a foreign archive was tantalizing. Furthermore, kunlun_girl had offered to share her studio, significantly reducing potential expenses. You probably think me either rash or else driven by sexual, rather than scholarly, interest. But while the two of us had grown rather close through our online exchanges, I assure you what I felt was more a sense of kinship. We shared similar interests, and a mutual feeling of being somehow different from most of society, though in her case, she was quite

aware of the cause — she had never considered herself the man her body suggested she should have been. And in her isolated library, visited only by those pondering questions hidden from the light of history, such a belief didn't merit the term “strange”.

By now I suspect you're beginning to connect the dots. When I claimed to be undertaking fieldwork in Mindanao last year, I was doing no such thing — there being “no cellphone coverage” was merely a convenient excuse, though it's true I had no means of contacting you. It took half the pilfered tuition just to pay for two-way airfare and a meager sum of pocket money; roaming cell service was out of the question. Once in Hong Kong, I was almost completely reliant on my hostess' hospitality.

The library was in an out-of-the-way residential area in northern Kowloon, two townhouses with the dividing wall broken down to make way for rows of hardwood shelves. The space between shelves was just wide enough for a person to squat down: interstices meant for business, not browsing. The stacks took up maybe four fifths of the space; the rest comprised an office where the proprietor did business, a lounge where he received guests, and *kunlun_girl's* studio, which was just spacious enough for us to sleep comfortably. We took our meals in one of three nearby diners and relaxed in the lounge when no clients were around. Visits were scheduled well in advance, so I arranged my research schedule around them. Except for an overnight trip to Macau — a ploy to circumvent the two-week stay limit — my days passed in that scholastic routine.

Suarez' account unfolded over several scattered journal entries, some from the expedition itself and others in later reminiscences. Rather than translate these fragments, I've attempted to reconstruct the story in its fullness, in the hopes of imparting the full, terrible splendor of what it implies.

1858. It was Ferran Suarez' second year in Hong Kong when a British medical officer told him of the snake-woman case, which had been relayed to him by a Filipino protege of his, Rafael Catangui. Suarez wrote to Catangui and, upon receiving his reply, embarked for the Philippines. I should note this inconsistency: While family history claims Rafael studied in Europe, both Suarez' notes and the letter from his British acquaintance (Xerox copies attached) place him in Hong Kong for the duration of his time overseas — not as a medical student, but as a surgeon's assistant. Ironic, isn't it, that the Catangui line doesn't trace its lineage to a “real doctor” at all. Not the only surprise, though: When Suarez reached the Philippines, it wasn't Rafael who greeted him, but another Catangui expunged from the genealogies.

Suarez noted Ciriaco Catangui's foppish appearance and self-deprecating wit; he introduced himself as “the younger and more ignorant” of the brothers. The patient, he said, had developed an adverse reaction to Rafael, so he was going instead.

The patient was kept in the basement of a guesthouse in the Catangui estate. Suarez' distress upon seeing the patient is clear in his writings. She

had withered limbs; a dry, scaly “superdermis”; eyes that shone behind a curtain of sparse hair. Though she could not speak, she remained in possession of her wits: She responded to Ciriaco’s greeting and nodded when he asked if she’d answer Suarez’ questions.

The patient knew basic Spanish, so Suarez questioned her directly. First, he confirmed her symptoms. They were as he’d heard. Next, he asked if she had recently attacked a snake; she had. Then, presenting her with a series of adjectives— color, pattern, size and so on — he put together a basic description of the snake. Finally, he bade Ciriaco stand out of earshot so he could inquire into her personal details.

On their way to the main house, Suarez asked Ciriaco about the locals’ response to the case. He mentioned the priest’s judgment and the albularyo’s call for a ritual sacrifice, accompanied by a ritual cleansing in a nearby river. The river was a treacherous one, however, and Rafael suspected the cleansing was merely euphemism — that the albularyo’s true aim was to sacrifice the patient herself.

Later that night, after Suarez and Rafael had met and dined together, the traveling scholar expounded on his theories. Following the myths of serpent-worship from Mesoamerica to India and the isles of Nusantara, Suarez had come across scattered accounts of people turned into serpents — “ophidification”, he called it. In some cases, people were said to literally become snakes; in others, though, their limbs withered, and their skin grew scaly. (Researching such ailments had led him to the Albay case.) Different cultures attributed “ophidification” to different causes: the caprice of evil

spirits, the vengeance of benevolent gods, and so on.

Yet his anthropological research had surfaced a link connecting these disparate “idolatries”. The Books of Hsan described a serpent-god, Yig. Known as a protector of snakes. Yig predated all other forms of serpent-worship and a startling array of related myths. The twisting of his coils in the depths caused the tremors of Kukulkan; his wake formed the underworld of the nagas, whose shapeshifting abilities mirrored his transfiguring powers; these powers he sometimes worked on humans, as with the transformation of Tiresias.

“But,” Rafael interjected — likely keen to display his own erudition, “Tiresias was transformed into a woman, not a snake.”

“Indeed,” Suarez said. “And your patient was no woman.” His audience was shocked into silence, so he continued. The patient, when discovered writhing on the road to the poblacion, had been presumed an outsider, since no one knew her. But with some difficulty, he’d gathered that “she” had been an itinerant laborer, which was why no one had noticed his absence.

"Absurd!" Rafael said, refusing to humor “mere fantasy”.

Suarez insisted. The deterioration in limbs, he argued, could have reached the genitals and other anatomical structures. Furthermore, he said that if his theories were right, the stories offered a hint at the cure.

Rafael scoffed. “What cure could fairy tales offer?”

Undeterred, Suarez explained: In some stories, supplicants voluntarily sought to be transformed. In these cases, the snake-folk lived fulfilling lives, many even assuming leadership roles. While he had been hesitant to credit these stories before, the sight of the patient made him reconsider. If the state could be induced and, moreover, managed, then perhaps there was method behind the madness. He suspected it may have to do with particular sorts of venom, or even fungal spores.

“Then prove it,” Rafael challenged. “If you can cure her before I can, I will yield to your wisdom.”

Thus, the scholars began their wager.

Suarez’ plan was to familiarize himself with native myths and folklore, look for parallels with the Yig accounts in his esoteric books and Chinese classics, and from there identify the steps in the transformation ritual. His host, he realized, would be of no help. Rafael Catangui remained generous with material hospitality only because hosting a foreign scholar vastly improved his reputation. The erudition by association buttressed his facade of being a doctor.

Ciriaco, however, proved all too eager to assist. The younger Catangui was enamored of fantastic tales and readily helped Suarez converse with natives, many of whom knew less Spanish than the snake-woman. Being only loosely “employed” in managing the family business, Ciriaco had

abundant free time in which to assist the scholar.

Notes on the two Catangui siblings — an uncommonly small brood, in those days — appear sporadically amid Suarez’ observations of the local customs and lore. Rafael, he notes, was clever, driven, and ambitious, but almost comically obsessed with affectations of intellect and class. While Rafael was respected by the town, Ciriaco was adored. He had mastered the delicate balance of sharing wealth without flaunting it, and charming the common folk while maintaining noble airs; when he worked, was neither slipshod nor resentful — the very image of noblesse oblige. His seeming frivolity arose, Suarez writes, from his delight in life’s various pleasures.

Yet Ciriaco was also given to moments of deep melancholy. During such moods, he would withdraw into his library. It was practically as large as Rafael’s, but instead of academic treatises, held volumes of native legends, local romances, and foreign adventure serials. Suarez’ notes suggest it contained a copy of the Melendreras version of the *Ibalon*. (Sadly, he lists only his thoughts on the text, not the verses themselves). I surmise that some of the epic’s lost verses were instrumental to his unlocking the mysteries of Yig — or, to use the Bicolano name, Oriol.

“But isn’t Yig a man?” Ciriaco asked Suarez when he mentioned this connection. “That is to say, a male god.”

“Sex is a concern only for certain living beings,” Suarez answered, “and each culture’s ideals of man and woman merely instruments of social order. We think of divinities as male or female solely for our own convenience. In

tracing gods across the earth, I've learned that a man in one corner of the world would be a woman in another."

Ciriaco took great interest in this and a discussion followed that covered various theories on transformation and androgyny in myth, including Saurez' thoughts on the native "shamanic transvestism" he'd learned of. "But perhaps," he concluded, "it is just Yig's way to avenge his — or her — children in kind. Take old Tiresias: For slaying a mating pair, he was made to live in androgyny."

A conclusive clue came from their investigation of the remote barangays in the region. Having discovered the species of snake the patient killed, Suarez narrowed the search down to areas where it was found. Then, through extensive interviews with locals, and reference to some lost record of topographic legendry in the Ibalon (similar to lines 181-192 of the Castaño edition, probably) he had identified a likely site of ritual transformation consecrated to Oriol — and location, he knew, was important. (He attributed it to the role flora/fauna played in the alteration.)

The site was exceedingly remote: An untamed area of rocky promontories clawing at the sea. Furthermore, the season had gone from hot to rainy, and soon storms would be blowing in. However, the patient's condition had worsened perilously, so that Suarez had to undertake the expedition sooner rather than later. While Rafael balked at the idea, he assured his guest he would help him prepare — but, realizing how deeply involved Ciriaco had become in the undertaking, told Suarez not to take him along. This decision wouldn't be his to make.

A week later, after a dinner held as a send-off for Suarez, Ciriaco approached him in his guest room, visibly intoxicated and not a little distressed. "Take me with you," Ciriaco said. Suspecting that he was simply worried about the journey's risks, Suarez assured him he would be fine. But his dear friend would not be refused. "Either take me with you, or I will follow in your shadow the entire way."

"Why," Suarez asked, "are you so keen on this journey?"

Ciriaco was silent for a while, then tears began to rim his eyes. "What power holds death over one who has never lived?" he said. "Whether Yig, Oriol or some other spirit — if they could make me a woman, I would gladly offer them my life."

I relayed the story to kunlun_girl over one of our dinners and watched her unfold a small, melancholy smile. "Was it like that for you?" I asked.

"A bit. We find different ways to come alive. Our own secret places." Then she asked, "But what did you think of it?"

"It's pretty amazing," I said. "Practically a scene from a fantasy novel on its own. Makes sense, considering what Ciriaco was like. I admit, it's made me a lot more eager to keep translating it. See how it ends — and as crazy as it is, I'm rooting for him."

“For her,” kunlun_girl interjected.

I apologized and started to say, “It’s just that at this point in the story—”

But she cut me off again. “It’s not about how it ends. Isn’t that how it is in these stories? No one answers the call without already having the heart of a hero — or a heroine.”

The expedition took nineteen days in total: Five to reach their destination, three to return, and eleven days spent amid the rocky coastline, sunken caves, and half-absent islands of Albay. A fierce storm struck on their third day of exploration. Suarez, by then already middle-aged, was stricken by fever. Their progress stalled for three days, during which Ciriaco made what headway he could in exploration — limited though he was by having to return to camp each night — and tended to Suarez. The scholar’s notes from this period are, well, fevered, but his affection for his companion is strikingly clear:

I wonder at times if this sickness is the Lord’s punishment for my blasphemy. What else would you call my obsession with these false gods? Yet if He were so vengeful, why would he also place such an angel at my side?

By the third evening, with Suarez on the way to recovery, Ciriaco had risked venturing farther. In doing so, as he was going through the nearby

woods, he came upon a site that seemed promising: A fallen tree had, by chance, bridged the way to a ridge on one of the promontories. There was a cave there which showed signs of ancient habitation. Because of the time limits, though, he’d not been able to examine it further. Then, he produced a carved stone trinket recovered from the cave.

Suarez “felt intellectual passion chase out what remained of my illness.” The stone was carved in the likeness of a snake.

I once asked kunlun_girl during another of our dinners if she believed in magic. By then I had translated most of Suarez’ expedition notes but — in a disgraceful show of lack of scholarly disinterest — I’d made a point not to read the ending. I surprised myself with how earnestly I hoped for the myth to be proved true.

“I would like to believe,” she said. Then laughed. “I guess that means I do. Wanting it is believing it, isn’t it?”

I found myself nodding, frightened by how earnestly I believed the myth to be true.

Upon Suarez’ recovery, the pair journeyed to the cave Ciriaco had found and delved into its depths. The cave mouth, it turned out, led to a remarkably

complex system whose traversal was complicated by portions partially or wholly submerged. For two days, they explored in the damp and cold only to find dead ends. Yet before they declared the cave a loss, they pushed through a narrow passage into a remarkably large cavern bathed in the soft phosphorescence of subterranean fungi. In that dim illumination, they spied an installment made of bronze coated in a pale green patina. It had a broad base, etched with lines from some lost syllabary, that supported a sculpture in familiar form: A woman who, instead of legs, had a long serpentine tail. Oriol.

Suarez got to work immediately, comparing patterns and images with notes he'd prepared specifically for the expedition. His illustrations and tracings from then are quite water-damaged, sadly, but the simple forms are easy enough to discern. There are several humanoids of various size and varying anatomy, many with ophidian tails or heads, some having retained nothing of humanity save their faces. Suarez decrypted these pictographs somehow and declared proudly to Ciriaco that he had figured out the ritual.

They spent the next day resting, then the next three combing the wilderness to resupply and gather reagents for the ritual. The process apparently involved a substance concocted from snake venom, certain plant oils, and — contrary to Suarez' earlier suspicion — not the fungi found in the cave, but the waters found in it, which he suspected contained a peculiar balance of minerals. The substance would then be spread, like an oil, over the recipient's body in a protracted ritual. Suarez wasn't sure how long it took for the effects to show, nor how exactly the ritual was conducted. The former, he reasoned, they'd find out soon enough; the

latter, meanwhile, was merely a formality.

I finished translating the expedition journals just before our trip to Macau. Its function as legal loophole was, I believe, merely a convenient excuse for *kunlun_girl*, who I suspect had noticed my fluctuating moods. Not because the myth had turned out false — it is true, though I suppose I can't force you to believe it — but because of an unforeseen consequence of having my faith validated.

Whether it was the happy hour cocktails we'd imbibed, or simply Macau's modern mythology of high stakes and low inhibitions, *kunlun_girl* and I allowed ourselves a degree of intimacy we'd abstained from in Kowloon. Amid glaring casino lights, under dim restaurant lamps, in the darkness of our budget lovers' suite — she was beautiful. In all senses one can experience, she was beautiful.

That night, as she lay beside me, I found myself crying, suddenly aware of how long I'd been dead.

Rejuvenated and resupplied, Suarez and Ciriaco retraced their steps to Oriol's chamber. They had stored the admixture in their two largest canteens, which they judged equivalent in size to the amphora shown to be used in the ritual. Ciriaco disrobed and Suarez poured some of the

substance onto him, taking care not to let any of it spill. The liquid glowed green in the luminescence, and Ciriaco stood like a glowing mirror to the altar's sculpture. He spread the substance evenly over his skin; Suarez helping with the parts of his back he couldn't reach.

A moment later, though, the Spaniard's hands began burning in agony. The pain raced up his arms then down his spine, leaving him writhing on the ground. Ciriaco knelt beside him when there was a blinding flash. Lights danced on the walls like coils of scintillating scales. A soft hissing filled the air. Ciriaco turned to face the altar, which Suarez, writhing on the floor, could not see, and said, "What have you done to him?"

The voice that answered, Suarez writes, was so sonorous and sweet that he nearly fell asleep upon hearing it; only the pain kept him awake. But whatever it said, he could not understand. To him it was as a wordless, whispered song. Only through Ciriaco's words could he grasp what transpired.

"He is no outsider! He is my companion, my partner."

A hellish, melodious hiss.

"It is not we who have denied you your due."

A lilting tune, capricious and menacing.

"Then take me instead. Let me replace the daughter lost to you. I will go

willingly — only undo your curse."

Then there was a powerful, swelling noise. The cave resounded with it, each echoing note chasing the next, composing a wave that at last overwhelmed Suarez' senses. The last thing he recalled was Ciriaco standing up once again—then a trickle of that nameless liquid sliding down his leg.

He awoke a day later, not to the dank interior of the cave, but to the warm light of Bicol and the worried face of his companion gazing down at him. "Ciriaco?" he asked.

She smiled.

When the two returned nearly three weeks from when they'd set off, they learned the patient had made a miraculous recovery. Suarez hazarded a guess: "Four days ago?" He was right.

Rafael had pressing questions of his own. The two had foreseen this, though, and delivered an account they had refined over their return trip. Rafael was predictably unconvinced, so Suarez bade him ask his companion questions that only Ciriaco could possibly answer. The interrogation lasted several hours. When at last it was over, the color had drained from Rafael's face.

Still, Rafael knew they could not convince the whole town, so they

constructed a cover story — a story that the recovered victim, once again a man clad in anonymous poverty, became the chief vector of. The snake-woman, it was said, had recovered her health but lost her memories. As no one in town knew who she was, she was taken into the Catangui household. Her name was Sofia. Rafael became her godfather. Behind the scenes, hefty bribes served to erase Ciriaco from history.

The ruse bolstered Rafael’s reputation, but Suarez was less fortunate. The account he published — which *kunlun_girl* read — was received with mocking scorn, ending his academic career. Personal notes suggest he thereafter spent several years in Albay, helping the Catanguis run the estate while continuing to study mythology. But one day, he says, “[his] angel was called to the side of her goddess, to balance the bargain she struck in that nameless cave.”

Her name would appear sporadically in his records up until his death, but only in reminiscences after that night. Later, he departed for China to pursue his old, abandoned mission. He would fare no better, falling ill in the newly ceded territory of Kowloon, never to recover.

Suarez’ surviving notes are incomplete, but modern databases have helped me fill in the gaps. I believe I know where Oriol’s nameless sanctuary is to be found and, as you read this, would have already departed for it. If by some chance I fail to reach it — or to strike a deal as favorable as Sofia’s — then this is farewell. And if that comes to pass, I hope you’ll nonetheless

appreciate my triumph for what it is: Answering the call as a child of Oriol, a daughter of Yig.



MAY IKINAKASAL NA TIKBALANG

STENO PADILLA

Bukas, kapag nakahapay na ang araw sa dakong kanluran, magtitipon ang mga lamanlupa sa harap ng Talong Daranak sa bulubundukin ng Sierra Madre upang saksihan ang pag-iisang dibdib nina Guiwan at Bulusan.

Ngunit sa araw na ito, habang abala ang lahat sa paghahanda sa kaabang-abang na pagtitipon, pinagtatalunan pa rin ng magsing-irog na tikbalang—mga nilalang na kalahating kabayo at kalahating tao—kung anong kasarian ang kanilang pipiliin at siyang kakatawanin sa bubuuing buhay bilang mag-asawa.

“Puke o titi?” tanong ni Guiwan sa kanyang kasintahan.

“Ikaw ba?” balik na tanong ni Bulusan.

“Bakit hindi mo masagot nang madalian? Kailangan mo lang namang pumili kung aling ari ang iyong aariin nang sa gayon ay makapili na ako ng sa akin.”

“Gusto kong magkaroon ng puke upang tanggapin ka sa aking kalooban, ngunit nais ko rin ng titi upang masisid ko ang iyong kaibuturan.”

“Lagi mo na lang pinahihirap ang mga bagay. Nais mo bang magdalantikbalang o hindi? Kung ayaw mo, titi ang iyong ariin at puke ang sa akin. Kung gusto mo naman, iyo na ang puke at sa akin ang titi.”

Ito na ang pinakamalaking pagtatalo ng magsing-irog mula nang tanggapin nila ang isa’t isa sa kanilang buhay. Hindi naman nakagugulat ang bagay na iyon. Bawat tikbalang na isinisilang sa mundo ay dumaraan sa ganitong pagsubok, sapagkat iisang pagkakataon lamang ang ipinagkaloob sa kanila upang makapamilya ng sariling ari.

Salungat sa ibang lamanlupa na nabubuo ang ari habang nasa sinapupunan, ang mga tikbalang ay bahagyang nakauungos sapagkat ipinangananak silang walang kasarian. Ang bahaging tao sa ibabang dako ng kanilang katawan ay isinisilang na walang ari. May kakayahan silang bumuo at pumili ng ari kapag tumuntong na sila sa hustong gulang. Kadalasan, ginagawa nila ang pagpiling ito sa sandaling sila ay ikasal sa

kanilang napiling tikbalang.

“Batid mo namang hindi magbabago ang pagtingin ko sa iyo kahit ano pa ang iyong piliin, di ba?” malambing na wika ni Guiwan.

“Ganoon din naman ako sa iyo,” tugon ni Bulusan.

“Kung gayon, bakit nahihirapan kang pumili?”

“Hindi naman sa nahihirapan ako. Kaya lang...”

Nang mapayuko si Bulusan sa halip na tapusin ang sinasabi, tila may subyang na tumusok sa dibdib ni Guiwan. Sa unang pagkakataon mula nang ipahayag nila ang pag-ibig sa isa’t isa, nakaramdam siya ng pag-aalinlangan sa kanyang puso.

“Sinasabi mo bang...”

Nang iangat ni Bulusan ang kanyang mukha, lumantad sa kanya ang nangingislap na mga mata ng kanyang iniirrog. Binalot siya ng matinding lamig nang matunghayan ang hapis sa mukha ng tikbalang na kanyang piniling makasama habambuhay.

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Sa yungib ng Biak na Bato unang nagtagpo sina Guiwan at Bulusan. Isang malakas na bagyo ang tumawid sa Kalilayan at tinumbok ang

bulubundukin ng Sierra Madre, dahilan upang magsilikas ang mga lamanlupang naninirahan sa taas ng puno at pansamantalang humimpil sa ilalim ng lupa o sa pusod ng bundok.

Nang makarating si Bulusan sa yungib sa gitna ng matinding bayo ng pinagsamang hangin at ulan, dinatnan niya si Guiwan at ang ama nito na nakaluhod sa magkabilang-gilid ng isang naghihinalong tikbalang. Nabagsakan ng malaking sanga sa ulo ang ina ni Guiwan habang lumilikas sila mula sa kanilang tirahan sa gubat. Agad itong nawalan ng malay.

Kinaumagahan, nang makalagpas ang bagyo sa Gitnang Luzon patungo sa Dagat Kanluran, dinatnan nilang wala nang buhay ang inang tikbalang. Tinulungan ni Bulusan ang nagluluksang asawa sa paglilibing habang naiwan sa isang sulok ng madilim na yungib ang naulilang anak.

“Kumain ka muna,” wika ni Bulusan sa tulala pa ring tikbalang. Hawak niya ang hinog na manggang tinangay ng hangin sa bukana ng yungib. Nang hindi siya kibuin o tapunan man lang ng tingin ni Guiwan, iniwan niya ang bunga sa paanan nito.

Sa halip na umuwi sa tinitirhang puno, nanatili si Bulusan sa piling ng mag-ama sa Biak na Bato. Kahit nakabalik na ang halos lahat ng lamanlupa sa kani-kaniyang tirahan sa Sierra Madre, hindi siya umalis sa tabi ni Guiwan. Siya ang nag-alaga sa dalawa habang nagluluksa sila. Siya ang pumitas ng mga bunga sa gubat at sumalok ng tubig sa batis.

Madaling nasanay ang mag-ama kay Bulusan. Makalipas ang tatlong araw

ng pagluluksa, handa na silang bumalik sa kanilang tirahan sa kagubatan.

“Ano...” halos pabulong na tawag ni Guiwan sa tikbalang na tumulong sa kanila. “Hindi ko pala nakuha ang pangalan mo.”

“Bulusan.”

Sumilay ang matipid na ngiti sa mukha ni Guiwan. “Maraming salamat, Bulusan. Ako naman si Guiwan.”

“Ikinagagalak kitang makilala, Guiwan.”

“Ipagpaumanhin mo sana ang inasal ko nitong nagdaang mga araw.”

“Wala kang dapat ihingi ng paumanhin sa akin. Nauunawaan ko ang inyong kalagayang mag-ama. Alam ko kung ano ang pakiramdam ng mawalan ng magulang.”

Nagtagpo ang kanilang mga mata, at sa sandaling iyon, nasilip nila sa balintataw ng bawat isa ang kahati ng kanilang kaluluwa.

**

“Ikaw ang kahati ng aking kaluluwa,” wika ni Bulusan. “Huwag na huwag mong iisipin kahit kailan na nagkamali ako sa aking pagpili.”

Naparam ang pahiwatig ng luhang namuo sa gilid ng mga mata ni

Guiwan. Pinilit niyang ngumiti, ngunit lalo lamang nalukot ang kanyang mukha sa pag-aagaw ng latak na alinlangan at ng lunggati ng kanyang puso.

“Ang totoo,” patuloy ni Bulusan, “nahihirapan akong pumili sapagkat natatakot ako.”

“Anong ikinatatakot mo?” tanong ni Guiwan.

“Na magbago ang iyong pagtingin sa akin kapag nalaman mo ang tunay na nilalaman ng aking isip at ang tunay na ninanais ng aking puso.”

“Sabihin mo sa akin. Ipinapangako kong hindi magbabago ang pagtingin ko sa iyo.”

Isang buntonghininga ang itinugon ni Bulusan.

**

Magkasiping sa ilalim ng bilog na buwan ang magsing-irog na tikbalang. Mahigit isang taon na silang nagliligawan noon nang mapag-usapan nila ang tungkol sa pag-iisang dibdib. Habang binabantayan ang bahagi ng malawak na kagubatang ipinagkatiwala sa kanila ni Bathala, ibinulong ni Guiwan ang isang tanong na matagal na niyang kinikimkim sa sarili.

“Kapag nagsasama na tayo sa iisang puno, ilan ang gusto mong maging supling natin?”

Saglit na natahimik si Bulusan, nakatanaw sa mga puno at halamang bagong-hilamos sa liwanag ng buwan. Pinaglimian niya sa maikling panahong iyon ang magiging buhay nila bilang magkabiyak at bilang isang bagong pamilya sa nalalapit na hinaharap. At sa pagbubukas ng kanyang mga labi, pinakawalan niya ang kalahati ng kanyang katotohanan.

“Kung ilan ang gusto mo,” tugon niya.

Ihinilig ni Guiwan ang kanyang ulo sa balikat ni Bulusan. Sabay nilang pinagmasdan ang nasasakupang gubat—ang biyaya ng langit na iniatang sa kanila ng Maykapal upang pangalagaan at payabungin—at pinagsaluhan ang dalisay na katahimikang kumakatawan sa kapayapaan ng mundo kung saan sila nananahan.

**

“Ang totoo niyan,” wika ni Bulusan, “masaya ako sa pangangalaga sa mga puno at halaman, sa pagbabantay sa maiilap at maaamong hayop sa ating kagubatan, at sa pagtatanggol sa ibang lamanlupa. Masaya ako sa piling mo, sa ating dalawa. Ikaw lamang ay sapat na sa aking buhay. Wala na akong mahihiling pa kay Bathala.”

“Ibig mo bang sabihin...” mahinahong tugon ni Guiwan.

Sa matipid na ngiting sumibol sa mga labi ni Bulusan, nakamit ni Guiwan ang sagot na kanyang hinahangad at pinangangambahan nang sabay.

**

Dumating ang itinakdang araw ng pag-iisang dibdib nina Guiwan at Bulusan. Tanghaling tapat na ay hindi pa rin natatapos sa paggayak ang mga lamanlupa sa pook na iyon para sa natatanging pagdiriwang.

Matingkad ang sikat ng araw at may mangilan-ngilang ulap na naglalangoy sa bughaw na kalangitan. Lahat ay pawang nasasabik sa nalalapit na pagsasama ng kanilang mga iginagalang na tagapagbantay ng kalikasan. Lahat ay atat ding malaman kung sino sa dalawa ang tatayong ina o ama sa bubuuin nilang pamilya.

Nang sa wakas ay humapay ang araw sa dakong kanluran, nagtipon-tipon ang lahat ng lamanlupa, maging ang ilang ibon at maiilap na hayop na naninirahan sa kagubatan, sa palibot ng matayog na talon. Sabay-sabay silang humuni at umungol ng awit ng kalikasan upang pasinayahan ang pag-iisang dibdib ng dalawang tikbalang.

Nagsimula na ring mamuo ang makakapal na ulap sa ibabaw ng talon. Kasabay nito, lumabas mula sa hilaga si Guiwan na napapalamutian ng makukulay na bulaklak ang ulo at mga bisig. Mula naman sa timog, lumantad si Bulusan na ginayakan ng magagarang dahon at baging sa katawan.

Nagtagpo sa gitna ng batis ang dalawang tikbalang, nakalubog ang kalahati ng katawan sa tubig mula sa tadyang pababa. Pinagsugpong nila ang kanilang mga kamay at taimtim na pinagmasdan ang isa't isa bago

nagsumpaan sa harap ng mga lamanlupa, mga ibon at maiilap na hayop.

“Guiwan, ikaw ang tunay na kahati ng aking buhay,” panimula ni Bulusan. “Ikaw ang araw na nagpaparikit sa aking mundo at ang buwang tumatanglaw sa akin sa tuwing naninimdim ang aking landas.”

“Bulusan, ikaw ang nag-iisang kaputol ng aking buhay,” wika ni Guiwan. “Ikaw ang lupang pinagmumulan ng lahat ng biyaya sa aking mundo at ang langit na sumasalo sa mga pangarap na aking binubuo.”

Naghari ang katahimikan sa bahaging iyon ng kagubatan. Habang nasisinagan ng silahis sa kanluran, bumuhos ang banayad na ulan mula sa makulimlim na kalangitan. Ang sabay na pag-araw at pag-ulan ang naging hudyat ng dalawang tikbalang upang isakatuparan ang bagay na matagal na nilang pinagtatalunan.

“Nakapagpasya na ako,” wika ni Bulusan.

Tumango si Guiwan. “Iniibig kita nang buong puso, at walang makapagbabago sa katotohanang ito kahit ano pa man ang iyong piliin.” Nagsimulang mangilid ang luha sa kanyang mga mata, ngunit pinigilan niyang pumatak ang butil nito sa kanyang pisngi.

Dumating ang pinakahihintay na sandali ng lahat—ang pagpili ng kasarian ng dalawang tikbalang na siyang magtatakda ng landas na kanilang tatahakin bilang mag-asawa at bilang isang bagong pamilya.

Nangusap ang mga mata nina Guiwan at Bulusan. Sabay nilang isinakatuparan ang pagbuo at pagpili ng ari sa ilalim ng tubig na nagmumula sa Talong Daranak. Naganap ang pagbabanyuhay. Ilang sandali pa, magkahawak-kamay silang umahon sa batis at dahan-dahang naglakad patungo sa pampang.

Nagitla ang lahat ng lamanlupang naroroon nang makita nila ang piniling ari ng dalawang tikbalang. Mabilis din namang napalitan ng kasiyahan ang pagkagulat na dulot ng kanilang nasaksihan. Sabay-sabay na humuni at umungol ang mga anak ni Bathala sa pakikisalo sa saya ng pag-iisang dibdib ng mga tagapagbantay ng kalikasan.

“Guiwan...”

“Bulusan...”

Hindi matingkala ang ligayang nag-uumapaw sa puso ng bawat isa. Naglapat ang mga labi ng dalawang tikbalang, dahilan upang lalo pang lumakas ang huni at ungol ng mga saksing lamanlupa, ibon at maiilap na hayop na nakapalibot sa kanila.

Ipinagpatuloy nina Guiwan at Bulusan sa isang mahigpit na yakap ang pagpapamalas ng pag-ibig sa isa’t isa habang tahimik na nagkakatamaan ang mga nakalawit na ari na kanilang pinili para sa sarili.



THERE ARE TIKBALANG GETTING BURRIED

STENO PADILLA

Tomorrow, before the sun bids farewell in the west, every lamanlupa will gather in front of Daranak Falls in the Sierra Madre mountain range to witness the union of Guiwan and Bulusan. But today, while everyone is busy preparing for the most important gathering in the forest, the couple continues to argue over which sex they will choose for themselves.

“Vagina or penis?” Guiwan asks their betrothed.

“Which do you prefer yourself?” Bulusan asks in return.

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“Why can't you answer first? You just have to choose which genitals you will own so that I can choose mine.”

“I desire a vagina so I can receive you within me, but I also want to have a penis so I can dive into your being.”

“Why do you always have to make things difficult? Do you want to bear our child or not? If you don't want to, then have a penis and I'll have a vagina. But if you do, then the vagina is yours and the penis is mine.”

This has been the couple's biggest argument since they accepted each other in their lives. This is not surprising for each tikbalang born in the world to go through this test, because they are only given one chance to pick and form their genitals.

Unlike other lamanlupa that develop their sex in the womb, the tikbalang have a slight advantage because they are born without genitals. The human part in the lower half of their body is born bare, and they gain the ability to shape their genitals upon adulthood. Often, they make this choice once they get married to their chosen tikbalang.

“You know very well that my feelings for you won't change no matter what you choose, right?” Guiwan says tenderly.

Bulusan nods. “So does mine.”

“Then why are you having a hard time choosing?”

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“It’s not that I’m having a hard time. I just...”

When Bulusan lowers his horse head instead of finishing what he is trying to say, something sharp seems to pierce Guiwan's chest. For the first time since expressing their desire for each other, doubt creeps into their heart.

“Are you saying...”

When Bulusan lifts their face, they see the glimmer in Guiwan eyes from tears welling up. A numbing cold envelopes Bulusan’s body as they recognize the sadness in the face of the tikbalang they had chosen to be with forever.

**

Guiwan and Bulusan first met in the cave of Biak na Bato. A strong typhoon had just crossed the Kalilayan and hit the Sierra Madre mountain range, causing the lamanlupa living in the trees to evacuate and take shelter underground or within the womb of the mountain.

Upon reaching the cave amidst the strong wind and rain, Bulusan found Guiwan and their father kneeling on each side of a dying tikbalang. Guiwan's mother was hit on the head by a large branch as they were fleeing from their home in the forest. She immediately lost consciousness.

The next morning, when the typhoon had crossed Central Luzon towards

the West Sea, they found the tikbalang mother dead. Bulusan assisted the mourning husband in the burial, while the orphaned tikbalang child stayed in a corner of the dark cave.

“Have something to eat first,” Bulusan told the stunned tikbalang, holding a ripe mango that was blown by the wind at the mouth of the cave. Guiwan neither spoke nor gave the tikbalang as much as a glance, so Bulusan left the fruit near the feet of the bereaved child.

Instead of going back to their tree home, Bulusan stayed with the tikbalang father and child inside the cave of Biak na Bato. While the rest of the lamanlupa had returned to their respective homes in the forest, Bulusan did not leave Guiwan's side. They took care of the two as they mourned. Bulusan picked fruits in the forest and fetched water from the stream.

The father and son took to Bulusan easily. After three days of mourning, they were ready to return to their home in the forest.

“Ano...” Guiwan said to the tikbalang who helped them. “I didn't get your name.”

“Bulusan.”

A shy smile brightened Guiwan’s face. “Thank you, Bulusan. I’m Guiwan, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Guiwan.”

“Um ... I would like to apologize for the way I behaved these past few days.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. I understand what you’re going through. I know what it feels like to lose a parent.”

Their eyes met, and in that moment, they saw in each other a part of their soul.

**

“You share a better part of my soul,” Bulusan says. “Never think for even a moment that I have made a mistake in choosing you.”

The tears forming at the corner of Guiwan’s eyes are stilled. They try to smile, but their face crumples even more as the doubt digs deeper into their heart.

“The truth is,” Bulusan continues, “I’m having a hard time choosing because I’m scared.”

“What are you so afraid of?” Guiwan asks.

“That your opinion of me will change when you finally know what’s in my mind and see my heart’s desire.”

“Tell me. I promise you that nothing will change.”

Bulusan replies with a sigh.

**

The two tikbalang were sitting in a tree under the full moon. They had been seeing each other for over a year when they started talking about their plans for marriage. While watching over the vast forest that Bathala had entrusted upon them, Guiwan whispered a question that they had long kept to themselves.

“When we’re already married and living in the same tree, how many children would you want us to have?”

Bulusan was silent for a moment, staring at the trees and plants awash in moonlight. In that short span of time, they contemplated the two of them living as a couple and as a new family. And when Bulusan opened his mouth, half of their truth was unleashed.

“As many children as you would wish,” they replied.

Guiwan leaned their head on Bulusan’s shoulder. Together, they looked over their beloved forest—the blessing from heaven entrusted to them by the creator to nurture and care for—and shared in the silence that echoed the tranquility of the world in which they dwell.

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“The truth is,” says Bulusan, “I enjoy taking care of the trees and plants, watching over the wild and gentle animals in our forest, and defending other lamanlupa. I am happy to be with you, with just the two of us. You are enough in my life. I could not ask Bathala for more.”

“Do you mean to say...” Guiwan replies calmly.

Upon seeing the smile appearing on Bulusan's lips, Guiwan finally receives the answer they both seek and fear.

**

The day of union has arrived. At noon, the lamanlupa are still busy preparing the ornaments for the occasion. Everyone is excited for the imminent union of their respected defenders, and they are all eager to know which of the two tikbalang will be the mother or the father in their new family.

As the sun commences its descent in the west, all the lamanlupa, as well as the birds and the wild animals living in the forest, start to gather around the towering waterfall. At once, they hum and mutter the song of nature to inaugurate the union of the two tikbalang.

Then, thick clouds gather above the waterfall. Guiwan emerges from the north with colorful flowers on their head and arms. From the south, Bulusan appears with their body decorated with beautiful leaves and tendrils.

The two tikbalang meet in the middle of the waterfall, with half of their body submerged in water from their ribs down. They hold each other's hands and gaze at each other before saying their vows in front of the lamanlupa, the birds and the wild animals.

“Guiwan, you are my better half,” Bulusan says. “You are the sun that makes my world beautiful and the moon that guides me in my darkest days.”

“Bulusan, you are my other end,” Guiwan says. “You are the earth from which all blessings spring forth and the heaven that catches all the dreams I make.”

Silence pervades the forest. A gentle rain starts to pour from the sky even as the sun shines in the west. The occurrence of sunshine and rainfall at the same time has signaled for the two tikbalang to carry out the rite that they have been arguing over for so long.

“I've already decided,” Bulusan says softly.

Guiwan nods. “I love you with all my heart, and nothing can ever change this truth no matter what you decide.” Tears begin to well up in their eyes but they stilled the drops before they could trickle down their cheeks.

The long-awaited moment has come. The tikbalang now choose and form their own genitals, which shall determine the path they are to take as a couple and as a family.

THERE ARE TIKBALANG GETTING BURRIED

Guiwan and Bulusan look deeply into each other's eyes. Together, they have fulfilled the creation of their genitals underwater. The metamorphosis is complete. Moments later, the two tikbalang emerge from the water and, hand in hand, saunter slowly towards the shore.

All the witnesses present are shocked to see the genitals that the tikbalang have chosen for themselves. But delight quickly takes over the disbelief at the surprising turn of event. The children of Bathala carry on with their humming and muttering as they share in the happiness of their guardians.

“Guiwan...”

“Bulusan...”

The overflowing joy in their heart seems impossible to contain. The newlyweds kiss, which intensifies the singing and chirping and hooting of the lamanlupa, the birds and the wild animals surrounding them.

Guiwan and Bulusan are locked in a tight hug, while the dangling genitals they had chosen for themselves brush against each other.



SAINTS AND BODHISATTVAS

JOYCE CHNG

Uhere the straits each other with the confluences of currents and trade routes was the famed Golden Chersonese, a beacon of light, the center of all wealth and riches. Saints and bodhisattvas met there, allies in the inter-exchange of spirituality and learning. You would find your path there, they said. You would never hunger nor would you thirst. Bewitching creatures lurked in the Golden Chersonese, fantastic animals that populated your mind's bestiary. Birds of paradise with tails that flamed like the sun, dragons with large flickering tongues and poisonous saliva, and large cats that roared and founded a city. It lured many explorers, sailors of the sea and wind. It lured me.

I was born in the middle, a straddler between two worlds, one of the sea and one of solid land. The midwife laughed and said I was destined to ride the waves, breathing both ocean air and the sap of sea almond and angkana trees easily. Ibu was perturbed by the midwife's words, but she only held me, so she said, trying to protect me from the elements. I was in the middle, where the currents of life swirled like whirlpools forming at the wake of ships. At two, I was already swimming. At four, I stood at the prow of a skiff, the sea breeze on my face, the sea singing in my veins. At ten, I joined my father in his travels. I remembered soaring stupas, the Sanskrit and Pali of saffron-robed monks, and the solemn tolling of gereja bells on Formosa's hill. I remembered the fragrance of spices and sandalwood wafting through the narrow sunbaked streets of Melaka, the cries of the vendors hawking their wares.

When I turned eighteen, I was given my own perahu. Rare for a girl, but I was never a girl, never a boy either. I wore a lacy kebaya at home, a simple chinon shirt and baggy trousers at sea. My hair was bound tight. I swung on ropes, unencumbered by loose strands of hair. My right hand held a dao, a gift from a friend whom I saved. His ship burned, his cargo gone, but he lived. He was grateful to be alive. I was a saint for saving him.

I fought with his dao, now my dao. With it, I explored the Golden Chersonese.

Then, she came into my life, like a bodhisattva.

My men were loudly discussing the merits of cooking while they repaired my ship. Away from home, they longed for their homes, so they distracted themselves with repair work. Sleek, sharp of prow, my ship cut through the sea like a kris. Yet it was not invincible against the forces of nature. Wood wore down easily, got chipped and sometimes dented. The underside of the ship had to be scraped thoroughly. Months at sea meant abundant growth of sea life. The sharp edges of the shells on the ship's sides hurt our exposed skin.

They joked about making seafood kari with the mussels as they removed them. On lean days we often picked them off the sides of the ship and ate them boiled in coconut water. I never liked them. I craved my mother's ulam. I missed the cleansing taste of the finely-chopped herbs and the bitterness of the fried shallots. But to play along, I laughed with them, the way my father had taught me. In their eyes, I was the towkay's son.

The last raid saw our rival, another band of lanun, trying to escape. In their panic, they rammed the prow of their perahu into the side of my ship. The sound of it made me sick to the stomach. It reminded me of breaking bones. We were lucky water didn't seep in. We limped into our port, our lives and cargo intact. I was livid. We would have to spend the whole month repairing the ship and miss a season of plying the sea before the onset of torrential rains. I hated returning to port and having to wait the rains out. For the repairs, I traded in a new chest of precious Chinese silk in exchange for tools and timber. I had intended to sell the silk. It felt like a bad start to the season.

Around this time, the dry season was nearing its end, ready to go but unwilling to leave. The land was parched, the grass a brittle brown, and the wind hot against my cheeks. It blew in gusts, stirring up puffs of dust from the ground. A large, desiccated spider tumbled across my sandaled feet. The withdrawing tide exposed the seabed rippling with life. Tiny fish darted in the pools of clear water. Crabs waved their pincer claws. I leaned back into the warm sand, my arm across my eyes, glad for some respite. I only wanted the repairs done as soon as possible. The heat lulled me into a light nap.

I heard someone walking towards me, footsteps crunching on the sand. I glimpsed beaded slippers with glittering beads of vivid red and green. Beaded slippers? I raised my face then to the glare of the afternoon sun. She stood before me, imperious, the sunlight outlining a slim figure clothed in a vivid sea-green kebaya and red sarong. Young nyonias were usually accompanied by a stern matronly chaperone when they left their house, if they ever left it at all. They led sheltered lives. What a rare occurrence indeed.

“You must be the captain of the Sri Matahari.” The voice was young and confident, clear with precise pronunciation of the patois spoken in our parts of the Golden Chersonese. I got up quickly, dusting my chinon trousers as I surveyed the girl in front of me.

Her hair was a light brown. Under the sun, the strands shimmered gold. Her skin was the color of my own: the color of a Peranakan child — olive skin with subtle shades of perang. Her dark eyes were large and bright with a

lively intelligence. Portuguese Kristang, then. There was a large population of them in this part of Melaka. They were mostly fishermen. The wealthier ones ran shipping consortiums.

“I am,” I said briskly.

“I have a request... a job for you,” the young woman continued without any introduction. “I will pay you.”

I smiled wryly. “I won't agree to any request without knowing the name of my potential hirer.”

Her full lips twitched. She must have pouted a lot as a child. She schooled her irritation with a smile too. “I am Maria.”

“What can I do for you, Maria?” I stifled my own chuckle. She must have thought I was a man.

She leaned forward suddenly, her manner at once shy and conspiring. Something flashed bright at her neck. A silver necklace. “I want you to kill a man.”

“Kill a man?”

I raised an eyebrow. I had encountered such requests before and twice I had refused them, very politely. I wasn't an assassin.

“Captain Neo,” Maria said severely.

“So, you know my name. Back to my question: Kill a man?”

“Not so loud!” the young woman snorted. My first mate, Halim, looked up sharply. He was always alert and quick to respond. That was why he was my father's first mate and now mine. Only he knew who I actually was.

“I am not a killer,” I shook my head.

“You are lanun. Lanun kill people,” Maria pushed on. I frowned. I was beginning to dislike her attitude. I wanted her to go away. “You are not averse to killing.”

“You must have mistaken me for something I am not. I am just a simple trader,” I said, very mildly. My men knew that particular tone very well. Suddenly, all repair work stopped, and the men stood up, very slowly, with hands on their parangs and kris knives, glaring darkly at her. “You have such a low opinion of us. We are not the ruffians you think we are.”

“Ai meu Deus!” Maria said angrily. She had noticed their reaction. She was no fool.

“I know that expression, senhora. You don't have to swear.”

“I would like you to hunt down the man who killed my father,” Maria whispered, her voice harsh, almost guttural. Her eyes were wet with unshed tears and she clearly hated showing that weakness in front of me and my

men. “I know who and what you really are. Please help me.”

Her voice tugged at something in me. Loss. Pain. Despair. I thought of my father, already several years dead. He died when I was twenty, a victim of the prolonged coughing sickness.

“*Please. Que os santos te abençoem.*” *May the saints bless you.* I knew the phrase. All the captains who plied the Golden Chersonese learned the two or three languages spoken at the major and minor ports, beside the “port tongue” which was a mixture of all the languages. I glanced at the silver necklace on her neck. It was a small crucifix. Serani. Most of the Portuguese Kristang were called Serani by the rest.

Against my better judgment, I nodded.

Her full name was Maria Fernandes.

Once she was perceived as non-threatening, my men went back to repairing the ship, their voices loud enough to be heard from the deck where I invited Maria for freshly brewed Ceylon tea. I did so, because it was the right way to show hospitality to guests, and because this was the way my father had taught me. It was also a good way to gauge my guest face to face, over tea and preserved sweetmeats from my own personal store.

Maria took off her slippers to walk up the wooden plank, even mincing

daintily across without losing her balance. She politely declined my helping hand to step into the ship. Her sarong restricted her movements, yet she moved quickly and with grace. Soon, she sat, legs tucked under her, while I poured the tea into delicate porcelain cups. They were the craze at the moment, all the way from China. She nibbled on the sweetmeats, complimenting the taste of the sugared dry hawthorn. I sipped my tea, wondering who she really was, where her family lived.

“I am an orphan,” she said without being prompted. “If you are curious as I think you are. I was adopted by a Peranakan family... but I left on amiable terms. This kebaya and sarong... they belong to a friend who took me in out of pity.” She lapsed into silence, staring into the sea. Heat shimmered over the horizon. The sky was a clear blue.

“Ah, I see,” I said. “How will you pay me? This is a business transaction.” She looked up, her eyes wide, her nostrils flaring. I realized she was afraid. “I will ... pay you once the deed is done. In the meantime, please grant me permission to work onboard your ship.”

“This is still very vague, Maria. I can't work on the basis of empty terms. My men need payment. Let me remind you that we are all rough people,” I shook my head. “We are all used to rough and hard work.”

Maria stared hard at me. “I have heard rumors about you, that you are actually a woman in disguise. I can work just as hard as a man.”

“What if I am?” I challenged back, suddenly angry at the intrusion of my

privacy. Rumors were often spread by jealous gossip and idle chatter. “Can you handle a weapon? Will you faint at the sight of blood?”

“NO!” her shout startled me with its sheer vehemence. “I am not some fragile flower! If it's handling weapons you want, I can do it. Teach me!” She spat the words out as if they bothered her.

“Well, then,” I said finally. “My ship's still being repaired. We can't leave immediately.”

“I can wait,” Maria pouted. “Even if it means a month.”

Halim chose this time to pop up, peering straight into the ship at us. He was a wiry man, built for the sea. Age had grizzled his temples, but his eyes were still sharp, his tongue even sharper. I saw him as a father of sorts, a replacement for my own. He wore his customary dark sarong and left his torso bare. His family kris hung by his side. “Semua baik-baik aje?” he asked, glancing at Maria sternly. Maria glared back, unafraid.

“We are well,” I smiled, waving him away. “Don't worry.”

My first mate nodded curtly and ducked back out into the afternoon sun, shouting orders to the crew to stop lazing around. Maria left her tea untouched. “I have no family left,” she said.

“We will talk more tomorrow,” I said, suddenly tired. Maria's presence had stirred emotions I'd thought were gone. I missed my family.

I woke up from a dream in which Ibu was grinding ingredients for sambal with the batu giling. Her strong hands rolled the stone cylindrical pestle across the large mortar board. I could hear the stone crushing the chili and herbs. Somewhere, someone was singing. The smell of the chopped galangal and chili mixture intoxicated me. My heart ached with longing. I opened my mouth to say something to my mother, only to peer up, sore, and ill-rested, at the ceiling of my cabin.

I found Maria waiting for me at the bottom of the ship. It was barely morning yet. The tide had rolled in and the hint of rain was in the air. The men slept in, wrapped in their sarongs. Only Halim was awake. He was idly fishing, but I knew he was also alert and listening for any sign of trouble.

She looked tired, as if she had not slept. She was still wearing her kebaya and was wrapped in a tattered shawl. I glanced down at her feet. Bare. The beaded slippers were gone.

“Are you comfortable?” I asked. Maria smiled wanly at me. “We walk barefoot on the ship. Are you sure you don't need protection for your feet?” My own were callused from years on board ships.

She only nodded.

The sky was beginning to lighten. A sliver of golden orange peered over the east. Was Maria the kind to bolt? Time to seal the agreement. I spat into

my right hand and extended it to Maria. Without hesitation, she spat into her right palm and then pressed it against mine. She didn't even flinch.

“Your life is now mine and my life is now yours,” I intoned the formal phrase used amongst people of our particular trade. “You share your food with us, and we share our food with you. We eat the same food. We breathe the same air. The sea protects you and me.”

“Amém,” Maria said, crossing herself. My lips quirked. I decided I was going to like her.

“Let's breakfast.” I walked towards Halim who had started a fire to grill the ikan kuning he'd caught. “And let us get you something to wear. That finery has to go.”

“Please let me keep the kebaya,” Maria hurried to join me. “I want to remember something from my former life.”

“Of course,” I answered coolly. The cooking fish smelled delicious.

We found headgear, a plain grey chinon shirt, and dark green trousers for Maria. The headgear came from Halim's own pile of clothing, the shirt and trousers from my chest since we shared a similar body type. Divested of her kebaya and sarong, Maria looked like a boy in her new clothes, her hair tied up into a tight bun and hidden under the headwrap. She wore no weapon

yet. Her necklace still hung on her neck.

She ate with what seemed like a healthy appetite, picking the flesh off the fish bone with her fingers and chewing the whole fish head before chasing it down with more Ceylon tea.

“The ship's not ready yet,” Halim reported. “We need one day more.”

“Our men are hardworking,” I said. My first mate grinned, a flash of white teeth.

“They are motivated by the sea,” he said, before leaning closer, darting a quick look at Maria who remained ignored by the rest of the men who swarmed over the ship. “You trust her?”

“Hers is a blood feud. She seeks revenge.”

“Keep an eye on her, Kapitan. I would rather have her off the ship.”

“She has no family.”

Halim snorted. “That's the reason given by half of our men. And ... she's ...you know ... a woman ...” He let the sentence trail into silence.

“You said that about me a long time ago.”

“You are our towkay's child.”

“Son. Our towkay's *son*.”

Halim's face reddened. “Kapitan, you have proved yourself on the sea. She? I am not sure, though I have heard that there are women on the other ships too, just as fierce and bloodthirsty as men.”

“Let her go clean the ship's deck first,” I said finally, wrapping my headgear around my head. “That's her first test.”

By mid-day, Maria looked like a bedraggled ghost. But the ship floor had been thoroughly scrubbed.

“Not bad,” Halim said, sounding unconvinced.

“Let her mend the sails,” I said.

By evening, Maria sat, looking pale. The sails were mended, the tears neatly sewn. She managed to get the tools from the men who treated her as some sort of novelty. Halim made seafood kari, the spices courtesy from our own supplies, the fish and shrimp netted from the day's catch. Maria received her coconut husk bowl of kari and retreated to the prow of the ship where she ate alone.

“Now let us see if she decides to stay,” I nibbled at my own food.

I was woken up by the sound of splashing water and the smell of wood fire. I peered out from my cabin. Maria was boiling water in the tin kettle. Fish was already cooking on wooden skewers she had fashioned out of the fallen twigs beneath the portia trees. She had caught enough fish for all of us.

I smiled.

Sri Matahari cut through the water as if relieved to be released from confinement. Her sails caught the wind full. I heard them humming their familiar song. Around me, the men went about their usual duties, checking the ropes, the hooks and sharpening their weapons. Halim stood at the lookout, his eyes watching everything. Our pilot, Abdullah, steered the rudder. He had an intuitive touch when it came to guiding the ship.

“Maria!” I barked.

She ran up quickly. Her eyes sparkled. I could feel her excitement. So far, she had shown no seasickness. She didn't seem to mind the sea. Perhaps, somewhere in her blood, there was sea water.

“Where does the murderer of your father live?” I asked.

“Temasek,” she replied quickly, her voice cold. “He lives in Temasek.”

While Sri Matahari sailed, I taught Maria basic weapon drills. I couldn't possibly teach her all the things I knew. Instead, I chose one weapon and stuck to it. Maria handled the dagger easily. Block, attack, strike. Block, attack, strike. I knew the men watched the practice from the corner of their eyes, still painfully polite and reluctant to include her in their activities.

“You need to be more aggressive. “I pushed her. “Attack me. The people you meet later will not be nice nor will they be gentle.”

Maria gritted her teeth. She had stopped pouting. In fact, I had not seen her pout since she had come aboard. She came at me, her guard open. I stepped aside and twisted her arm. She struggled.

“Again,” I said. I released her. She didn't rub her arm. Instead, she inhaled deeply, closing her eyes, before opening them again. She rushed, I evaded, only to have her side-step me. Her foot caught me off-balance. I tripped and stumbled. The men chuckled.

She reached down to help me up. Her grip was strong. I got to my feet. I could smell Maria. She smelled of spices and sweat. Her hair oil was not unpleasant, her body soft and warm. I felt my body respond, a flush of moist heat between my legs. The response surprised me. I had never felt it before.

Before I could speak, she had placed her dagger onto my bare neck. I felt the cold edge press gently against the skin. “Surprise,” she whispered in my ear. “*You have thick soles. I think you need shoes.*” She smirked.

“Beginner's luck,” I pulled away, scowling at her. “Well done and *thank you, no, I don't.*”

Halim sighted the ship from a distance.

We were nearing Temasek, having navigated the complex network of small islands and sandy shoals surrounding the island. Maria had spent the week on the ship learning how to steer the rudder, wrestle and hone her fighting skills, and scrub the deck with coconut-husk bristles. The week had passed uneventfully. The season had only begun. Most ships would only emerge from their hide-outs and ports once the merchant ships arrived. The ones plying the straits now were either fishermen or...people like us.

I had grown used to watching Maria prepare hot water and food every morning. I... grappled with the surge of emotions and physical sensations whenever I saw her. I dreaded and craved standing next to her. She was the saint I couldn't bear to touch, a beautiful bodhisattva so pure I felt guilty for even walking close to her. An exquisite and rare beautiful bird-of-paradise. Yet, she saw me as her captain and the person whom she had hired to kill her father's murderer. The voice of reason in me warned me to stay far away from her and maintain an air of business. I had never had a woman on board my ship. Halim was right. It stirred up *things* in me.

The men were not immune either. One by one, they started to drift close to her, so that they could catch a glimpse of her before scuttling away with

their dignity intact. A couple of them tried to share food with her. When she washed herself with the clean water we stored in barrels, everyone pretended not to see. We draped a sheet across her part of the ship to cordon off the area. Yet, she didn't seem interested in any of the men. She treated them like older brothers. Strange and distant older brothers.

Kill the murderer, get my payment, and we would be rid of her. These thoughts filled my head.

Where would she go once the deed was done?

“Perahu!” Halim shouted.

It slid in confidently, like a hunting shark lured by blood and the prospect of a meal. The perahu was of the same make as Sri Matahari. Its sails were angled sharply. The captain was banking on speed. There were lanun who prided themselves on their attack skills. Many were hit-and-run experts: attack their opponent or merchant, take what they needed, kill everyone aboard. I had seen ships adrift at sea, the crew dead and the cargo stolen. Most of the time, we just sailed past and offered a prayer.

What else could we do?

There were ten figures standing at the side of the ship, their weapons drawn. They were ready to board. Their pilot was steering the perahu

so that it was heading at us directly. They were ready to board and kill. Abdullah yanked at the rudder and Sri Matahari moved, pulling away. It was our own tactic, to draw the enemy into a circling dance. "Let them give chase," I said, my heart pounding, my blood singing in my veins. Beside me, Maria swallowed convulsively, her eyes wide.

The lanun drew close, enough to see their features. Their faces showed a range of colors: from perang to putih. There were three Dutch men among them. Some of the Dutch decided to stay after incursions into the area. Most had moved to Batavia where I heard they wreaked havoc and were terrible masters. They had fought with the Portuguese for territory: Local rulers used them as pawns in their own bid for power. These Dutch men looked battle-hardened, their skin thick and leathery, their eyes fierce. They wore the same clothing as the rest. They had thrown in their lot with these lanun.

"Short sabers," Halim muttered darkly. "Probably stolen." He hated the Dutch.

Maria gripped her dagger with a wild look on her face. She seemed to have seen something...someone on the ship.

"What's wrong, Maria?" I asked.

"It's *him*. I recognize him. He's there on the ship!" Her voice trembled, halfway between fear and exhilaration.

"Who's 'he'?" I growled.

"My father's killer. One of the white men! There, look, he's wearing headgear!"

I saw him. He was a middle-aged man with white hair and grizzled face. Tall and lanky, he leaned heavily to his left. Old injury?

"Are you sure?" Halim snapped.

"Yes!" Maria shivered. "Yes!"

"You ready?" I asked her. "Are you sure?" I repeated Halim's question.

"Yes. I am."

"Abdullah, we are going in," I shouted.

Abdullah needed no further instruction. Sri Matahari began her attack run.

"He killed your father?" I whispered.

"Yes, he did. They fought over something a long time ago. They were... friends. He killed Papa. He killed him ... and Mama pined to death. I saw

her die. I was only ten. Ten. I want to kill him for what he did to Papa and Mama. He destroyed my family!” Maria's knuckles were white, her breathing shallow. Her eyes, though, blazed with hatred.

“Today you get to kill him and avenge them,” I said.

We drew close enough to board. The lanun yelled curses at us. My men hurled the boarding hooks.

With a laugh, I leaped across, my dao aimed at the captain of the ship.

He was an old man, but he fought harder than a cornered harimau. Still, I managed to subdue him, kicking him hard in the ribs. He fell hard backwards, his head hitting the boards. Dark blood seeped beneath the head. His men roared, having witnessed the death of their captain. They were going to fight even more viciously now.

In the tumult of combat, I didn't see Maria. Everybody was busy killing or not getting themselves killed.

The chaos parted, to reveal Maria confronting the Dutchman who killed her father. Her eyes screamed death. She yelled a stream of Portuguese words so obscure I didn't understand most of them. Only “death” and “go to hell” made sense.

The man seemed to freeze, as if he recognized her, before he launched into a series of slashing cuts to drive her off. He wanted to kill her.

Maria ducked, dodging the saber. The silver necklace swung, catching the light of the sun. Then my line of vision was hindered by a tumbling mess of wrestling men. When they rolled away, I looked desperately for Maria. What I saw sent shocks up my back.

The Dutchman had her pinned to the floor, his saber tip pointed towards her throat. She was resisting him as fiercely and strongly as she could, spitting into his face. He swore and cursed at her. Suddenly, he grunted, and his entire body stiffened. Maria had somehow managed to shove her dagger deep in his chest.

“Go to hell,” I heard her say in Portuguese. The man didn't respond. He was already dead. She looked disgusted as she pushed the corpse off her body and pulled the dagger out, leaving a deep, bloody gash.

By this time, the battle was done. The remaining crew members begged for mercy, only to have Halim slit their throats with his kris. The rest of my men went about the dead bodies, making sure the crew were dead. The ship was carrying stolen cargo: Three boles of expensive Chinese silk and two large cedar-wood chests. Upon opening the chests, we found eighty gold and silver ingots in each. They must have recently attacked a merchant ship to have such riches. We were in luck. I thanked all the deities, even the saints and bodhisattvas. I was already planning to give some of the gold to Ibu on my next visit home.

Dagger in hand, Maria stood in the sea of corpses, staring numbly at the dead men, including the body of her father's killer.

"It's done," she said in a soft voice. "Rest in peace, Papa and Mama."

She didn't cry. After wiping her dagger clean of blood, she helped the men carry the cargo across the plank, back to our ship.

We left the perahu adrift, the fate of every lanun who died at sea. Sri Matahari sailed away, richer, and heavier.

"I am voiding our agreement," I told Maria when the ship found shelter at a quiet mangrove swamp. Halim was wading in the soft mud, hunting for large meaty crabs. We would celebrate later with a meal of boiled mud crab.

"Why? I promised to pay you," Maria sputtered. She seemed to have weathered her first kill well.

"We have two chests of ingots. I am going to give you eight of the gold ones. I hope you can start a new life with them."

"Eight gold ones ..." Maria let her words trail off.

"We will drop you back at port tomorrow," I said. "Go back to your friend. Pay her one gold ingot as compensation."

"No, I want to stay," Maria said firmly. "I want to stay on the ship. With you."

"I am not your protector."

"You are not," Maria said. "But we swore an oath, remember? *Your life is now mine and my life is now yours.*"

"Ah."

"I want to uphold our oath," she said, watching Halim catch his first mud crab. He was chuckling away like a little boy with his first catch, his face and legs smeared with mud. The men laughed too. It had been a bountiful day.

"I want to travel the Golden Chersonese with the ship... with you," she continued, her gaze returning to rest on me. She was very close now. I could smell her. She had washed herself thoroughly with our water after the encounter with the lanun. She bore the fragrance of sea salt. Her dagger rested tucked in her belt. "I want to know you better," she said shyly.

My heart rose at those words. I tried to maintain a stern demeanor. "You might get more than what you bargained for."

"The Peranakan matriarch bitch made me do all the menial chores," Maria snorted. "I can endure *anything.*"

"Anything? Including me? I can be rather unbearable, just ask Halim." I

replied. "Are you sure?"

"You are interesting, Captain Neo." Maria giggled.

"I am only *interesting*?"

Maria laughed her first real laugh. Such a wonderful sound. The men glanced quickly at her, startled by her sudden gaiety.

"Of course." Her eyes sparkled merrily. "That is why I want to know you better."

"Indeed," I said. "Indeed."

So, you came into me like a bodhisattva. We sailed the Golden Chersonese together, you and me, straddlers between the worlds. With two of the gold ingots, I bought you a pair of new boots, no more beaded slippers, but in the latest fashions outside the Golden Chersonese. They were apparently the rage in the courts of the kings and queens, made of the finest leather, with a tracery of yellow flower embroidery curling along the edges and the softest of velvet lining their insides. You laughed and said you could run faster with bare feet. "Don't be silly," you said as the sun rose above us in reds and oranges.

I laughed back. You kept the shoes in your private wooden box with the

kebaya and sarong. You still wore your silver necklace.

And all was right in the world again.



TABI-TABI PO, TAO

SLAC CAYAMANDA

I hate it here,” Chico mumbles to himself as he slumps in the seat on the bus next to some guy he has never seen before. Chico never talks to anyone unless they talk to him first. He keeps his head down in school, so he rarely gets to look at his schoolmates’ faces when he walks down the halls.

“Hey, you’re Chico, right?” says the boy next to him, dressed like James Dean with his hair slicked back and drenched in pomade that smells like citrus, wearing a white t-shirt over black jeans paired with some black boots.

Chico nods to acknowledge the boy’s question.

“I’m Mento.”

“That’s a weird name,” says Chico. “Your parents named you after a candy?”

“It’s not as weird as Christine for a guy, right?”

“Hey, how did you know that name?!” Chico hates the name on his birth certificate. He never utters it to anyone nor writes it on his exam papers.

“Well, I’ve been observing you for years, since the first year of high school.”

“What, why would you do that? Dude, I’m not into guys!”

Before Mento can explain, Chico turns away from the window. Chico has never liked being noticed. He doesn’t like the attention. He wears plain black t-shirts a size bigger, and folds the sleeves up to make it fit just a little bit better. He wears black to hide his figure, the impending growth of his chest.

Sitting on the aisle, his seat facing everyone on the bus, he feels even more exposed to the other students, afraid they would stare at him. He leans his head on the seat and closes his eyes to give himself the illusion of being invisible.

Chico decides to open his eyes, and 4 hours have passed since they started their trip. Mrs. Rodriguez, the teacher chaperoning this busload, stands up in front with her red megaphone and announces that they would be taking a 30-minute break for lunch at a designated stopover.

The place is an old run-down gas station that has a few food stalls. Nothing fancy like Starbucks or any fast food restaurants one might find in NLEX or SLEX. There is a turo-turo with a dozen of viands to choose from though. They really are in some backroad of some town in Laguna.

Chico feels the need to relieve himself but has always been unsure of public bathrooms. He sees that most of the boys have gone ahead to find food first. So he takes this as an opportunity to head for the bathrooms.

He takes a peek. The toilet is packed with much older men. About ten of them are in line for the urinals. Some of them know each other, chatting about women they've been seeing from various towns. Some are on their mobile phones playing games. .

"You should see Linda, páre. She's always willing to come by the truck when I'm in Tarlac," says one of the men in line.

"Yeah, páre, you should also meet my girl, Vanessa from Ilocos and my other girlfriend, Gina from Baguio, I always stay at their homes. I don't have to pay for a motel when I'm waiting for the cargo. I get to fuck them all the time when I'm there," says another truck driver.

Chico sees that there are only two toilet cubicles. Five men are in line. He makes his way to line up for the door on the left where there are only two men in the queue. The men are huge and he feels them staring at him for being so small. His hearing sharpens, so acute that he could hear their words coming closer and closer. Every time someone utters some woman's name, his heart leaps. He is sure that they are about to discover his secret.

He backs away from the cubicles, he makes his way between these large men, while saying, "Excuse me po, sorry po. Tabi po". He panics then he realizes that his voice gives him away more than his body does. He runs out, gasping for air.

Once out, he slows his breathing to calm his heart. He still needs to pee. He thinks of his next move, moves his gaze around to check out the place and he notices that there were some bushes behind the bathroom. Maybe he could hide behind the bushes to do his business.

He walks towards the plants, he turns his head to see if any of the students are looking his way.

The bushes are santan plants twice his height. He checks for an entry, and finds a small gap between two bushes exactly his size. A doorway to his bathroom. He steps through and there is a much bigger space behind the bushes leading to a forest. There were tall acacia and balete trees that aren't scary like ones in stories or films.

He hurries to a spot behind a rock big enough to cover him. He pulls

down his pants to squat. He hurries to finish and fixes his clothes. As he steps out from behind the rock, he sees the silhouette of a boy walking backwards towards him with his left hand covering his eyes while his right hand is trying to feel his way around. Some boy goofing around.

Chico starts laughing when he realizes it was Mento. “What are you doing? You’re going to trip!”

“Is it safe to look?” asks Mento teasing.

“Yeah, yeah!” says Chico.

“Ooh, someone’s in a good mood.”

“I don’t know, maybe because I just had the best pee ever!”

“That or it’s because of this place. It’s magical for people like us, you’re no longer in Laguna, dude!” says Mento.

And Chico is surprised that he understood what Mento meant, “Has it always been here? It’s like... glowing. I’m sure I did not see this earlier. And what did you mean by ‘magical for people like us’ and where are we?”

Mento gestures towards the opening of the forest. Chico relaxes and follows Mento. There is indeed something magical about that forest and he is feeling something homey about it. It feels like a safe haven for him, he has not experienced that in a very long time.

Chico chuckles as he walks towards the entryway, excited for what is waiting for him inside. He can hear the sound of birds, whistling a song.

They are singing for him, and he knows that they are speaking to him in his mind. Thousands of white butterflies flap their wings to make a rhythm so loud that blends well with the sound of the birds. They make their way to Chico. He is enchanted by the magic he is experiencing. They are saying hello to him.

“What is this? Where am I? Why am I so happy?” asks Chico.

“This is where we are from, this is where our kind lives through between time and history. You and I are alike, Chico. We are descendants of magical beings that were erased from the history you know too well. We are the Mentefuwaley.”

Chico is shocked. “Where is this exactly?”

“Well, we used to live as doctors and spirit guides, we were a part of the Teduray tribe. But that place became harsh for many of us. We cast a spell and created an alternate plane where we can exist without having to die, become ill or get hunted by people who do not understand us and have forgotten about our existence.”

Mento starts walking to the heart of the forest. Chico, though still in disbelief, follows.

From afar, they see wisps of smoke rising from a circle of campers who are merrily chatting with each other. Some play musical instruments. Some dance while the others clap in the tune with the music.

Chico recognizes some of the instruments the people played, the two-stringed guitar, hagalong, and the gimbald drums. He notices that those people are not simply making conversations with each other, but they do it in tune with the music. He knows what it is, it is a Balikata! He doesn't even remember if he learned that from school or dug up from a memory buried deep in his mind. He feels a wave of nausea as all the knowledge rushes back to his brain.

Mento notices and catches him by the arm. He sits him down on one of the logs among the people in the camp.

An elderly woman approaches, she has broad shoulders and thick arms, is dressed in white and has a kerchief wrapped around her head.

Mento takes the elderly woman's right hand and presses its back against his forehead. The woman smiles and then turns to Chico. She smiles at him. Chico feels his nausea wash away, and he feels the warmth of the cure from the old woman's smile.

"She's Upi, that's her name, she's our mother here. She cannot talk. A Spaniard became her lover once but he cut her tongue out so she couldn't tell anyone about their relationship. But she speaks through her mind, listen", says Mento. Chico only smiles at Upi.

Upi then gestures for Chico to place his palms up and cup them together. He does so and water in a coconut shell appears on Chico's hands. Upi smiles and Chico sees in his mind that she wants him to drink from it. After gulping down the water, he feels a surge of energy enter his body. He becomes a brand-new person... or rather, he has become the man that he always was.

Mento stands up from beside Chico. He screams loudly but it is not a disturbing sound. It is a very loud hum. Everyone in the camp stands up, quiets down and faces Chico, Mento, and Upi. Chico notices this and he stands up as well.

Mento points at Chico and shouts, "Our brother is home, he has found his way back to us. We are all here to welcome Chico to where he belongs, to where he will remain safe, with us!"

Mento turns to Chico and says one more thing, "Thank you for finding us, Chico!"

Chico feels that tears are falling down his cheeks, and under his breath, he whispers, "Oh God, I'm home."



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Joel Donato Ching Jacob is the writer of *Wing of the Locust*, 2018 Scholastic Asian Book Award Winner, and *Artifacts* from the Parent 2019 Editors' Choice for Best Asian Short Stories. He enjoys fitness and outdoors. Cupkeyk lives in Bay, Laguna with his mother and dogs. Follow him on twitter and instagram: @chimeracupkeyk

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Ms DEE CHAR

Dee Char is Malaysian and was born into a family with tribal heritage. It wasn't until she had her own child that she started to think about her family's past and the lives they lived, particularly with magic. Hence, she started writing her first book inspired by their Borneo heritage.

In her previous life, as an engineer, she could never have imagined herself writing a book. Fast forward twenty years, Mr. Low and the Magic of Borneo is Dee Char's first book.

Dee Char currently lives in Malaysia together with her gym-religious husband and her unicorn-loving daughter in a plushy-filled house.

RIZAL IWAN

Rizal Iwan is a writer from Jakarta, Indonesia. His short stories were published in The Jakarta Post, Magdalene online magazine, and several collective anthology books. He also wrote a series of horror novels for children, entitled Creepy Case Club. In addition, he is also an actor and has been involved in several theater productions, short films, and web series.

THAM CHEE WAH

Tham Chee Wah is a salesman first before a writer. They are also a professional in organizing sales convention and exhibition, planning marketing events and took the stand as the event's emcee.

As they travelled the world, including Africa and South America, either as a backpacker or an event coordinator for an International Company having its offices in countries in Africa and the Middle East, they listened to stories. They eat the local food and tried to live like the people in the countries they visited. That was how they began writing, apart from creating documents for the companies; they took the experiences and turned them into short stories.

No matter how many countries they've been, they still love Malaysia, a place they so understand its scents, sceneries and stories.

MOCHI

They were never pushed to become who they wanted to be but when they were pushed down by those who didn't believe in them, they buried themselves in literature and art. They started to love writing when they realized that they could rhyme, they then pushed themselves until one day they started going into poetry, where their love for writing grew. It grew and it grew until they got the courage to send in stories to some publications. Living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, they wanted what everyone wanted: to leave a mark in the ever flowing river of life. And with writing they found it. Stories are a part of life and to write about the stories that reside everywhere.

STRALLE

Stralle is a freelance writer and editor from the Philippines with an interest in narrative and game design. While not previously published in print, they have written articles and essays on gaming culture (available online), and have works published or forthcoming for indie pen-and-paper and video games.

SHIFT

Shift is a Malaysian author who identifies with she/they pronouns. They usually write short stories of varying genres but prominently fantasy and horror. As an author, Shift's goal is to tell the tales that rise from the mundane and share them with others. They hope to continue to be a part of and contribute to the creative community, to express random ideas through their writing and reach people who think the same way or even inspire others to be creative and ignite passion in them just like how other writers have done to them. To Shift, even when there is nothing there, one just needs to look a little bit closer and believe a little bit harder to see magic come to life right in front of our eyes.

A. XIAO WEI

She doesn't like to be open about everything related to her personal life, so she chose A. Xiao Wei as her nick pen. Found herself through art since elementary high school. She has made some poetry since then in her diary book. Life changing and sometimes, she can't be straightforward so she wrote it on artisanjuice.my.id mostly about injustice, body, her roles and sexuality. On various occasions, she reads her works or turns it into a

song. She speaks (mostly) through poetry and song for a cause(s) not applause. She is an initiator of some activities, along with stage of expression or fine art installation to encourage women to be braver in their own way.

RENZ CHRISTIAN TORRES

Renz Christian Torres is a freelance writer. He has authored the fiction collection *The Hoopoe Stories* and the children's book *Sami Has a Secret*. He has written for several publications including *Adobo*, *YoungSTAR*, and the *Dumaguete MetroPost*. He was a special fellow for fiction on the 53rd Silliman University National Writers Workshop in 2014 and has won second place in the 2018 Doreen Gamboa Fernandez Food Essay Writing Contest. He co-manages *Duma Alt Press*, an indie press for writers in Dumaguete.

STENO PADILLA

Steno Padilla is a gay writer from the Philippines. He has won two *Lampara Prizes* for his gay-themed young adult novels, "*Ang Lihim sa Tore ng Sinagtala*" and "*Si Aris sa Tagsibol ng Damdamin*," as well as the *Romeo Forbes Story Writing Competition*. His other works appear in "*Busilak: New LGBTQ Poetry from the Philippines*," "*DxMachina: Philippine Literature in the*

Time of COVID-19," "*Katitikan Journal*," and "*A/Part: An Anthology of Queer Southeast Asian Poetry in the Pandemic*," among others.

JOYCE CHNG

Joyce Chng lives in Singapore. Their fiction has appeared in *The Apex Book of World SF II*, *We See A Different Frontier*, *Cranky Ladies of History*, and *Accessing The Future*. Joyce also co-edited *THE SEA IS OURS: Tales of Steampunk Southeast Asia* with Jaymee Goh. Their recent space opera novels deal with wolf clans (*Starfang: Rise of the Clan*) and vineyards (*Water into Wine*) respectively. They also write speculative poetry with recent ones in *Rambutan Literary* and *Uncanny Magazine*. Occasionally, they wrangle article editing at *Strange Horizons* and manage *Umbel & Panicle*, a poetry journal and ezine about and for plants and botany (which they also founded). Alter-ego J. Damask writes about werewolves in Singapore. You can find them at <http://awolfstale.wordpress.com> and @jolantru on Twitter.

SLAC CAYAMANDA

Slac Cayamanda is graduate of AB-Political Science from De La Salle University. He currently works as a Community Manager and a Writer. He founded *White*

Wall Poetry in 2015, a performance poetry collective aiming to elevate Filipino spoken word. Slac Cayamanda is a proud and loud trans-man and trans advocate. He uses his poetry to educate people about transgenderism, SOGIE and empower the minorities. He has taken his poetry across the pond in Malaysia and Singapore, hoping to also take his poetry to other countries.

In December 2019, he launched his first solo chapbook entitled, "Of Shadows and Broken Mirrors", a poetry collection highlighting stories about trans & queer adversities, as well as mental health.

BOOK COVER

GUIA TY


Guia Ty is a self-taught artist from the Philippines whose art focuses on females, flowers, and the abstraction of human emotions. Her primary medium is watercolors, incorporating inks and acrylics through years of practice. She has participated in local and international art competitions at a young age, winning three times in Hong Kong. She has also been part of two international group exhibitions, in Porto Venere, Italy and in Harrogate, England. Check her art page at facebook.com/guiatya or email her at guiatya@gmail.com.

ARKIN FRANY

Arkin Frany is lost. He's still figuring out how to be a fully functional adult. He has been accepted as a fellow for creative nonfiction in both the 58th Silliman and 16th Ateneo national writers' workshops. He has also been a fellow to the inaugural Mulat Sulat SOGIE Inclusive Children's Story Writing Workshop in which he developed his first children's book, *One Of The Boys (Or How Kenny Saved The City Of Toyland)*. His poems and essays have been published locally and can be found in *Saro: Literary Journal of Samahang Lazaro Francisco*, *Vox Populi Online Magazine*, *Aftershock+* among others.

You can also check him on behance.net/iarkinfrany if you want to see his graphic design portfolio. Email him at iarkinfrany@gmail.com. You can see him lurking on twitter and instagram: [@arkinpurrranii](https://twitter.com/arkinpurrranii).

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Native culture and colonial repression clash in these fifteen fantastical stories of belonging from Southeast Asia.

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