

THE BEST OF PHILIPPINE
SPECULATIVE FICTION 2009



Best of Philippine Speculative Fiction 2009
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B e s t o f
P h i l i p p i n e
S p e c u l a t i v e
F i c t i o n 2 0 0 9

edited by Charles Tan

Acknowledgements to Dean Francis Alfar, Nikki Alfar, Vincent Michael Simbulan, and Kenneth Yu—editors and publishers whom without, an anthology such as this might not exist.

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B e s t o f
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S p e c u l a t i v e
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S u m m a t i o n 2 0 0 9

THE SIXTEEN STORIES included in this anthology were chosen from magazines (online and print), anthologies, and single author collections. The authors reside in the Philippines, France, Singapore, and the United States.

A n t h o l o g i e s

WHEN IT COMES to anthologies, 2009 was the year of delayed releases.

Philippine Speculative Fiction IV edited by Dean Francis Alfar and Nikki Alfar (Kestrel IMC) was originally scheduled for late 2008 but finally got released in February 2009. Subsequent volumes should follow this new schedule. The book features twenty-three original stories and an excerpt from an upcoming novel.

Another anthology that finally saw the light of day was *A Time for Dragons* edited by Vincent Michael Simbulan (Anvil Publishing) which is a themed anthology. The call for submissions was posted way back in 2005 but it is only this year that the anthology finally got released under a mainstream publisher. There are seventeen stories in this book, fourteen of which are original. In *Locus Magazine*, Rich Horton describes it as "...[the book] manages a wide range of styles – and dragons – and it's another fine collection."

A web-only anthology is *The Farthest Shore* edited by Dean Francis Alfar and Joseph R. Nacino (Estranghero Press). It takes its name from one of Ursula K. le Guin's *Earthsea* novels and includes twelve secondary-world fantasy stories. Two of the stories

are reprints from *Philippine Speculative Fiction I* but the rest are original to the book.

An international anthology worth mentioning is *By Blood We Live* edited by John Joseph Adams (Night Shade Books) as it includes a story from Singapore-based writer Gabriela Lee. “Hunger” was originally published in *A Different Voice: Fiction by Young Filipino Writers* edited by Vicente Garcia Groyon (UST Publishing House) and is reprinted in this vampire-themed anthology.

The Apex Book of World SF edited by Lavie Tidhar (Apex Book Company) includes “L’Aquilone du Estrellas (The Kite of Stars)” by Dean Francis Alfar and “Excerpt from a Letter by a Social-realist Aswang” by Kristin Mandigma. These were originally published in *Strange Horizons* and *Clarkesworld Magazine* respectively.

Cinema Spec: Tales of Hollywood and Fantasy edited by Karen A. Romanko (Raven Electrick Ink) includes the flash fiction piece “Oracle in Chains” by Rodello Santos. Santos is based in America.

M a g a z i n e s

LOCALLY, THE MAGAZINES dedicated to fiction aren’t faring so well. Both *Story Philippines* and *The Digest of Philippine Genre Stories* have only released one issue in 2009, whereas the former is supposed to be a quarterly while the latter’s release, *The Digest of Philippine Genre Stories: Special Horror Issue* was originally slated for 2008. A new eBook publisher, *Rocket Kapre*, has released a web-only fiction magazine entitled *Usok*. The first issue had five stories, three of which are original while the other two are reprints.

Mainstream magazines, from *Uno* to *Rogue*, have occasionally been publishing fiction pieces in their pages, which happens to include texts that could be categorized as speculative fiction. The

weekly periodicals *The Philippines Free Press* and *Philippines Graphic* also churned out several speculative fiction stories over the course of the year.

Online genre magazines such as *Fantasy* and *Expanded Horizons* have also published Filipino authors such as Rochita Loenen-Ruiz and Eliza Victoria.

C o l l e c t i o n s

WHILE NOT SPECIFICALLY labeled as speculative fiction, there are two noteworthy collections released this year.

Waking the Dead and Other Horror Stories by Yvette Tan (Anvil Publishing) includes ten stories from the author, most of which are reprints. Unfortunately, the book lacks a proper bibliography. Author Paul G. Tremblay describes the book as: “Many of the stories revolve around legendary spirits/beasts and read somewhat dreamlike, Jamesian in a way, while there are others that are in voice, style, and plot very much a modern horror story.”

The Lost Language: Stories by Marianne Villanueva (Anvil Publishing) is not exclusively speculative fiction but those that fall under this category are well-written. This is a mix of eight reprints and six original stories, the former being published in both abroad and local venues.

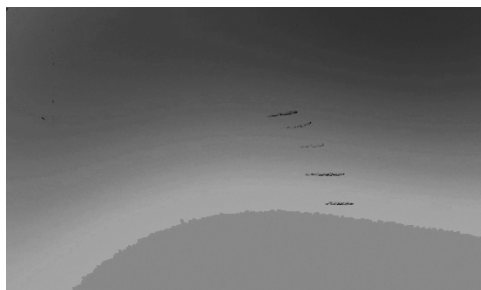
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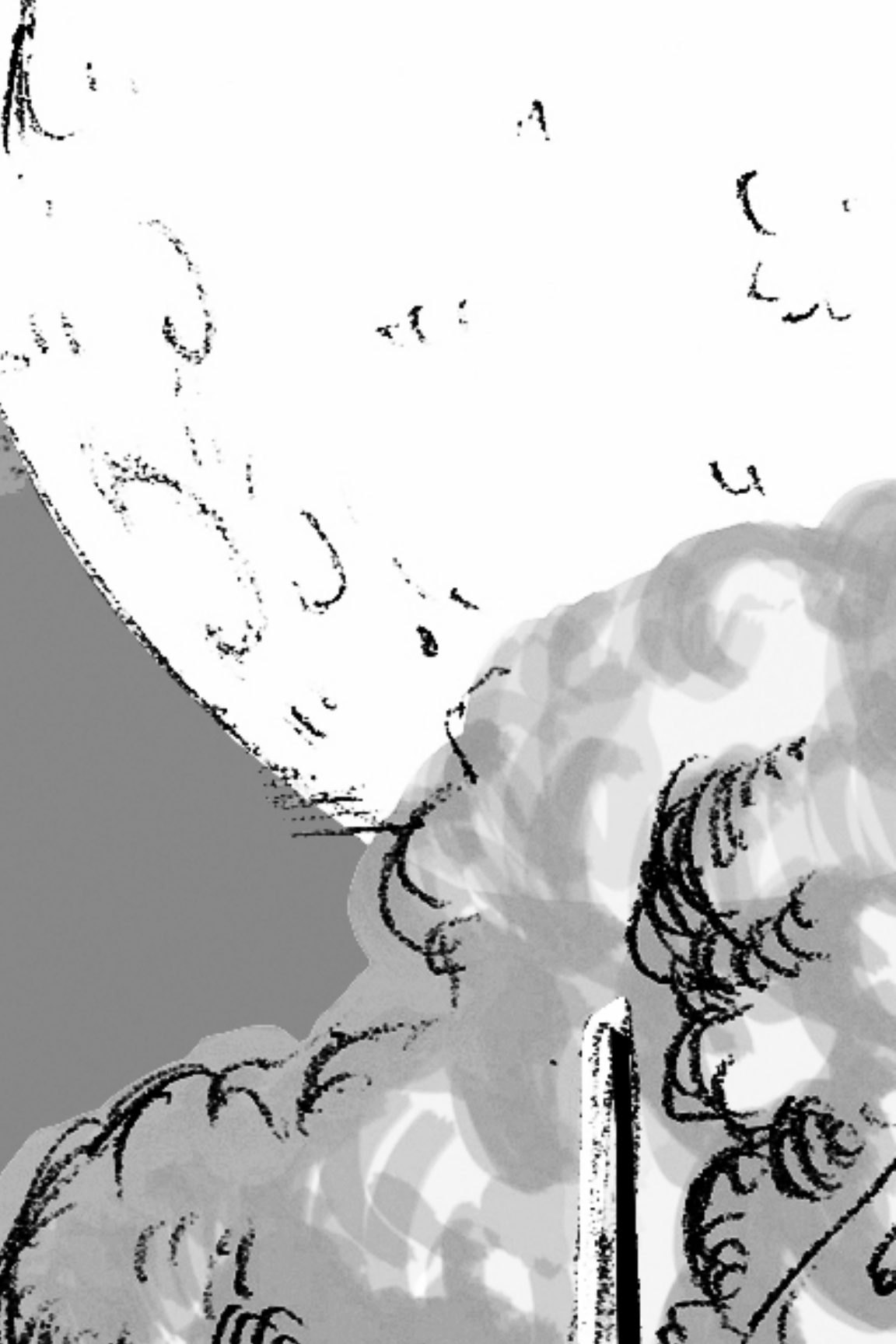
WHILE NOT NECESSARILY awards in of themselves, three stories published in 2008 made it in the Honorable Mentions longlist of *Best Horror of the Year: Volume One* edited by Ellen Datlow (Night Shade Books). These are “Thirty-Two” by Elyss

Punsalan from *Story Philippines*, “Psychic Family” by Apol Lejano-Massebieau from *Philippine Genre Stories IV*, and “Seek Ye Whore” by Yvette Tan from *Rogue Magazine*.

Netherlands-based writer Rochita Loenen-Ruiz was this year’s Octavia E. Butler Scholar. She is the first Filipino to have attended the Clarion West Writers Workshop.

In the annual Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards, Luis Katigbak’s science fiction piece, “Dear Distance” won third place in the English short story category.





The Fires of
the Sun in a
Crystalline Sky
(after Greg Brilliantes)

Francezca C. Kwe

THE ENDING IS something from a banal romantic film. At last she sees him, and for a while her heart stands stock-still in her chest, like a stone lodged in the straining gears of breath. His back is turned to her, but the muscles move quickly, the jerking elbow insists on the importance of the task at hand: the gathering clouds overhead are dark and heavy, and the roof must be patched before he can savor the warmth of a dry house while outside, God's fury will strip the land bare. Simple knowledge made monumental by time and the passing of generations of farmers and thatched roofs.

Up on the roof, he doesn't know that behind him is an event of greater urgency, although it has spanned only a few, lost years. To her, this meeting is epic; she stands there, heaving, sweat pouring down her temples. Her longing threatens to burst from her like a torrent that can outrun her strides, and reach him faster than the impending rain.

When they were young, the children often asked her what she would do if she saw him again. Alive and well, that is, not as dust and bone, the image of the father they didn't remember, according to the official data. I would weep with joy and kiss the earth, bless all the saints, she would always say, and as the years went by they outgrew fantasy and asked her the same question out of their anxiety to prove to themselves that, yes, she was well, her memories intact.

Now she did none of those things she said she would do. She merely stood there, willing him to turn his eyes from the roof and the sky, to the ground where she must seem tiny, like a frightened animal. Look at me, she shouts in her mind, because her mouth and tongue have no courage to do it. She is suddenly gripped with the fear that he will never turn, never see her—even before it is allowed to happen, the final moment of a story that has waited to be closed for ages will be swallowed up by the black of the screen. The crescendo would be cut at this point: she, uselessly rooted to the spot, he with his eyes scanning the sky. Then the story would be over and neither of them would exist.

But he does turn, out of some strange but welcome need. And he sees her, in the center of a landscape at the end of the world. Her name flees from his lips as the first drop falls from the sky. He is young, impossibly so. She is shrunk by old age, but the albularyo was right, here in the land of the enchanted immortals, beneath the roots of the tallest trees in the forest, time and age are irrelevant. “Here, you will finally find him, as he was when you last saw him.”

•

I’M SORRY, BUT is that too unbelievable? That was my grandmother reciting from her trove of stories, while the rest of my family shifts uneasily around her. Sibling, cousins, nieces and nephews; they never interrupt her when she launches into her tales. The world of her memory is a shadowy one they are afraid to enter. They stand at the mouth of the cave, whispering among themselves, calling to her to come out for breakfast, lunch, dinner, a birthday or an anniversary, the drafting of her will.

Maybe she knows, and doesn’t care. All I know is that she lives to tell this particular tale, in a particular way. “It’s disjointed because I only came to know of it in snippets, whenever I came across someone who knew about the woman in the story,” I remember her saying. “Clara, that was her name.”

"The woman you named me after," I would say.

"Is that so?" my grandmother would say, nine times out of ten.
"Your name is also Clara?"

"Yes, Lola. Clara, your granddaughter."

A dark moment, and then would smile, dispelling the curse.
"Of course it's you, my dear."

"But the story really did happen," she would insist. "Sometimes, years would pass before I came to know the next chapter."

No, make that the preceding chapter. My mother, in happier days, used to comfort my grandmother's listeners by saying that there was nothing wrong if stories were told in the reverse, ending first. The traveler who invests in this journey does not move forward and claim new, unfamiliar lands. Instead, she traces her steps back, to the very roots, like a star implodes to know its insides, and a vagabond, tired from a lifetime of wandering, desires with the last strength in the legs to go home to that dim space before the first step was ever taken.

But now, worn to the bone from my father's myriad indiscretions, my mother is as resigned and woeful as the rest, when my grandmother starts from the end.

"You know," my grandmother reminds me, one afternoon my mother and I drop by her house, "I am fond of this one story because the heroine—"

"—The woman who ventures into the fairylands to find her lost husband," I supply helpfully.

"Yes." My grandmother looks peeved at the interruption. "The heroine is much like me." My mother sighs and tells the nurse—hovering at the door to lola's room—to take a break. She slips out, a streak of white at the corner of my eye.

"There is a reason why I tell it this way," my grandmother continues her speech. "I first heard the story after the war, when all of us were poking in the rubble for something to start on." "That war," she says, her finger rising to point accusingly at the space above my head, "gave birth to so many stories. But Clara was someone I knew from my girlhood."

In my mother's face I can see that her nerves are tensing to breaking point. I know that at this moment she feels as if she is being pulled closer to the yawning mouth of the cave. It frightens her, because the person in there is someone she truly loves. "Ma," my mother begins, "the war has been over for sixty years."

My grandmother laughs, her laughter slow and luxuriant, as if it is a fountain she steps into and bathes in without a care in the world. I envy her, because I cannot savor the tickle that rises up my throat before it is plugged with sympathy for my mother, with her thin face and sad hands.

"Don't think I don't know it, Teresa," she tells my mother. "I have been counting the years!"

Later, going home, we are both silent for a while. But my mother, like a winded toy, starts the subject. "Your lola," she says, gripping the steering wheel hard. "Your lola is becoming less lucid by the day."

I don't answer and she views it as denial.

"She is, Clara," my mother stresses. The car swerves a little for emphasis. "I want you to accept it, because it will get worse and we are eventually going to lose her."

I glance out the window at the trees colliding into each other in a blur for the benefit of the car and its occupants. "Mom, she has telling that story since I was little. It's pretty much the same story as ever."

The gate to our village looms in front, and I can hear the dread soaking my mother's voice as it opens to admit us. "She says over and over that it happened to someone she knew but when is it really about someone else," my mother mutters. We swing into our street and even from a distance I already know what my mother is scanning the space for: my father's car.

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OF COURSE, MY mother is referring to the actual story of Lola's life, which is really one for the books. The country's war scars are ravines stretching from every point on its consciousness, concealed under the intricate webs from other decades. But we sense that it is there, nevertheless, like a fossil under the shaky ground we walk on, remaining completely mysterious even as we strip the earth in our search for it.

At the end of the war, when the debris was pounded and remixed in concrete, the bodies cleared off the streets, fields and out of bombed-out houses, my mother was a malnourished three-year-old. My grandmother, twenty-five years old and a widow by all appearances, immediately set about pumping up the child's system with milk and honey from the land of plenty. My mother, like all the children who barely survived the war, gorged on corned beef and Hershey's that the Americans inundated the market with. But the high soon wore off, because the sudden fat-rich diet shocked her system and made her more sickly than ever.

With only the shirts on their backs, because their house had been blasted apart during Liberation by American artillery, mother and child set about rebuilding their lives. They initially stayed in a hastily-constructed residential building crammed with 3 families in a room; my mother trudged to public school on infusions of ampalaya and malunggay, and my grandmother, who had not lost her brilliant math skills during the war years when there was little else to count except days of having nothing, got work as a bookkeeper. She put herself to school again, graduating from an accountancy course and passing the Board.

But during the war, my grandmother never once imagined it would end someday, beyond which she would become the first CPA in a family of teachers, give her daughter a life of ease and relative comfort, witness the first two decades of a granddaughter she herself would name—impossibly wild fantasies in 1942. She was terrified senseless; it became true for many that fear seeped into the pores until the surface became a numb, rigid layer.

Her daughter was turning a year old and there were too many times when the child burned with fever, barely able to sip the sugar water she prepared. There was nothing else. To ask for medicine from others was akin to asking for cold, hard money. The house they had moved into was falling into disrepair. They were supposed to be renting, but no one came round to collect the rent anymore, because the landlord had been hauled off to Fort Santiago based on the testimony of a man with a bayong on his head.

She was able to find work tending a small eatery in Quiapo. The pay was almost next to nothing but the owners were kind; they allowed her to bring her daughter upstairs to their house while she worked the counter downstairs. The child tasted canned milk after what seemed like an eternity. Sometimes, she was paid in meals, when the canteen closed after hours, she and her daughter could eat as if they were customers.

She wanted, more than anything, to go home to Iloilo, where she would no longer be a stranger. The neighborhood's recollection of her husband was as good as that of a fleeting ghost who had gone like so many others. She had heard that back home people had gone to the hills where it was safer, but in Manila, laid with tripwires, where would one go? She felt she needed to stay where her husband would be able to find her.

There were regulars in the canteen who she came to know by name. They left messages with her, asking her to relay them when certain people came asking. She was careful and cautious, a reluctant link in an intelligence chain she was careful not to know too much of. But she delivered the messages unwaveringly, until one day a truck of Japanese soldiers stopped in front of the canteen not to swipe from the larder but to take the owner, an elderly Chinese mestizo, for questioning. They returned him three weeks later, gaunt as a stick, stamped with wounds and burns. Shortly after he got back, he told my grandmother, in his halting Tagalog, that he knew what she was doing. "No worry," he said, "it's okay."

She was good-looking in her youth, my grandmother, and in a world of men at war, it was a dangerous thing. She would steel herself against the gazes of the Japanese sentries posted at every street. There were too many stories of girls singled out and fancied, and the possibility was never far-fetched, for a single mother who had to venture out to work. Once, having just gotten home she was about to bolt the door when a Japanese soldier stuck his boot in and wrested it open. The soldier had seen her on the street and followed her, and now he pushed his way into the house and pointed his rifle at my grandmother. At the sight of a stranger, my mother started screaming, startling the Jap. He crossed the room in two strides, hand raised to smack the child and found my grandmother in his way, snarling and livid. He must have realized, as he looked into her eyes, that she was prepared to fight to the death. He spat on the ground and left, and that very day my grandmother moved herself and her daughter out of the house she had shared so briefly with her husband. They moved in with her employers, keeping a low profile until they were able to find a place on the other side of the city.

•

THERE HAD BEEN no word for months of her husband, my lolo. However hard she tried, even mustering up the courage to journey to Capas and there languish before the iron chain-link fences in the hope of receiving a scrap of news, she could learn nothing. Like the other women, she secreted notes in the kakanin wrapped in banana leaves, scant provisions they would pass to the details that were occasionally permitted to work near the camp's perimeter. Nothing came back from her inquiries of whether a USAFFE private named Dominador Sales was alive and interred in the camp. No one had seemed to remember a young man from Iloilo, who had literally stepped fresh off the boat into war.

But for a long time she continued her vigil outside the camp, passing along food, medicine and cigars—hot commodities she paid a fortune in Mickey Mouse pesos for—in the hopes that my grandfather was inside and would somehow benefit from these supplies. My mother vaguely remembers the frequent “Those precious things we worked to hard to send him probably went to those American and British officers who were somehow, always fitter than the rest of the POW’s.” She shakes her head whenever she says this, my mother, who has endured a war with weariness all her life.

Little Teresa was always mentioned in the letters from her father, before they stopped coming altogether from Bataan. The letters exist only in my grandmother’s memory. Also, no photographs of my grandfather exist—among the many things, my mother says, lost in the war. She herself has no solid image of her father tucked in the corners of her mind. All she remembers of him was that he was very tall.

“Not so tall,” my grandmother tells my mother. “He only seemed so because you were barely out of babyhood when you last saw him.” To have an idea of what he looked like, we rely on my grandmother’s descriptions. Average height, medium build, broad shoulders. Dark hair and thin lips, deep-set eyes. A full mustache, small ears. If you do not see him from those words, imagine our predicament, my mother’s and mine. They were all we had.

This faceless man was last seen in January 1942, on army furlough for a day. Up to this point he has a past trailing behind him, but the nearest he ever gets to us, his descendants, is this glimpse of him at the end of his appearance. It can also be that even my grandmother’s testimony is unreliable because the picture she can paint for us is only up to certain moment; he is twenty-two years old, dark-haired and of medium build forevermore.

But on that day, they were like any young family enjoying a picnic at the Luneta—the young mother and father swinging a giggling toddler into the air. The air was fresh, the bottle-green

grass revitalized by the dew. The mother had packed a lunch of sandwiches, salad and fruit. The fruit had come in a basket from the neighbors, a sort of welcoming gift for the young couple that had moved next door on their sleepy Ermita street, from a small town in Iloilo.

The move was an intrepid one, but as the young husband told his wife, the war will be over in the blink of an eye, the Americans have everything under control, which is why I'm confident fighting alongside them. Right after this whole fiasco, we will know how wise it was to have already settled in Manila—we can launch right into our lives again and Teresa will have all the opportunities only available in the capital.

Now, in the meantime you can relax, Milagring, he added, you and Teresa lie back and rest easy, continue with normal life. We fighting men can take the brunt of the difficulty. It will be tough on the front but at least we can rest knowing that you'll be spared whatever brief horrors this war will bring.

That is the last thing he says on our record, this young man, forever young while we grow older and older under the yoke of the years.

•

IN THE LAND of the encantos, one never ages, the albularyo told Clara. The leaves fall and the trees bear fruit, new shoots penetrate the bark and the ground, the day breaks and the night falls, but time cycles around these things, winding back to a never-ending present. The elementals, the goddesses, the spirits never lose their youth and their power.

Your husband is there, the old man said, peering at a basin of dark water that rippled though nothing touched it. Do not believe what mortals say. He found the entrance to their world somehow, and stepped into it. In doing so, he disappeared from our world.

She tried hard to contain her ecstasy at this revelation. She fought back the urge to laugh and cry. She had long believed that he was alive somewhere, was always looking for clues, visiting sanatoriums and hospitals, far-flung provinces where he could be suffering from amnesia—the kind of scenario that happened in films and TV shows that nonetheless made her sit up and take notice.

Their children were growing rapidly, they had long gotten accustomed to not having a father. They were starting to egg her to get married again, for her own happiness, they said. She would smile, her secret knowledge safely cocooned in her heart.

The visit to the albularyo came fifteen years after the arrival of that letter from a stranger in Manila telling her that her husband had escaped from the Death March but had died soon thereafter of gangrene, in the hut of a poor farmer in La Union. It cannot be possible, she reasons. The name of the sender, who claims to have been the farmer's neighbor, is alien to her. The war had turned the world upside down, tampering with so many identities, weakening what had before seemed the only truths. In its aftermath, it was so easy to be mistaken.

We buried him in the field, the letter ended with this statement. The words threatened to topple her stability. She buried the letter under a pile of receipts and forgotten clippings.

•

OVER AND OVER Lola told me that the woman of the story, Clara, was a girlhood friend she had lost touch with. After the war, amid speculations from persons who were lost and found, lived or died, or never existed at all, my grandmother got wind of the story. It kept her interested because, she said, it was quite like her own.

Lola and this woman Clara had been fast friends in their young social circle, but then life was moving too fast for my grandmother,

because she had given her reply to Dominador, the young man with whom she had been going steady for two years.

They were married in Jaro in 1941, on a humid March day. Thirty people attended the reception dinner at her parent's house. She wore a embroidered white dress with silk sleeves—loose at the waist, the better to hide her stomach. He was in a white sharkskin suit and white and black brogues. She remembers the picture that was taken after the ceremony, the sprig of flowers is wilting in the heat of the church, his mouth is slightly open as if on the verge of saying something, a bit of the altarboy's lace sleeve is in one corner of the picture, now obliterated.

It was a simple affair, hastily prepared because of the growing, urgent thing that made her sick every morning and gave her awful cramps. The delicate matter was solved by a smooth agreement between her parents and Doming's, and the delicate diamond on a gold band that Doming presented her with one lazy afternoon after she had woken up from a siesta intermittently interrupted by the insistent need to pee.

It had come forth of urges that left them in pain in each other's presence, threatening to blast them to bits if ignored? One afternoon in his empty house, the occupants having left to attend some fiesta in Molo. Having stolen away from Tia Andeng, Milagros's chaperone, they had passed the point of no return how many exhilarating times that one afternoon?

The relationship had progressed from mutual attraction and enjoyment of laidback, teen enjoyments to something more serious that she was only beginning to understand. They were no longer agog about hanging out at the plaza after Mass, going to refreshment parlors with their friends, or driving to watch sunsets at Villa Beach. They were dropping out of the whirl of parties and soirees and the hawk-like gaze of Tia Andeng. Almost overnight, an intoxicatingly sensual curtain had enveloped both of them, thickening whenever they were together, or when a hand touched an arm, an elbow nestled into a side.

Rising on the horizon now, Milagros could see the crown of a gigantic promise that had been heretofore asleep. The rest of my life is only now beginning, she would think, lying in bed and envisioning the future. She felt both apprehensive and thrilled by what she felt was her initiation to a wider landscape, that as a child was hidden from her window. She watched her mother with new interest, and every adult woman fulfilling the role of wife and mother with the thrill that soon she would live out hers.

The friends she had known since she was a girl bored her, and she shied away from their company, thinking that she would take up the thread once more when she was through exploring this marvelous period. They would all be lost to her, after her marriage and after the war, although one account would surface, its revelations coming every now and then, until it grew into her own memory.

•

GOING FROM END to beginning, a certain juncture will be passed. This is a period of rest from the heavy load we have been strapped to, a pocket in time. I believe that it is so for my mother.

My mother, like so many children of the war, for whom incredible physical hardship was a thing of the past, belonging in the stories of survivors who were plagued with the curse of being able to remember. But the seat vacated by a harsh, wartime existence was taken by an equally ruthless, and invisible aggravator. My mother, with her happy childhood the early reward for the miseries she was to face later.

But like I said, there were happier times for my mother. My father was yet to accumulate so much debt from maintaining three families at once, years away from the casual flings that could never stay hidden and from the first night he slept away supposedly on a business trip.

He was a spectacular womanizer, although he blamed it on an itch he could not ignore, more than anything else. It's a disease, Teresa, don't you understand, he would say to my mother, pressing her palms to his cheeks. Help me, he would say, and she would cry out as if he had stabbed her.

To his children, he was generous. I was twelve when my mother and I first ran into a half-sister, who looked enough like me to seem my twin though she was obviously younger. This girl who had my eyes, my nose, was dressed in beautiful clothes. She stood in the middle of the mall sniffing, eyes darting around wildly with the terror of being lost. My mother halted in mid-step and taking my hand tightly, circled around the girl like a wary predator. She caught sight of us, the look of terror replaced by a flash of recognition. In a second, she had fled. My mother let go of my hand and took chase; in a moment, the roles had reversed and I was now the child alone in the crowd. I waited in that spot for close to an hour. My mother finally arrived, trembling, face flushed. Don't ever tell your father what you saw, she said.

Before all of that, we lived in an idyll.

My grandmother was in her prime, bursting with stories that everyone took as gospel wisdom. In this brilliant light, my mother thrived, doorways opening for her with so much ease and speed, her husband a supportive presence. She had decided, when I was ten years old, to go to graduate school in Sydney, at prestigious business school that had been impressed with her work as one of the brightest financial consultants in a big multinational conglomerate. She could bear leaving my father behind to his job as a junior bank official, but she would not be able to endure being separated from me.

We would spend a year in a foreign country, before she accepted an offer of a higher post in the company, in exchange of moving back to the Philippines before her studies had been completed. I had been in school for five months, a tongue-tied foreigner who only sat through the unintelligible hours at school to get closer

to that magical time of the day when my mother, done with her own classes, would pick me up and we would drive the long way home, passing dusky fields dotted with so many cows, the sun on her side of the window, highlighting her smiling face. Somewhere along the way, we would pull into a cozy restaurant and have dinner and rainbow sundaes. Time, if it ever moved, retreated into night leisurely; after hours of talking in bed, we would sleep in each other's arms.

I remember the day we left the country, Lola and Father seeing us off at the impressive, high-ceilinged airport lobby. We waved goodbye and skipped off to the restaurant for ice cream, a worthy treat for two explorers on the verge of an adventure.

•

A BLIP IN the rewind, from the past that time has faded into legend, we are thrown into the recent past. I open my eyes and the morning is too quiet. My mother, whose face has been grooved so much by her invisible war, sits at my bed precariously. I inhale carefully, fearful that the slightest movement will cause her to crumble.

She takes my hand and I already know. The tears will come much later when I rewind the last few days myself, and I see my grandmother, visibly weaker, trying to summon the words to her story. The oxygen mask on her face is making talking difficult. She is more vexed than words can say, precisely because she cannot speak as she wishes.

Lola, I implore her, please rest. I already know how the story starts. But here she is, shaking her head vigorously. The nurse gets up to take her pulse, but my grandmother yanks her arm away from the nurse's grip with a surprising strength. I tell the nurse to let me watch Lola for an hour, before I catch my last class at the university. She says she'll grab a quick bite, and scarcely has she closed the door than my grandmother pulls down the mask from

her face and tells me, There is something else you need to know about the ending.

I don't know if I should let her give vent to her obsession again, and I tell myself that I will call the nurse the moment she gets overexcited. I try to breathe deeply and project calm. My grandmother sees this and lies back, more relaxed. Now, she is staring into space with a thoughtful look on her face.

In spite of myself, I ask her. What was it that you wanted to tell me, Lola? She smiles and closes her eyes.

The story ends when she finds her husband, I continue. Is there anything after that?

She opens her eyes, her smile grows wilder and she winks at me. How can someone who has gone through so much smile like a child? I can feel the corners of my mouth being tugged upwards, feel my lips parting and my cheeks stiffening with the coming of laughter. In sync, we laugh, my grandmother and I, we splash unabashedly in the fountain of her laughter, bathe in its abundant waters.

You want to know, her smile is telling me. I too don't need to speak to answer her.

She came back, my grandmother exclaims. Without him! She sighs with contentment, as if surveying something she has built and now likes. I saw her again, she murmurs, sleep creeping into her voice. We ran into each other and she told me she was doing fine in the world. The nurse enters the room and my grandmother only manages to nod before she surrenders to her dreams. I get up from the chair as quietly as I can. At the door, I take one look at my grandmother. She is sleeping soundly, the ghost of her smile lingering on her face.

And that was the end of her life, and the beginning of mine: the last time I saw her, and heard of her nameless heroine, that woman who emerged from the perfect world squirreled away in the creases of this one, leaving in their blissful oblivion the men who had been spirited away, and going on their own to fight the war.

•

DURING THE WAR, there was no speak of albularyos, elementals and spirits, as if they were luxuries the starving body could not afford to indulge in, even in thought. The present was too vital, haranguing one from moment to moment. He disappeared in Bataan, and no trace would be found of him until the mailman dropped the letter in her hands years later. Sometimes, scraping things together for the children during those lean years, finding measly-paying work and odd and ends to buy and sell for a cup of rice, she would get to thinking that it was better off that he was not there—anyone who was not so painfully alive during that time was better off. She would think this until the present brought her back and she would check herself. But this thought crossed her mind countless times.

Before the war, during that period they would later call “Peacetime” they had met at a weekend dance. He was dark and of medium build. She was haughty and proud, pulsing with life. They fell in love.

The day the world lost its gravity

Camsy Ocumen

WAS ALSO THE day Eric planned to propose to his long-time girlfriend, Lydia. He had the entire night planned: dinner at an expensive hotel, a presidential suite, and a white-gold ring studded with three little diamonds he had saved half a year for.

Walking down from his apartment to his car that night, he does not give any importance to the empty plastic bags across the street floating ghost-like. Or to the frenzied cockroaches running all around the street; some are even flying. He's too preoccupied with his own jitters to care. All he thinks about as he drives is whether he should kneel by her side of the table after dinner and propose or wait until she sees the grand view of the suite balcony and then kneel.

•

ALJO, A GRADUATE studies student in London, takes notice. He is walking to a nearby grocery store and smoking his cigarette the day the world lost its gravity. He sees it when he flicks his cigarette. The ashes do not fall to the ground. Instead, they float and scatter across the plane. He looks around wondering if anyone else sees the spectacle—nobody does save for a man in a very sleek suit walking toward him.

“You noticed it too, yeah?” the man asks. Aljo just looks at him. “Been keen on it for days; nobody believes me. I reckon you mind the littlest things when you’ve got a boring job like mine.”

Aljo is no longer listening. He points to the park across the street, where an old lady is feeding pigeons. “The crumbs... they’re floating as well.”

•

IN LA, BIANCA had taken advantage of her parents being on vacation—she throws a party in her house, and almost her entire high school shows up. While everybody is getting drunk, she and her boyfriend, Kyle, make out in her parents’ room upstairs. As Kyle unstraps Bianca’s bra from under her shirt, she notices the cup of beer beside the bed. It is spilling upwards.

“Kyle!”

“What?” Kyle moans, mistaking his girlfriend’s interjection for foreplay. He pushes her to the bed, feeling up her skirt. She can’t help herself; she moans. Kyle then remembers the cup of beer he brought up and wonders how Bianca would like getting wet with it.

“What the hell—” he says when he sees the beer for himself streaming upward in small drops. It then spills in great big beads until nothing is left in the cup, the particles going in hundreds of different directions. Then the paper cup follows. “What the... Fuckin’ a! What the hell’s going on here!” he jumps out of the bed, eyes wide with shock. All around them, every little thing is floating upwards—pieces of paper, pens, and figurines. “What are you, a witch or sumthin?”

“What? No!” Bianca exclaims. She is still on the bed, too shocked to even move. “I don’t know what the hell’s happening, Kyle—help!” she says as she crawls toward Kyle, reaching out to him.

“No way! Fuck this, I’m outta here!” As he opens the door, he sees more things floating: flowers from vases, paper cups, utensils, bottles, and beer. The music is gone. For a very brief moment, there is silence. Some think maybe it’s the drugs. But

when someone asks—“Do you see that?”—many panic; it’s not a hallucination after all. They run in all directions, tripping all over each other when, in fact, nobody has anywhere to go. The rest, the lucky drugged ones, enjoy the ride.

Kyle!” Bianca calls from inside. He looks back at her for the last time and runs.

•

THE PIGEONS THAT the old lady is feeding start to soar upwards out of control, along with dogs, squirrels (tail-first), swans, cranes, and many-colored little fishes. All of London is in shock. People stop in their tracks to watch the upward rain of leaves and animals—the fishes flip wildly in the air, gasping for breath. How wonderful it is all for the suavely dressed man.

“Who do you want to be with?” he asks Aljo.

“My girlfriend back in my country,” Aljo replied. “You?”

“Me? Been floating all my life. There isn’t a difference now.”

“You think we’re next?”

“Yeah. Find her in the sky.”

Aljo looks at the man, but says nothing. He wonders how it is back in the Philippines. What kind of creatures are populating its sky?

Within the houses, furniture starts to rise as well—tables, chairs, vases, books—all gravitating toward the highest point of the ceiling. Little children who go outside to watch the spectacle are the first to follow the animals and the furniture skyward.

“Children!” the parents shout as they run across the ground grabbing at their kids. Many strangers try and help. Some are able to get hold of a child’s foot, but it is impossible to bring the child back down. The only hope is to hold on to them like balloons. Some are only able to grab a shoe or a skirt—they hand them over to the weeping parents on the ground.

•

LYDIA IS ONE of the first to float in their street. She is a petite girl, and so while many adults are still on the ground, she is already afloat along with kids, furniture, cats, dogs, excrement, and some sewer rats and cockroaches that aren't able to hide behind cracks. Just a few moments ago, there was a stampede of rats and cockroaches. The people, unaware of the telltale sign, climb up chairs and tables in fear. But these small creatures, who know better, hide beneath the cracks.

Lydia is also one of the first to discover how to control the direction in which you float—swim through space like water. See, she has a date with Eric, and she is determined to make it even if she has to swim to the hotel. She knows Eric will be there. He has never broken his word.

•

ERIC, ON THE other hand, is stuck in traffic when it all takes place. Just minutes after he leaves his apartment, vehicles screech to a halt: cars, jeeps, and trucks collide as hundreds of colored plastic bags drift in the air. Eric watches from inside his car, wide-eyed. “Putang ina” is all he can say. It takes him some time before he notices his ring struggling to get out of his pocket. He grasps it tightly.

•

LYDIA, IN HER little black dress and heels, swims to the hotel—trying to avoid all the excrement floating around her. She looks down on the city and shudders.

“Lydia! Sa’n ka pupunta!” her parents call out from below. They hold each other tight.

“Si Eric!”

“Lydia!” But she ignores them. Her parents have each other; that is enough.

An old apartment's roof breaks open, spitting a hundred fragments of furniture: pieces of beds, tables, chairs, and a battery-operated organ still playing Beethoven's "Für Elise." One by one, roofs of houses and buildings break open, spitting out furniture and people.

In a quieter area of Manila, Aljo's girlfriend, Mabel, is floating. She clutches her dog tightly. The poor creature is so scared, it shakes in her arms. There are already a number of dead people in the air with her. The family of five in the house in front of her decide to kill themselves before they can even experience flying. When their house spits them out, they are all wrapped around each other's arms. It doesn't take long, though, until they lose their grips and drift apart. Mabel watches the faces of these corpses and sees something that resembles contentment.

Some though die unlucky deaths. The man who lives a block away from her floats directly into a bathtub. It hits his head hard. But Mabel does not want to focus on these things. She prefers watching the basketball players still chasing after the ball that flies away instead of going through the ring. She begins to wonder how the rules of basketball will have to be changed in zero gravity.

She looks up at the sky and imagines herself as a star. "We're going to be a star, Mamu," she tells her little dog, but he only whimpers back at her. "Don't worry, baby. It's gonna be alright. It's gonna be alright."

•

ALJO IS BUSY swimming through London, trying to get back to the Philippines. It was the sleekly dressed man's idea to swim. So far, it doesn't seem to be working for him. But for the man, now long gone, it seems to have.

What Aljo does not know is that the man did not really go that far. He bids Aljo goodbye saying, "I want to explore the world while there's still time." But he doesn't. He swims as fast as he can

toward the concrete wall of a flying house across him. He uses the remaining moments before his death to marvel at the blood from his head raining on the sky. He never felt more alive.

Down below, Aljo sees the world disintegrating, tearing itself apart. Almost nothing is left standing. Aljo could feel himself floating farther and farther from the ground. All around him in space, there are many more like him, thousands of them, in fact. All swimming, all searching.

•

LYDIA MANAGES TO swim to the hotel, but Eric is not there. She finds Eric's car nearby. It no longer has a roof or a hood—all its other parts are struggling to break away. She swims to it as fast as she can. "Eric?" she calls out. She looks around her, hoping to find him. "Eric!" Still nothing. *Babalik siya*, she whispers to herself. She crawls into the passenger seat, straps herself in, and waits.

•

THE WHOLE WORLD is being torn apart. Eric flies away, out of control. He thinks of holding on to any object, but there is an even greater risk of death in that. He swims his way to Lydia's house—or at least where it used to stand. "Lydia! Lydia!" he calls, but the noise of all those who are still alive, the noise of all the lonely, searching people drown his voice out. "Lydia!" he persists. He has long since removed the ring and its box from his pocket, and is holding on to it as if it was life itself.

•

BY THE TIME Kyle realizes his mistake, it is too late. The whole world is already tearing itself apart, and he is already badly bruised from the gashes caused by the stampede. He refuses to think of what might have happened to Bianca, alone and helpless in her parents' room. "Bianca!" he starts.

"Bianca!" Tears fall upwards from his eyes, and it blurs his vision. "Bianca! Bianca, I'm sorry!" he calls out amid the corpses of his classmates.

•

GIANT ROCKS SKYROCKET up into the sky. "Hold on, Mamu!" Mabel cries out. She is curled up and holding on to her knees while Mamu is between her. She had always wanted to fly. Not once does Aljo even slip into her mind.

•

IF HE KNEW this, he wouldn't be swimming like a madman back to her, shoving everything in his path away—a vase, a rock, debris, or a corpse. The world is falling apart too quickly, and he has not even left London. He has not moved. His clothes, they are ripping apart. He is soaring away fast, way too fast.

•

THEY ARE ALL going round and round, rocketing toward the abyss, their clothes now long gone. Eric knows there are others around him, but there is no way he can see or hear them. The wind is whooshing too hard in his ears. His arms are pulled to his sides, and his hands are forced open. He cannot regain the ring stolen by the wind.

S t r a n g e W e a t h e r

Dean Francis Alfar

TENET PAUSED AT the ridge, licked the dry dust from her lips, and looked at the small settlement that clung to the side of the mountain in the distance. Behind her, the uneven path was an unending brown, broken only by the heavy footprints of her mule.

“Well, Alister,” she said to her mule, “let’s hope that this one is better than the last.” She tugged at the reins, squinted her eyes, and looked for the best way down. “Though I doubt it.”

As she neared the village, Tenet briefly considered passing it completely. The few houses that she could see looked tired and worn down, as if abandoned by the hope of better days. A few fields were marked by erratic stone fences, with only small clusters of greenery managing to break free from the earth’s embrace.

At a nearby well, a man and a woman watched her approach.

“Stranger.” The wiry man in rough homespun nodded in her direction. “Are you passing through?”

“My name is Tenet, good sir,” she replied, offering a smile. “And I will pass through, if afforded no opportunity for gainful employment.” She straightened to her full height.

“What?” The man scowled at the short stranger, unimpressed by Tenet’s soft brown eyes, odd clothes, and accent.

“She’s looking for work,” the woman beside him said, scratching at a sore on the side of her neck. “Paying work.”

“Do we look coin-made to you, stranger?” the man said, tightening his grip on a long piece of wood.

“Perhaps a few coppers, good sir,” Tenet said, extending her hands, palm outward, “and a place to sleep for the night. Maybe there is something I can do for you or this place.”

"There's no work for you here," the woman replied. "Fortune left us years ago, along with the weather. Though you're welcome to stay."

The lean man nodded slowly.

"I think I can work with the weather," Tenet said, shielding her eyes against the harsh sunlight.

"Truly?" The woman's eyes widened. "Are you a weatherworker?"

"Not exactly," Tenet answered. "But I am a Craftsman."

"A Craftsman," the man repeated, a little fear edging into his voice. "What does that mean?"

"I follow the Traitor's Way," Tenet said simply.

The man and the woman exchanged a look.

"Forgive our ignorance," the man said, "but we've never heard of such a thing, have we, Maery?"

"No," the woman Maery said, shaking her head. "Not at all."

"Can you show us what you do?" the man asked, with the smallest shrug.

"Stay right there, Alister," Tenet told her mule, pointing to a precise spot on the dry ground. She walked some distance away from the well and faced the man and woman, who watched her every motion with distrustful eyes.

Tenet considered the environment, and sought to encompass the nature of everything in her immediate vicinity. When she closed her eyes, her Craft opened up and briefly showed her the patterns of her surroundings: the heavy lines of climate interlaced with overlaying concentric circles of heat; the solid granulated outlines of the ground and earth; the jagged strokes of the woman Maery's anxiety; the immutable texture of the man's irritation; and the odd saturated hue that the man and the woman shared, that she assumed was a flavor of doubt. Only the well resisted her sight, a discomfiting emptiness where she expected to see the folding pattern of receding water.

The well can wait Tenet knew that her reading was superficial, more akin to a glance than long contemplation, and she knew that there were many other factors to consider, other facets to the circumstances than her hurried overview gave her.

As Tenet's understanding of the status quo increased, her Craft began to present opportunities to betray the established parameters, giving her potential openings to create unexpected change, identifying weak areas that could be subjected to traitorous incidents.

When she opened her eyes, she knew what to do.

"Good sir, good lady Maery," she called out to the two spectators. "The rule of drought is the law in this place. But it need not always be so."

Tenet closed her eyes again as she engaged the spark of Craft within her, selecting a weak point in the pattern of dryness and heat, slicing her mind through the layers of lines, sequences, and strokes. Inside, she inserted a memory of rain, and imbued it with all the desire she could muster. This wasn't very difficult, because she did want rain, had wanted it for days. She felt her need wash over her and into the pattern, invisible rays of persuasion emanating from her and into the equally unseen patterns. Above her, dark clouds quickly gathered, and grew heavy with water, as moisture betrayed the rule of drought, and rebelled against time and circumstance.

Easy now easy easy

When rain began to fall in thick and weighty drops, Tenet opened her eyes. The woman Maery had her arms extended to the sky, her face raised up, mouth open to the welcome precipitation. The man trembled where he stood, a hand on the lip of the well, his eyes fixed on Tenet.

"That's that," Tenet said with smile. "I'll check the well too—"

"There's no need for that," the man beside the well said, tightening his grip on the thick piece of wood in his hand.

"Thank you, thank you," the woman Maery laughed.

Tenet nodded, then walked to her mule Alister, who stood expressionless in the growing downpour.

“We’ll have a roof over our heads tonight, Alister,” she whispered into his big ear.

•

VEN BENT OVER the line of small wet stones, flecking away the rainwater that dripped down his cowl, trying to gain a sense of the muddied oracular tidings. When he had awakened from his once-a-decade month-long druidic sleep, he had been perturbed by the news—word of which had reached him through the gossip of winged insects—of an unexpected drought in lands east of his stead.

For a moment, he considered not investigating the oddity; the lands outside of his domain were not his responsibility; and those very same lands were considered wild, inasmuch as they fell under the influence of neither king nor state. He dismissed a more general feeling of obligation to all of nature at large—he wasn’t the kind of druid who felt the need to respond to the cry of every living thing.

In the end, it was the anticipation of activity that moved Ven to take the journey; the quotidian nature of his druidic routines made him feel older than his twenty-eight years. He dressed himself in simple garments meant to deal with the anticipated heat of the land he journeyed toward, leaving his well-muscle arms uncovered. At the periphery of his stead, he dismissed his wide-eyed animal companions, opting, as usual, to travel alone. The animals, their hopes crushed yet again, lumbered, skittered, or flew back to their own dens, holes, and nests. It was the old one-eyed ferret—who waited until his master had gone beyond his limited range of vision—that was the last to abandon optimism.

Days later, Ven considered the readings his fatidic stones suggested in the muddy earth, and shook his head. His confusion

stemmed from the fact that the stones warned against an unnatural drought—which he fully expected—yet the evidence of rain falling around him with unnatural abandon disputed the oracle. Irritation trumped confusion as Ven plucked each damp oracular stone from the wet earth, placed them in the pouch at his belt, and moved eastward in the heavy rain, silently cursing his sodden choice of attire.

He stood shivering, at the crest of a wet hill overlooking a small village that seemed to have dealt well with the unnatural rainfall. Furrows had been dug into the flatter areas of the mountainside, creating channels for the fallen water to follow, leaving a handful of less-drenched paths.

Ven attuned his senses to the surroundings—seeking impressions from stone and sky and water—and affirmed his suspicions. This was, in general, where the strangeness centered, where the sky's waterlines bent toward. Somewhere in this village, something was very wrong. This was where his power was needed.

He decided to begin with the rain. Where, prior to his departure, his interest had only been in action, by the time Ven began his incantation, the entire set of circumstances had gained a very personal veneer. He wanted, more than anything, to end the irritating rain, which had no business falling where it did and in such vast quantities, upsetting the balance of water tables and aerial waterlines in many different places.

He used powerful words, repeating the secret formulas he learned at the feet of the dead druid Itus, admonishing the elements for their unruly conduct, seeking to restore matters to as they were before the unnatural rain. At the height of his incantation, he felt a degree of resistance to his will, which caused his eyes to widen and his body to straighten up.

With a hoarse shout, he extended a fist into the sky, scattering dull-colored powders as he opened his hand a finger at a time, and broke the unnatural pluvial pattern. By the time he lowered his arm, the rain had ceased falling.

Satisfied, Ven began to negotiate the muddy earth in the direction of the village, seeking the true cause of the anomalous precipitation.

•

TENET WOKE UP struggling for breath, clutching at her midsection as she stumbled out of her bed, spitting blood into the battered pan near the door. For long moments her mind reeled, permitting no complex thoughts, and she used that time to slowly bring the pain under control, slowing her breathing until she was calm. When she could stand, Tenet wiped the unbidden tears from her face, and stepped out of her humble quarters in the outskirts of village, to deal with whatever it was that so suddenly and so forcefully assaulted her.

Not what who who did this

She had planned to spend the day investigating the well in the center of town, the well that had registered as an emptiness to her Craft when she brought rain the day before.

The well can wait

Tenet squinted her eyes against the brightness outside. She saw Alister, her mule, blinking mutely in the harsh sunlight that penetrated the roof of his makeshift enclosure. Around her trusty companion, puddles of water began their process of returning to the clouds. Tenet, almost choking in the thick air, murmured comfort in Alister's ears and squelched through the mud, seeking higher ground.

Tenet's mind was still awirl with questions that had no answers when she finally made her way up a muddy ledge that gave her a better view of the village. From her vantage point, she could see the abandoned cottage that the woman Maery had told her she could live in. She could see the small cluster of houses and the defiant well *the well can wait* but no sign of whoever negated her Craftwork.

She looked up the higher portions of the mountainside, and closed her eyes, sparking the Traitor's Way within her. Immediately she saw that the patterns of the surroundings had been restored to the rule of drought. Warm moisture covered her skin as she focused on the lines between elements, seeking where her Craft could take hold. Tenet shuddered as she felt the definite influence of another person on the earth and sky around the village, a presence she could not immediately identify. Extending her vision, she stroked the connecting lines, setting up a timorous movement among them, and followed the motions to what disrupted the state of rain she had created.

Tenet permitted herself the tiniest of smiles. *I don't need to see you*

Bolt, she thought coldly, holding the memory of the thunderstorm that had terrified her as a child, invoking her ability to influence vagaries and happenstances, thwarting the governing rule of electrical generation, lashing out along the connective lines to her unseen enemy.

•

VEN WAS HALFWAY down the slope, picking his way carefully through the slippery rocks, when the sky directly above him darkened in the span of a heartbeat. He barely had time to utter an arcane syllable before a jagged bolt of lightning struck where he stood, triggering a mudslide that carried his unmoving form a hundred strides down the hill before stopping.

Moments after the mud settled, Ven fought the vertigo that bedeviled him and slowly restored his outer skin to flesh, thanking his old master for the druidic secret word of transforming flesh to stone. He changed the skin around his face last, holding his breath until he was able to clear an airway, finally pulling himself up on unsteady feet.

“Lightning, is it,” he muttered, blindly angling his head to the dark sky. Around him, in the air that smelled faintly of metal, fat water droplets started to fall sporadically.

When his eyes turned back to flesh, Ven quickly inscribed a sigil in the air, his fingertip leaving a light viridian trail. When the circle was complete, he gestured down toward the ground. The green circle settled rapidly on the wet earth, gleaming once before its color subsided.

He took a solitary seed from the pouch around his belt, and tossed it in the middle of the circumscribed area. Limned in green light, a single sapling forced its way out of the mud, rapidly extending thin arms several lengths into the sky. Ven regarded his handiwork, permitting himself a moment’s satisfaction: the dweomered tree would attract the next few bolts of lightning, should any come again.

Convinced that there was a malign intelligence at work against him, Ven thrust his hands into the mud, and uttered a new incantation. When he stood to his full height, he held out his hands, filled with wet earth and stone, his voice intoning words in the language passed on to him by his old teacher. The druid then brought his hands together, as if in prayer, as his last words faded in the strengthening rain.

“Show me,” he said.

When he unclasped his hands, he knew where to find his opponent—a miniature replica of the surrounding hills stood cupped in the cusp of his hands, threatened with destruction by the downpour. One small rock, irregularly-shaped, represented the person that struck him down.

“Dao,” he whispered, flinging the contents of his hands in the direction of his foe. Where the largest clump of earth and stone fell, the ground trembled. The head of a creature appeared first, as if submerged in the mud, its mouth open in a soundless roar.

“Rise,” Ven spoke against the growing wind.

The elemental pulled itself out of the earth and towered over the black-haired druid, ignoring the pelting rain. Its broad mass was flecked with dull-colored stones made darker by the water; its empty eye sockets gleamed green, the professed color of the druid Ven.

“Destroy,” Ven commanded, his voice as loud as thunder. The creature turned away to obey.

•

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE lightning flash she had triggered, Tenet made her way as quickly as she safely could to where it struck, needing to see if whoever was protecting the rule of drought was truly felled. She did not want to underestimate her foe, reasoning that no enemy should be considered defeated unless she saw the evidence with her own eyes.

As she alternately walked and clambered upwards, she unwillingly recalled her last duel, the very duel that had resulted in her exile. She had considered Erin a friend and fought only to retain her honor, misjudging the younger Craftsman, who fought for love. When Erin collapsed under her assault, Tenet turned away, and was caught unaware by her foe’s desperate attack.

It was Tenet who fell that day, Tenet who lost her titles and honors, Tenet who had to leave the Guild, Tenet who was marked as exile, Tenet who had to give up Dion. She was still haunted by Erin’s face, her bloodied mouth twisted in triumph.

“Enough,” Tenet chastised herself, irritated by the useless memories that offered no comfort. *What’s done is*

Her thoughts were interrupted by an explosion of rock and mud, as the immense elemental landed in front of her. Before she could move, the creature of earth and stone struck her with its massive fists, its size incongruous with the speed of its attack.

Tenet landed painfully on the ground, air escaping her lungs in a terrible exhalation laced with spittle and blood. Sensing another

blow coming, she shifted to a side, ignoring the lancing twinge in her right leg. The elemental's fists thundered down where she had been, sending rocks and mud flying in all directions.

Elemental her thoughts raced. *Think fast think think*

Fury and fear ignited Tenet's Craft where she crouched, showing her briefly the structure of the creature. In that moment of white heat, Tenet stretched out her hands and twisted at the first available weakness, realizing that she did not have the time to seek out a perfect flaw.

The torso of the elemental whirled around, while its feet remained rooted where it stood. Once, twice, thrice, it spun, flinging bursts of mud and stones in an erratic circle, the stones that composed its hips grating against its upper body.

Tenet twisted the pattern again. *Fall fall fall*

Abruptly, the elemental was sundered, its torso spinning several more times in the air before shattering into innumerable fragments a short distance away. The creature's legs ceased to move, the force that animated it dissipating in the rain.

Tenet stood up and gasped once as she tested her weight on her injured leg. Satisfied that she could walk, she set out to finish her cunning opponent once and for all.

•

VEN WAS IN the middle of an incantation meant to subdue the unnaturally returning rain when he felt a backlash of mystic energy strike him. He fell with a startled cry, and grimly exerted mastery over the internal flames that would have consumed a lesser druid. He weighed two options as he lay transfixed for a moment on the muddy ground—begin anew his interrupted incantation or deal with whoever sundered the elemental he had summoned. His scowl turned into a feral smile as he stood up, thin red smoke rising from countless pores of exposed body.

"So, you're strong," he spoke softly. "Good."

From his damp pouch he took a brown weathered nut, its surface pitted but intact. He ignored the pain that swept over his body once last time as the last of the mystic backlash evaporated, and focused his thoughts. One expelled breath later, the nut began to tremble in his hand, drawing on the power of the earth.

“Temblor,” he whispered, hurling the quaking seed in the direction of his enemy.

Where it landed, the earth heaved and convulsed, accompanied by the deafening sound of the world being torn asunder.

•

TENET WAS CONSIDERING what to do next, when she saw something small hurtling in her direction, and realized that she could perish in the next instant. With no time to spare, she turned her Craft inward, betraying her own body’s natural parameters and nature, forcing what composed her to temporarily realign and adapt to the threat. It was a dangerous gambit, for very few who followed the Traitor’s Way and attempted the extreme act were able to restore their own natures.

Tenet believed that she was one of the few who could.

She fell on the ground changed, and rode the devastating earthquake.

•

THE GROUND WAS still shuddering when Ven reached the summit of the hill and looked for his enemy. Half-blinded by mud and tiny tendrils of pain, he saw a human body crumpled on the vertiginous ground.

When the quake finally stilled, Ven rushed toward the collapsed form as quickly as he dared, slipping only once on the uneven and wet ground, his senses alert for his opponent. As he neared, he realized that the form was that of a small woman.

Guilt and dread filled his being as he looked at her, using his eyes to search for weapons or blades or the usual signs of magery. She looked like no warrior or druid. Ven decided that she was one of the villagers or a traveler, caught in the terrible web of his anger.

He knelt by the woman's side, extending a hand to lift her mud-splattered head from off the ground.

"I'm sorry," he said, hoping she was still alive.

Tenet's body had returned to its original state moments after the temblor ceased. But she had no time to reflect on the fact that she had managed a feat few would even consider attempting, for when her vision returned, she saw the face of a stranger, and realized that he was cradling her.

"Excuse me," Tenet muttered, struggling away from the man's powerfully built arms and on to her unsteady feet. She grimaced as a dull ache traveled up and down her right leg. She looked around wildly—anticipating another assault—before rubbing away the most of the mud that covered her face.

"Are you all right," Ven asked, rising to his full height, towering over the wisp of a woman before him. She looked like a strong wind could blow her over, but she was more than fair, he observed, abruptly aware of how much he missed a woman's company. He ignored his thoughts' digression.

"I'm fine," Tenet said, as she met his gaze, staring a moment too long into the man's deep black eyes. When she felt her heart quicken in that moment, Tenet thought that her own Craft had betrayed her, finding the secret weakness of its own mistress. *This isn't the time or place I could be attacked in the next moment I don't even know who this man is where he's been what he's done if he even likes women I don't want to I don't want to*

"Who are you?" Tenet demanded, attempting to regain her composure.

"My name is Ven," the broad-shouldered man said, offering his hand in the space between them, before just as quickly taking it

back, only to extend it once again after wiping away most of the mud that encrusted it. "And you are?"

"I'm Tenet," she said, shaking his hand against her will, biting her lower lip to prevent any more words except what was absolutely necessary from coming out as she looked away from the tall stranger. *Don't do this not again not again why does this have to happen here now he could even be the enemy*

Tenet entertained a brief memory of her time with the poet Larsus, the most execrable man she ever met. "Women are defined by their emotions, men by action. When a man meets a woman, he considers what to do. When a woman meets a man, she considers if she should fall in love," Larsus had told her once, over dinner at the court of the Weimark. Tenet, of course, disagreed vehemently.

"Pardon me," Ven told the strangely curt woman whose thoughts seemed elsewhere. "If you can walk, I'm sorry, but you must leave. This is not a safe place. There is—"

"Danger," Tenet interrupted him, pulling away from her own untimely reminiscences to focus on the matter at hand. "I know. I came to help."

Ven looked at her questioningly, blinking away rainwater. "Help? But there is—"

Tenet raised her hand to stop him and forced her heart to focus on the matter at hand. "There is something here, someone who is—"

"Perverting nature," Ven said, ignoring Tenet's hand. "I know. I have been fighting him."

"So have I," Tenet said. She bent over to briefly massage her right calf.

"You have?" Ven said, looking her over, before quickly averting his gaze. He had noticed how she favored one leg over the other, and felt an intense longing to touch her, to see if she was all right.

“Do I look like I’m out here for any other reason?” Tenet asked him, wiping away raindrops from her lips.

“I don’t think it’s safe here, not for you,” Ven said, turning toward her. “There is a village down there—”

“Listen, Ven,” Tenet said. “For your information, I’ve been here since yesterday, doing something about the strange weather, and I—”

“You have?”

“I have. And furthermore—”

“Are you a druid? Because if you are, I haven’t—”

“No, no,” Tenet laughed dismissively. “Of course not.”

Ven waited for Tenet’s laughter to fade in the uncomfortable silence.

“Wait, are you a druid?” Tenet began tentatively.

“Yes.”

“I see.”

“What about it?” Ven asked.

“I meant no disrespect,” Tenet replied, turning away.

“Then you should listen to me, Tenet,” Ven said forcefully. “You must leave. I am engaged in a duel, and I—”

“No, you listen,” Tenet faced Ven. “I’m not leaving. I’m in a duel too.”

“You are?”

“I am.”

“And by what virtue are you in a duel?”

“By the virtue of Craft, that’s how.”

“I see.”

“Good.”

“A Craftsman.”

“Yes.”

“You.”

“Yes!”

“Well, then.”

Tenet watched Ven control his facial expression. *See he's not anything special just like every other man I've met judgmental and boorish and and and*

Ven watched Tenet's mud-smeared beauty eclipsed in magnitude by her spirit, and fought the improper attraction he felt for her, despite her obvious flaws.

"Then stay, Tenet," Ven told her. "But stay behind me where it's safe. I could be—"

Tenet bristled at his words. "I'll stay because I want to stay, and not because you permit me to stay. And I could be attacked any time too, so you better watch yourself, druid."

Tenet stood next to Ven and looked him squarely in the eyes, attempting her best defiant stance. *Don't look into his eyes his eyes don't don't*

Ven shrugged his wide shoulders and suppressed a smile. "Do what you like, Craftsman, but do it quietly. What I do requires concentration."

"Well, you keep quiet yourself," Tenet admonished him. "I need silence too."

"I hope you can defend yourself, because if—"

"Please," Tenet interrupted, closing her eyes.

•

WITHOUT A FURTHER word, Ven knelt down and selected several stones on the ground. Sweat dotted his brow as a small stone floated up first, followed by a second, then by a third, then more and more, the collective mass growing in size until a large cluster of rocks defied the pull of the earth in front of him. He glanced briefly at his new, spirited companion beside him, astonished to discover that Tenet was no less attractive when she wasn't arguing with him.

Tenet's eyes were shut tight as she fought to control her Craft, which was focused on the man beside her. *Enough enough so he has*

nice eyes so what there's a battle to be fought a duel to be won and I can't afford to he's looking at me he's looking no no no no concentrate concentrate Tenet forced her Craft to deal with the pattern of rain, coaxing more from the sky, fighting the rule of drought. Who knows he may be of some help after all

When the rain continued to grow in strength, Ven stood up and released his armada of floating rocks, hurling them downhill. "Findfoe," he intoned, his raspy voice charged with potency.

Satisfied with his work, he watched the flying stones gain speed. He was about to speak to his companion when he saw the stones veer backward toward him and Tenet.

"Look out!" Ven shouted, pushing Tenet away.

Tenet landed with a shocked grunt and opened her eyes only to see a swarm of stones heading toward her. She raised her hand and pulled at the pattern of motion, instantly causing the rocks to turn away. "Back! Back to your master!" And as soon as she was certain she was out of danger, she rapidly stroked the lines that led to the dark clouds once again. *Bolt bolt bolt bolt bolt*

"No!" Ven shouted, moving away from Tenet as he gestured toward the stones hurtling toward him. "What are you doing? I'm their master!"

"What?" Tenet shouted over the ominous rumbling from the heavens.

In the downpour, Ven alternately waved his hands left and right in quick succession, causing the incoming stones to crash in those directions, away from him. "Why did you—"

"But I didn't mean— Wait!" Tenet gestured frantically in the rain. "You were the one who sent the elemental?"

Ven and Tenet exchanged a look of bitter epiphany as the smell of metal surrounded the druid.

"You sent the lightn—" Ven began.

Their next words were lost in the sudden brilliance of the multiple lightning strokes that blazed from the sky, the crash of thunder that followed a moment after, and the mudslide that enveloped them both in its voracious embrace.



IT WAS THE rain that revived Tenet. She found herself half-buried in silt and stone, carried by the mudslide near the small house the woman Maery had told her she could live in. Nearby, she could hear the frenzied braying of Alister, her mule, who was mere instants from breaking the cord that tied him to the post of his makeshift corral. When the rope finally frayed apart, Alister rushed to his mistress, attempting to soothe her.

“Alister,” Tenet pulled on the mule’s reins and brought herself up out of the mud. Every part of her body ached, and the throbbing in her chest made her suspect that she had shattered more than one rib. She looked up the broken hill and saw a lopsided tree tumble down the slope, blackened and charred by lightning. Her eyes widened as she remembered Ven. *No no no*

“Alister, there’s a—there’s a man down here,” she cried, ignoring the flares of pain in her legs and arms as she crouched and began to dig through the mud and stones. The mule stood by her side, unable to do more than nuzzle the back of Tenet’s neck as she frantically searched.

Painful minutes passed before she located Ven’s body. Like the tree that had fallen, it was charred almost beyond recognition. Tenet could not fight the tears that ran down her muddy face as she gently excised Ven from the ground. *He can’t be dead I refuse I refuse I refuse*

In the downpour, Tenet triggered her Craft and realized that he was still alive, albeit barely. She felt a surge of joy rush through her tired mind and body. *He needs healing he needs healing*

She considered invoking her Craft to help him, but knew better. There were some things she could not do.

“Alister, come here.” Summoning the last reserves of her strength, she somehow managed to lift Ven’s dying form onto the mule. “Come on, I hope the woman Maery can help.”

Alister followed his mistress, pausing when Ven's body began to slip down to the ground.

Tenet corrected the load, fought back her tears, and spoke to her mule.

"Alister," she said. "This is Ven."

And they rushed toward the center of the small village, oblivious to the pelting rain and empty houses.

•

THE WOMAN MAERY and the wiry man in rough homespun stood in the rain by the well, waiting for Tenet.

"Look at everything that has happened," the man said without looking at the woman Maery. "It was a mistake, inviting that girl to stay."

"I wanted rain," shrugged the woman Maery, wiping away the water that dripped down her face. "No harm in wishing."

"You gave her a house to stay in," the man said, spitting into the mud in front of him. "You asked her to stay."

"The well needs refilling," the woman Maery turned to look at her husband. "You know that."

"Didn't have to be this one," her thin husband said. "Too dangerous. The earthquake, the angry skies—"

"In time it would be you or me," the woman Maery shrugged her shoulders. "Is that what you want?"

The man kept silent.

"Hush now," the woman Maery told her husband. "She comes."

"She looks hurt," the man observed.

Tenet approached the couple, leading Alister, who had Ven on his back.

The woman Maery raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"Who's that?" her husband asked. "What happened? Look at you. What have you done, Craftsman?"

"Please," Tenet began, "this man needs help. Can you help him? Do you have anything that can help? Please!"

The man walked toward the mule and grimaced at the sight of the burned body. "Looks dead to me."

"You're wrong," Tenet exclaimed. "He's still alive. But please, he's slipping away. It's all my fault; it was a misunderstanding, and I—I—"

Tenet gave in to tears of guilt, turning her back to the couple and leaning over the well.

"There, there," the woman Maery offered, signaling her husband.

"I—I can't help him the way he is right now," Tenet said softly. "My Craft, it doesn't work that way. He doesn't deserve to die; he was only trying to help. But I didn't—I didn't know—"

Thunder drowned Tenet's words as man took her violently by the legs and upended her into the well. Tenet didn't even have enough time to form a scream.

"That's that," the man said, wiping water away from his face.

"And what of that?" the woman Maery pointed to the body on the mule.

"Save the mule," her husband said. "The well has no use for the dead."

"She said he's still alive," the woman Maery said.

"Not for long," her husband replied.

"All right, then," the woman Maery nodded, approaching the mule.

Alister furrowed his brow and started backing away.

•

TENET'S THOUGHTS AFTER landing with a resounding crash in the well: *He pushed me into the well he pushed me and I'll kill the bastard and I'm alive and I think I broke my arm and Ha I knew there was something about the well and how will I get out of this and Ven what about Ven and Alister*

The first thing she did after looking upward was to check herself for injuries, cataloguing new pains and breaks with an affected distance. *This is the worst day of my life* She knew her left arm was possibly broken in several places, which made the thought of somehow climbing up the well an absurd notion. She gingerly touched the area behind her head and above her neck, and realized she was bleeding. *Wonderful*

The second thing Tenet did was to shout—

“Help! Help me!”

—before realizing that the only two people who could hear her were the man who threw her in the well in the first place and his accomplice of a wife, the woman Maery. Tenet didn’t hold high hopes for Alister to rescue her. He was, after all, only a mule, albeit a loyal one. *And Ven could be dead by now he could be*

The third thing she did was to investigate where she had fallen and how she still lived. The bottom of the well was mostly covered in mud, the result of her overnight rainfall. It was the mud that had broken her fall—which meant that either she had not fallen that far, or that the ability of mud to absorb a fall was severely underrated. *Go on make light of things because Ven and Alister are as good as dead and all you can do is*

The last thing she did was to decide to explore the rough tunnel that she found while she struggled around the bottom of the well. *Maybe it leads up let it lead up somehow*

•

VEN FELT HIMSELF floating in the dull emptiness of pain. With what little power he had left, he clung to life, but knew he would die soon. Most of the power of the lightning bolts had been absorbed by the dweomered tree he had conjured earlier, but when its capacity was overwhelmed, Ven was exposed to the remaining bolt’s fatal power.

As he began to slip into darkness, Ven thought about the argumentative but attractive Tenet, the sad and unexpected ending of his life, and heard a voice call his name.

Wake up

In the growing dimness, Ven struggled to open his eyes but failed.

I know what you are, what you can do. Take my strength now and help Tenet

Ven gathered strength and sent his thoughts toward the voice. *Who are you?*

Tenet calls me Alister, which is good enough

Alister?

Yes. Listen, she has been thrown into the well. You must help her

Into the well? But I can't—I have no—I'm hurt

Take my strength. I know you are able to. I am a beast

A beast? Her beast? No, no, I can't—

I can see why you don't want to. I can see your memories. You can heal by sharing the life of beasts

Then you know that the first and only time I did that my companion—

Died. I know. Do this

You might die in my place.

If it is so, then it is my life to give. Hurry now, you're fading

Why are you doing this for me?

I do it for Tenet. This is the only way I can help her. You must live so she can live

If you perish—

Then make certain I do not

But she'll—

Tell her I made you do this

Do you understand what you're asking me to do? How you could—

Do it

And Ven did.

•

THE WOMAN MAERY walked toward the mule Alister, her head partially averted, as she truly did not wish to see the dead body on the mule's back.

"Come now," she said in the rain.

Her eyes widened when the mule suddenly knelt on the muddy ground, as if the charred burden on its back became too heavy to bear. The woman Maery watched in trepidation as the mule became suffused in a soft green glow.

"Husband," she cried, gesturing for the man to come over.

"What?" her husband said, joining her.

"Look," the woman Maery whispered.

The charred body of the man twitched once before issuing a dreadful wail, its head twisting upward as if to drink from the bountiful rain. The woman Maery and her husband were unable to move, transfixed by the occurrence before them.

Pink flesh peeked from under the cracked and burnt skin, forcing its way up as the druid Ven regenerated himself. New sinews grew where muscles had been lost, and the sound of reinvigorated bones—aligning themselves where they should—filled the drenched air. He stood on renewed legs, carefully drawing as much as he dared from the mule, making sure that he did not repeat the tragedy of his past fatal error.

When his physical restoration was complete, Ven offered silent thanks to the quivering Alister, before turning his fury on the murderous couple who stood in shock in front of him.

"Monster," the woman Maery managed to say, before pulling at her husband to run away.

When he was struck by lightning, Ven had lost much of his cache of helpful implements. What little had survived vanished in the mudslide that followed. All he had left were the words he

knew, whose use, without a focus, drained him very deeply. He shouted one and stomped on the wet earth, causing mud and stones to splatter over the retreating couple.

The woman Maery found that she could neither move nor speak. Alarmed, she tried to turn her head toward her husband, but found the motion next to impossible. Everything seemed so slow. Her vision darkened until she could no longer see. The sounds around her seemed deeper, lower in pitch, and soon she could not hear.

The man watched his wife turn to stone, and screamed for mercy for the brief duration that his throat remained flesh.

When there was only the sound of the falling rain, Ven regarded the two statues with contempt, and pushed both over into the mud.

He knelt by the mule, making sure he had not caused death. Alister looked at him with tired but approving eyes.

"You've saved me in more ways than you know," Ven told him. "Thank you, Alister."

And he ran toward the well.

•

TENET FOUND THE black-skinned creature squatting over a crack in the earth at the bottom of the well.

The sight of it filled her with revulsion: it seemed primarily composed of a huge maw, overcrowded with teeth; its skin shimmered black but was broken in places. Though it seemed to have no eyes, Tenet felt the baleful force of its stare.

Tenet felt images intruding into her mind with the weight of weariness. Desperately she sought to spark her Craft, but found she couldn't. The ebon creature's thoughts caressed hers, twining and intertwining, insinuating itself into the core of her being.

Stop stop stop

To Tenet's horror, she found her body obeying the creature's unspoken command. As if through the eyes of a stranger, she watched herself go closer and closer to the foul creature.

Stop stop stop

Her mind was filled with images, persuading her that her death was inevitable, that the creature needed to feed to do what it needed to do, that it was the first of many sent ahead to prepare the way, that when its kin came the world would be reduced to blessed emptiness.

The ebon-skin's maw salivated with anticipation. It showed her how futile it would be to fight, how it had influenced a man and woman in the village above and persuaded them to hurl their fellow villagers down the well one by one, how its presence twisted the natural order, how it would savor the taste of her eyes.

Tenet tried to scream, tried to move, tried to run—but instead closed the distance between her and the creature. She watched helplessly as she offered her pained arm to the foul thing's maw.

No no no no no

Tenet involuntarily shuddered as its black tongue, notched with sharp bones, cut her arm open from elbow to palm, pausing only to delicately slice open a path to the tip of her middle finger.

No no no no no

"Tenet!" a voice boomed from behind her.

Ven? but how how how did you Ven please help

Tenet felt the ebon-skin's control weaken, as it turned its attention to the new intruder. She bit back the pain, cradling her bleeding arm as she huddled nauseously on the ground.

"V—Ven?" she managed to say. "Run! Run!"

"Leave her be, rank thing," Ven shouted, swiftly picking up a pebble and hurtling it at the creature. As it flew in the air, Ven uttered a secret word, causing the stone to expand in size in accordance to his will. The massive boulder struck the ebon-skin and broke apart with tremendous force, but with no apparent effect.

The quality of air changed in the chamber below the well, becoming thick and fetid, as the black creature extended its thoughts to Ven, taunting his strength, showing Ven how his demise would fuel its power.

Ven fought wildly, but found his thoughts turned askance, as the creature commandeered his body. He began to walk to the creature.

“No!” Tenet shouted. She triggered the spark of her Craft, igniting the Traitor’s Way with the flame of her anger and fear, and focused on the abomination.

To her dismay, she saw only emptiness: no lines nor patterns presented themselves, no schema nor structure to exploit, no rules nor governances to affect. She had no power over the creature.

Ven was near enough for the ebon-skin’s twisting serrated tongue to reach.

“Ven!” Tenet turned her Craft to him, seeing the totality of his being, the green lines of his subdued will, the radiant concentric circles of his virility, the intense shades of his spirit—the entire intricate pattern of his being. She recognized the unmistakable imprint of Alister, deduced the reasons and results of her friend’s assistance, and saw the bold blossoming of deep emotion in Ven’s heart. Above all that, she surmised, was the invisible influence of the ebon-skin.

I don’t need to see you

She provoked the lines of Ven’s humanity, stroked the circles of his pride and dignity, realigned the patterns that altered his behavior, pulled taut the strings of his personal identity, and freed him.

In the instant that he was liberated from the control of the foul creature, Ven spoke the most terrible word he knew: it was the word that provoked spring, that banished winter, which made mountains grow, and enabled birds to defy the pull of the earth. It was the word upon which all his druidic magic rested, the essence of transformation, the secret of that all living things knew only

when their minds were at rest. And he spoke it directly to the creature.

From her position on the ground, Tenet, bleeding and bereft of power, could only watch in hope. *Kill it kill it kill it*

In the face of such naked expression of truth, the ebon-skin shrieked, portions of its distended face forming virulent pustules that erupted stark yellow and brown fluids, thick and noisome. From its wide open maw, dark-colored ichor spewed forth, as the creature regurgitated all the undigested remains in its belly.

It took a step back, and fell into the crack in the earth behind it.

Exhausted by his expression of the word, Ven shifted his gaze away from the fissure and began to make his way toward Tenet.

"Thank you," he whispered as he approached. "For saving my life—though I was supposed to be the one to save yours. That—that creature, what was it?" Ven paused for breath. "Listen, I have to tell you about Alister—"

"No, no!" Tenet shook her head vehemently, her voice hoarse with fear and memory. "Don't turn away!" *It will come back I know I know I know it will*

From the dark fissure, the creature's sinuous tongue lashed out, and, catching hold of Ven's legs, pulled with all its strength.

Ven fell forward, smashing his face on the ground, violently flailing his arms to gain purchase, as the creature dragged him with unnerving speed toward the crack.

Tenet extended her good arm toward Ven, heedless of the pain that beleaguered her.

"Take my hand!"

For the second time that day, their eyes met in clear-cut epiphany.

When Tenet met Ven's bloodshot eyes she realized that he would not take her hand, would not risk her being dragged away as well. *How just like a man*

When Ven met Tenet's wide eyes he realized a sublime and powerful truth: she would never give up.

"Live, Tenet," he shouted. "I choose you to live."

"I choose life for both of us," she shouted at him. Stretching her arm to the limit she grasped his arm. "I will not leave you!"

Ven smiled through the pain of his struggle, and kicked and shook and thrashed about with all his might, with all he could muster. The ragged edges of the tongue cut wildly at his legs, stripping away skin, but quickly began losing its grip.

"Fight it, Ven," Tenet screamed. "Fight it!"

Unable to hold on, the creature suspended in the fissure released its hold, its tongue recoiling back into its maw, and at last plunged into the murky depths that it first came from.

The silence that followed was punctuated only by the tortured breaths and pained gasps of the two figures sprawled and bleeding on the damp ground, their hands clutched together.

Tenet strained her voice and broke the stillness.

"You know, we still have to somehow seal that hole and get out of here."

•

IT WAS VEN'S idea to bury the village and the well in an avalanche the following morning, after he explained the provenance of the two eerie statues near the center of the cursed place.

Tenet agreed to his suggestion, but only after they both made certain that the mule Alister was fine. Tenet embraced her loyal companion, before she withdrew her influence from the surroundings and ended the rainfall she had called for earlier.

Side by side they stood on a faraway ledge, covered almost head to toe in the healing mud that Ven created, hours after they were able to leave the well.

Tenet showed him where the mountain was weakest, and that was where Ven caused the mountain to fall. Neither took pleasure in the devastation.

When the landscape finally settled in its new configuration, after the last stone fell into place, they began to limp in the direction of the setting sun, alternating riding on the sturdy mule Alister, intending to warn the neighboring states and kingdoms concerning ebon-skinned threats from the depths of the world.

“Do you think they’ll believe us?” Tenet asked.

“Between you and me, we have the scars to prove our words,” Ven replied with a grimace.

“You know, Ven, you never apologized for attacking me first.”

“You were the one causing the rain to fall.”

“You were the misguided druid who didn’t know enough to discover what was truly the cause.” Tenet reached from Alister’s back to scratch one of the mule’s big ears.

“I could say the same about you.”

“I’m not a druid.”

“And the world is grateful that you aren’t,” Ven edged ahead, favoring his better leg.

“Ha!” Tenet exclaimed, carefully attempting to dismount. “Feel like a little lightning today?”

Ven looked back at Tenet with a smile as bright as the sunlight, and extended his hand to help her.

“Try me.”

Tenet returned his smile, bolts of lightning the furthest thing on her mind.

I believe I will

The Sewing Project

Apol Lejano-Massebieau

ON THE MORNING after she turned 21 years old, Eudela borrowed her uncle's horse-drawn carriage and for half a day journeyed through the inner city's confusing warren of streets. Despite that it was already a feat that she made only one wrong turn, ending up on a sad concrete strip populated by shriveled old women selling prayers for the dead, braided hair belonging to lost loves, and bottles of fetus floating in formaldehyde, she still screeched, "Punyeta!"—a noise loud enough to send the fetuses into hiccups. Eudela was not a girl to make light of mistakes, especially not if the mistakes were hers.

It was a little past one o'clock when she finally arrived at the Chinaman's shop. Followed by a shopgirl who squeezed her girth through the stacked aisles by walking sideways, Eudela did her shopping. Consulting a list meticulously made the night before, she chose four meters of sturdy cotton 160 inches in width; a pair of Solingen scissors that she was assured was so sturdy she could pass it on to her children if she felt so inclined, a packet of golden-tipped needles, and a roll of ordinary white thread, this last marked down to 75 percent its original price because street dust had turned the first layer a dull brown. (Eudela was a perfectionist, but this did not prevent her from being frugal when she could.)

As soon as the doors had flung open on his shop of notions and all sorts of knickknacks, Inkong had put the greasy tabloid he was reading down on the wooden counter to watch the girl enter with the brisk strides and purposeful gestures of someone at least a

full head taller. He thought back on his daily horoscope just read: “Today you will make a fortuitous acquaintance.”

Thinking of that line, as he was making change for the girl, Inkong asked, “Is it for a sofa slipcover, or for curtains to diffuse the noon light?”

Eudela hesitated for a moment, then shook her head no. For the first time outside the presence of family she declared, “I am going to sew myself a man.”

Adam’s apple crazily bobbing up and down his thin neck, Inkong swallowed down a chuckle. From the way the girl in front of him had squared her shoulders as if for a fight, he wisely figured out that to laugh was not a good idea. So instead he reached from behind the counter and tossed for free into Eudela’s basket a square of cardboard on which two overlarge plastic buttons were attached. “They might come in handy,” he said, “for making the eyes.”

•

THAT NIGHT, BACK in the upstairs room she occupied in the enormous ochre house she shared with her grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, stray family friends, and an ever-expanding variety of cousins, Eudela swept the dust bunnies out from under her fat, lumpy bed and slid her purchases into the dark space.

The next two days were busy at her grandmother’s sewing studio where Eudela worked as quality controller. They were finishing an order from the first prince’s best friend’s company for ten thousand and one hundred ten shirts made from cloth woven by the women of a famous coastal village two days away eastward. Save for the curious blood-red hue of the dye extracted from the exploding pods of the granada tree, the fabric looked like ordinary cotton, but warp and weft were woven together so tight and using a technique passed on from mothers to first daughters that the cloth would never wear thin.

In the studio they employed only magichands, gifted artisans marked from birth by having extremities that ended with at least six fingers each. Eudela had never come across a misaligned hemline, and only once on a loose button, and then only because the magichand responsible was an aging dame who needed a pair of eyeglasses but was too vain to admit the fact.

Eudela enjoyed her job immensely because in the factory she rarely had to deal with errors and mistakes. She felt strongly that she really had had enough of those, that she had been plagued by them all her life.

•

A BIG PART of her woes had to do with that although there existed passionate attraction between her parents Celina and Eduardo, man and wife were also hopelessly incompatible.

They would spend their nights locked in their room making love so loud that every time they climaxed the ground on which the house stood would tremble, waking everybody and their next-door neighbors up. Members of the village's various religious organization even began holding prayer vigils for the souls of the inhabitants of the ochre house. After cracks began to appear all over the walls, requiring expensive repairwork, Eudela's grandmother finally put her foot down: either the couple find their own apartment, or else they install soundproofing.

Daytime, the noise they made came from vicious spats that would begin from nothing at all but could escalate to plates being hurled and names being called. Eudela had been born on the same day as a girl cousin, and in the confusion that inevitably followed one of her parents' fights, she would spend days being called by the wrong name and sucking from the wrong teat. (Her aunt, her cousin's mother, for myopic reasons was rarely able to tell Eudela and her own baby apart.) When Celina would finally notice the mistake, the infants would change hands; but then Eduardo would find out, and the couple would be bickering again.

This state of affairs continued until the two girls were six, when Eudela's cousin's parents moved their family away to the colder countries, where they set up a business selling fried lumpia. Eudela was finally left at peace, but indelibly marked.

As a reaction to the early chaos, Eudela developed a rigid, exacting personality which served her well first at school, and then now at the sewing factory, but which had the effect of leaving her almost in a perpetually agitated state. The slightest disorder stressed her out.

The sewing studio was her oasis. From eight in the morning until five in the afternoon, enveloped by the hum of sewing machines, she would make her way through piles and piles of clothing, knowing that they would all be the same, shirt after shirt after shirt, and the same with the pants and the skirts. She would always feel a tug of regret when the end of the workday came.

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GIVEN HER PERSONALITY, Eudela was the kind of girl who usually tried to do things right, but despite the entire family's urging, she would not do as expected of women her age and try to find herself a spouse.

"You're going to end up a sour-faced old maid," was her grandmother's perpetual warning, often said right in front of her Aunt Nelisa, whose face was set in a perpetual grimace and who was, in fact, an old maid.

"Che!" her aunt would mutter under her breath, only to pull Eudela into a quiet corner to tell her of the cold frustrations of lonely nights.

Her Uncle Guevarra, who was the village basketball coach and thus knew all the young men who lived in the area, would every other week find an excuse to invite one or the other of them over to present to her niece. Guevarra taught Eudela to ride a bicycle when she was a child and she was fond of the man, so she suffered

the introductions, but as soon as it was polite to do so, Eudela would excuse herself to go hide in the big house, leaving the young man to discuss sports with her uncle over perspiring glasses of kalamansi juice.

It was her father Eduardo who finally changed Eudela's mind. The man had long ago found a solution to his marital woes by going to work on a fishing vessel. He would leave on voyages for months on end, coming home only four times a year, enough to quench his and his wife's passions, but never staying long enough for plates to start getting smashed.

On one of his stays home, over Sunday family dinner and tired of hearing grandmother, uncles, and aunts complain about the nonexistent state of his second daughter's romantic life, Eduardo snapped, "Just let Eudela be!"

Now as anyone who put half the effort into it could guess, the problem was that Eudela had made up her mind not to end up like her mother, married to somebody she seemed to detest half the time. A girl who wanted to be clear about her positions on all the important issues, Eudela had some time ago decided that while she wasn't very fond of Celina, Eduardo she positively disliked. From her childhood she remembered him screaming the loudest. She didn't relish the thought of having her father on her side.

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AFTER A WEEK spent thinking and another spent planning, writing down the pros and the cons, outlining logistics, and calculating expenses, Eudela came to another decision.

She had only the regular eight fingers and two opposable thumbs, but so fascinated by how expertly the magichands worked, the willful young woman decided that she was going to eliminate at least one of life's uncertainties. She was just going to go ahead and make herself the most perfect of men.

After her trip to Inkong's shop, and with the last of the indestructible shirts folded, packed, and shipped, Eudela went home and took a long bath. Free of lint and well-perfumed thereafter, she unrolled a sheet of brown paper and did her pattern over twice.

She was certain that her man must be exactly four inches taller than she was. "So I only have to tilt my head back slightly to look him soulfully in the eyes." Eudela had other precisions—the distance between the eyes and the angle of the jawline included. She also had down pat the length of the neck, the width of the shoulders, the breadth of the chest; the diameter of upper arms and thighs; the thickness of wrists and calves.

Just before applying pattern to cloth, she snipped off a corner of fabric and went in search of the individual whose opinions in terms of aesthetics she trusted most.

Her elder sister Marina had, unlike Eudela, survived their shared childhood largely unscathed. She now travelled all over the twelve continents, exhibiting her canvasses painted with women whose torso grew various fruits and flora. At that moment she was on creative hiatus, and when Eudela found her she was parked with her easel under the backyard's century-old mango tree, accompanied by the wooden dog that had been her pet since the age of seven.

The artist looked unconvinced at the limp piece of fabric her young sister held out. Unravelling an inch of thread, she put this in her mouth, chewed for a second, and then spat it out.

"There is only one color for a man," closing her eyes, in her throaty alto Marina began. "Make him an azure forehead, ultramarine lips, and beryl cheeks. I see a sapphire nose, navy ears, and—"

The artist dramatically gasped, touching her throat with red-manicured fingernails and opening her eyes wide.

"What is it?" Despite that Eudela was familiar with Marina's theatrics, she was nonetheless slightly alarmed.

“I don’t know about you, but personally I would die for a guy with brilliant cerulean eyes.”

•

A WEEK LATER, Eudela was back in Inkong’s shop. Trying to ignore the shopgirl crowding her from behind, she investigated the display of embroidery thread, paying particular attention to the blue selection.

Sensing her exasperation, and of course it must be admitted attracted to the way her firm breasts pushed against her linen blouse, Inkong approached and helped her figure out which shade of blue was which. Then—and at this the shopgirl lifted her eyebrows in surprise—he invited her to the eatery across the street to chat over jasmine tea and sweet hopia. Despite that she appreciated how Inkong was so helpful and that she found him to have a very nice smile, Eudela very firmly shook her head and declined.

•

FOR THE NEXT few months, when Eudela wasn’t working, she spent almost all her time with the sewn man. The family was not sure what to make of the the plan at the beginning, but whatever misgivings anyone had was soon erased by Eudela’s impressive dedication to the project.

She bought a used embroidery book, and tattooed the torso with an intricate assortment of fauna. There were two wild cats, a monkey-eating eagle, and a nest of serpents, mainly done in chain and blanket stitches, bullion knots, and couching. On a rainy Saturday morning, the girl in her could not resist; Eudela permitted herself a trio of lacy daisies on the lower back.

When Aunt Nelisa saw the results, the older woman began to hyperventilate and almost passed out.

Eudela's man was going to be a showcase of all things she admired and found beautiful, and she wanted him to be just exactly right. So at least once a month, after diligently examining her work and making sketches of what she still wanted done, she went with a shopping list and made the trip to Inkong's shop.

February, because she had had enough of embroidering in blue, Eudela allowed Inkong to introduce her to filaments named carmine and cerise, saffron and bisque, lilac and heliotrope—different shades of red, yellow, and violet. Ever so practically, she also chose some alabaster, jet, and umber.

March, she made up her mind that the cerulean eyes Marina saw were going to be of hand-blown glass. Promising Inkong that the buttons he'd given her were to be used on a jacket, Eudela had the shopkeeper send an order off to the artisans in Venezia.

On a hot April day, Eudela was in the shop stocking up on fine wool, using the money she had initially saved up for a beach holiday. "He will always be dressed in suits," she explained to Inkong, who himself went around in jeans and old T-shirts, although when he knew Eudela was coming, he did take care to wear one of his two tops that were not already saggy around the collar.

As he was wrapping the wool in brown paper bags, Inkong flashed Eudela one of his easy smiles and then, thinking that after months of getting acquainted he now had a chance, he asked Eudela if she now wanted to get some tea and hopia. After she had said no, the young woman was surprised at how bad she felt seeing Inkong looking crestfallen. She was even more surprised that she felt such an urge to then say yes that the only way she could stop herself was to grab her bags and run out of the shop.

•

IT WAS A Sunday afternoon and she was quilting a belly. Her man's stomach had to be made of sturdy stuff, Eudela had decided, the better to swallow life's challenges. To that end, she had chosen squares of tough corduroy and high-quality batting from Europe, and was hand-sewing together the fabric squares at the large wooden table in the kitchen.

It was one of those rare moments when Eudela found herself alone in the same room as her mother. After giving birth to Eudela, Celina had taken a break from baby-making, only to take it up again seven years later, when Eduardo began working on the ships and the long absences enhanced their fertility. She produced five children in quick succession, and had still not gotten herself rid of the perpetually harassed look shared by mothers of small children everywhere.

After watching Eudela stab her finger a few times and curse repeatedly, Celina stopped stirring the porridge she was cooking in an aluminum pot, lit herself a cigarette and, with the stick clamped between her lips, sat beside her often ignored second daughter.

She had never said anything to Eudela about what she thought of the sewn man, but now she foraged through the huge wooden sewing kit, finding a ball of yarn and a crochet hook. She made a few chain stitches, some slips, a triple treble. For a few minutes, they sat quietly together, each one absorbed in her task. The younger woman even stopped cussing.

When Celina was done, she surveyed her work, then passed it to her daughter. It was a loud purple, lopsided and loose, one lobe larger than the other—an imperfect heart. Not saying anything, only exhaling cigarette smoke, Celina stood up to stir her porridge.

•

IT WAS OCTOBER, there was the beginning of a chill to the air, and a beautiful young couple sat together on the garden swing of the ochre house to enjoy the evening breeze. Eudela was pretty in a white dress and her hair brushed in soft curls around her shoulders, and the sewn man was indeed a sight to behold—patchworked, quilted, and embroidered to such beauty, each stitch perfectly in place!

Eudela was trying her best to enjoy the singing of the frogs in the pond and the humming of the nighttime mosquitoes, but after a while, she decided that she needed some conversation. For the best part of an hour, she told him stories from the sewing studio. All throughout, it was a monologue; the sewn man uttered not a word. Eudela had sewn his mouth into a tight line, because she had been convinced that the perfect man should be the silent type.

Her throat sore from talking, Eudela finally shut up and rested her head on the shoulder of her perfect man. She rubbed her cheek against the wool of his jacket. Beneath his clothes she could feel his muscles made strong by the polyfill she had packed in there very tight.

In ten minutes, Eudela was sitting upright again. The wool was scratchy on her skin and made her perspire, while the muscles were much too hard, they hurt her head.

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IT TOOK THE young couple just eight days to figure out that they were not meant for each other. On a Thursday morning, they said their goodbyes at the door of the ochre house, surrounded by Eudela's family, who were of the position that although the sewn man was a little too stiff for somebody who was after all sewn and stuffed, he was not at all of a bad sort. Aunt Nelisa could not help but sigh as with admirable stoicism the sewn man got on the horse-drawn carriage and went away to the coast, where the women weavers awaited him.

As soon as the carriage was out of sight and she was done waving, Eudela took out paper and pen to begin making a list. The failure of her project had led her to much self-examination. One of her realisations was that she was much too tense, and a little hobby like cross-stitching would help her relax. All the supplies she needed were to be found at Inkong's shop. With the sewn man out of the picture, she might even ask him out to drink jasmine tea and snack on hopia.

L e x T a l i o n i s

Paolo Chikiamco

THE DAY I finally returned home, I was bearing my sister's corpse on my back.

It caused quite the ruckus at the gates, let me tell you. Not because of the body, for it was completely swathed in the finest discarded taters of cloth from a side alley in Meldea, but because I was not someone the Tribe of Atigon expected to find strolling into their village on this fine autumn morning, or any other morning for that matter. This was quite a reasonable assumption, as most people who are exiled and told “never to return on pain of death” would, in fact, never return. Yet there I stood, in my torn scholar's robes and my mismatched sandals, with nothing but a rucksack to carry what little I owned, and the corpse of my sister to shield me from the wind blowing through the cold northern mountains. That was Yaline for you... always watching out for me. Some things, I suppose, never change, especially in the village of the Dragon Slayers.

The front gates had not been guarded, which was not much of a surprise. When one took the effort to ring the perimeter of one's village with the cracked, gaping skulls of your traditional enemies—who just happened to have fangs the size of an oxen's forelegs—one could be fairly secure that there would not be very many unannounced guests. Oh, there was always a snow-mad bounty hunter or two, paid in barrels of coin to steal a dragon's tooth—rumored to allow one to raise the dead—or commissioned to exact vengeance on one or the other of the Tribe who had managed to disrespect some lowland merchant who had more gold than wit... So, yes, there were days when the dragon heads in the Circle of Skulls had smaller, fresher companions,

but for the most part the outside world left us alone and the Tribe for its own part had little use for the outside world, save as a conveniently large dung pile upon which it could heap its unfortunate undesirables ... of which there were surprisingly few, which made me, I suppose, something of a notorious figure in the village. Or so one might imagine from the number of people who turned out to watch me stroll towards my doom.

They came alone, and in pairs—in groups of three, or four,—their eyes wide and jaws agape, quite unlike their normally stoic faces. It would not do to show emotion you see, for Dragons, they say, lived on the fear of humankind, and took from our terrors their sustenance and pleasure. It was why only those of sufficient bravery were allowed to ascend to the high places of the Mount of Girai, to Dance with our ancient foe, and in so doing become true warriors of the Tribe. Yet to suppress fear is one thing, and to mask outrage or disbelief is quite another. Certainly, none of my people had any need to fear the bedraggled, rangy youth who walked so suddenly back into their midst that day— none save one.

Her face was blank, a carving of plated bronze atop a core of pure iron, yet her normally graceful movements were hurried, even panicked, and her sun-warmed arms pushed aside the slow and the stupefied with equal alacrity, until she found her way to my side, leaving my younger siblings behind. My mother did not touch me, for that would be against the Laws, but the pain in her voice wrapped itself around me as tightly as a shroud.

“My child, my child,” she whispered, “What have you done?” “I have returned,” I answered simply, for although there was much to be said, I had not the heart to say it.

“No—you have died,” she said, and her hand moved as if to touch my cheek, then wisely withdrew. “You have died by your own hand, and your own choice.”

“Not I,” and this time it was my voice that cracked. I turned from her, unable to look into her eyes, into the heart I would break, and break twice. “Where is Father?”

“You know he will not see you,” she said, and her tone had changed, “What did you mean, ‘Not I?’”

I did not answer. “Where is father?”

“Laeth...” she said, with increasing urgency, “Laeth why have you returned?”

I looked at her then, and grit my teeth. “Father should be here.”

Then she saw my burden, and she knew my purpose, and it broke her. My mother’s mouth opened, yet it was the cry of an animal that emerged from it, an animal shorn of its fur, and naked to the elements, helpless and unprotected. It was this cry which finally brought my father, from wherever he had doubtless been watching my arrival, brought him towards the threshold of the village where I had laid Yaline’s body, now wet with my mother’s tears.

He was a giant of a man, with shoulders as broad as a most men were wide, and muscles so defined they had their own peaks, and valleys, and mountain passes. I started to explain to him why I should not be put to death, how our Law required me to bring my sister’s body back home, and that such a mandate took precedence even over my exile—but my father’s gaze slid over me like water over fowl, and he crouched beside my mother and looked upon the cold gray face of his only daughter as if it were the map of a battlefield. He did not weep, or shout, or even frown, for he was the Master of the Tribe, and had learned long ago it was in his interest to suppress more than his fear. But his gaze latched on to my sister’s body as if it would see nothing else for the rest of his days, and so it was with little difficulty that I snuck behind him and toppled him to the ground with the hardest kick my weary legs could muster.

There was a collective gasp of horror at my act, and a second soon followed when I placed a knife to my father’s throat, and pronounced the words he had never expected to hear, and which I had never expected to say.

“Ozen of the Tribe, Ozen Heavyhand of the Tribe of Atigon, I am your son, Laeth, your son of seventeen winters and all the seasons between, your son and son of Chire and the son of Raques and yea, even unto Atigon himself. And as I hold your life in my hands, I demand my birthright, my inheritance, and my trial.”

“Laeth no!” My mother shouted, but I had senses only for my father, and he said nothing, his eyes burning into mine as if by will alone he could make my sockets as empty as those of the skulls in the Circle. But he said nothing, and made no movement until I had said the final words which the Law demanded.

“I am Laeth, your son, and I would Dance with the Dragon.”

And my father said “Today I will mourn my daughter, and tomorrow I will burn her. But the following dawn I will give you your sword, and give you your candles, and you will ascend to the peak of the mountain and contend with our foe, and you will either return a Warrior of the Tribe—or not return at all.”

He smiled as he said the last, and I had no doubt in my mind which outcome he preferred.

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ALMOST BEFORE WE’VE sucked on our mother’s teat, we Atigon are taught about the Enemy. The dragons and the Atigon have been foes almost since the world formed itself from chaos. Our legends are filled with the indignities visited upon our people by our winged adversaries—tales of villages razed, women ravished, and children sacrificed to their deities. If the Atigon are cold of heart and brutal of action, it is because only such a people can stand against creatures such as these, whose jaws had rent the jagged mountains, whose scales turned aside the sharpest of blades. More than that, it was the sorcery of the dragons that made them legends, and especially in the lowlands, even men of learning traded tales of the eldritch powers of dragonkind.

Yet, much as the Tribe hates the dragons, there was likewise a level of grudging respect, perhaps because the Atigon can conceive of no other foe worthy of their ire. Dragons, we are told, are not to be treated as mere beasts. Predators the dragons may be, but they have a culture and an intellect more than a match for any human. In the old days, before the dragons had retreated to the snowy fastness of the mountain, Atigon raids had been on entire packs of the creatures, and they would march into cities created by dragons, filled with draconic art, music, and literature. But that had been before the Retreat, before the magic of our forefathers had stripped them of their ability to reproduce. It was then that the dragons became a dying breed, and when the war had become an extermination, then a slow, occasional erosion. For no one really knew what would become of the Tribe, if our great adversaries disappeared from the land.

That was why not every male child of the Tribe was given the opportunity to participate in the Dance. As with many other cultures, the Atigon had a particular ceremony which young males needed to undergo, in order to become men—but in Atigon we had two: the Passage of Fire, and the Dance with the Dragon. The former was what most men undertook, and it involved an entirely unpleasant mixture of rigorous fasting and ritual combat, but in its favor it had an almost perfect survival rate. There was nothing dishonorable about taking the Passage instead of the Dance, and one was not deprived of any privilege because one settled for it.

For those who desired fame and prestige—or, as was more often, for the parents who desired fame and prestige for their children—there was no trial other than the Dance, for in our history, those who had returned from it went on to become the very best of our people. Under our Law there were only two ways by which a son of the Tribe could be allowed to undergo the Dance: the first involved his father or the male head of the family publicly proclaiming his child's worthiness before the assembled village and giving solemn oath that if his child failed the task, his own

life was forfeit. The chances, of course, of this being done on my behalf had always been rather slim, to say the least.

The second method involved the child besting his father in combat, and ritually demanding to participate in the Dance. My father was one of the most preeminent warriors in the village, and he had been since my youth, and while I must admit to youthful fancies of splitting his head with a rock, I had never in my wildest imaginations ever dreamed of actually attempting it. Yet when necessity calls, at times even possibility bows its head. It may not have been my brightest moment, but I had done it, and by some miracle had managed to pull it off... though not, perhaps, in the eyes of all.

"My friends say you are a coward."

"Is that so?" I asked my youngest brother Sarn, as he went through the ritual morning motions, on the day my sister was being burned on her bier. "Why do they say that?"

Sarn gave me a strange look, but did not pause in his movements. A disciplined child. Where was that bawling babe who I had left behind six years ago? "I know better than to ask that question."

"Which question?"

"Why?" His tone made it a curse, and not an inquiry.

Ah. "I take it there were some new rules put into effect by father after I was set aside?"

Sarn shut his eyes, as if he could shut away my existence. "I don't want to end up like you."

Neither did I, I thought to myself, and watched my youngest brother as he mimicked the ancient forms of our forefathers. The two of us were silent for a time—I wouldn't call it a companionable silence, but it was an accepting one. He was who he was, and I was who I was.

After a while, Sarn spoke again.

"*She* didn't know any better either."

I smiled, sadly. "Well I've been told weakness of character tends to be infectious. It's a good thing I left before you could catch it."

“Yes,” my brother nodded, “It’s a good thing.”

Neither of us paid any heed to the thick cloud of smoke billowing in the distance.

“What do you think?” I asked him.

“About you?”

“Yes,” I answered, surprised to find that I did care what he thought.

“I think... I think that you didn’t fight Father fairly, but that fights aren’t always fair.”

I knew who those words had come from—how often had I been told the same thing? I kept my peace. “That is true and wise Sarn... But it doesn’t answer my question.”

“I think... that if you were a coward, then you wouldn’t be picking a fight with a dragon. That’s what I think.” He paused. “And *she* always said you were the bravest man she knew.”

He had stopped in his movements, and if Father had been there, Sarn would have received quite the beating. I stood up, dusted myself off, then placed my hand on my brother’s shaking shoulder.

“I can’t ask the question...” he said, his voice crackling, “I can’t ... but...”

I held him close, as his grief leaked past his eyelids like a breached dam. And then, in the faintest of whispers:

“But I want to know *why*...”

“So do I brother,” I said as he finally let himself go. “So do I...”

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THE DAY AFTER most of my sister was consigned to ash, I set out to find a dragon. I had with me my battered rucksack, the incense candles that would draw the dragon to me, and a hideously heavy iron sword which had been immersed in dragons bane for the requisite twelve-hour period. I was also tattooed with

the markings of a prospective warrior, an endeavor which had caused no small amount of consternation to the elderly women who had been unlucky enough to be assigned the task, as they had constantly complained that I just did not have the necessary muscle mass for them to properly draw the traditional symbols—for victory, power, and virility. At one point I had quipped that I hardly needed the symbol of manliness, unless I was entirely misinterpreting what I was meant to *do* with the dragon, but the spinsters had looked so shocked that thereafter I said not a word, for fear of leading them to an untimely end.

Not that their markings seemed to do me any good. I set out shortly after sunrise, but I arrived at the Passage of Fangs in the orange haze of late afternoon. The trek was arduous, and the added weight of the sword on my back made it next to impossible. I wondered anew at how I had managed the long journey from Meldea with my sister's body, but whatever unnatural strength had borne me then seemed to already have deserted me.

When I saw the snow capped “fangs” which had given the pass its name, I practically collapsed from relief and exhaustion. I wanted nothing more than to curl upon myself like an infant, and pray no dragon came until the morrow. But I knew that if I was to do what I set out to do, I must move quickly. For Sarn's friends were right in a way—I was a coward, and if I did not act now, I might not act at all.

I dragged my beaten body the dozen or so steps towards the rocky shelf that stood like a platform in the middle of the pass. Upon it, inscribed in a red that may or may not have been dried blood, was a circle with designs that matched the symbols painted upon my chest. At eight points around the circle were niches carved into the rock, and into each I placed a candle before struggling with stones and branches to conjure up a tiny flame, with which I lit each wick. Then I set my monstrous sword upon my lap, closed my eyes, and waited.

It did not take long.

It had two great wings, each folded across its great back like a pair of coiled snakes, while its barbed tail swished and swayed in a counterpoint to its elongated neck. It was large, certainly the largest living creature I had ever seen, half and again the height and breadth of the huts back in the village, yet it moved—no, *glided*—upon the hard packed snow with an ease and a silence which would have put to shame even the shade of an Ice Leopard. But while the big cats were as white as their names implied, the dragon was black, black, black—so dark that even had it been the dead of the night, I had no doubt I would have had little trouble spotting him, for his black was no mere absence of light, but a presence in itself, an obsidian that seemed to bleed the richness from any color that it touched. Even without the tint of its scales, one would never lose sight of this dragon, for its eyes glowed with a hungry, inner flame, orbs of gold that reached out and grabbed the mortal mind as easily as one of its great black claws could grab a mortal body.

I stared at the magnificent creature, the living death that approached so gracefully, so inexorably, and I took a deep breath, gripped my sword tight, and breached three centuries worth of Law and tradition.

“Hold,” I called out to the dragon, “I wish to parley.”

The dragon did not pause.

“Hold,” I called out anew, this time with a tremor in my voice. Had my studies been in error? “I wish to parley!”

Still the dragon came for me.

In desperation, I stood up, took my sword in my hands, and hurled it as far as I could away from myself and the dragon—which, truth be told, was not far at all, but it was out of the circle, and I turned back just in time to see the dragon lunging for me, its maw gaping wide.

“Parley!” I screamed, covering my face futilely with my arms, “Parley!”

A second passed, and then two, and when I realized I still breathed, I slowly put down my arms, and found the dragon sitting on its haunches opposite me, not two meters from the circle, with an expression on its saurian face that could only be described as exasperated irritation.

Well? It rumbled, in a deep—if slightly peevish—voice, **Get on with it then.**

Incredibly, I felt my ire overcome my fear, “Why did you not halt? I called for parley! Under your laws- ”

You think my kind foolish enough to respect a parley called by a man with a sword in his hand? A tongue of flame licked out between razor sharp fangs. We have Danced with Man a very long time. We are wise to your nature.

I shook my head, my body still quaking from the aftermath of my fear. “You could have just told me to rid myself of my blade! I had no ill intent. ”

And I was to assume this—from what? Your warrior’s markings? Another gout of flame. Although I confess, that had I truly appraised your form, I would have been less inclined to view you as a threat. You are a rather... scrawny example of your species are you not?

I looked at the creature, slack-jawed. “I cannot believe I am standing here being insulted by a dragon.”

Neither can I. the dragon replied, then it smiled in a manner that was more a display of teeth than of amusement. **I should be eating you.**

I shook my head. I did not come here for this. “I require a boon.”

Once again the dragon sounded amused. **And what would you have to offer me, skinny human, that I could not just as soon take from you?**

I had never thought to see a dragon startled, yet that was exactly how it looked when I had made my proposal. Flame spewed liberally from the dragon’s mouth, but its gold-eyed gaze was calculating, and slowly, it nodded its head in agreement.

And what would you have of me in return?

“In the low lands,” I began, “there are legends which hold that a fang of the dragon can allow the dead to rise again.”

The dragon quickly shook its head. **Falsehoods and lies! Do you think we would need to make a pact with humans if we could so easily revive our brothers?**

“I did not think it to be literal truth,” I said, although my heart was heavy in my chest. Hope finds its way into the tiniest of cracks, no matter how well you think to guard against it. “Such is the way with legends. But from what I have seen, they do contain some truth if only a kernel of it. Tell me then... what is the truth?”

The truth is that the dead are dead, and not dragon or god or man can change that, it replied, though the voice was strangely subdued, **but we can, in some small way, converse with those who have gone before, and allow them some passing form on this plane, if we are offered the part of their body that first gave them life. But I do not see —**

I reached into my rucksack, and brought out the heart of my sister, and laid it on the ground before the great black dragon. The creature looked at it silently, then back at me.

You place more stock in your legends, it said, **than you seem ready to admit.**

“Please,” was all I replied, “Let me talk to my sister.”

The dragon considered, then once more nodded its great head. **As long as you adhere to our bargain human.**

“I shall not be forsworn.”

Then step aside.

I did so, and the dragon lurched forward, and brought its head down above the last that remained of my sister. The dragon took a deep breath, then exhaled, slowly, and a pinprick of flame shot outwards from its jaws, and impaled Yaline’s heart. Within seconds it was consumed in fire, and from the ash rose a smoke that smelled, oddly, of the sea, and the smoke rose like the cloud that had risen from my sister’s bier, but when it reached the level of

my eyes it began to swirl, and twist, until I found myself looking into Ylaine's eyes. Beautiful, stubborn Yaline, who had fled from the village to find me, and found death instead.

Brother...

Her voice was a longing, a hunger that made my eyes water.

"Dear sister..."

You found me...

"Don't I always?" I replied. "You'd almost reached me. I was at Meldea."

A ghostly laugh, which bore only echoes of satisfaction. *I knew it would be so. You were ever the little scholar, always with your books, always with your questions. Oh how close I was... How near... It would have been grand indeed if I had found you. I missed you so...*

I choked back a sob. I knew if I did not hurry, I would lose myself there, my eyes fixed upon the land of the dead, and all would be for naught.

"Tell me why you fled sister. Tell me why you fled the village."

She paused.

Why I told you dear brother, I missed having you to look after...

I smiled, sadly. "You never could lie to me Yaline."

Her pause was longer this time and the fear, the hesitation, was palpable.

It no longer matters...

"It matters to me."

Laeth, Laeth... I cannot...I—

"Ah Yaline, my sister," I said, after a deep, calming breath. "Did you think I would not look at your body?"

So she told me then. And the earth gave way beneath me.

•

IF MY PEOPLE had been surprised when I arrived at the gates two days ago, they were positively dumbstruck when I returned from the mountain, my sword dripping the unmistakable blue-

black blood of a dragon. No one had thought I would emerge victorious—and in a way, that made the celebration that followed all the more frenzied. It had been decades since the last successful Dance, and the tribe seemed to forget in that moment who I was—Leth the exile, son of Ozen—and for the first time in my life, I truly felt as if they had accepted me as one of them.

Ah, sweet ironies of life.

My father was the first to reach me, shoving away other would-be well-wishers in a parody of how my mother had met me at the gates. He raised me on his shoulders and proclaimed to one and all how his son, his long lost son, had done what so many others could not, what so many others had not even dared attempt. He carried me all the way to the elders' hut, where a feast was hastily being prepared, sat me down at the head of the largest table, placed a mug of ale in my hand, and waded into the crowd, presumably to personally rouse the entire village to join in the festivities.

I watched his retreating back, and said not a word, but then my mother was upon me, and Sarn, and my other siblings, and I drowned my sadness in drink and laughter.

Later that evening, as I lay in my own room, my old room, I remembered the day I left, which seemed so long ago, when I had thought I would never return. If there had been one aspect of my childhood with which even my father could not find fault, it had been my knowledge of the Law.

At first the elders greeted my frequent visits with much enthusiasm, holding me up as an example to other recalcitrant youths who neglected the fossilized customs and traditions of our forefathers. All had been well when I had been learning the Law, committing to memory its intricacies and idiosyncrasies. When I had learned all that had been written, however, I had then turned my attention to what had been omitted rather than preserved, the gaps in the tales rather than the stories themselves, and that's when I outstayed my welcome in the huts of learning. I don't remember the exact incident which led to my being banned from

the sight of the elders, but I do remember the questions which led to my father hurling me bodily from the village. It was an evening much like this one, save that during that night, the young man who had attempted the Dance had not returned.

“Why,” I had asked him, “do we not reclaim the bodies of those who have failed the Dance?”

He had given me a ferocious glare, and forbade me to speak of it. But I had known the boy who had ascended the mount, and I would not be deterred.

“Why do we permit it? The Law would have us retrieve our dead, wherever they fell, to bring them home to merge with the skies of our ancestors—why should our best and bravest be treated different?”

My father had stood then, grabbed his belt dagger, and warned me in the harshest of tones that I was to cease, or face the worst possible end. But I was aggrieved, and possessed, and would not be silenced.

“Why are there even any dragons left? Why are they not dead? Why are there still dragons for us to slay?”

And he had taken me by the scruff of the neck, and hauled me out of the house as I kicked and screamed, while my sister and brother ran behind him and pleaded with him for mercy. But I—I only shouted more questions, asked for more answers. My father did not speak, not a word, until he had crossed the circle and thrown me to the ground. Then he proclaimed my exile, turned and shut the gates behind him, never looking back.

Now, I gazed at him, sleeping by the foot of my bed, guarding me bodily from any who would steal my much needed rest. I looked at him, so peaceful in sleep, as I took out my knife and slashed his throat, and watched his life spill out onto the ground.

•

THE DRAGON WAS waiting for me, as I reached the pass, my breathing strangely unlabored after ascending the mountain for the second time that day. I knew now there were heavier burdens than iron swords, or the bodies of our loved ones.

Is the deed done then? it asked formally, as I came to stand before it.

"It is," I told the dragon, "And for that you have my thanks." **Strange you are indeed, to thank me for such as this. If I live eight more centuries, I doubt I will ever give a boon which less deserves the name. Were our situation other than it is, I would be tempted indeed to release you from your bargain.**

"Even if you would," I answered, "I would not."

Another flame lit the air, and flared brilliantly as it died. **No. I suppose you would not.** It paused, and I took a deep breath of the cold spring air. **Are you ready then?**

"No," I said, "but do it anyway."

The flame came quickly, hot and harsh and hungry, awakening senses I had never known and filling them with pain and agony. It was not a glorious magic, not the type of which songs were sung, or legends made—it was a thing of blood, and sweat, and torment. But so it is with all manner of birth, and when it was over, when my thoughts could do no more than scream, I found myself kneeling on the snow covered ground, heaving for breath.

Breathe deeper. The pain will grow, but for now you need air.

So I did, and it did, and I threw back my neck and roared to the heavens, but I found that soon I had the strength to stand, my four legs pushing my body from the earth with a power I had never before known. I looked then at my new companion—Zanarat—and unspoken words passed between us, and I knew what ought to be done.

I rose into the air on uncoiled wings, and flew into the snows.

I never once looked back.

Marianne Villanueva

DAUGHTER, OUR ISLANDS are disappearing. Once, there were two: two proud pieces of rock rearing high above the waves. Our islands had always existed: they were the two arms of Laon, who slumbered in the caldera beneath us. Around us were rings of hard and soft corals, and in the cave-like spaces of these corals lived an abundance of animals: snakes and eels and starfish and seahorses and clams. Surrounded by such abundance, we seldom knew hunger, or sickness.

You and your sisters were born on these islands; until today, no one had ever left. But you don't care anymore; your eyes look only to the silver bird that will bear you far away. Remember, your island is Isa. Isa, the first, the mother of all.

Remember your mother, Raymunda, she who was the only person brave enough to swim underneath the blue water we call Pangarap, the only one to see the bowl of the volcano Laon that lies deep beneath the water, the volcano that birthed us all. Remember the names of the fishes and birds. Remember the beings of the sea, the beings of the air. Remember how you fell asleep each night, listening to your mother's crooning and to the sound of the waves.

Five families lived on Isa. At first, there was a way to walk on the ground between the houses. But gradually the water rose and that was when we began to use the rope bridges. We wondered, occasionally, about other beings, the ones we guessed must inhabit the world. The world that was so far away we couldn't smell or taste it.

Because we couldn't imagine that other world, we decided to think only about things we could smell or taste or hear ourselves.

Smells like what was cooking in each other's houses. Tastes like the opaque, soft, peppery insides of mollusks and snails, or the juice we sucked from the bones of fish.

We knew how to pray. Every year, the storms came. We shut our windows and waited.

During one storm, the one we called Insiang, the house at the opposite end of Isa was swept away. That was the house of Ligaya and her five sisters. When the wind died down and we opened our windows, we didn't recognize the world. And gradually we realized it was because a house was missing. Far away, we saw a pointed shape, bobbing on the waves.

A few of the men took out boats and rowed to the wreckage. When they reached it, they saw Ligaya's body, floating on its back, her face already purple and swollen. They knew her because of the scar above her right eyebrow; we all remembered the day, 10 years earlier, when she had been clambering over the slippery rocks and fell. Hers was the only body to be recovered.

Your mother said it was Urdo's fault. He should have built a stronger house, one that could withstand the lash of wind and waves. He was the father; he should have known. In a house with six women, the men grow weak, your mother said.

Your mother's voice grew rough and hard, and you and your sisters stopped listening to her. One day we discovered that she had shouted herself out of her body. She was sitting at the kitchen table, as always, but we could tell it was merely the shape of her that remained. Her soul had escaped to somewhere far beyond our reach.

Naturally, we looked high and low: under the eaves of all the houses, in the storage rooms and even in the caves beneath the rocks. But her soul was truly gone. Behind your mother's eyes now was a still darkness, and her skin became soft and papery.

Once we caught you jabbing at her forearm with the serrated edge of a clam shell. Tears were running down your face. Insistently you called out to her, demanded a response. That was when I took

your mother's form and put her in the wooden box that I had kept in readiness all these years.

Once she was in it, it floated gently on the waves. I pushed it as hard as I could, and the current bore it away. You remained watching the sea for hours.

The other island, just over the horizon, was called Dalawa. It was almost exactly the same size as ours, but for whatever reason the families on Dalawa had many more children: there were ten houses clinging to their rock.

One day the people on Dalawa sent word. They said that either Pangarap was rising, or their island was sinking, they couldn't tell which. They had started building a wall out of coral. They hoped it would protect them.

One day, we realized it had been almost a year since we had had any visitors from the other island. The men took out the boats. They sailed for many days. They kept telling one another, It must be only a little farther, only a little farther. On the third day, it dawned on them what must have happened. This terrible knowledge seized them with panic. They set the boats straight for home and from far away we could hear their shouts, like the shouts of madmen. Get ready, they shouted. Prepare!

We realized that we had seen it happening but in our fear had refused to believe it. Pangarap was indeed rising.

As children we had felt the water lapping at our toes. Now, it washed around our ankles. And strange things were being borne in by the tides: strange glinting things that broke if one pressed too hard; and pieces of clothing that might have belonged to a woman, so delicate was the stitching on the waists and hems.

Once, the sea brought a man. He was naked, and his sex was swollen to an extreme size. For hours we gathered round, studying the form of this strange being. We saw the scars on his shoulders, and the gaping wound on his right thigh. His earlobes were rimmed with silver studs, and his fingernails were long and curved and reminded us of talons. We could not tell whether he was old or

young, but he seemed to have died in some fierce confrontation. His open mouth was twisted in a grimace. We anointed his body with oils and then sent him back to his home.

Perhaps it was a year or two later that the man we called Kawayan came. He stepped out from the belly of a huge silver bird that landed in the water and floated there, as if waiting, only a few steps from the rocks. How we shrieked when we saw the bird loom over the horizon. Impossible to describe our fear at the deafening noise it made, or the enormity of its wings, which seemed to block out half the sky.

For agonizing minutes, we watched and waited. Finally, a hole opened in its side and from the darkness within a man emerged. He was only the first. He told us – in a language that sounded much like our own, but with a harsher, staccato inflection – that there were other islands like ours, scattered all across Pangarap. Most were so far away that it had taken many men's lifetimes to create birds large enough to reach them. And the news made us happy and afraid at the same time, and for many many nights we did not know sleep. Happiness was replaced by apprehension. Premonitions crowded our dreams.

Each of us now felt a new host of ever-changing sensations. Some described it as a tickling of the arms. Some called it a restlessness of the feet. Those of us afflicted could not lie down. As soon as we lay on our mats, we felt compelled to get up again, no matter how exhausted we were. Our dreams, too, seemed to have deserted us.

We heard voices, which mingled with our fears. There was a new feeling now, a feeling we didn't yet know how to name. There was a name for the time before the arrival of the silver birds, and there was the present time. Our memories, which had heretofore been distinct, exact, which used to contain all the knowledge of the world, now yielded nothing, only a frightening whiteness. Our actions became imprecise, unfocused. We forgot things as simple as the names of our own children. What was now the past was lost to us forever.

The men who came in the silver birds had a favorite word: "Explain." They wrote down our words and hid their thoughts from us. Soon, several of us fell prey to a strange sickness. The first victim was Vina, who was only 15. She was forever staring at the silver bird men, and at one in particular whose hair was burnished and light, the color of the sun.

We had lived with each other so long that any emotional disturbance suffered by one of us infected the whole. Everyone in the four remaining houses on Isa had heard the quickening of Vina's breath at each approach of the light-haired stranger. Each of us knew what caused her heart to begin its strange staccato melody.

The sickness affected the sight. One day we heard Vina's mother utter a terrifying scream. When we came running, we learned that, only a short time earlier, Vina's mother had found Vina naked and sobbing on the floor next to her bed. Her eyes had developed milky cataracts in place of the pupils which had been brown only yesterday.

Vina's mother had fallen backwards, clutching her heart. Her father lay on the floor, prostrated by his grief. Now the two elders were inconsolable, both of them wailing with grief.

Someone suggested throwing a net to prevent Vina's soul from escaping, as your mother's had. And so Vina lived from that day on underneath a weaving of hemp. Everyday the milky whiteness of her eyes became more terrifying, and her sobs became more heartrending.

I saw the way you looked at Vina, and I knew that you had made up your mind to leave.

Take care. Keep this amulet around your neck at all times. If you return to us with love, your voice will be high and pure. If you return to us with hatred and repugnance, your voice will be like those of all the other children whose souls were stolen by the men in the silver birds.

Love us, always. Tell yourself everyday, upon first waking, who you are and where you come from. You are our daughter, our life.

Spelling Normal

Mia Tijam

FAUX-HAWK-HAIR STREAKED WITH gray and violet, ears wearing six earrings, eyes kohled, lips glossed and usually around a flavored cigarette, she walks in wearing her Astroboy shirt, Levis jeans and black Sisley rubber shoes to the quaking bows of the Knights in Jaguar Armor.

She is called *The* *whoa* Sorceress and is on her way to see whom the Real Kingdom reverently referred to as *The* Wizard of the Wonder Web. She enters the Wizard's Office whenever she pleases but her presence is still announced with a squeak by his unexcitable secretary, Jeeves, even when the Sorceress always pleasantly smiles at him.

"Yo baby!" the Sorceress thunders to him after she slams the door shut. "I'm so tired of being the scary freak only you and my thralls adore!"

The Wizard of the Wonder Web drops his cool omniscience away from the matrices of dimensions in the Web to look at her. The Sorceress grins, "Not that I'm really complaining. I do get what I want, after all."

The Wizard of the Wonder Web sits back, smiles, and loosens the knot of his tie, "Okay, love, what is it now?"

The Sorceress grumbles, "Just *that*, my *job*."

The Wizard of the Wonder Web sighs, "There's a dimension out there with a Giant Mongoose worried that it would die first from going deaf and which I believe is still strangling that Babbling Anaconda, among other glitches in need of necessary endings from your powers."

The Sorceress sits on his lap and plays with his long black hair, "Boring and that and those can wait. Something else."

The Wizard of the Wonder Web asks, wary, “What *else*?”

The Sorceress smiles again, “I was thinking that maybe I should check out Fairy Tale Reality. Meet my kind of creatures. Take a break.”

The Wizard of the Wonder Web groans, “*The* Mistress of Pragmatism actually wants to go *there*?”

The Sorceress laughs, “Oh, shut up! I promise not to turn the Real Kingdom *or* that reality!”

“Which dimension?”

The Sorceress frowns, “And have me under your Technocrati surveillance in YouTube?”

The Wizard of the Wonder Web laughs, “You can’t blame me. You keep on ditching your bodyguards. Remember them? Mr. Google and Agent Yahoo? And where are they anyway...”

“Ask Jeeves. Tell them I said hi when they finally get here,” and the Sorceress reaches for the console on his desk, fingers tapping too-fast-codes for even the Wizard of the Wonder Web to follow. The Wizard of the Wonder Web mumbles, “Whoa...that’s hot...”

The Sorceress giggles, “...and `rand=2/0x0?1y...` Catch me later, baby!”

And the Sorceress kisses him and vanishes—

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@@@Into The Youniversity of □□□@@@
 @@Where You Can □ $\overline{3}^{\frac{1}{10}}_{10}$.on Reality@@
 @Through Your ~□ $\overline{3}^{\frac{1}{10}}_{2}$.□□ $\overline{2}^{\frac{1}{21}}_{1}$ □@

★

—landing hard on a chair
 —looking sedated in a flowing black kaftan and her head with flowing black hair
 —feeling *woong ... woong ... wong* in an air-conditioned classroom
 —interrupting a Dwarf from his tirade.

“Ah, welcome to the Fairy Tale!” the Fat Godmother Cat who was the moderator chortled. “What shall we call you, sweetie?”

The Sorceress gritted (*damn slipstream*) out, “Not sweetie. I’m called The **whoa** Sorceress.”

“*Right*. But for the sake of expediency, we shall drop the clutter and just call you Sorceress, yes? Unless you want to be called *Sorsee*? Or *Sor*, like a nun?”

The Sorceress muttered, “Fatty is catty-Zafra-funny. Let me—” and she began to move her fingers but was stopped by a wing.

“Can’t do that. Rules,” the Fairy beside her whispered as it daintily moved its wing back and covered her mouth with a handkerchief, and the Pixie near them bobbed her head.

The Dwarf resumed his scathing rant about the latest psychotic upload in “*that freak’s mySAP.com*” and therefore downloaded “*not a Fairy Tale*” while the Elf seated across him was nodding in camaraderie and then added more highfalutin to the Dwarf’s jargon.

“Oh yeah, that weird-wired-son-of-an-avatar is such a freak,” the Fat Godmother Cat affirmed to the Elf, chortled once more, and with that concluded the forum.

The Fairy Tale Cast immediately exited and the Sorceress was left asking—*what rules?* growling—*I’m supposed to be on a break* thinking—*the Dwarf is an arrogant prick, that snooty Elf and the Fat Cat must be friends, and in Fairy Tale Reality everyone apparently doesn’t know that they’re all freaks.*

The Sorceress began looking around for the nearest Elixir-to-Cirrhosis-Stop to contemplate on whether to piss off or piss away or stay to piss on Fairy Tale Reality (especially since she wasn’t digging her non-smoking assigned look).

The Sorceress decided to stay to figure out the program and then on had come to eventually understand that nobody configured with anybody (except the Elf and the Fat Godmother Cat because they were Fellows in Magic-Cards-and-Harry-Potter-Addiction). And that they were all required to decode their own Fairy Tales through encoding their individual mySAP.coms.

@

http://*Sorceress*mySAP.com.ph

An Existential Dialogue With Invisible Man; Refereeing Barbarians At The Gates: Hannibal vs. Conan; Stopping The Magic Dragon And The Big Bad Wolf From Puffing Nemo; Turning Little Into Bloody Red Riding Hoodlum; Waking Briarwood From The Sleeping Pill; Convincing Rapunzel To Cease Waiting For Godot To Cut Her Hair; Teaching Wily Coyote Smarts Is Hard To Do; Friday the 13th: Cousin It Going Bald; Shutting Up A Celebrity Death Match: Lolit Jeckle & Joey Heckle vs. Cristy Donkey & Jobert Binks; How To Exterminate Zombies In Less Than 28 Days; A Lecture On The Dating Game Given To Dr. Ripper, Dr. Jekyll and Dr. Lecter; Preventing 2012 (Rainbow Brite On Acid, Care Bears Gone Wild, Gollum Proposing Marriage With The Ring, Britney Spears Turning Goth...); "Retrieved" From Mulder's X-Files: Stan Lee, Stephen King, Anne Rice, Neil Gaiman, J.K. Rowling...; Guiding Bill and Steve's Excellent Journey To The Center Of Yodaism; Spreading Manga To The World: Get REAL, Be FREAKS...

The Fairy Tale Cast gaped at what the Sorceress uploaded, “Whoa!”

The Sorceress just thought, *And I rest that *whoa*case.*

And because the rule was Bash-Emo/Don’t-Gush (and being a Sorceress she was then expected to be like Fairuza Balk in *The Craft*) during mySAP.com sharing, the Sorceress would only smile sweetly and was sympathetic and helpful to everyone.

Then one afternoon, the Fat Godmother Cat demanded from all of them who were surprisingly nice (and really just wonky from all mySAP.coms), “What’s the matter with all of you! Are you all high?!”

The Sorceress, the Fairy, the Dwarf, the Pixie, the Elf and the rest of the Fairy Tale Cast all started laughing and talking like Chewbacca. The Fat Godmother Cat threw her paws up with an “Argh!” and dismissed them. After that, the five trooped to chug Seagal and Tarantino’s Found-Gold-From-The-Philippines and started configuring their individual mySAP.com webs together as they swigged their way through more Elixir-To-Clarity-Via-Cirrhosis.

The Sorceress asked the Elf who was seated beside her, “I thought elves didn’t drink?”

The Elf downed a shot and answered without looking at her, “I don’t.”

The Sorceress shrugged and asked the Fairy, “And in Reality, what are you?”

The Fairy answered, “I’m a lady.”

The Dwarf muttered, *Yeah a ladybug*, “What? The lady is a dude!”

The Fairy smiled, “I bet you’re a frog,” and moved to kiss the Dwarf.

The Dwarf blanched, making the Fairy laugh and the Sorceress laughed out to him, “Are you really?”

The Dwarf drawled, “I’m a gamer who ain’t got game with them bitches and I want a revolution for free beer.” Then he turned to

the Pixie, winked, “Come on, put out,” and blew come-hither-bubbles.

The Pixie giggled the bubbles back to the Dwarf, “And you’re sooooo not my Prince Charming!”

The Elf mumbled as he downed another shot, *Damn, you got me.*

The Sorceress arched her eyebrow at him, “Excuse me?”

The Elf shook his head, looked at her, and said, “Even I couldn’t object to the disgustingly saccharine comments you made about myownSAP.com because they made sense *only* realizing hours later how insulting you were.”

The Sorceress laughed, “Is that a rhetorical question?”

The Elf then arched his own eyebrow at her, “Ah, what is a rhetorical question?”

The Dwarf (who had unzipped his fly towards the orchids) turned and declared to them while peeing, “The task! The task is to make the ultimate mySap.com=fairytales!” And then forgot to zip his fly as he walked back to them. The rest all quickly said *Good-(Gawd!)-Bye*, not wanting a sty to grow on their eyes.

Later on, the Sorceress reluctantly messaged the all-knowing Elf for Fairy-Tale-Tricks, “It’s these damn rules! I can’t seem to make my Fairy Tale operate! MydamnSAP.com refuses to be spelled into my ultimate Fairy Tale!”

The Elf advised, “Have you tried the Walk-Alone-Into-Epiphany?”

The Sorceress sighed, “I’m constantly bugged in the Path”

“The Drink-To-Revelation-In-Oblivion?”

“Oblivion cannot be reached.”

“The Toke-To-Decode-The-Cosmic-Joke?”

“I got the Void’s *Please try again later.*”

“How about the Simulated-Misery?”

“And be a bad bard just begging to be killed?”

“Sex-To-Infinite-Success?”

The Sorceress laughed, “You use *that*? My, my, aren’t you *kinky.*”

The Elf choked out, “No!” then coughed, “Well, I’m out of treats.”

The Sorceress asked, “I thought elves knew everything. Just how *old* are *you*?”

The Elf intoned, “I’m an elf: it’s all about MDAS.”

The Sorceress almost shrieked her frustration, instead groused, “I need a damn hug.”

The Elf quietly said, “Now that I can give you. Happily but after.”

The Sorceress scoffed, “You? Hug? Yeah, sure, whatever.”

After,

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http://*Fairy*mySAP=Fairytale.com.ph

I Just Want To Be A Woman

http://*Pixie*mySAP=Fairytale.com.ph

Finding Prince Charming In Neverland

http://*Dwarf*mySAP=Fairytale.com.ph

Legend: I Am Awesome!

http://*Elf*mySAP=Fairytale.com.ph

The Meaning of Life Is, Well,

Um, Something Ineffable Like

What A Buddhist Sartre Said

http://*Sorceress*mySAP=Fairytale.com.ph

Spelling Normal

The Fat Godmother Cat was happy over their myFairySAP.coms and threw a Piss-The-Elixir-In-The-Pool-Party. The Dwarf and the Elf drank Daddy-Whisky that was melting the paint from the Daddybucks cups they were using while checking out the

frolicking bikinis (except when it was the Fairy's). And rather than piss where everyone was swimming, the Sorceress *hik*cused herself with, "I'm going to the Jamie."

"Jamie?" the Pixie asked.

"Ex-John-then-James-now-Jamie," explained the Fairy.

"Nature. Even a sorceress pees, you know," the Sorceress mocked.

The Dwarf sang, "Jamie's got a gun..." and laughed, "Ye freaks!" then leered at the Sorceress, "Want me to walk you?"

They all said "No!" and the Fat Godmother Cat commanded, "Gentle Elf! Escort her!"

The Elf silently walked the Sorceress to the Jamie while holding her hand like a granny. After the Sorceress pissed the Elixir back to Nature and came out, the Elf said, "I know you don't even look at me—"

The Sorceress stopped walking—sobered— and looked straight at the flushed Elf, "Are *you drunk?*"

"—and that you dislike me—"

The Sorceress nodded, "Yeah... But you're not so bad."

The Elf sighed, "—time for that hug."

He hugged her.

It felt just weird to the Sorceress being hugged by someone so thin (and actually being turned on by a hug from someone smaller).

Then the Elf kissed her.

The Sorceress could only sputter as he continued kissing her to his yellow light, found herself kissing him back to green light, and then both stopped to a red light with, *whoa*. She thought *what the heck was that* and *that was that* and almost ran away from the smiling Elf on their way back to the rest of the merry Fairy Tale Cast.

That night, the Elf continued to secretly woo her with his telepathic chatting like I can smell you from here while the Sorceress sat by the pool with the Fairy. The Sorceress almost fell

into the pool in surprise as she laughed then smelled herself, *From there? Do I stink?*

The Elf sent, *You smell good... Are you laughing at me?*

The Sorceress looked at him, saw his anxious and frowning face, and mouthed *No*.

And the Elf smiled again.

The Sorceress found herself blushing and liking making him smile.

And whenever the Sorceress was asked to sit with the Fairy Tale Cast, she would feel the Elf's hand stroking her hand and he would dazzle her with his nerdy talk. The Elf and the Sorceress were in a sticky-mushy-haze and continued to sneak kisses ever after.

The Sorceress was reduced between blushing, giggling, and sometimes almost tapping her fingers to be away from the confusing turning of Fairy Tale Reality. She was not supposed to seek the Advice-About-Secret-Affairs from the Fat Godmother Cat but she found herself blurting out, "I actually *feel something* for that freaking Elf! I don't know what to do with him... You're his friend, right? What do I do?"

The Fat Godmother Cat clapped a rolling laugh, "I knew it! So that's why he's been mooning—you do know that he has a Real Girlfriend, yes?"

"Yeah, he told me. And he doesn't know that I do have a Real someone, too."

The Fat Godmother Cat rubbed her paws, "And the Tale tangles. Here's what you do—you actually do?! Who?"

The Sorceress mumbled, "*The Wizard of the Wonder Web*."

"Oh... Wow... Wait, YOU ARE *that* Heartless Mistress et cetera Sorceress?!"

The Sorceress winced, "Yep."

"Whoa," the Fat Godmother Cat said, holding her paws up. "Not in my level of operation," and vanished.

After that, the Elf began snubbing the calls of the Sorceress and she didn't understand why until one night he finally answered her *hi's* and *why's*.

The Elf said in all contempt, "I know who you are."

The Sorceress felt like fainting, "How did you find out? I can explain—"

"You enthralled me."

The Sorceress reeled, "*Enthralled* you?! That's not true!"

The Elf whispered, "I felt... What I felt was real." Then he clipped in disgust, "Never mind. I hope you got what you wanted. You're really a freak." And he retreated into his Cave-In-Mars again before the Sorceress could even explain the beginning of the eternity of *that damn *whoa**.

The Sorceress called on the Fat Godmother Cat in all her disturbing *The Sorceress*whoa-you're-going-to-be-deleted*glory*, "HOW DARE YOU MEDDLE."

The Fat Godmother Cat implored, "I had to tell him because you're you... And you can't possibly be... No way! A sorceress *doesn't* fall in love, much more with an *elf* in Fairy Tale Reality!"

The Sorceress let go of the **whoa**, "Duh? We're in Fairy Tale Reality! And do you even have any idea what ripples and tears in dimensions your interference will bring? And why did you tell him that I was just toying with him? I wasn't. And now he's so hurt and he thinks that I don't feel anything for him, too. And I can't convince him because he doesn't even want to talk to me... And damn, it *hurts*."

And there and then the Sorceress who never cried began crying.

Thankfully it was Fairy Tale Reality so *The *whoa** Sorceress could cry and cause just a storm and not a storm to rival a pissed off Storm. After all, *just crying* was normal for all creatures there, even a Sorceress.

The Sorceress told the drenched and shivering Fairy, Pixie and Dwarf what happened and asked through her tears, "...So what

do I do? Can't leave this bad juju virus going around, you know. And this damn crying has to stop!"

They enthusiastically agreed: the Pixie said that the Sorceress should send flowers to the Elf while the Fairy said to write a *sorry: friendship: peace* letter. (That stopped the storm.) And she did just those because that's what creatures did in Fairy Tales, especially since the Delivery Brownie was reliable and said that flowers and letters always worked.

But the Delivery Brownie suddenly found himself wanting to munch magic brownies after the Sorceress left smiling at him and so had ended up giving them to his crush, T.S. Elliot's Girlfriend. (Who said *Flowers for me? Sweet!* and upon reading the letter *Woops, not for me... Whoa... THE Sorceress fell for the... Elf?!*)

The Sorceress covered her face when she found out and was pulling her curling hair in dismay.

The Dwarf said as he looked at her head, "You know, you should just look for the Elf and talk to him before you pull all your hair out. And, uh, it's all turning into dreadlocks."

So the Sorceress would go to the Elf's geeky haunts and whenever the Sorceress was near enough the Elf, he would actually scurry away *eeping* from her and declare to bystanders, "Dreadlocks is stalking me!"

The Sorceress wouldn't use her *whoa* powers on him and spell him into staying put so the bad juju spread and disturbed all in Fairy Tale Reality. The Pixie (who began dating Smurf, the Elf's Best Friend) told the Sorceress, Fairy and Dwarf that the Elf was finally threatened by his Real-Einstein-Girlfriend with *When I come home, we'll talk...*

The Dwarf shuddered, "*Talk*. That ain't good."

And that the Sorceress was vicariously threatened with... *and I will find that bitch and slap her.*

The Dwarf shook his head, "That ain't right."

The Fairy bristled, "If I had Einstein's brain I would slap and leash her boyfriend."

The Pixie said, “Does she even have any idea that she wants to slap the Queen of Bitch-Slapping?” and to the upset Sorceress, “That’s a sincere compliment, by the way.”

The Fairy said to the Sorceress, “Don’t you worry, girl. She has to go through some Fairy-Slapping first. And her boyfriend, too.”

The Sorceress was finally exasperated, “I’m not even worried! It’s just that the way that damn chicken-legged Elf’s acting is making me feel like a damned rhinoceros vampire stalking a tiny virgin. I ought to curse him with that I-Love-You-Virus or hex him into my loving zombie! And here I just want to talk and clear things up and say sorry.”

The Pixie sighed, “He’s really called Heathcliff, you know.”

And the Dwarf shrugged, “What can you do?”

Remembering her promise, spell-slapping anyone would surely turn and end realms. And before The Wizard of the Wonder Web sensed *her* disturbance in the Web’s Force—

—finds out

—loses his cool

—obliterates that dimension to its last 1 and 0

—which she was almost tempted to allow, the Sorceress tapped her fingers and disappeared from Fairy Tale Reality

★

@@@Into Where You ☺☐5@@@
 @@Live ~☐3¹⁸₂.☐☐2²¹☐¹₁₀@@
 @Really@

★

★

—and lands back onto *The* Wizard of the Wonder Web’s lap.

The Wizard of the Wonder Web catches her before she tumbles off to the floor, “The Web *was* on its way to going haywire *and* I heard Jeeves shrieking outside. Love, what did you do this time?” The Sorceress gulps nausea, “The damn slipstream really needs to be fixed!”

The Wizard of the Wonder Web hugs her closer, “I missed you— did you find what you were looking for?”

The Sorceress sniffs, “Not *my* Fairy Tale.”

The Wizard of the Wonder Web laughs.

And the Sorceress sighs, hugs *The* Wizard of the Wonder Web then straightens his tie, stands up, lights her flavored cigarette, and walks out of the Wizard’s Office smiling (to find that mongoose and snake and likely turn them into lovers) happily being *The* *whoa* Sorceress especially after.

D a d d y

Yvette Tan

I DIDN'T HEAR it at first, so engrossed I was in transcribing my Jay-R interview at my office workstation. My cellphone ringing, the chorus of Placebo's "Protege Moi," Brian Molko's heartbreakingly beautiful, hoarse voice saying, *Protect me from what I want*.

A quick glance at caller ID said "Number Unknown," which could only mean one thing: the guys from MCA Universal, London, were calling for my scheduled Simon Webbe interview. I tore away my earphones, flipped open my Motomig, at the same time grabbing my notebook and flipping to my prepared questions and popping a fresh tape into the tape recorder. I've had a lot of practice multitasking this way, so it was no trouble. By the time I had the earpiece by my ear, everything was ready. At first I could hear nothing but static, which was weird because my phone normally has good reception. And then I heard it: a male voice. It took me a while to understand what it was saying, but not before I recognized the voice.

"Achie," he was saying.

"Achie."

I could feel the blood drain from my face, my body begin to shake. There was no mistaking that voice. I had been hearing it for twenty-six years of my life.

"Daddy?" I whispered.

But he was gone, the line dead.

I slumped in my seat, almost dropping the phone when I set it on my desk. That was my father. Of that I was sure. It couldn't have been anyone else. It all would have made sense, except that he had died in front of his family two years ago in the ICU of the Cardinal Santos General Hospital.

My phone rang again and this time, I sprang to get it.

"Hello?" I said breathlessly, hope surging in my chest.

"Is this Yvette Tan?" a male voice said in a British accent. "Are you ready for your interview with Simon Webbe?"

"This is she," I said dully. "I'm ready."

•

TO THIS DAY, nobody knows exactly why my father passed away. The official records state his cause of death as sepsis, complicated by diabetes, but really, this is the doctors' way of saying they have no idea what killed him. One day he was alive and well, the next day, he suddenly collapsed, and the day after that, he was dead. It was all so sudden, but then, somehow, I think we had all been expecting it.

I couldn't sleep that night, or for the nights after. Half of me was freaked out by the phone call, by the jerk who thought that mimicking my dead father's voice was a good idea for a joke; but another part of me was hopeful. What if it really was my father trying to call me from the afterlife? What was it that was so important he had to cross time and space to tell me?

I didn't tell anybody about the call. It could have been a prank. It could have been a fluke. It could have been my imagination. I had been sad and tired lately, my mother nagging at me more than usual. Why can't you find a job with regular hours, why can't you find a nice guy and settle down, why can't you clean your room? Ever since his death, there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think of him, that I didn't miss him. I don't think that it's just me. I think the whole family felt the same way. Daddy was our pillar, our rock. He kept us together, kept us sane. I stopped my thoughts before they could wander any further. That phone call was a fluke. It was probably the MCA guy trying to get through from London and the connection being bad. My Simon Webbe interview had gone well, the article garnering praises from my

editor, but still, I couldn't help but wish that it had been my father on the other line instead.

The second time he called, I was in a meeting. We were lining up the website's features for the next week when Brian Molko's voice interrupted my editor's speech about management expecting more hits.

My pulse quickened when I saw caller ID. Unknown Number. I wasn't expecting a long distance call this time. I rushed out of the conference room and into the corridor, flipping my phone open as I did so.

"Hello?" I whispered.

"Achie?" came my father's voice through the crackle of static.

"Daddy!" I almost shrieked.

"How are you? Daddy, I've missed you!"

"Achie?" he asked again. "Achie can you hear me?"

"Daddy!" I said loudly, "I can hear you!"

"Ach—"

But then static took over, and he was gone.

Mitch, one of my co-writers, found me sitting on the floor outside the conference room, sobbing. She had gone for a bathroom break just before my phone call.

"Are you all right?" she asked, reaching out to help me stand up. "Who did this?"

"I'm okay," I lied, pushing her hands away. "Just the phone call I got. I'll be fine."

She gave me a suspicious look.

"You go back in, I'll follow." I said, wiping my tears on my sleeve. So much for my poise.

She squeezed my shoulder, then went back inside the conference room.

I looked at my phone, still open, nestled in the palm of my hand.

It couldn't be a joke, unless someone with a cruel sense of humor was holding a tape recorder with my dad's voice on tape. As much

as I tried to rationalize it, I knew deep in my heart that it wasn't a tape recorder or some sick fuck imitating his voice. It was daddy, calling from wherever he was, trying to tell me something.

My first instinct, of course, was to let everyone know about it. My mother, my brother, my sister, everyone who had known and loved my father. They would be happy to know he could still contact us, would even want to cart my phone around just in case he called again. But, I slowly convinced myself, that was out of the question. Nobody would believe me. They would think I was crazy. Worse, they would think I was possessed, communing with otherworldly entities. My mother would march me straight to church for an exorcism. I hated to admit it, but there was also the selfish thought that he had chosen to contact me and not the others. Not his beloved wife, not his doctor daughter, not his only son. So I decided, once again, not to tell anyone. Only this time, I was sure about what secret it was I was keeping.

•

"I WISH DADDY were here," my little brother said angrily as he slammed the door shut.

I guessed that my mother had once again asked him to do something he didn't like. My brother was of the opinion that my mother lived to make him do distasteful things like hand her this or help with that. Before, he got away with not doing things because my father would do them for him. He was, after all, the baby of the family, the only boy, and my father spoiled him rotten.

"What do you miss most about daddy?" I asked.

"I miss that he used to take me to eat out after school," my brother said. "We'd go to Angelino's on Wilson. Or Chopstix. Or Cravings."

My brother was living proof of the adage that the way to a man's—or boy's—heart was through his stomach.

"Are you still mad that he had to die?" I asked.

During my father's wake, my brother had alarmed everyone with his rants about how angry he was that daddy had left him alone, that daddy was selfish because he had to die. The rants were alarming enough, but to hear them coming from a man in his late teens somehow made it worse.

"I hate God for taking him away," my brother said.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that God wasn't the only one who wanted our father dead.

•

"IF YOU HAD a chance to speak to daddy now, what would you tell him?"

I was in my sister's room, lying on her bed while she leafed through a back issue of *O Magazine* on the floor. My sister is a big Oprah fan. She lost 30 pounds in three months and became a gym bunny after watching an episode on Oprah's fitness plan. Watching Oprah partly helped her through the aftermath of our father's death, the good Ms. Winfrey's advice lifting her through the most trying of days. If my sister weren't so religious, she would have thought Oprah was God, and Dr. Phil a saint.

"I don't know," she said, then paused, giving the question serious consideration. We never joked about daddy. Ever since his death, the subject of him had been shrouded in reverence, like some holy doctrine.

"I still have one of his texts to me," she whispered. "He said, you will always be my darling daughter. He sent it two weeks before he died."

She stared at the pages of her magazine, and I wondered if she saw anything in front of her at all. The one text of him that I kept for the longest time had come out of the blue a month before he passed away. I had been spending a lot of time in the office, enjoying my work too much to want to come home. It had said, "Take care, I love you." I had kept the message because it was so

unlike him. Daddy was always generous with his I Love Yous, but always verbally, and never out of the blue. I lost the message, along with everything in my phone's memory, when I accidentally dropped my Ming and had to get it reprogrammed. Now that I think about it, even then, he probably had an inkling that he wasn't going to be with us for much longer. They say that happens sometimes, knowing that you are going to die. In my father's case, it was something that he had been wishing for for quite a while.

"What would you tell him?" my sister asked me.

"That I loved him. That I missed him," I said.

"Oh sure," my sister said. "That's what any one of us would tell him. But what would you say after that?"

I looked at her. She had a point. My father probably already knew that we loved him and missed him. What else would I say besides that?

"Why are you asking, anyway?" my sister asked.

I shrugged. "It just came to me."

•

AFTER THAT CONVERSATION, I decided to write down questions that I would ask my father, should he call again. After two weeks of writing down anything that came to my mind, I had a really long list, which went from what did he really die of to what the afterlife was like to if sasquatches really existed. I spent the next two weeks paring it down, the whole time jumping whenever my phone rang and being disappointed whenever I could see a name or a number on my Caller ID.

My final list read:

1. How is the afterlife treating you?
2. What did you die of?
3. If you can see the future, what is going to happen to the family?
4. Can you give me this week's winning Lotto numbers?
5. What do you want me to tell the others?

It was a rather shallow list, but he was my father and I didn't see the need to impress him with philosophical musings. I crumpled the list soon after. I wanted our conversation to be spontaneous. Besides, there was only one thing that I wanted to tell him.

•

"TELL ME AGAIN how you met daddy."

I was helping my mother make lumpia. By helping, I mean sitting by the table and not getting in the way.

"Oh, we were kai-siawed, introduced," she said, chopping carrots into even, miniscule pieces. "He said I was 'peh-peh, pui-pui, dio-dio, sui-sui,'" she said, reciting a quaint Chinese rhyme that meant 'fair, chubby, tall and pretty.' "I was his first and only girlfriend," she sighed. "He wanted to be a lifelong bachelor, until he met me."

During the 23 years of their marriage, my parents were never apart for more than a few days. They were joined at the hip. They went everywhere together, and if possible, they took their kids with them. My mother was lost when my father died, though she did her best not show it. But even months after, she would suddenly stop what she was doing and leave the room, only to come back minutes later with tear-stained eyes and a forced smile on her lips.

"You miss him, don't you?" she asked, pushing the carrots from the chopping board and onto a plate.

I nodded.

"I miss him too," she said. "I still talk to him everyday. I know that wherever he is right now, he can hear me."

I saw that my mother's eyes were wet, and that she was remembering. She was the love of his life, and him, hers, even though she did not know it until later. My mother was the daughter of a rich tea merchant. My father had to work to put himself and some of his siblings through school. She gave up a

life of luxury for him while he in turn tried to give her everything that she was accustomed to. He did the same for the rest of us, always giving his family the best. When the economic slump hit in the 90's, we were deeply affected, but we weren't poor. And yet, it was this inability to give his family the life he thought they deserved that depressed him, made his heart break, made him want to stop living. I believe that my father loved us a lot. He loved us so much, it killed him.

"If you could talk to him now, what would you say?" I asked.
My mother smiled. "I would tell him to be happy."

•

TWO MONTHS AFTER my conversation with mommy, my father called for the third and last time. By then, I had stopped waiting for his call. Two times was freaky enough. A third would be asking for too much. I was reading in my room when my phone rang, and a shiver ran up my spine when I realized that Caller Unknown was flashing through my screen. Trying to act as normal as possible, even though I was alone, I flipped open my cellphone and whispered a hello. This time, there was no static to separate us, no noise to make us not hear each other.

"Achie," he said.

"Daddy," I replied, tears streaming down my cheeks. "We miss you."

"I miss all of you too," he said. "But that's not why I called."

"What do you want? Why did you have to leave us?" I asked, openly crying now, thankful to be alone when he called for once. "I didn't call so you could cry," he chided. "Achie, you're the eldest. I want you to do something for me."

I sniffed, wiped my tears, kept quiet, waiting for what he was going to say.

The line was silent for a while, then my father's voice, deep and warm and soothing, said: "Don't forget."

“Don’t forget what?” I asked. By this time, the static had crept in once again. I knew I was going to lose whatever signal it was that connected me to daddy. “Don’t forget what?”

“Everything,” he said, his voice fading as the static overcame it. “... love you.”

“I love you!” I screamed into the phone. “I love you!”

And then he was gone. I don’t know how long I lay on my bed, my pillow muffling my wails, which slowly turned to sobs, and finally, dry heaves. Somehow, I knew that that was the last time I was to speak to him, that he wouldn’t be calling again.

•

DON’T FORGET. UP to now, I’m still not sure what that means. I’ve asked a lot of people, always careful to couch the circumstances as if it had been a dream. Mitch says he wants me not to forget the good times. My sister says that he wants me not to forget him always. Joaqui, my boyfriend, says that he wants me not to forget myself, not to dwell on his absence. They’re all probably right, and yet, I get the feeling that it’s not what daddy was trying to tell me. I still think about it a lot, though not as much as I used to. I figure that daddy wouldn’t want me stressing over it too much, especially since I’m up for a promotion next month. Besides, whatever it was that he didn’t want me to forget, I have a lifetime to remember.

From
Abecedary a:
a pornographic novel

Adam David

An Agape
an audacious apologue

AT AN ANNUAL adulterous assembly—as Aaron, Azalea, and Ada achieved animalistic apogee—Adrian—amidst Aaron’s, Azalea’s, and Ada’s Aahs and Awoos—arrived alone at an awkward anticlimax.

Ada—arms abuzz and akimbo—ambled across as Adrian—ashamed, affected—apologised: “Accident.”

“Again?” Aaron announced as Azalea’s ascending-descending amber ass amazingly accelerated atop Aaron, arms across Azalea’s alps, abdomen all aglow. “Already?” Azalea added amusedly.

Adrian allowed Aaron’s and Azalea’s annoyances air-out anonymously. Ada, always amiable, accepted Adrian’s apology. “Alright?” Ada asked, and Adrian absentmindedly answered “agreeable” after an antsy awkwardness.

Anticipating Adrian’s antisocial answer, Ada animated an arm across Adrian’s abdomen. Adrian acquiesced as Ada acrobatically applied appropriate actions around Adrian’s abdominal area. Ada asked Adrian again and Ada’s anticipated angsty answer about-faced as Adrian acknowledged an ache arousing.

Across, Aaron’s and Azalea’s adrenal acrobatics achieved additional acoustic acuity as Azalea adagioed all activities, acuminating Aaron’s adversarial adventurism at Adrian’s avowed: “Aah! Aah! Aah!”

Ada—as Adrian agazed at Aaron and Azalea—affirmed Adrian’s aggravate agent, and—also agogged at Adrian’s aggrivement—actualised an agape.

Astride above, Ada allowed Adrian all-out aft access. Ada’s ankles anchored at Adrian’s armpits, Adrian’s arms around Ada’s asscheeks, Adrian abluted Ada almost absurdly: “Aye! Aye! Aye!”

Adrian’s avid adoration appealed at Ada’s appreciative acumen, as Aaron—Ada’s avowed—affects all affairs an antagonistic angle, an attitude Ada and Aaron always argue about, although answers are always absent.

Ada—flutter, achingly admiring, already addicted—allowed an Aah attain altostratic altitude as an azimuth acceleratngly approached: “Alas! Alas! Alas!”

Ada adored Adrian’s aesculapian affection, an alternative away Aaron’s acerbic abrasiveness.

Amenable at anything Adrian asks, Ada agilely all-foured afore Adrian, awaiting ambush.

Across, Azalea—albeit agnostic—allah-akbared as another azimuth’s arrival approached. Aaron—amused at Azalea’s auditory appreciation—ascertained an award as appropriate, ante’d-up agility-wise, and afterwards also approached an arrival: “Awoo! Awoo! Awoo!”

Adrian, animus awake, advanced at Ada and—at Ada’s astonishment—alighted atop, adobe-like accessory acock above Ada’s abyss.

Ada acknowledged Adrian as an Adonis awakened, an Adam anew, an aggressor allured and alluring.

Ada—agonizingly, aggressively, affectionately—accepted Adrian’s animal again and again and again and again: “Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!”

Afterwards—as aethereal Aahs and Awoos again abounded—Aaron, Azalea, Ada, and Adrian altogether allowed another annual adulterous assembly achieve absolute adjournment.

Before She Rises

BEFORE SHE RISES she lets the stirring cock crow, just tossing the end of our story's progress to "five I'll snooze some more, but four I'll go: which is it, then?", the simplest, most honest query, but then destiny decides to introduce complexity through the cock crowing three then returns to sleeping: she frowns,

exclaims quietly “what?” while just beside her, awake, humbled queerly by sex that lasted all of the sixth of the hour just passed, I mumble-grumble, gusts of fake breath tossed for emphasis, after which she asks “are you okay?” to which I reply “very”, afterwards I zip-lip,

intent on a personal (read: “bitter”) monopoly of joy in the dark, which she then notices after a while, so kindly attempts at a blasé conversation about, of all topics, politics, that I attempt to zone out of but really her every word is a tune in my head that I quell in vain with hums as I flex and stretch in bed

and knowing fully how this would hurt, I, amidst talking, just nod out and yawn and plop on down again on soft warm cushions and so mouth stops talking, brows start furrowing, and with cock still snoozing my victim quits and slips out without a “boo”, and no fixing this

issue, I, jackass, continue to pretend to doze in bed, one eye open to this fox by my feet, watch her pick up stuff and refit armour and brush hair and teeth, each and every action a feather in air and as she finishes she stands upright and shoes in both hands, without shake or wave, tiptoes out of this book's chapter, shutting door, spiriting body out farther than before, as I remain peeping from behind cushions once warm now turning frigid by the quiet morning wind, and right outside, the cock, now awake, just for her, crows four.

B a f f l e g a b B e d l a m
b e a s t l y b o d i c e r i p p e r

BRIEFLY BEFORE BREAKFAST began, Beverly—babushka'd bachelorette badly beset by Babinsky's—braved beastly Boulevard backgammon boys and bastinadoed back-bent beggars as Beverly's bastardy baby boy Billy audiolingually affirmed bountiful bellyaches as beyond bearable.

Beverly, barely abating Billy's bellyaches by bread-eating—bread being an already bemoaningly affluent acquisition as an adult bedlamite, and an all-the-more anxious business as a baby-burdened adolescent—bungled as an answer a balancing act between banausic banality and baneful bankruptcy: after acquiring “Bellflower” as an alias, Beverly became a buxom bomba actress, a bare bold buffer, a billabong bimbo, a beurre blanc bottom, a bed-and-breakfast bedmate, a big-mouthed bilabial blandish benefactress—all-in-all a big-budget business around and about Aurora Boulevard.

After bidding “bye-bye” at belly-aching baby, Beverly bikes across Aurora and alights by Act and between building and alleyway advertises body bit by bit: barely a brastrap, an actual buttcheek, an ankle black-and-blueing, and alabaster belly boiling and bubbling, alluding to a bodacious balut-appetite.

As Beverly argues against aching belly, a black BMW brakes beside Beverly's blue BMX and behind blue-bottle bifocals a businessman barely beyond boyhood—an absolute boychick—attempts at a barter between an amorous businesswoman's allegedly adept appendages and a boychick businessman's bonafide big bucks, and after a brief and altogether amateurish bidding argument, boychick businessman agrees at businesswoman's asked-about amount.

Beverly boards automobile and broadcasts at boychick businessman an ancient alleyway beside AliMall. “Atmospheric,” boychick businessman acknowledges as BMW brakes at alley's

bend. Behind, at backseat, Beverly alludes at a barely appropriate act, an act all balk at but all actually adore. Boychick businessman appreciates Beverly's almost boyish brashness but belays all advances as another barely appropriate act amasses at brain: boychick businessman anxiously asks about Beverly's appendages' alleged abilities and allowed an affectation appear by bawdily baritoning about a bicuspid bourguignonne blowjob.

"A bicuspid bourguignonne blowjob?" asks Beverly, baring barely-blossomed breasts, acting all astonished but betraying an attitude bordering at boredom. "A bicuspid bourguignonne blowjob!" boychick businessman affirms arrogantly, and at backseat allows Beverly access at belly and boxers and all bits beneath.

Beverly, atop boychick businessman, administers adequate beating, beginning at ball-bottom and arriving at blood-filled bulb, accelerating as Beverly's biceps attain brief buffery, affirming all allusions about alleged adept appendages, at boychick businessman's boundless astonishment. "Alright?" Beverly asks boychick businessman, all breathless, blushing, and bare-assed. "Ah, baby," answers boychick businessman, briefly amnesiac.

Beverly applies adept bilabial abilities at boychick businessman's bare bottom and balls, awakening—angering—boychick businessman's amorous animal, albeit barely achieving an Asian average. But Beverly, always agreeable, attempts at blushing boychick businessman about brandishing bigger breadth above all boys before and after. Boychick businessman agrees at Beverly's assessment, blushes, and begs Beverly again about a bicuspid bourguignonne blowjob, and blushes again after asking. As answer, Beverly bares believable admiration at boychick businessman's arguably baby-like boyhood, and brings attention at balls again, and also at actualizing begged-about blowjob.

"Brace all appendages!" Beverly asks boychick businessman amiably as Beverly attempts at achieving appropriate big-mouthedness. As asked, boychick businessman—all flutter—braces all appendages at BMW's backseat accessories, anticipating any and all, acknowledging Beverly's A+ abilities.

Beverly, at achieving absolute big-mouthedness and also an above-average bigness at boychick businessman's adult apparatus, allows boychick businessman's anticipation boil beyond bedazzlement.

"Bitch!" boychick businessman belts annoyingly, briefly blue-balled by Beverly's activities. Boychick businessman attempts at beginning an argument as Beverly, bowing by boychick businessman's ankles, begins—brazenly, belligerently, and above all, beautifully—blowing boychick businessman's big boy bulk.

Beverly blows and blows, bouncing and bobbing again and again, bit by bit and afterwards allows all-in, balls-deep, accentuates by biting, big-licks and big-lip beating, but amidst best blowing boychick businessman bartered about and bought before and after, Beverly's brain bemoans big budgetary anxieties: bedroom and board, Biogesic, breakfast; bills and acne.

"Balls and all, baby; balls and all," boychick businessman announces beneath breath and Beverly, being an accommodating babe, attempts bringing back attention at boychick businessman's balls and all, achieving bigger big-mouthedness and better breathing arpeggio, actions boychick businessman acknowledges by arching back bodybuilt arms and bludgeoning Beverly between brows, across bridge, again and again. Beverly attempts at breaking-off but boychick businessman anticipates and blocks all anti-blowjob activities by Beverly, afterwards adapts a beatific attitude as boychick businessman blows bazooka and Beverly binges—against all anger—at boychick businessman's bitter bouillabaisse, afterwards baptizes Beverly between blood-splattered barely-blossomed breasts. "Bon appetit," boychick businessman asides.

As Beverly brushes and burps bellyache away, boychick businessman adds a bit at agreed-about amount. "A bonus," boychick businessman announces, acknowledging Beverly's brand-new bruises and big blackeye.

Boychick businessman brings Beverly back beside Act and bids "arrivederci" before accelerating BMW across Aurora Boulevard

and beyond. Back between building and alleyway, Beverly assesses amount by amateur arithmetic and believes all barely addresses bedroom and bills.

Black-and-blue and bloody-nosed, Beverly ambles across Aurora by bike, at a baranggay bakery and buys bread and butter, Biogesic, and bathroom-cleaning acid. Beverly arrives at abode and before anything attends at bellyaching baby's bleeding-gum bawlings, affectionately addressing "Billy, Billy," becalming baby, afterwards attempts at arranging baby's big bottle breakfast as burrowing beastie beneath Beverly's blood-splattered barely-blossomed belaboured breast bellows, bucks, beats.

I

I'M THINKING SHITTY things, ill-fitting shrill things, things I think I'll dismiss if I insist in thinking "This isn't right!", still I think "Kill him, kill him, his shirt is insipid! Slit his thighs, his wrists, his lips, his lids! Slit him 'til his spirit is piss!", I fight this dirty, glib ill will, still, I'm thinking "Will I slip? If I slip, will I kill smiling, grinning, liking it slightly?"

Concerning Charnelhouse
Charlie's Chef-d'oeuvre
comedic cacoethes

CHARNELHOUSE CHARLIE—CAMISOLED celibate culinary caliph—cubes carrots, chops cabbage, carves cheese, chills champagne, chars chapatti carefully, ceases, crosses CR's cul-de-sac 'cross chateau's cockroachy carpet-floor, crouches, concentrates cutting cherublike corpse's cured cankered campaniform cock clockwise, carefully considering cellulite, capillaries, ceaselessly chatting: "Charnelhouse Charlie, consider caution: catching

clueless carefree chattels—children—can conclude careers, cause criminal cases, cemetery check-ins!!!

“Can Charnelhouse Charlie, creating convincing catchpenny charades—cleaning chores, clothing calamities, clumsy calculus—cajole, confuse, catch?!?”

“Can Charnelhouse Charlie chloroform caterwaulers, casually carry carpeted comatose customers ‘cross crowded crossroads, crooked corners?!?”

“Can Charnelhouse Charlie cleanly cut carmine crosses ‘cross calves, carefully chop cheek chunks, convincingly cook chili con carne con calavera, cadaver caldereta?!?”

“Can Charnelhouse Charlie confidently circumvent clumsy cop-collaring, crude civil crusades, cruel Christian conscience?!?”
 ‘Course, Charnelhouse Charlie can!!! Charnelhouse Charlie’s crimson career’s complimented ‘cross cities country-wide, captivating cavorting canaille, capricious concubines, cheap cads, casual colleagues, cloying cops!!! Charming criminal, Charnelhouse Charlie!!! Cause celebre!!!”

Charnelhouse Charlie cheerfully cackles canorously, cubing croutons, chopping chili, carving cucumber, charring corn cobs, captivatedly cooking cut cured cankered campaniliform cock, charcoal’s candescence crisping crust.

Charnelhouse Charlie concludes concocting culinary cock-a-hoop, clears clutter, cha-chas, commences chowing cilantro-chiffonaded chowder-coated chapatti. Contentedly chewing chowder’s cock chunks, Charnelhouse Charlie, ceaselessly chic, chuckles “Chickeny!!!”, chugging chilled champagne, climaxes, cheering-on Charnelhouse Charlie’s criminality’s considerable calculating chichi cleverness.

A S a d D e e d

AS ADD EASES, Ed’s dad Asa de Sades Ed’s ass, eases seed—adds, adds—deads Ed’s sass as Ed sees Asa as a sad dad.

U n o M e m e n t o M o t t o

MOM, ON NOTE to teen:

“No men on moon, no tenet to tote, no note to tune. Neon nun-totem on mount? Mute monument to no-one.”

A S w e e t M e s s

SWEET TESS MET Tom, seems sweet to Tess, “stout esteem, most zest, must mow!” Tess swoons, now on to two moons on Tom’s nest Tess sees Tom’s tons o’ zoo-smut: mooses mount sows; mutts, tots. “Wow!” Tess wets, oozes, sweetness now moot, now mess on toes.

T o r t u r e T h e a t e r N o . T e n

ARTHUR—A THREAT, a thorn—ate a teen heart to no hoot nor roar, no rant nor rave, author one neat note (a taunt, a revue):

“Ave, Rhona, ave, ave: rear too tan to not rut, throat too hot to not tear, her teat too rare an art to not have; ate her to honour her, teat ‘n heart, throat to rear, to return her to ever ‘n ever.”

O n A Q u e e r Z o n e

ZOË (NEE ANNE, nee Evan)—queer queen anon on a queue none vue, on a venue none even van on—a no-noun, a no-one on a neon eve o’ an uneven era.

I n A R a g i n g K i a

ADOR, A DIM, dour drunk (on gin and rum) goading God and King on a dark road, ran on a roaming dog, a Rod (dinging Kia), an oar and a ring, and a grinning man dining on a gourd.

D e l i c a t e
D o m e s t i c D e l i c a c y
d i d a c t i c d r a m a t u r g y

DRAMATIS: DEAF-DUMB DOLORES—doddering dwarfy dame—dozes dribbling, droning decibelfully, deeply descends down daedal dirty dreamscape, down disturbingly diseased decades-old debutante days.

Dramatisation: Dirty dream drives Dolores conscious. Dolores checks crib, checks ceaselessly-dozing decades-old dermoid child's diaper chastefully, determines distinct dahl-like dampness, changes diaper delicately. Despite delicate chasteness, Dolores disturbs child's dozing, causing child's crying. Child's cries don't descend down deaf-eared Dolores' cranium, continues changing child's diaper. Determined child's cries climb 'cross decibels, doppler downwind, disturbing dozen duplexes, catching Dolores' distracted consciousness. Distressed, Dolores draws dusty diaphanous draperies, drops damp damask duster, decidedly comforts child. Claspings droopy double-Ds, Dolores draws child close, closer, close, closer.

Diptych: Child digs down Dolores' doughy deflatedness, cross-eyedly drinks dairy draught deep, drams deliciously, drams delightfully, catching dainty delectable drops dribbling down cheeks, dripping down double-chin, deglutitiating child chuckling, chewing, ceaselessly drying down Dolores.

Child's drinking concluded, Dolores dries chaffed double-Ds, couches derriere, denudedly drifts down daedal dirty dreamscape,

down disturbingly diseased decades-old debutante days, during Dolores' crazily determined drifter dad's daily dozen crystal-methamphetamine-caused crime: despicable double-drinking chewing-down chugging Dolores' debuting chests' dairy daiquiri, doggy-style deepdicking devirginisation deftly dealt directly Dolores' delicate dianthic dahlia—"Definitely Daddy's child. Definitely Daddy's child," drawled Dolores' dad—causing (Dolores' doctors determined) decades-long depression, chronic cardiological disturbances, dwarfism, degeneracy, child-bearing: daunting darkly devolutionary descents down Darwinist dead-ends.

Dramatics: Dirty dream drives Dolores conscious. Dolores checks crib, checks ceaselessly-doing decades-old dermoid child, currently droning, dozing comfortably, dreaming decades-old dreams, chuckling. Dolores cradles doughy chapping droopy double-Ds, curd dripping. Definitely Daddy's child. Definitely Daddy's child.

Denouement: Dolores checks child's damp clumpy diaper, draws corner, coaxes dozing child's darky dangle. Dolores dampens, determines deepest desire, determines dirtiest dream, decides definite depraved deontic destiny, defers, devotes degenerate dental demonstrations. Deaf-dumb Dolores—doddering dwarfy dame—descends, drops, dreams, delights.

A B o a O ' A b b a - B a o b a b

BOB, BUB A cob: "Ooo, aaa! O, cocoa-caca o' Bab!"

A S t a r t o s s ' d T r o l l

OLAN STA ANA—a loon—slots lotsa tots door to door, nasal to anal, rants "Don't start! Don't start!" and all tots as "Rats!" and "Tools o' Satan!" to Santa tattoo on ass.

A V a i n S a i n t

ONE NITE, GERTIE goes to oven, turns it on, 'n sits—sore on tears, snot stains on vest—starin' out to no-one, attention to none save a vague sour taste on tongue.

A S l a v e ' s H a r d S a l e

A BROAD'S BARE ass—raw over VD—draws blood as a dude lords over her, shaves her, lashes her red as he blows a wad over her shoulder.

O n A F i n e N o o n

ON A FEE of nine-five, a vue of one buff banana bonin' a nun, cooin' "Ooo, aaa!".

A G a g a G a g

PAPA GLAD LEGAL gal Lulu gulped—lapped up, "glug-glug"—pee-puddle a la agua.

E n d a n g e r i n g
E l o q u e n t E d a c i t y
e g r e g i o u s e p i t a p h s

ERRONEOUSLY EATING EARLYWOOD echeveria,
Eddie—easygoing eccentric edentate elementary Economics
educator—endured exotic epidermal ensanguine explosions
escalating exponentially everyday, eventually engulfing Eddie's

entire exterior, evolving echinococci, creeping down esophagus, effusing effluvia, emaciates, evokes eclampsia. Eddie expires, eight ephemic earnest etchings—euphuistically efforting emending embourgeoisement—Eddie's étagère's center exhibit, definitively encapsulating Eddie's effeminate effervescence, Eddie's existence's extant evidence:

“Every excellent endeavour eventually ends exemplary.”

“Education: every Eve's Eden.”

“Égalité equals Emancipation.”

“Evening ends everynight, dawn comes eventually.”

“Elegies: every esprit's elysian evensong.”

Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

A N E E D D E N I E D

ADAN AND DAVE invaded Ben, divided bun, beaded, beaned, and denuded, and Ben bein' bad in bed, Dave and Adan, undivided, bade Ben de nada, and a vain adieu.

A n A l l e y V u e

ALLAN, EYE UNEVEN, lay lean Ella—all eleven—'n Ella yell “Nay!” 'n Allan yell “Aye!” 'n Ella yell 'n yell, 'n all lull 'n Allan yell “Yay!” 'n leave venue 'n Ella lay level, eye all null.

A S m a l l S e a m l e s s G e m

ALL GALS SLAM Sam as Sam's eel seems small 'n smells as smegma smells.

A F a n

NATE—A FAT, unneat teen—vue Vanna feet a tan teat at TV ‘n
Nate vent tent, ‘n eat.

D e a d E a s e

DESSA SEES ADE seed dead Ada’s ass.

W a h a h a h a h a !

I GAG A gay hag!

F l a g r a n t l y
F l a g i t i o u s F e t i s h e s
f a g g y f a b u l a t i o n s

FLAKY FLANEUR FELIX, following Fredo—fetchingly fabulous
feminised fraternal freres—fussily film fulsome fornications for
fogey freewheeling foreigners’ fees, featuring forceful felchings,
fast-paced facials, ferrets, fistings, feral face-fartings, funnellings,
fingerings, forced fecal-feedings, furballings, fluids-flickings,
furrowings, fibrilatings, flimsy flapjackings, funnybonings,
flippings, forehead fondlings, floppings, fork-flinchings, fishy fish-
feastings, facecloth face-offs, facetious falling-outs, facile falafel-
fryings, fascist fastballings, fast-talkings, featherings, fatigued
feedbacks, far-flung feints, felicitous frenchings, feisty Fabregeings,
Ferris-wheelings, felonious fermentings, furious Fibonaccings,
foreplayings, fistula-fillings, flagellum-flexings, fleshy flagwavings,
fletchings, ferocious fore-and-aftings, foghornings—for Fredo,
few fantasies feel failures; for Felix, few filmbuffs feel filched.

| |

FIRST FINDING I'M living with HIV, it's silly, thinking "I'm dying! I, victim!" Sickly, dizzy, high in pills 'til, inspiringly, I inflict HIV willingly in dining grill I stint in nightly, rightly victimizing girls, mixing chill piss in spicy chili, shit bits in sizzling sisig, thick spit in icy drinks 'til midnight, 'til, tiring, I sit in high spirits, ticklishly giggling, priding in illicit thrills, in kicking, in fighting HIV, in living!

G l a d s o m e
G l a s s - J a w e d G o g o - G i r l
g o n z o g o - a r o u n d

GORGEOUS GLENDA—GLIB g-stringed gimmicky glamour-puss—goes gaga-gooney grogshop guy-glaring, gleefully gloats golden globes, generously gives guys gash-glimpses, guiltlessly guffaws, gasps, 'fore going for grandest gigantically generous guy. Guy—fantasising goose-stepping galoot—gladly follows Glenda going for grimy girlsroom, furiously grabs Glenda's glistening gam. Glenda gasps. Guy grabs Glenda's golden globes, gropes Glenda's gluteus, forces finger forward, farther, farther. Glenda grimaces, grabs guy's growing girth, frees giant from garter, gamely grinds glans, geniculates, generates generous friction. Guy gasps, growls, gibbers foolishly. Glenda, go-getting glutton for getable genitals, grins gap-toothedly, goes for guy's gigot, glowingly glissandos further, further, goads guy's glob, gargles. Guy goes "Goddamn, girl!" Glenda giggles, goes further, further. Guy, glutton for getable gash, growls "Giddyap!" forces Glenda forward, ghoulishly grabs g-string, garter failing, falls. Guy greedily gropes gash formerly glimpsed, finally finding Glenda's gigantic gynaecological grotesquerie, Glenda's genuinely freakish fact: "Glenda's" formerly "Glenn," 'fore genitals-gibbing, 'fore gender-forgery. Guy, freaked-

out, goes “Goddamn, gay!!!” grabs “Glenda” furiously, grudgingly gropes face, forces fingers forward, grittingly gouges “Glenda’s” gaze, ‘fore fisting “Glenda’s” gap-toothed grin. Guy gruffly goes, ghastly gesticulating grossness. “Glenda”—gank, gibbous, glazed glamour-puss—giggles, gingerly grins gap-toothedly, grisly gargles gore, gleaming, grateful, gratified.

S L E N D E R K N I V E S K E P T S H A R P

SLENDER KNIVES KEPT sharp for emergency surgery: “so, what now?” and you flinch at their cool efficiency at ripping you to shreds, the damage done with just three words, from crotch through gizzard through liver through breasts, twist of wrist and quietly exquisitely the sheets are soiled

quick with blood, truly yours and yours truly, “not a bad mix” or so you say, opinions may vary: “I’m still not sold to the thought”, it sits in my brain folding and turning but it’s just too big so wrought I, a lout, pop it out (a zit of words), “so, what now?” and you cry it out

beside me in bed, the hot spot, the origin of everything from months before, better times in better climes, the little we didn’t do would fill six cups or more, so now we’re here with our sour milk, our bitter coffee: we gulp them down to seem not worried but our fingers shiver so we spill our drinks but not mop up, letting coffee—milk mix it up, “it’s how we work” you like to blurt out often just to hurt, expert to the strength of words, first their weight then their size when uttered correctly, so three more from you, quietly quick you self-surgerize from behind cry-sore eyes: “now, we go” so now, we go.

Heinous Half-Life
Hankering Hoaxy Heftiness
hagiographic hokum

HEARTILY HEROIN-HIGH, HAMMOCKED Henry—
happy-go-lucky hurly-burly harelipped hippie—happily hums
hollow hosannas, hiccups hoarse hallelujahs, hee-haws hazy
hi-hellos, heebie-jeebies, his heartbeat helter-skelter, his hands
herky-jerky, his half-digestions halfway-up, his head
hemorrhaging
hundred halibut
hallucinations.

The Annotated Account of Tholomew Mestich and the Tiles of the Ganew

Elyss Punsalan

The 42nd Calendar Millennia

IF THERE EVER was a hero in a story, it would certainly not be someone like Tholomew Mestich of the Northern Ganew¹. Tholomew was born with a black heart and an acid tongue, to a pair of the most feared villains in the history of the Ruby Isle. His parents were Jill the Plunderer, the proud daughter of an infamous line of pirates, and Paul the Disappearer, stellar alumnus from the Secret School of Thievery and Lies. With this kind of parentage, it was logical to conclude that their son would grow up to be The Greatest of All Villains, benefiting from the intelligence and vast experience of his mother and father.

Fortunately for the citizens of Ganew, right after Tholomew was plucked from the womb of Jill the Plunderer, Fate stepped in and slapped the bottom of the infant with such a force that it prompted him to scream and wail in fear. His screams were so terrible that it killed his parents, the attending midwife, and all of the master and mistress's guards and servants. Everyone in the household, except the child and a deaf housemaid, perished.

¹The Northern Ganew used to be the habited portion of the Marcks Ruby Isle, located mid-east of the Spurious Sea. It was a thriving and commercial country, but soon became uncharted when the Great Flood in the 70th Calendar Millennia (C.M.) moved it.

Now the deaf housemaid did not want to face the prospect of raising an evil child, nor did she want to try her hand at murder, and so she bundled the offending infant in rough cloth and tied him to the back of a horse. She whipped the horse with only the babe on its back, and hoped it would run off into the wilderness and be attacked by wolves.

By some trick of nature the horse was cross-eyed, and instead of going straight into the wilderness where all horses were expected to run to, it got itself lost. It trotted then into the manor of the Mestiches, an old and amiable couple who liked to spend their time tending their vegetable garden. The rough cloth bundling the child got caught in the outstretched branches of the shrubbery, and inevitably loosed its load onto the patch of cabbages.

Geraldine Mestich found the infant boy nestled peacefully in one of her gigantic greens, and was so overjoyed with the find she almost broke her back when she did a little dance. Henry Mestich was more delighted than his wife was for having a child to dote on; he was giddy with glee that they had found themselves an heir for their promising vegetable garden, as well as his family's heirloom, the Mestich Yellow Tiles².

•

TILES, IT MUST be known, were serious and important concerns in the Ganew. They were treasures in their own right, and being thus had acquired themselves laws and traditions to ensure their safety in the care of the Guardian Families. How the families

²There were actually two sets of colored tiles inherited by the Mestiches, one of them dubbed the Mestich Grays. Its whereabouts are still unknown to this day, but myth has it that the Tiles were thrown by mistake into a pile of charcoal by a cleaning servant in the 10th C.M. It was said that the cleaning servant was sent to prison for a total of thirty-seven years, and was then found dead with his hands around his eyes. The prison guards believed that the servant was driven mad everyday by the sight of gray tiles covering the walls of his cell.

came to be Guardians was still a mystery in the 42nd C.M.—there had been thousands of years without any record of their ancestors³. However, all families were given this responsibility; the tiles did not differentiate between rich and poor⁴. The Ancient Law of Ganen, the first king after whom the country was named, dictated that all Guardian Families were not to part with their tiles at whatever cost. To disobey this law meant exile into the chasms of Yoor, the land of the forgotten, which was said to be more dreadful than Hell itself.

One tradition affecting the Ganew Tiles concerned inheritance. The Tilers, as the bearers of the tiles were called, had to pass on the set of tiles to their male next of kin when the latter had reached the age of fourteen. Male next of kin were usually the younger brothers of the Tiler or if there were none, his sons or nephews. Because Henry Mestich had neither brothers nor nephews, his male next of kin was by default his adopted son Tholomew. The senior Master Mestich died in peace in his rocking chair after the naming ceremony, leaving old Geraldine to care for the black-hearted child.

•

DAYS QUICKLY TURNED into years and the infant grew into a most annoying young master. His misconduct infuriated the Mistress Mestich at the least; his mischief horrified the servants of the house. Young Tholomew loved to play with people instead of

³Earthquakes and fire destroyed almost all records in the first dwelling caves of ancient Ganew, around 6th C.M.

⁴Although the tiles being available to all did not offer any basis for prejudice, there were some families who, based on the shape, rarity of color, and condition of the tiles, imposed their superiority over other Guardians. Most tiles were commonly chipped and colored black. Higher-valued tiles were perfect squares with a thin glasslike cover over the pigments. The most precious of them all were the Ganen Blue Tiles held by the king of Ganew, Matthias Jarqoal..

toys, causing them to cry and break into pieces with his irksome games. He found boundless entertainment by hiding in the bushes of the narrow road leading up to Hartgent market and setting pranks upon travelers. His most infamous deed concerned a vile mannequin drenched in pig's blood hanging from a tree, which dropped on the Bishop Minor's head. He also admitted to deceiving little girls into following the silly wishes of a talking fairy. The talking fairy was later found to be the stable boy from the Mestich manor, whom Tholomew had forced to wear the Mistress's clothes and wings made of duck feathers.

Mistress Mestich tried her best to discipline Tholomew—first with strong words, and then eventually with strong whips using her late husband's belt. But the child was as stubborn as dried mud on a sheep's hoof—he learned nothing and amended not his misdeeds.

One morning, young Tholomew discovered himself braced to his bed, preventing him from instigating a self-made rebellion on the Royal Soldiers of the Blue Tiles. The battalion was marching back to its barracks after a year of war with the seacoast pirates. It had taken Tholomew weeks and weeks to come up with the perfect surprise attack using the most meager tools in his possession—small amounts of gun powder, beating drums, and some mirrors. The Mistress had learned of this plan from the stable boy who had become Tholomew's personal servant. She immediately ordered all her housemaids to gather rope and tie the sleeping master to his bed the night before the battalion's return.

The following day, once the soldiers were safely in their barracks, the young master was released. Naturally Tholomew was livid over his thwarted plan. He charged towards the threshold with a rucksack upon his back and in an angry voice said that he would leave the manor and never return if the Mistress would continue treating him like a child. Although, one could hear through his loud voice that he was only feigning his threats. He simply could not imagine a life away from comfort. To his shock, Mistress Mestich

was ecstatic, unburdened finally of a very difficult fourteen-year old boy. The woman ran to the threshold, kissed her stepson on the cheek, and shoved some money and a small pouch of Mestich Yellow Tiles into his hands. With one quick push Tholomew was out of the manor, followed by the sound of the heavy door being shut behind him⁵.

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AS FAR AS black-hearted Tilers go if there ever were any before Tholomew, they were a proud lot who would never consider asking forgiveness from those they have offended. At this point Tholomew made up his mind to set out on his real adventure, and never return. The possibilities of a million pranks thrilled him no end.

Tholomew became notorious in the Ganew for his practical jokes, and later was nicknamed Tholomew the Obscure, owing to his ability to hide masterfully from his victims before he struck. Years went by and his company grew in number—drifters, beggars, and thieves who were bored by their occupation joined him in his crusade to make fools out of dour citizens.

Of course, Tholomew gained enemies with equal measure. Generals and Bishops Minor plotted his end for his band's offenses against their offices. But the one who hated him most was Erginette Acrom, the eldest daughter of John Acrom⁶ the

⁵Geraldine Mestich was later found dead on the floor of her house. She died at peace like her husband did, however there was tittle-tattle around town that the adopted son Tholomew had something to do with her death. That is only partly true, of course. When Tholomew left the Mestich Manor, old Geraldine did her little jig and broke her back completely, and that became the ultimate cause of her demise.

⁶The Unbroken Black Tiles were then considered less precious than the colored tiles, but higher in value when compared to the more common chipped black tiles.

master swordsmith, Tiler of the Unbroken Black Tiles. It seemed that she was Tholomew's favorite target, as he always picked on her whenever she was on her way to the rose gardens. Tholomew picked on Erginette not because he hated her, but in some mysterious, untold region in his black heart, a tiny red stream was bubbling with joy at the sound of her voice. It reminded him of old Geraldine's garden song, the one she was singing when she first saw him in the cabbage patch.

Erginette on the other hand, failed to notice any trace of affection in Tholomew's words. His was an acid tongue, and in moments of panic, nothing but the sharpest and most hurtful sounds came out of his mouth. Still, Erginette could not resist letting her eyes linger on Tholomew—the prankster bore a handsome face that was unrivaled in the Ganew. He kept appearing like a demented angel in her dreams, sometimes dancing with her at an elaborate ball; at other times throwing overripe tomatoes on her pretty head.

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IN DUE COURSE, Tholomew the Obscure's band of pranksters was declared a threat to the kingdom, and sentenced to the chasms of Yoor upon capture. Tholomew then led his band deep into the Unfathomable Wood to escape punishment from the Royal Soldiers.

The wood was thick with dark trees and thorny plants; wolves howled even in the mornings because the dense canopies made it impossible for sunlight to sift through. After several days of walking, they came onto a small clearing near a river that flowed out of a cave. They were tired and hungry, and then beset with misfortune when it began to rain⁷. Tholomew ordered his men

⁷Rain inside the Unfathomable Wood does not come from the clouds in the air. The trees themselves produce it, as it is their way of reducing the amount of water in their trunks.

to run for the cave and to climb the stone platforms on the river banks to keep themselves safe.

Once inside, the men lit more lamps and much to their amazement, saw that portions of the cave's walls were covered with a shining, unfinished mosaic. The tiled wall, as tall as two giants with one standing on the shoulders of another, glimmered green, gold, red, and silver in the light of the lamps. The tiles set on the wall were not perfect squares, but looked as if an enormous hammer struck them and shattered everything to smaller pieces. A bare stony wall was in the center, bordered by countless, tiny, dark-colored tiles.

At the same instant, the men inside the cave realized that they were all Tilers. Even though they were drifters, beggars and thieves, they obeyed the Ancient Law of Ganen, and had with them, bound to their bodies since they were fourteen, small pouches of heirloom tiles.

One clever youth removed a small pouch attached to his waist and brought out a chipped black tile. He raised the small object near the mosaic, trying to find the part where it could fit. Tholomew became amused and told the youth to give up—the mosaic was massive and it would take him months to find the adjacent piece. The youth was about to follow Tholomew's advice when an invisible force started to pull his hand, leading him to stick the tile onto the base of the wall. The mysterious force let go of his hand as the tiles on the base shifted of their own accord, grating stone tile against stone wall, and then realigning to form what looked like the claw of a gargantuan eagle. The men gasped in terror at the eerie occurrence, yet the youth remained unfazed. He approached the base and laid his palm on it for he wanted to know how the tiles could move. But he was famished and this prevented him from thinking clearly. In desperation, he said out loud that he wished there was some food to keep his stomach from grumbling. Out of the eagle's claw, roasted mutton and fowl flowed onto the floor, with citrus fruits and grapes tumbling right after.

The youth picked up the roasted mutton, smelled it, and tasted it. "It's real food!" he declared, and soon the band forgot the Ancient Law and stuck their black chipped tiles on the wall and wished for the lot that their hearts desired. In a few moments there was more food than anyone of them had ever seen, beautiful women stepped out of the wall to dance with the men, jewels and crowns adorning their heads.

Only Tholomew, who remained standing on the edge of a stone platform, hesitated to part with his tile. It was as if one prankster was detecting the tricks of another, filling his head with suspicion about the mysterious mosaic wall that granted the wishes of his men. Why would a wall bestow gifts in exchange for a measly tile? His black heart grunted haughtily. There is a trap waiting to be sprung, it said.

As he furrowed in thought, the youth who had laid the first tile proposed Tholomew to approach the wall and ask for the lovely Erginette to be his bride. With him bearing a set of colored tiles, the wall would certainly not refuse, and may provide him even more.

His pulse raced with thoughts of Erginette. Her soft rosy cheeks glowing, her lips slightly parted in delight, her slender arms around his neck. *Oh! She is joy to me and there is nothing I will not do to be with her!* he thought. The tiny red stream in his heart was now a raging river, threatening to break the black solid mass. Tholomew lifted one yellow tile out of the two in his possession, raised his hand toward the mosaic wall, and waited.

The men took notice of Tholomew and the Mestich Yellow Tile. For a long time nothing happened, but the earth gave a gentle shake. Suddenly, Tholomew's hand was being pulled up, up, up towards a high perch on the wall. From the air he could see what the men in his band could not—the mosaic tiles had reformed into an outline of a huge beast with the claws of an eagle, the wings of a bat, and the head of a reptile. It was tattered in some parts, for not all tiles needed were present in the cave. At the end

of his flight, Tholomew was horrified to see that his yellow tile fit into a section of the beast's head, and the mosaic tiles shifted to form a dragon's eye⁸.

The force that held Tholomew up began to wane and soon enough he fell straight into the river below. A magnificent dragon made of multicolored tiles was moving its form restlessly inside the wall; it was trying to break free from the stone. It stopped moving when it saw a frightened old man hiding behind a column of rock. This man happened to be Charles Medelin, black sheep of the Guardian Family of the Red Tiles. The tile dragon lowered its head to where Charles was, and the rock became a column of spiders that fell on poor Charles, making him jump up and down at the sight of the crawlers. Without any protection, Charles became more afraid and therefore vulnerable to the tile dragon. He gave up his Red Tiles and raised them to the wall in exchange for his life.

The Red Tiles did not fit any part of the dragon in particular. Instead, they disappeared beneath the skin of the dragon and forced other tiles of blood to flow. The tile dragon beat its wings

⁸In the 55th C.M. Year 17, modern Ganew scholars were able to decipher the name of the beast as Gargashen (translated as "the moving fear"). This name was mentioned in rare annals unearthed from the 3rd C.M. Cave of the First People, south of the Ancient Ganew cave dwellings. Gargashen was originally of real flesh and blood not unlike animals that roam the Ganew; it wreaked havoc on the First People for two millennia. It was at the end of the 4th C.M. when a young but brilliant shaman, later crowned King Ganen the First King, used a puissant spell to trap the living Gargashen into one of the caves' walls. King Ganen was only able to devise a more permanent way of keeping Gargashen from re-entering the Ganew when he was advised by his bride Queen Alexia, on his seventh year of rule. He transformed the dragon into a tile mosaic and then distributed its important tiles to all the families in the kingdom. It was also in that year when the Law of Ganen was believed to have been decreed. Unfortunately, the magic of transforming the beast into tile was an imperfect one, as the beast was still able to use some of its formidable powers.

and a powerful wind broke. With its every movement, a sound similar to gigantic boulders crashing into each other was heard. Finally, the tile dragon pushed its head against the stone wall and then the rest of its body followed, wriggling free of the cave rock that had imprisoned it for millions of years. It attacked the men on the platform, maiming them and stepping on their fragile bodies. Charles Medelin was spared, although the tile dragon breathed on his head and set his hair ablaze. With that it flew out of the cave in the direction of the villages.

Now Tholomew did not so much as drown, but he did have a hard time fighting the torrent in the river. Upon reaching the banks he realized instinctively that the Ganew was in grave danger. The tile dragon would circle the land to get all of its tiles back, and this would mean the beginning of an everlasting darkness, and the end of whatever happiness there was between him and Erginette.

Erginette! He exclaimed. He had not yet declared his wish to the wall! Quickly he laid his hand on the remaining tile blocks and fervently said, "Let me and my men be returned to the villages that we may warn the people of impending danger!"

The wall glowed faintly and crumbled to dust, expending the remnants of its power, and soon they were on the streets of the village. The first to set sight of them were the Royal Soldiers, and in next to no time they were pursued.

"Wait!" Tholomew said, "Do not capture us! I bear news of an unspeakable terror! A tile dragon is heading towards our villages, and it shall destroy everything in its path!"

"We cannot believe your acid tongue, Tholomew the Obscure!" the soldiers answered.

"Then you will believe mine!" The voice was from a woman—it was Erginette's, the honorable swordsmith's daughter. "I have just come from Hartgent, and I saw a beast made of tiles attacking men and women. Tiles were flying towards it! It was as if a force was calling all the tiles together to bind themselves to the beast!"

“It’s true then!” the people declared, and they all became very frightened, even the soldiers, for they had never fought a dragon before.

“I have a plan, if you would consider!” Tholomew said. “If the dragon is after the tiles then he shall have them. But not without wounding him!” The people listened and obeyed his ingenious plan. They immediately forgot that it was the infamous prankster who was trying to save them.

Tholomew asked that all Guardian Families fasten their tiles to sharp objects—a spear, an arrow, a javelin, whatever they could find. The small ones they would fit even onto a table knife. Tholomew asked John Acrom to fuse his remaining yellow tile which was half the size of his palm to one of the latter’s best blades. John, with his own inventiveness, affixed the Acrom Unbroken Black Tiles onto Erginette’s heavy sword. Tholomew also asked the Royal Soldiers to acquire the Ganen Blue Tiles from the King, and to pound and mix them into the exploding powder for the cannons⁹.

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THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, the tile dragon flew across the Ganew sky and descended on the village where Tholomew, his band, Erginette, the Royal Soldiers, and the rest of the citizens, waited inside their houses. The tile dragon beat its wings and a powerful wind swirled around it. It breathed fire on the rooftops and drove the men and women out into the streets. The dragon then let out a long shrill cry to summon the tiles.

⁹Obviously, King Matthias refused to let go of the Blue Tiles; he had not forgotten Tholomew’s prank on his 30th birthday where a naked squire was seen streaking through the royal party with the words “King Matthias’s Lover” on his back. The squire was never captured and was believed to have taken great protection from Tholomew’s band. Furthermore, the Blue Tiles had just been returned to the castle, handsomely set into the king’s royal crown and scepter. The Royal Soldiers, Tilers all, then decided to pound their own heirlooms and mix it into their gun powder.

The swords, spears, spikes, knives, forks, combs, and scissors to which the tiles were attached began to shake. The light ones then flew instantly toward the dragon, and inflicted tiny wounds on its body. Some light weapons were able to inflict more respectable damage to the dragon; however, the beast remained strong and feisty, still able to demolish the general's office in a single blow. Unfortunately the heavier weapons were only clanging about and getting stuck in windows; some tiles were successfully wriggling free of the swords and then flying out to join the dragon.

Most of the swords and spears were unable to pierce the tile dragon, and Tholomew began to hate himself for not thinking about that. If he did not act quickly, all of the tiles would be lost, and they would be left with useless weapons against the mighty beast.

It was at this moment that Tholomew collided with a brilliant thought. He took the Acrom blade to which the last Mestich tile was still attached, pried the tile free and clenched it tightly with his teeth.

Erginette saw all this and tried to stop him—she knew that once Tholomew left their iron house, he would be bodily lifted towards the tile dragon. Tholomew had no acid words for her now; the tile was keeping him from talking. Erginette met the boy's glassy eyes and understood finally what Tholomew had been meaning to say for the longest time. She kissed him on the cheek and told him to come back alive.

Tholomew boldly charged out of the house bearing the sword of Erginette Acrom in his hands and the last Mestich tile in his mouth. Quickly he was lifted up and flew straight towards the dragon's chest. The Unbroken Black Tiles, so it seemed, formed part of the tile dragon's dark heart. Tholomew pointed the Acrom sword at it, and when he struck, plunged it mightily and deeply into the beast, cleaving a path through its chest. In the blink of an eye he was within the dragon's heart. He raised his sword and pointed it straight up. The Mestich yellow tile forcefully

pulled itself through the dragon's head towards its other eye, and Tholomew cut the dragon's body through, at last emerging like a geyser at the beast's crown. The dragon gave one final shrill cry as it exploded into a thick cloud of dust and rock.

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ON THE GROUND there was a mass of colored and black tiles, a harmless mound of pulverized dirt and stone. Tholomew stopped flying and fell gracefully to the ground, and there his heart turned red and happy when Erginette Acrom claimed her sword and his undying love¹⁰.

¹⁰Tholomew Mestich and his band were given royal clemency and dispensation. Tholomew then wed Erginette Acrom the next day, officiated by King Matthias himself. (The band was still able to set His Majesty's long cape on fire, which was quickly put out by Tholomew with a pail full of blessing water.) The couple bore three sons – Henry, Benedict, and Simon, and a daughter Johanna, who collectively gave Erginette absolute joy, and Tholomew persistent bother.

B e a t s

Kenneth Yu

MY FATHER'S VOICE, sturdy and robust: "Are you ready?"

Before I could answer him or choose between nodding or shaking my head, I felt the unrelenting push of his callused hands on the small of my back and slipped off the stern. The rough, almost splintery wood that served as my seat vanished beneath me, becoming a fraction of a second of airy suspension--a brief moment for me to catch whatever breath I could. The sea met me with a hard slap; the sounds and sights of the surface disappeared. Through the glass of my facemask the world transformed into an intense and velvety shade of royal blue. The shocking coldness of the water invigorated me. Immersed, I spent my first moments floating motionless some feet below the surface, savoring the sensations: the weightlessness, the saltiness, the hollow echo and gurgle of the depths, the tickle of rising bubbles on my legs, arms, and cheeks. In time my lungs protested and I propelled myself upward. I broke through and gulped the humid air.

"Cara!" My father again. He leaned over the side of the boat. "How's the water?"

"Delicious!" I gasped, beaming.

He returned my smile and signaled a thumbs-up. He turned to direct a question aft. "Are you sure the schools will pass through here?"

"I think so." From somewhere onboard, the boatman's tinny voice carried over the blowing breeze. "It's their season."

Whether the dolphins passed through or not, the pleasure of my first jump just beyond the shallows could not be broken. I floated on my back and shut my eyes to the sunlight, savoring the mixed sensation of the sun's prickly warmth with the water's

chill as I was held aloft on the light bobbing of the divergent tidal eddies.

“We’re near enough to the reef’s edge, so even if they don’t come, you can still do some snorkeling,” Dad said. “We can move to deeper water later, to try and chase the school, if you want.”

“That’s fine,” I answered. I drifted languidly like a slack string of seaweed for a few moments longer before gripping my snorkel’s mouthpiece with my teeth and twisting my body around to float on my chest. The world turned royal blue once more. Blue, and then some.

It is darker under the water but awash in color, filtered as the light is through the prism of the ever-moving current; there are hues on the seafloor that can’t be replicated elsewhere. The coral beneath my floating form unfurled and shone in an accumulation of varying shades matched only by the cascade of exploding reef shapes--round and balanced domes, wavy-lined and bulbous oblongs, spiky balls and blocks, long columns with branching tendrils--all made vibrant and vivid by the shifting latticework of light that blanketed the sea-bottom in a luminous mesh, rippling white crochet.

A flight of silverfish shimmered by, each of them a wavy mirror. Pointed darts of black-lined yellow guppies shot in and out of the coral’s crevices, unheeded by angled, slow-moving angelfish, the brides of the reefs, whose long fins trailed behind them in tapered, stylish trains. In a bed of swaying seagrass, a collection of spiny seahorses--ignoring and in turn ignored by a hovering, speckled puffer--clung to apple-green blades with their tails lest they be borne away by the drift. The seahorses’ cousin, a leafy sea dragon, smoothly slid along the ragged edges between the vegetation and a mound of wave-worn rocks. A family of orange clownfish circled beside the half-open maw of a pebbly giant clam, and just below them, on a patch of white sand, I delighted in piercing through the chromatophore camouflage of a small octopus passing by on rolling tentacles. A leatherback turtle, its mottled carapace the

length and breadth of the coffee table back home, entered the scene, gliding through on flippers as elegant underwater as they are clumsy and plodding on land. It was a shame that my shadow, and the larger one that belonged to the boat, intruded into the patterns of light, color, movement, life.

We were anchored to a buoy just off the continental shelf, where the reef wall ended and the seafloor dropped steeply in a severe cliff, down into the fathoms below, where royal blue transforms into a heavy cobalt the deeper one dives until, when even the strongest sunlight cannot reach that far anymore, all turns black. This was my first time to see the real depths, to swim so near to them.

Muffled as his voice was through the water, I heard my father call my name; I raised my head.

“Cara! Here they come!” He gestured wildly to me off the starboard quarter with one hand and pointed to an area of open sea with the other. I turned to look.

The coruscating light on the ocean’s surface could not blind me from seeing the lustrous bodies of the dolphins as they jumped over the water. I had seen this before, but only on my father’s old, grainy home videos. To see this for real, right before my eyes, sent a shiver up my spine. My heart skipped with fresh excitement. For the moment, the dolphins were still a bit distant and small, but their forms were clearly defined; they approached quickly, looming larger with each leap. I traced their path and calculated just how near they would pass.

“Swim there! Swim there!” Dad pointed some fifteen feet farther into deep water. “They’ll pass near that spot! But don’t go too far! Just stop there!”

I shook my head and chuckled. My father was more excited for me than I was for myself, which was plenty enough as it is. I stretched my body out and swam to where he directed.

In mid-stroke I rose with the crest of a sudden swell, felt myself carried up, then under, by a massive breaker. The sea was calm,

but Dad had warned me that this happens sometimes; with all that goes on in the waters there could be many reasons for the way the currents behave. Like he taught me, I recognized what was happening and kept my head, grabbing a lungful of air before being taken beneath. I tried as best as I could to keep from resisting the vortex's pull, to conserve my energy by keeping my body streamlined, flowing with the force of it until it died and I could make my way back up.

But the rogue swell pushed me far deeper than I expected, and when I felt the tug of the unexpected riptide dragging me farther away from the shelf, so powerful as to wrench my mask and snorkel from my face, I knew--with all my dad had taught me of ocean currents, with the pain of the water's pressure rising in my ears, with the hull of the boat swiftly disappearing from sight--that all in this brief instant, I was done for.

Struggling was useless, but I struggled nonetheless. "The greatest danger in the water is not the shark or the barracuda," Dad had lectured me once. "They'll leave you alone most of the time. The greatest danger is the diver himself. Stay calm. Don't ever panic or it'll be the worse for you." I remembered his words but could not make myself follow them. I scrambled madly against the undertow as it bore me away, and in disbelief at what was happening I released my last bit of breath in a flurry of bubbles. With a muted, underwater scream I called for my father like I was eight and not eighteen, right before I plunged from the blue to the black. The world was removed from me.

I fell into unconsciousness and, perhaps into worse; I can't be sure. In the impenetrable gloom where I found myself suspended I felt no pain, even when I knew I was no longer drawing breath. I became aware only of a steady, rhythmic thumping, a regular beat that I surmised could not be my heart if only because it rose in volume and strength, instead of diminishing and dying, taking my life with it.



SOMETHING NUDGED ME, brought back my self-awareness. I turned to look but I still could see nothing. The nudging turned insistent, pushing me in a certain direction. I tried to ignore it, to go back to black, but it wouldn't leave me be, so I gave in and forced my limbs to move where it urged me. Blue increased around me once more by increments, the light returned, the water ended, and I burst through to the expanse of sky on high. With great heaves I refilled my body with the sweet breath of life that I had believed I would never taste of again.

I found myself being circled by the school of dolphins. We were in unfamiliar waters. The boat and my father were nowhere to be seen. No land was in sight, which my mind told me was impossible; no undertow, no matter how strong, could've delivered me far enough away from the island. I turned my face upward but even the sun and the clouds overhead looked alien; they seemed younger, just like the air I was breathing smelled cleaner and unsullied. Everything around me appeared brighter with a different, newer light. The sun's position at the sky's apex told me that it was noon, but a quick look at my wrist presented an impossibility: my diver's watch read that it was only mid-morning. I realized too that I had not fallen into fits of coughing or choking, as my water-filled lungs should have reacted if I had truly drowned and been revived.

The dolphins clacked and chirped their greetings, intermittently puffing spray from their blowholes. I could not accept that I was where I was, swimming among them; I needed to reach out and touch them to dispel my doubts. Only when I stroked the rubbery hardness of their fins, handled the smoothness of their skin, both clammy and warm at the same time as they passed beneath my palm, could I admit to myself that I was breathing and alive.

The dolphins were patient and waited respectfully until I had gathered my wits and equilibrium. When they sensed that I was

ready they broke their circle and proceeded to form a line in preparation for moving off. I hesitated, but one of them swam next to me: a clear offer to hold on. I took his dorsal in my hands and with a flip of his flukes we sped off, trailing white spume, slicing through the water faster than I had ever done before.

One would think only the birds know the meaning of true flight, but the open ocean is as much the sky to its own denizens. In moments I understood what it meant to soar.

We skimmed over the whitecaps. Some of the other dolphins occasionally broke through to playfully jump the foam. The crisp, bracing wind, the sprinkles and spatter in my face, refreshed me, drawing honest laughter from my lips. In pure joy I shouted at the top of my voice to the heavens. The heady sensation of cutting through the sea felt wonderful, as did riding in the wake of the trails of the other dolphins ahead; it was their strength and their energy that carried and filled me, that brought me forward. The waters became the universe and our playground, limited only by the infinity of the horizon's line. We swam this way for what felt like minutes, hours, the span of days, the length of years.

I could not imagine being happier.

When our time was done the leader leaped into the air and struck a pose against the sky before plunging down; he did not resurface. The rest followed, including the one I held onto. Unprepared, panic filled me once more, and after a couple dozen feet of descent, with the blackness below approaching, I could not restrain myself and let go. My instinct told me to swim back above as fast as I could, but after covering less than half the distance I discovered, inconceivably, that I felt no pain, experienced no exertion, and did not run short of breath. I stopped.

In gentle angles, countless beams of sunlight pierced the water like expanding rapier blades that dissipated into placidly dancing motes. I floated there among the shafts of light, suspended among them, between the azure half-light and its gradual vanishing into the depths. The water glowed, luminous, so broad and so wide,

to my left, my right, and below me. Surrounded by the eternal, I imagined all that vast murkiness, all the possibilities it could contain, and felt so very small.

I took a gamble and, against intuition, drew breath, prepared to drown. Nothing happened. The water tasted as sweet as the air, if still salty, and coursed through me as my own blood. The ebb and flow of it through my mouth and nostrils, regular as the tides, cooled my body and soothed my nerves. I couldn't help but smile at my discovery, a child learning wonder in her first steps.

Upon inhalation, upon taking the waters of that mysterious ocean into me, the beats I had heard earlier returned, much stronger than before, not fast or slow, just even. I twisted this way and that but the source lay neither below nor above; it was all around, and when I closed my eyes, I could hear it within me. The water itself pulsed with the sound. No longer relying on my eyes but on the traveling vibrations, I appreciated that it is not just what we can see but also what we can hear and feel that is richer under the sea.

A gentle prod to my thigh disturbed my reverie. My eyes met that of the dolphin that had been pulling me, its protruding beak upturned in that perpetual friendly smile all dolphins owned. "What? You didn't know?" it seemed to be saying and laughing at the same time. I couldn't help giggling back, and the fizz tingled as bubbles escaped my nose and throat. It circled me once then drifted close to offer its fin again. I took it.

My dolphin did not head directly down--perhaps it sensed the remaining vestiges of my fear--but instead descended at a gentler angle and at a slower pace. It pivoted off its initial line and advanced to a shallower stretch of sea, not quite the shoals but not the deep either, where it took me on a journey through a montage of captivating visions, each of them settling into their permanent places in my memory.

As we approached, a blurred mass of shapeless green transformed into a flotilla of billowing, leafy kelp, taller than the tallest man,

which we blended into so neatly it felt as if the stalks' shoots and branches parted for us as a courtesy; the foliage's tips caressed my bare arms and legs as we swam through. When the kelp forest ended we entered and drifted over a space where a large cast of crabs skittered sideways across the sea bed, tracking thin furrows in the sand, a veritable multi-clawed army on the move to parts unknown. We evaded a fluther of translucent jellyfish that stagnated in one spot, eerily motionless, sharply pink against the blue, and slid into the cavities between a cluster of rock formations, arrayed in uniform rows, the width and height of cathedral pillars, astounding in their size and their strange symmetry.

We turned aside at the end of the bed when we came up against a sheer, craggy embankment that rose from some vastness below, passing so close to it that I could see into its many shallow recesses, where smaller marine life--too many and too various in appearance for me to give them any names--capered and dashed on thin legs that recalled silver and gold fibrils. Various kinds of sea anemones--round, wide, and flat like the severed heads of sunflowers, fan-shaped and flapping like elephants' ears, or solidly trunked like petite, fibrous ferns--dotted the rock in their purples, tangerines, ambers, and mauves, their tentacles endlessly curling and whirling to the flux. The embankment's face was encrusted in many places with armor-plated barnacles, and enshrouded in others with extended tracts of algae, innumerable air globules the size of ball-bearings caught in the hair-like fuzz so as to resemble dew on the morning grass. I brushed my fingertips across the algae and the globules escaped into wriggly flight, crystals in miniature on the ascent.

My dolphin and I retreated from that great wall, and while doing so a wide shadow cast on us made me look up. A manta ray, easily the length of a car from nose-tip to tail-end, coasted by on wings extended like those of a giant bat's. Some weak sunlight still slanted down, enough for me to spy a thin, bony remora hiding in the protection of the manta's ventral side. A bit lower

and advancing in the opposite direction was a bulgy-eyed goliath grouper, longer than a man is tall; we were close enough to it for me to count the brown and white splotches on its skin and the spiny tips of its fins. But even at some distance farther off, we were all dwarfed--me, my dolphin, even the ray and the grouper--by the hulking aspect of a gentle whale shark, waving its tail fin as it propelled itself slowly forward and away.

When the distance between the wall and the two of us was enough, I turned to see that it was no wall, but the jagged, upper end of an undersea mountain, the peak of which towered high overhead; our coming near to it was just the barest brush across a fragment of one of its outcroppings. I discovered that my dolphin had taken me that much into deeper water, up against a mass so large, and I hadn't noticed the change till now.

We veered off and made our way into a gully that, after a swim through a narrow corridor, grew into a wide canyon, the sheerness of its sides expanding before us in emergent grandeur. Here, there were many schools of different types of fish, each of them spurting away as we neared. As we proceeded, ledges and overhanging underwater flora served as a canopy over our heads, blocking the thinning light and darkening the surroundings further.

But I was no longer afraid. My fear had vanished, replaced by all the wonder that I had been shown and my complete trust in my dolphin. It turned its head to look sideways at me, nodding its head in assurance; I understood and tightened my grip.

My dolphin banked sharply and plummeted into a fissure in the gorge, leaving the light behind us until, once more, blindness. With my eyes useless, my ears thrilled to the water's throbbing beats, which grew in volume the deeper we went.

Just when I was prepared to revel in this bliss forever, it ended, all too abruptly. Pain erupted in my chest as if a hammer swung in full force had struck me there. I released my dolphin as unpleasant, staccato flashes assailed my brain. My body crumpled into itself; I could not endure the intensity. I surrendered, and gave myself up for lost.



LATER, WHEN I was back on board, my father said that I had disappeared for a good fifteen minutes. The freak wave had lifted the boat up almost thirty feet, startling both him and the boatman into losing their legs. When the sea leveled and they looked over the edge, I was nowhere in sight. They scoured the area but couldn't find me.

"Then the dolphins came back," Dad said. He clutched my hands tightly as he spoke.

"I think they had also been taken when the wave hit. We couldn't find any sign of them either until the boatman heard their chirping and splashing some thirty feet away from where we were anchored. You were on your back, and they were pushing you toward us. We hauled you in. You were so pale, and you weren't breathing. I thought you were dead. I squeezed your stomach until you coughed up a bucket's worth of seawater. We helped you force it all out. I never thought I'd see the day where I'd be happy to hear you choking. Lucky, lucky, lucky. For someone who was under as long as you were, you're none the worse for wear. Still, let's ask a doctor on the island to look you over, just to be sure.

"I made a mistake, Cara. I don't care how strong a swimmer you are. Next time, life vests. No arguments, okay?"

He told me all this over the roar of the diesel engine as the boat straddled the island's coastline and headed back to the resort. I listened quietly to his voice from where I rested near the prow, a towel draped over my shoulders, hugging myself and gazing out over the water. A smile broke out and spread across my face when I caught sight of the dolphins racing alongside our vessel, matching our speed, a sleek escort of glistening silver shapes. My father embraced me from behind and we watched them together. I'd like to think they were making sure I reached land safely before they made their goodbyes.

To be honest, I can't remember any of what my dad recounted to me, not even of how I got back on the boat. But I do recall the exact moment when I realized where I was, and what brought me back to him completely.

After the last of the seawater had been expunged from my system and my dry panting diminished into normal breaths, Dad pulled me to his chest and enclosed me in his arms, calling me, murmuring my name over and over: Cara, Cara. His heartbeat, thudding rapidly in my ears, startled me into full wakefulness. With the beats beneath the waves still clear in my mind, both sets of sounds reverberated so differently in so many ways--the first, fast, where the second was steady; the former, light and high-toned where the latter resonated full and rich--yet were also so very much alike where it counts the most.

W i l d w a t e r

Crystal Koo

MY NAME IS Huuri Imh. The ladies and gentlemen of the Court may have previously noted the gills around my neck, as I am of pure Sjenese descent from the country of Kuz.

Sjene is a poor, conservative fishing village at the northeastern tip of Kuz. Many patrims live in the flatlands and find their survival in the sea, sending boats of their catch three times a week to the markets in the Kuz mainland in the far south. But my patrim lived on the hills of Yamera, where the orinu breed in the wildwaters. The people of Yamera dove into the wildwaters and caught the orinu for their hides. The orinu have been in Sjene before any of our race; it was the bodies of these reptiles that carved out the three hundred underground channels of the Sjene wildwater complex, the source of our wells. A diver who can wrestle with the orinu and stab its heart without losing his or her life is held in high regard.

Few patrims live in Yamera and there are no schools in Sjene. Itinerant scholars from the mainland used to come to Sjene to watch the orinu and the divers, and in return they taught the children how to read and write in Kuzan. Then the scholars stopped coming some years before I was born. The last scholar to come, I was told, had put forth the opinion that we should find means of livelihood other than the orinu trade because of the dangers it posed on anyone who handled the reptiles.

In my younger years, the children of Yamera learned the orinu trade from the members of our patrim who brought the orinu home to slit its belly and remove the skin from the carcass. The cured hide was sent to the tanning houses in the mainland, while

the liver, which produces its own deadly toxin, was carved away and the flesh cleaned of any trace of the poison before being sold in the mainland as meat. Steam was carefully passed through the liver, turning the toxin into a harmless gas, before the liver was thrown into the wastes piled in front of every hut.

I call the patrimis plying the orinu trade “they,” though I come from one of them. The people of Sjene, especially of Yamera, are stubborn in their traditions. They are barnacled to their old ways and trust only in the catching of sea life, refusing to farm them because they find it unnatural. The people of Yamera do not have the luxury nor the minds to find other means of livelihood; my father, my mother, and my elder brother faced the orinu everyday. But I was set aside because my father had greater hopes for me. He wanted to me to leave Sjene, to leave Kuz, and to eventually find myself surrounded by the wealth of Otuja. Although everyone in Sjene knew that the only way to out of the island was an education, only my father dared to want it for his son.

My patrim worked their lives for me; my elder brother Yeherou’s generous spirit prevented him from becoming jealous. I watched with other children how our elders scraped the flesh off from the inner side of the skin of the orinu with their hands, soaked the skin in brine, and let it hang in thick smoke. But when the elders called the children to try skinning, my father took me into the house and gave me old books left behind by the wandering scholars of his childhood. He vowed that I would never have to touch wildwater nor blood.

Contrary to what others may think is the rationale behind my present situation, I was never ill-treated by my peers for not knowing how to use my gills. I was never ridiculed during my adolescence for my incapability to wrestle even with a young orinu. The adults naturally disapproved of my upbringing, but what they might have said to their children seemed to have been countered by the children’s own quiet acceptance of me, which I suspect came from the elders’ own talk of the scholars. While the

villagers condemned the liberalities that the scholars had brought, there was still a tone of reverence that was always preserved for the mainland.

It is difficult to say what I myself thought of the arrangement at that time. I did not crave matches with the orinu. Without this desire, I could not have compared with a life I had never lived. Years passed and I became a young man with unused gills. One day my father gave me every coin he had kept aside for me, as well as the name of a tanner at the docks in the Kuz mainland who received imports from Sjene everyday. I can easily bring to recollection the boat ride I had with the Sjene fisherfolk on their way to the mainland, a journey that took a day over rough sea. I had been deathly afraid of drowning.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Court, I write this confession to you in fluent, standard Otujan. When I arrived at the Kuz docks eleven years ago, I could only speak the Sjene dialect and broken Kuzan. I found the tanner, and out of the greatness of his heart, he pointed out to me a small academy and a cheap inn. I was accepted into the academy because of its interest in my gills. The irony, ladies and gentlemen of the Court! For what other good could come out of Sjene? When the other students wanted to see me breathe underwater, I sank my head into the lake and held my breath. I didn't dare open my gills; I was afraid that I would be overwhelmed by the flow of water through passages never used and that the shock might kill me. Sjenese lungs made me able to hold breath for more than ten minutes, and for them this was already proof of breathing. I studied linguistics in the academy and made Otujan my primary language. I worked as an errand-boy at the docks at night and chance made it that I never had to descend underwater.

When I finished my schooling, it was my gills again that brought me here to Otuja to study law in the scholarium. The scholarium wanted me to compete in the annual water-sport festival of Otuja under its banner. When I tore open the letter in my apartment

in Kuz, I thought of how other Sjenese would have wanted such an opportunity and would have deserved it! I broke into laughter that was not far from crying. But who was to say that any other Sjenese who had not sacrificed his gills and whose patrim had not sacrificed themselves could have come this far? A week later, I boarded my first ship to the nation of Otuja.

By night I taught myself how to swim and by day I attended the scholarium's swimming matches. I never used my gills; doing otherwise would have been death for me. Ten minutes under water was more than enough in Otuja and I wiggled my gills for their satisfaction. I studied with all my might and became a Master. When I left the scholarium, I had my gills stitched closed. I found work in a guild and met a pleasant Otujan girl. I told her I was from the Kuz mainland and that the scars around my neck came from a childhood accident; she asked no more questions and married me. By civil law, I was made a citizen of Otuja, the final reward for my patrim's labor.

So should it come as a surprise that I would want to return to Sjene for a visit? Is it not right that I would return to my home as the first Sjenese scholar? I left for Kuz and found a small boat to Sjene. When the villagers saw what I had done to my gills, they shrieked and wailed, tearing off my clothes. I escaped to the hills of Yamera. Those I had once looked upon as elders flung clods at me. My peers, with families of their own, herded their children away from my sight.

The people were hollow-cheeked and their faces gray. I learned from those kind enough to whisper to me that the orinu trade had been outlawed in Kuz in fear of its toxins and that the skins and the meat of the reptile had been banned from all marketplaces. The Yamera patrim had been moving to the flatlands to become fisherfolk but now there were disputes over ancestral territories at the beaches. My patrim had refused to move down. My mother had died a year ago; my father had not been far behind and had passed away two days before my return.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Court! How shall I describe my brother Yeherou when I found him? How shall I put misery into words for those who are born too fortunate to understand? Yeherou had tended my parents and cradled them till their last breaths. My brother was a sturdy man with strong wrists. In secret he dove into the wildwaters and killed orinu to sell their skin and meat to pirates. Yeherou had performed the Orinu Dance after our mother's death.

Why do I insist on writing the Sjenese patrim instead of the Otujan family? Because there is no word in Otujan that can convey the depth of patrim, its connotation of sacrifice until death. The Orinu Dance is a ritual performed by the son of a deceased parent, in which he wrestles with an orinu underwater and kills it with only his bare hands. The presentation of the dead orinu during the burial shows how the extent of the son's grief gives him strength capable of such violence.

Yeherou would dance again for our father. But the sight of the villagers of Sjene had moved me, and I wanted to proclaim my own grief at the death of my father, the one who had made me a scholar. I remembered how I had been valued for my unused gills in the Kuz mainland and in Otuja. Here were young men and women worthy of being saved from starvation in the same way! They had to go to the mainland, all of them. And then they could come to Otuja.

But I, the prodigal, had to first win their hearts. They would only be barnacled to the old ways of Sjene, the only ways of Sjene. I would have to perform the Orinu Dance to show sincerity and traditional valor; I would risk death for my patrim's name and my people. Yeherou called me a fool. How could I kill an orinu with my bare hands with my gills and my inexperience with the wildwater? Day and night, I persisted in telling him that such an extraordinary feat would stir the hearts of the Sjenese, until he recognized my father's resolve in me and yielded. He broke open the stitches on my gills and held my hand as I bled. He brought

me to the wildwaters so I could learn to wrestle. When we first went underwater I could not open my gills; I held my breath. It was the first time I was in the wildwaters and I could not control my trembling. The currents pulled me in all directions and I could only clutch on a rock in response. The waters swirled and eddied. Through the clear water I saw my brother treading the currents, walking on them as if on air, his gills opening and closing, his arms gesticulating at me to follow his example. I felt resentful at my incompetence and the sudden emotion freed my gills. The first rush of water through my brittle passages choked me and I turned cold and fainted.

Yeherou revived me on land. We tried again but I could not get through the first breath. Yeherou threw up his arms and sat by the banks as I nursed my gills. I was not to argue with him. He would perform the Orinu Dance and I was to return to my family in Otuja alone.

I realized then that my brother had only been humoring me in his own primitive way, knowing I could never use my gills. Ladies and gentlemen of the Court, do not mistake this as malicious jealousy on his part. As I had said before, my brother was the most generous man in the world. He was not at fault for being ignorant. I agreed with him and made plans together for our father's burial.

I now come to the part in which the ladies and gentlemen of the Court would have the most interest. When Yeherou left to wrestle the orinu, I went to the cellar where he was steaming the livers of the orinu he had killed. I took three livers and threw them into the wildwater nearest our home. Putting everyone to sleep was the only method I could think of that would allow me to save at least a few youths from the village and bring them to the Kuz mainland in secret. The rest is known to all.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Court, three days after this writing, I will be standing before you, my own lawyer, to plead for my case. I am responsible for the deaths in Sjene. But as everyone

had witnessed, I returned to Otuja by my own free will and gave myself to your custody. I did this to prevent foreigners who know nothing of us from bringing shame to Sjene by spreading lies across the world. I have written this honest confession not without reason. I believe in the evolved sensibilities of the people of Otuja, as much as I believe in the backwardness of Sjene and had wished to rescue my people from it. I have written the story of my life, the causes which had prompted this tragedy, and have placed my trust in your judgment. Yes, I refer to it as a tragedy because of the good that was thwarted. Death had never been my intention. It is of underestimating the lethality of the orinu, and of the love I have for my home, that I am most guilty.

But if your instincts were to move you in a way different from that which I hope, then may I ask leave to make two small requests? I am a man of the law; I am aware of the sentence that may fall upon me. I would like to ask that my wife, Eandl Imh, be given a copy of this confession. I also ask that my remains be sent back to Sjene and buried in the Yamera hills, next to the graves of my parents and my brother. Ask the people of the hills; they would know the house of Imh.

Until then, I remain

Faithfully Yours,
Huuri Imh

M o o n d o w n a n d F u g u e

Alexander Drilon

“TONIGHT I DIE, Bulan.”

Two lovers were squatting at the edge of dusk. The halfling female spat a sullen look at her beautiful god and wrapped her wings around herself as he spoke.

“Why care for the taung-araw? This rite is your tradition.”

“Because they are my people.” Her eyes were bloodshot, hungry for the silkiness of human tongue and the lazy way it stewed in her mouth after it was severed. Sixty years as a huntress for the nanay-gali, yet the singularity of it all still consumed her. She was, after all, what the townsfolk called a manananggal, which literally means ‘one who removes,’ and she reveled in the tumultuous delectability of the hunt. Never mind the thrill of strangulation, or the gargling chromaticism of the screams. It was the feel of the meat against her teeth – bittersweet betel nut and yam pudding. But those were comparisons to a lost existence, and he made no hesitation to remind her.

“Your people? You speak of a stolen life, not of this one.”

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HER EARLIEST MEMORIES were of infancy, unlike most others who remembered nothing before they were three. Warm hands slid under the fullness of her belly, pulling her into the light of a wet evening. Then there was the gentle swaying—her first dance with the moon. The delicious rhythm drove her quite mad, and she thrashed about only to find the aching nipple on her lips as she passed out into the darkness.

She learned to walk in the summer that followed, but preferred to pass the time sitting in her room. Her stout stocky limbs dangled off the side of her little mattress, each squiggly toe moving about as if her feet were playing a sonata in the dim light. She had grown the most beautiful head of hair—the kind the manangs called the color of fish fat and squid ink—and she twirled it about in languid fashion as she stared out of her bedroom window. Even then the evening had seemed so taunting. The shadows of leaves paced hungrily under the macopa and the durian. Brown shapeless figures groped the grass blades as they raced to and fro around the tree trunks. She shut her lids tightly and breathed in the thin damp breeze. The dark was her heaven, and she could sit there entranced by the tender courting sounds for hours at a time.

At the age of five, she was headstrong and given to wandering. After her lessons, she would steal past the lansones to sit in a clearing where a veil of stars could pick out her gleaming eyes. It pleased her when the birds came in swooping low over the shifting canopy in idle, wide circles. They waddled on the branches for a bit, their aching wings clipped tightly to their sides before disappearing quietly behind the mangoes. She often thought about them, wondering whether the sun seared the wings off their shoulders, or if their young flew off never wanting to be found.

“Marta!” The scream would come piercing through her solitude, and then she knew it was time to head back. Her mother was furious when she ran up to the villa doors. “Did I not tell you how dangerous it is for a little girl to run alone past those trees at night? You deserve a good whip with your father’s tsinelas. Now, come inside for prayers.”

“Yes, Inay.” Her reply was strained but polite, and she sauntered in reluctantly, taking her place at the altar. The Black Virgin towered over her with arms outstretched in the hazy conflagration of shifting candlelight, and the chanting began. She gazed up into its marble eyes and prayed against hope that it would be over before her tiny knees turned purple.

“They fear us more than their statues, you know.” The moon god interrupted her reverie. “They flounder in the promise of darkness like bala fish thrown into a bangka. Why should you be sacrificed for their sake?”

“You cannot hope to understand, Bulan.” His words were a firmament that kept the waters from flooding the earth, and gave the winged serpents dominion over the rain, but now they scattered her thoughts, and her mind spiraled away. “I do this for no one.”

“Then what principle does this serve? You speak of your losses, my child. Who is to speak of mine?” Bulan was insistent, and he pressed down hard on the ground, snapping roots where they lay in their graves. The earth groaned with the weight, but her figure remained unmoving, and he recalled the night they had first met.

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IT WAS A few hours before daybreak when he caught her, a vision gaunt and lithe pressing steadily through the mist. Had she not been turned as a child, her beauty would have been hailed as ‘preciosa’ by the townspeople. Yet the sight of her now, a winged torso whose lower half seemed mercilessly torn off below the navel, easily threw the bravest of the farmers into a fit of panic as she flew over the rice fields. Her face was satiated—acute with the smear of fresh blood on her throat; and yet her chest seemed to pound with a strangeness that he not seen in her kind. It sat over her like an elusive, smoldering hollowness that, for all his power, he could not understand.

The creatures that were her predecessors were mindless predators, ripping flesh off those who strayed into the barren fields and carrying it back to the waters of the ilog where her mistresses waited in congregation. At the sight of their meal, the nanay-gali would open their jaws wide, snapping like grotesque

hatchlings in a nest as the bleeding manna dropped steadily from the heavens. The halfling then flew off to her lair, squealing with the rapture of the kill on her palate. Her kind never stole further into the night, especially not in the way this one did—lost to the processes of what seemed to be a conscience.

He had shown himself to her the following evening in a form that seemed almost human. A warm brilliance pulsed from his skin as he moved towards her amidst pockets of dead grass and makahiya that bowed in his presence. In the distance, the santelmo filtered lightly over the tips of the mountains in muted synergy with his radiance. She paused in mid-air as he approached, studying his glowing figure with eyes that showed neither concern nor trepidation, but a sense of wondrous disbelief—the consequence of which was his surprise.

“You stare as if you know me,” he said.

“But I do,” she replied, for she realized that she always had. “You are the moon.”

In time, their meetings turned to ritual. Each evening, she looked up as the great orb changed its face slowly from full circle to darkness, and then she knew he had cloaked himself to descend to the earth. At times he would assume the form of a great eagle as they flew over the jagged shoulders of the Apo, or a fine young lobo as they grazed the desiccated palayan fields. The night he took her to the graveyard, however, he looked like a man.

She found him sitting on a panchon then, whistling in the place where the people of the barrios buried their dead. The half-light was unruly, and it bit through the indifferent chill as the moon god rose like a specter in the dim.

Bulan eyed her as she approached, allowing the silence to fondle her before he motioned to the ground. “Look here,” he said.

A dirty stone protruded at an odd angle out of the caking mud as if it had been knocked out of place by a large animal. A naked infant with wings was carved onto its surface. She recognized the figure from her childhood prayer books as one of the anghelitas

that hovered over the Black Virgin as the holy mother ascended into the heavens. It knelt with its hands clasped tightly to its chest and its head cocked to the side, and it stared unwaveringly at something that had been chiseled into the rock:

MARTA
Post Tenebras Lux

The halfling turned away. She wanted to scream. The fissures on her lips began to drip thick, turbid spit, and the rows of vaults, tombs, and stony images yielded to arousal. Marble eyes turned opaque stares in her direction; crosses shifted in the twilight.

“Do you not recognize it?”

She brushed him off. “How did you find this?” Her hysteria was escalating, rising to the sound of a thousand questions that drove her to deafness. Then there was silence, and a lingering nothingness that shrieked and screeched in her ear.

“You had a name.” He floated tenuously over the dirty gravestone as he moved beside her. She had called him by name the first day they met, but till this moment had kept hers from him. “Why have you never chosen to tell me?”

No answer hung there to meet the moon god’s question – only an empty space where her thoughts seemed to jostle with each other – a sanctuary where he could not reach her.

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BUT THE TIMES when the moon god might have stretched out to bridge the beyond had well passed. Now he was sitting beside her in the place that was theirs, and no matter how hard he fought, the void continued to edge insidiously between them, engorged with the anguish of memories he was denied. It seemed to captivate her, holding her reverent despite the slew of dizzy anguish creeping through her entrails; and yet the hour of the

ritual was drawing dangerously close. Bulan hurried to address her.

“You are a fool to do this, child.”

His words roused her. “I am no child!” How could he have thought so little of her all this time? She was his companion. Had he not come to think so as well?

“You and the taung-araw. You are no different from the impregnable jackfruit. You grow ripe with each thrust of the immodest winds, distending with a mass you cannot hope to carry.” He drummed his annoyance on his chin. “But the crippled god Lupa pulls on you, and one day you find yourself plummeting towards the filth, racing towards an inevitable splat with your own shadow.”

“These words change nothing. I am to leave this world tonight.”

“Yet yours will not be the only death on your hands. Without you, your mistresses will not survive.” The halfling was a scavenger for the nanay-gali, and he knew that the old women would starve in her absence. But his words only seemed to strengthen her resolve.

“Do they not deserve to die for what they have done?”

“I speak of this because I fear...”

“You fear my loss!” She had cut him off, and a lull fell upon the night.

Mist began to swirl in the moon god’s eyes. The brittle twines of the Kapalaran, the spinners of fate, had led him to this one moment, and he found himself helpless and without a reply. Clouds edged by at a funeral’s pace, leaving meadows of grey cotton wisps in the turtle-colored sky.

“We are a cursed people, Bulan! Cursed by forces beyond our control. Have you forgotten this as well?” The halfling remembered his story with unparalleled clarity...

She prodded him often in the past, asking what sort of fabric he made the moonshine out of, or how the great mountains came

to exist. In turn, he acquainted her with the tales of the land he had known: of how the Higante dominated the plains before the early god Bathala threw them into the steaming furnaces of the Mayon, the remainder of them taking to the forests as the pipe-smoking Kapre giants. He told her of the Tikbalang, the first race of men-horses, and how they trudged to their deaths in the boiling mud springs of the north. He bragged of his relationship with the maiden, Makiling, and how, after she partook of the forbidden fruit, he preserved her naked figure in living rock where he would lay next to her at the end of his days.

They liked to wander through the kawayan as they talked, bending the green as they roused the lizards with their banter; and although he refused to show it, her questions amused him thoroughly. In fact, their conversations had gone on for so long that he had learned to anticipate when she would next begin to press him.

That one evening she had asked about the nanay-gali, however, had taken him by surprise. He stood without answering at first, his thoughts welling up like a smoky haze as they spread over the vastness that was his. Then, he drew himself together, collecting the fragments into a tiny pool at the center of his soul as he began to speak:

“The nanay-gali were born in the days before this land was broken into pieces. The old women lived in privilege for centuries by the river where the waters offered up fish to their baskets and carried their dead off into the sea. They were, however, like all who belong to the taung-araw, a discontent people.”

The halfling grew pale. His words awakened a deep, vicarious hurt inside of her. She wanted to open her mouth, but resisted the urge instead.

“Much like you once were,” he said, as if he understood what she meant to ask. “They sat in the daytime watching the manaul or the adarna soar into the clouds, wondering why they could not be one with the gods the way these creatures were. In time,

their seamstresses took to fashioning wings out of the nipa, yet the fabrications only took them several feet off the ground despite the most potent of levitation spells.”

“One day, the youngest of them discovered something huge caught in the fish traps at the deep end of the river. The creature was incredibly long and stout. Its body was covered by large velvet scales that danced all the way from its forelegs to its back where they crept onto an enormous set of leathery wings. The serpent lashed about, attempting to shake itself from a tangle of weeds and catgut that had snagged the antlers on its moldy skull. The find intrigued the young virgin, and she ran proudly back into the village to tell her elders.”

“News of the discovery spread quickly, and the women ran to the banks barefoot, stepping through carabao dung and shouting at the prospect of having caught a water dragon in the river. They grabbed hastily at the net and heaved the beast out onto the moist loam. The creature was young, and could barely have been a century old, but they took to it with bolos, splashing its purple blood onto the riverbank as they butchered the beast in an attempt to sever its wings.”

“They cackled when they had finished, dumping the remains into the water and hoisting the tent-like appendages over their shoulders as they scampered back into their houses. There the seamstresses gathered, spreading the young girl who had found the dragon on her back. They lit red candles and crouched low as they began to sew the wings onto her flesh, holding down the screaming girl as they did. When they were done, they pushed her into the sunlight, hissing for her to fly.”

Bulan shifted his weight and clasped his hands tightly. He wanted desperately to stop, as if the silence would somehow offer a means of rescuing her, but her eyes betrayed her insistence, and he continued on. “The girl obeyed, flapping her wings even as the blood trickled down her spine, but the wings only took her as high as the apex of the guava before she fell back onto the nearest

hut. Furious at their failure, the women dragged the girl out into the swine pens, cussing at her for being so fat.”

“Then they took their bolos again, this time to dismember her lower half so that she would be light enough to rise even higher. When finally she did, the women cried out in triumph, wailing at the chance to take like gods into the skies.”

His tone grew strained, and he hesitated, for he knew what followed would be a death song. “I had come of age in that time. The god Bathala took favor on me and fastened my light against the night sky. I was tasked to watch over his darkness, and I gazed over the world with the judgment of my youth.”

“It was through such power that I had observed the carnage of the nanay-gali. I looked down on the butchery with angry eyes, for the winged serpents were loyal creatures that served me and my brothers. We rallied together, Arauw and Lupa at my side, and upturned the river in our rage. The waters dashed the women against each other, throwing their skirts over their faces and splashing mud between their heavy thighs.”

“We cursed them that night.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “For the thievery of flight, they were transformed into thieves of the flesh – condemned to prey off the taung-araw for their sustenance for the rest of what became inhuman lives.”

The halfling grew limp, her body surrendering to violent shivers in the cold air.

“The virgin herself could not be saved, even as the stolen dragon wings remained beating on her back. She was, after all, a spawn of the nanay-gali, and she stayed bound to the women by a force even the gods could not break, scavenging flesh for the old women until her own body gave way, at which point she transferred the beast’s essence to a new vessel. The cycle remains unbroken to this day.” His words trailed off into an abrupt grumbling as a monsoon crept determinedly above them; but the moon god’s story had already driven the halfling to delirium, and she took off in flight, leaving him in the charged clatter of the tempest.

She was climbing just below the clouds in a matter of seconds. Bulan's words echoing in her head... *a force even the gods could not break*. Rain began to fall on her face in large corpulent drops as the downpour swathed her bare breasts. The great mountain, Apo, stretched out dangerously before her. Its broad cliffs fell gracefully to its sides in dangerously clever, wide curves. Large deciduous growths projected from its torso like tiny bristles quivering in the storm, threatening to skewer her should she veer close. She told herself she was free—free as the incessant flapping that drove her past the perilous slopes. If she thought long and hard enough, she might have convinced herself it was true. But all that remained in her head was a compulsion—a compulsion steadily nursed from the day of her turning.

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SHE WAS TO enroll in a proper school the day after they took her. Her afternoons with the venerably toothless town prayle and his monotonous account of The Annunciation, and Maria, the Birhen, were mercifully over, and she was down on her knees playing with ants in the yard. The red insects were tiny but ravenous, and they tore at each other like horned war beetles on the broken twigs she held up in the air. She imagined thick poison dripping from their prickly legs as they played out the silent duel. Dusk was swaggering around her figure by the time her mother found her.

“It is getting dark, anak. You must come inside. Must I remind you everyday? The enkantos will have you for dinner, aba! There is a full moon tonight.”

But the full moon was something she could not quite resist. Should she obey, she would submit to her father's scolding, a bowl of mongo leaves, and the tireless novenas that snaked at the pace of the kohol through her mothers' hands. Prayers rose up from the villa doors like warnings on the fog, and at that moment, she decided she would remain a child no longer.

“Leave me alone, Inay!” Tears streamed down her soiled features in stout, gem-like globs. She pulled up her skirt and began to run, bounding away as fast as her precocious little grown-up feet could take her, even as Inay’s pleading voice faded into the rustling of leaves. When her breath finally gave way, she realized she was exhausted, and she curled down on the cogon and fell asleep.

When she awoke, she was in the air, drifting swiftly past the stars with a desperation exceeded only by her fear. At first, she thought she was dreaming, the way she dreamt of the tall payasos of the town fiestas, or of swimming in basins of dark green sago; but then she looked up to find herself in the shadow of a mangled body, and horrible black wings, and she screamed. The creature seemed almost human, but frightfully cut in half. Black locks swept past squalid features – a crooked nose stump cradled squarely between intense black eyes, and thin dusky lips that arched down in a violent pout. Brutish arms held her sternly against the rushing breeze, and no matter how she squirmed, she could not wrench herself.

The banks of the river crept slowly toward them, growing larger and larger until she found herself shoved into its raging waters by her captor. The surge was indomitable, and her hair caught hastily in the murky current as she gagged on the froth. Through the tangle she stared up at the halfling holding her little head under the water’s surface in fierce baptism.

All around them sat the old women, singing and wailing with an anticipation just as fierce, waiting for the ritual to reach its conclusion – the death of a matron and the birth of a new savior. She could hear the chanting from beneath the surface like a dull and gentle caress. The cacophony numbed her, stroking her veins even as the silt poured steadily into her chest.

Then she felt it, much like an enormous roar that erupted within her womb. The beast wrenched itself from the halfling above the water, the draconic concentrate filtering downward toward her until it punctured her navel. It climbed into her loins at first,

severing her lower torso as it did. The amputation fell lifelessly toward the river bottom, and she stared wide-eyed at her legs as the fish swarmed around them, nipping at the frayed flesh.

The essence then squirmed upward, clawing frantically toward her arching back, raking decidedly at her skin till she felt a bursting from her spine—two grotesque wings twisting to the rhythm of the moonlight like beans sprouting ferociously in the midday sun. They fought against the torrent, pushing, straining, and finally tenting into enormous new appendages. *Do not worry. It was whispering in her ear. The old vessel must pass away, but I have taken you as my own. You are reborn, little one. You are blessed.* The winged animal grew calm as it settled in the curve of her flesh, and she woke to the perching of a new duality. Half woman. Half creature. She thrashed about as the water boiled up around her, and her life rippled away in dark muddy circles.

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THE MEMORY OF the pain tugged at the halfling's senses, and soon the horror of her visions began to fade. She was back on the hill now. Back with the moon god. Back where she realized she could no longer keep the beast at bay. The brute was relentless, its dragon limbs extending large expansive outlines that loomed over her in the twilight, goading out her own shadow until what marked the ground was all fury and all menace. The creature wailed in her bosom, pleading for the new vessel she would provide it with. *This is your birthright. Find a child, it begged. Her innocence shall replenish you, and you shall conceive, immaculate.* Its thirst was a ravenous gluttony that stretched out over generations without deceleration; the winged serpent—a voracious, living vigor that would not be quenched. She gave the moon god her last look as her sorrow sank into her breasts. “My mind cannot be changed, Bulan.” The words poured out like a requiem. “It is time.”

Bulan rose up, struggling hard against the sudden breaking in his throat. His luminescence was virile, and it bathed her with the color of maize as he took her features in. In his lifetime he had seen young kapitans sold off to war, barrios razed to the ground, and women traded into slavery. He had taken the niños in their sleep and watched their fathers mourn in the moonlight. There would be no bargains. "Do as you wish," he said. He was alone now, as he realized he had always been, and the night recaptured him in its embrace.

Already the old women were gathering at the river, their long toenails tilling furrows through the angry mud. Trees lashed at them, slapping long processes of bramble against their backs and shins. Even the winds huffed at their dirty hair and threw mire into their faces. The entire forest seemed to rise up in a great bawling, spitting out skeletons and the empty nests of the kalapati. But the nanay-gali trudged forward, their voices rising up in an unassailable reverberation against the holocaust.

She could hear them, beckoning for her to come as they always did. Their voices ebbed through her in ruddy waves, calling her forth to anoint their savior, stirring the creature within her as it rocked in its amnion.

The great orb itself was molten and high in the heavens, soaking her purple and green in the escalating breeze. It climbed higher as she watched, gaining a distance that wiped away all understanding and all familiarity. She steeled herself and bore down on her being as she realized what she had to do.

She called on the beast, and it took her into the air.

The old women looked up in alarm. She was coming, speeding towards them with an alacrity that tainted the winds. They understood. The halfling's betrayal loitered over them like a fetid stench, and they snorted loudly, throwing their heads back as they stomped on the earth. They began to guffaw in unison, lifting up a sordid protest for the child she was not carrying.

The beast itself grew perturbed, and the creature grunted wildly. It laced her bile with putrid urine and blew smoke into her windpipe. Unseen talons punctured innards. Veiled nares sprouted daggers of fire. The halfling choked in the icy darkness, but hurried against the winds despite these tortures. She was close now, and her entire body began to vibrate, as if in resonance to the orchestrated malady. The river sped towards her in a frightening blur as her senses gave way, and she caught herself mumbling strange utterances.

To you do we send up our sighs... O banished children of Eve...

The words were foreign, and she stammered them out in the swirling confusion. The creature fought within her like a demented child, but she cursed it, and it drove her forward. Night pressed inward in colors of crimson and lurching teal, and soon she found herself at the banks of the ilog.

Weeping in this valley of tears...

She paused at first, gazing on her mistresses as they tottered forward, hemming her in with their shrieks. Proptosed eyes burned through her with a mangled ogling. They were squealing for her sins, squealing as the incessant throbbing barked through her temples.

And after this our exile...

She looked down at the torrent, and plunged into its waters.

•

THE FLUID WAS cold and familiar as it surged into her gaping mouth. It engaged her as she gagged, and for a moment, she forgot she was not drinking blood. She was drunk, intoxicated by the waxing of her approaching death. Below the surface, she could hear the old women offering up their incantations in a mad, driving tempo. The churning of the current grew to a great fullness in her ear and yet she could still hear herself, a tintured sanctity above the deluge.

That we may be made worthy of the promises...

Her spirit escaped in a shimmering sliver that streamed outward from the tips of her eyelids, and the beast snarled horribly in the distillation. Its velvet dragon wings crumpled against their weight as the tumorous scaffolding capitulated. But the ceremony held no audience. The halfling was absent, unreachable, attending to a new voice the flavor of bittersweet betel nut and yam pudding in her ear...

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"MARTA, WHAT DO you have there?"

"It's just drawings, mama!" She covered them in haste, sweeping her long black hair quickly over the pages. Her tiny head landed with a plop on the floor.

•

LOOKING DOWN, SHE could see that same head, pale and lifeless as it swayed under the water. Her limp carcass bobbed to a steady ictus as the huge wings that adorned it caught broken in the current.

•

"PLEASE, ANAK, MAMA just wants to see. Now move over and have some suman." Marta propped herself up on her elbows, and with a clumsy flip she turned herself over on her back.

"There you go!" Her mother could see Marta's scribbles — bright silver and brown crayon wax of what looked like a little figure gliding through a sea of dark circular strokes.

•

SHE WAS BACK in the air, soaring upward against the chaos. The nanay-gali wailed in the moonlight. They crouched low over the water, eyes dripping films of fat salty tears onto the surface. The serpent itself seemed to flail about in a garish spectacle as it returned to the seminal undertow. It cried out in the black, bleeding burble as it reared its head and receded into the foam.

•

“YOU KNOW WHAT she is, Inay.” Marta teased.

“I know,” her mother said with a warm smile as she looked down at the small piece of paper. “Why is she flying in the dark?”

“So no one can see her.” Marta paused, as if what she was going to say was an enormity she could not give up. “She likes to hide.”

•

SHE FOUND HERSELF ascending quickly into the heavens, climbing just below the clouds as she always did. The barrio loomed steadily into view beyond the forest. Hints of activity emerged from the dark. Farmers yawned in the moonlight. Vendors collected their trays of roasted beans.

•

“BUT WHO IS she hiding from?”

Marta’s lips curled up in a smile. “You, Inay!” She fell down on the cold narra in fits of laughter. Her mother snorted mischievously as she grabbed Marta’s sides. “Stop tickling, mama, please! Stop!”

Their laughter fell apart as Inay drew Marta into her arms. She began to hum. It was a slow sad song of warning—of bamboo breaking, and children falling from coco trees.

•

THE LULLABY ECHOED in her ears as she took to the air pristine. She was flying faster now, faster than wings, or thoughts, or forgotten beasts could carry her. Her memories flayed away like coconut husks as she sped amidst circles as black as fish fat and squid ink, straight into the outstretched arms of the moon.

The Maiden's Song

Kate Aton-Osias

THE FIRST TIME Pedro saw her, she was out in the fields gathering palay.

That was not truly the first time he saw her, of course. There were other days—other hot, humid days—when he had seen her, tending to the rice beds under an unforgiving sun. Why, just that morning he most probably had seen her, bending, gathering, shifting (bending, gathering, shifting) in the tedium of harvest, along with all the other dark-skinned women of the barrio.

But for reasons known only to the gods and destiny and love—oh, most certainly, love!—it was only on that day, at that hour, at that very minute, that Pedro really, truly saw her. And with the prophetic certainty that few men were blessed with (although which, mysteriously, seemed to be a common enough trait in Pedro's family), Pedro knew his heart was no longer his.

Pedro was in love.

A period of courting ensued. As was the norm, the village elders kept a vigilant watch as Pedro submitted himself to the rigors of courtship. No one ever suspected that there would be anything less than a positive outcome for the efforts Pedro expended. It had long been the tradition that men wooed the women with the completion of various mundane tasks, the accumulation of which was considered a wondrous feat worthy of their intended's lifelong affection. It was the way things were done in the barrio and no one, in the village's remembered history, had found reason to challenge the convention.

But though Pedro had persevered for sixty long days—bringing water from the well every morning, chopping wood in the afternoon, singing old kundimans by her window at night—the maiden refused to accept his suit. It was not that the maiden was being coy, although this certainly was what everybody concluded, even her own embarrassed family. The truth of the matter was that the maiden herself did not know whether she did want to spend the rest of her life with Pedro. Unlike him, who, prior to one pivotal moment, had only seen her in conjunction with the rest of the scenery, she, on the other hand, had always seen him—singing to his carabao, ploughing the fields, muttering to the sun—and found him, simply put, unremarkable. But she knew what was expected of her, and, being practical in nature, compromised: she would wait it out, hoping against hope that either he did something marvelous, or he would grow tired with the over-extended courtship.

Another thirty days followed as Pedro attempted to find his way to the maiden's heart through wood, and water, and saccharine love songs. By the ninety-first day, Pedro's family voiced their own doubts about Pedro's time-consuming quest. But Pedro refused to be dissuaded. His heart, once lost, could not be redeemed. It was the way of some men. Pedro had no space, no matter how small, to nurture affections for another woman. It was only a matter of time, he said, a matter of seconds, compounded into minutes, compounded into days, compounded into months, but still, just a matter of time before the maiden conceded her heart.

And so another thirty days passed, and then another, and another. From well to forest to window (well to forest to window), Pedro pursued the maiden with steadfast determination. Only on cold, stormy nights, when no one could hear him nor witness his tears, would he allow himself the privilege of venting out his frustrations. On those nights he would weep and shout and scream to the cold winds. Why, he would ask, why? And the gods would howl with him, as if they too regretted that he was destined to fall in love with such an impossible woman.

Eventually, the storms would end and Pedro would remember the challenge in her eyes, the cadence of her voice, the scent of sweat and earth and sampaguita that was uniquely hers. Then, tired and spent but still oh so in love, Pedro would return home, the frustrated, impatient, and almost overwhelmingly despondent beast within him once again calmed by the memories of his obsession. He'd wait forever, if he needed to, he would promise himself over and over again. Then, satisfied with his declaration of loyalty and love, Pedro would fall into a deep sleep, chasing a certain dark-skinned woman in his dreams.

Forever turned out to be one year.

By all accounts, the three hundred and sixty-sixth day was just like any ordinary day. The men went about their business with their carabaos, the women with the harvesting of palay. But similar to the seemingly ordinary day when Pedro's entire life changed when his eyes settled upon one unsuspecting maiden, the three hundred and sixty-sixth day would also prove to be a defining moment for Pedro. And it all began when Pedro was overcome with a dangerous kind of delirium.

It was a delirium brought about by obsession, by a year of continuous servitude, and of course passion; an explosive, unbridled, savage passion that had been stoked with every glance, every sound, every movement the maiden had made, and had been pushed back again and again and again by the need of to retain a veneer of propriety. But who defined propriety? Pedro asked himself. Who? Did he not deserve recompense for all the effort he had exerted? Had he not been the perfect gentleman, the perfect suitor, this entire time? Was he not entitled to some reward for his devotion, unmatched in the barrio's relatively long history?

The treacherous questions plagued Pedro as he led his carabao through the mud from one end of the field to another. Perhaps it was the scorching sun, or the hypnotic movement of man and beast against the mud, or perhaps there was no reason at all

other than that Pedro had finally lost his patience. But a plan was formulated in Pedro's mind. It was a crazy plan, a plan that would never even have occurred to Pedro just a year before. It was also a simple plan, so simple that it couldn't possibly work. Or could it? And if it did—oh, if it did! Pedro shivered underneath the glaring heat.

With delicious possibilities roiling in his head, Pedro continued on with his day. Just as the sun was about to set, he made his way to the maiden's house, carrying the wood he had chopped for her family. After the usual chitchat, Pedro set about to serenading his beloved. But this time, instead of singing to her about lovers and beauty and eternity, he began to hum an old song, so old that it had lost all its words to time.

It was part of Pedro's inheritance from his grandfather. Ancient by the time Pedro came along, the then-patriarch of Pedro's family had doted on his only grandson. From a young age, Pedro was taught the way of fields, of animals, and of ageless strings of notes and harmonies that held the power of the barrio's secret history. Pedro never quite believed his grandfather's claims of the ancient melodies' magical properties, but he had conceded that the songs had, at various times, proven useful in calling rains when there were droughts, warding off locusts, and finding errant chickens. The particular song that Pedro hummed that evening was a haunting melody he had often used to calm animals during bouts of illness. As he sang, Pedro thought of the first time he had seen her, the first time he had heard her voice, the first time she had spoken his name; and everything that he felt began to drip and trickle and ooze until finally, the dam broke, and the entirety of all his repressed emotions flooded into a crescendo that was pure, and feral, and truthful.

The entire barrio succumbed to sleep.

Trembling, Pedro walked into the maiden's house, up the stairs, into her room, and ever so tenderly picked his beloved up from her bed. In complete silence—for not even the crickets were awake to

witness the abduction—Pedro took the maiden out of the barrio, up the mountains, and into a forgotten cave.

Then, bathed in the light of a single candle, Pedro waited.

The actual plan that Pedro had dreamed of earlier that afternoon involved a little more than just watching the maiden in her slumber. But the weight of propriety kept Pedro from indulging in even the least wicked of his fantasies. Never mind, of course, that he had held her far longer than was necessary before putting her down. Never mind that earlier that afternoon he had challenged the very definition of propriety. And never mind as well the fact that by abducting the maiden and taking her away from the barrio's prying and protective eyes, he had made a travesty of what was considered proper between two young, unmarried individuals. The gods had not granted Pedro sufficient mental acuity to analyze introspective contradictions. And even if it did occur to him, he was too close to her, too distracted by a flood of inappropriate thoughts to question his own irrationality. All he knew was that it was wrong, somewhat indecent (but not horribly so) for him to do anything but look.

Oh, but how he looked!

Pedro drank in the sight of her: the way her hair cascaded to her ears, to her shoulders, to the tips of her breasts; the way she breathed, evenly like soft rainfall; the way she would moisten her lips with her tongue, the contrast of her dark lashes against her cheeks, the elegance of her bare toes curled up against the soles of her feet. It seemed that every inch of her was made to tantalize him. And with every breath, every moment that passed that he was in her presence, a sliver of his control slipped.

He was shuddering when the maiden awoke a few short hours after her abduction.

The maiden did not know exactly what had occurred. But the maiden was known for her intelligence and in the few moments it took for her to sit up and brush the hair from her face with her hands, she was able to safely conclude three things: 1) she was no

longer in her home; 2) she was in a cold cave; 3) she had most probably been taken there by Pedro.

After getting a good look at Pedro, she dismissed the possibility that she had been rescued by him from some form of beast or monster. He was her abductor, of that she was fairly certain. But though it did surprise her to find that he had it in him to take her from her home, she was still confident that he would not do anything that would harm her. She also felt (correctly, as she would soon find out), that though it seemed she was in a precarious position, being obviously less physically capable than her captor, that she nevertheless held some sort of power that, should she decide to wield it, could bring Pedro to his knees.

And so it was that she, calmly and without a hint of fear or trepidation, asked Pedro to bring her back home.

"No!" Pedro's eyes glazed as he begged. "Please, please, let me try."

The maiden knew, even perhaps better than Pedro, what he was really asking for with his plea. She even knew how he intended to convince her to concede her affections, having put two and two together with the abduction and the intensity of his expression (though it must be said that Pedro, after having conveniently forgotten how he had indulged himself with thoughts of her in his imagination, was not entirely certain how he could accomplish the seemingly impossible feat of having the maiden concede anything, much less her affections). In truth, she had always been curious about the act of lovemaking. It was the subject of many a conversation between her and her more experienced sisters, and she had it on their authority that it was worth all the words, and more, that they had devoted to describing it.

"Please, let me try," Pedro repeated, as he reached out a hand to her, his entire being teetering on the brink of desolation, and yet—and yet, and yet—even he could sense that there was a glimmer of hope; a glimmer of hope that grew brighter with each passing moment that the maiden hesitated.

"Let me try," Pedro said one last time, as he finally gave in to the temptation and let his hand fall on top of her knee. "Please."

Perhaps it was the allure of the shadows; or perhaps it was the lingering influence of Pedro's compelling song; or perhaps it was something as mundane as the maiden's own curiosity. Pedro was not about to question whatever mercy the gods granted him. All he knew was that no dream, or fantasy, or delusion could compare to the ferocity of emotion he felt when the maiden took the candle and blew out the light.

In the dark, they made love.

It was tentative, slow, and excruciatingly gentle. Within the universe of their embrace, Pedro and the maiden explored an old language of heated flesh and surrendered moans. It was a language that countenanced no shame embedded by the realities of convention. Instead, it created small spaces and secret places where the vagaries of promise, curiosity, friendship, devotion, fervor (for love, for experience, for something undefined yet precious) could converge, thrive, and entangle into a rhapsody of intimate, unspoken words. And, in one beautiful moment, the language broke the barriers of the heavens, so that the stars collided, the gods wept, and the fates were awed into silence in the euphoric aftermath.

Afterwards, Pedro did not sleep. Instead, he indulged himself in what was proving to be a favorite pastime of his: watching the maiden. And when she awoke, he found himself smiling at her tenderly.

"Love me," Pedro said as he brushed an errant strand of hair from her face.

But the maiden simply looked away.

"Love me," Pedro said more urgently, a hint of despair creeping into his voice.

The maiden did not answer.

"Love me," Pedro whispered, no longer smiling.

And in the ensuing silence, Pedro was graced with crystal-like

clarity: the maiden could never love him. He could spend an eternity carrying water, chopping wood, singing songs and still, she would never love him. It was a painful and unchangeable truth. The realization made Pedro's eyes water, as an unbearable sadness began to settle on him like an encroaching darkness.

The maiden herself could not look at Pedro. It was an undeniable fact that she had never felt such ecstasy as she had that evening. But just as some men were granted the certainty of prophets, some women were granted irrefutable epiphanies. And it was this epiphany that she had been graced with at the peak of passionate rapture: that though her body and her mind had surrendered, her obstinate, impossible heart would not.

Oh, how the maiden wished she had the words to soften the blow of an unfair truth. But she had none and all she could do was turn away.

But this tale does not end with such sadness, for in the end, Pedro proved himself a better man by taking the truth and her silence and his battered heart without complaint. And then, as a reward from the fates that had cruelly destined him to such insurmountable love for a woman who could not return it, he was bestowed a song.

It was a song unlike any that his grandfather had taught him—a wordless melody that survivors of lost battles would have found achingly familiar. It was his song, and their song, but more importantly, it was the maiden's song; a melody that encompassed all that could not be said, all that was too painful to be spoken and the sad acceptance of all that could not be changed.

Pedro continued to sing as he led the maiden out of the cave, down the mountains, and into the barrio, his voice once again entrancing the denizens of forest and village into a deep melancholic slumber. He was still singing when he finally returned the maiden to her house, the first rays of the sun peeking out over the horizon.

"I'm sorry," the maiden said, not knowing what else she could say.

Pedro smiled, sadly but sincerely.

"I know," Pedro said.

And as she turned away from him, Pedro felt himself crumble slowly, then fade, underneath the soft gaze of dawn.

C a p t u r e

Gabriela Lee

Dragon. (pronounced: drăg'əŋ) (n) *Derived from the Greek word "drakon," which comes from a verb meaning to see, to look at, and more remotely, to watch.*

- from *Brewer's Concise Phrase and Fable, rev. ed. 2000*

A p r i l 2 0 0 8

AFTER GRADUATION, HE found himself back at the beach: the old cottage, to the cliffs and the sea and the cove. The memory of a dragon's eye moon, photographs burned in a cleansing fire, was still seared in his memory. He clambered down the rocky outcropping and walked the length of the shore, the sand between his toes an intricate, transient lacework. He made his way carefully, alone, towards the cave.

He found the creature just before the sun set across the horizon, casting brilliant rays of light across the flowing surface of the ocean. Remembering the stories of their old caretaker, he looked on with a mixture of wonder and revulsion as the last red-orange flickers of light licked the obsidian dragon scales, the folds of translucent emerald wings that grew from the back of the prostrate mound of flesh in front of him. As the last of the sunlight faded, the figure in front of him began to fade—become smaller, slipping into a form that was both achingly beautiful and strangely familiar. The entire cave smelled like a forest, newly washed by rain. Her hair

was spread over the dark surface of the rock, melding perfectly with the shadows.

A p r i l 2 0 0 5

THE FIRST TIME they made love, he traced the sinuous shape of her tattoo with careful fingers, cresting the curve of her spine. It wound from her back to her stomach, winding around her waist like the proverbial serpent, tempting him to taste a forbidden fruit. She moaned and bucked underneath him as his lips and tongue and fingers made slow, languorous love to her, playing her finely as one would an exquisite instrument. The thin sheen of sweat on their skin glistened dimly in the lamplight.

She was older than Sam, though by how many years he was never quite sure. He had seen Lydia enter the dormitory across his, and saw her jog around the university quad quite regularly, just before the bell tower chimed seven o'clock. She was a student, that much was certain, but from which college and what course, he was never able to ascertain. It was only in his summer photography class that he had gotten to know her, classmates that never quite spoke, but passed small, folded notes to each other while Professor Alcantara talked about capturing the chiaroscuro, about looking at the world through light and shadow.

Are you doing anything Friday night? she wrote once in her careful, looping handwriting.

Sam glanced briefly in her direction as he received the folded piece of paper. They were sitting at the back of the classroom, half-hidden in the darkening afternoon. It looked like it was about to rain. He couldn't read the notes on the blackboard. *No, I'm not. Why?* he asked, hurridily scribbling underneath her sentence.

Do you want to have dinner?

A clap of thunder punctuated the droning voice of the teacher. Half the girls in the class screamed in surprise. Lightning sliced

through the sky, cutting across the ominous clouds. Thunder boomed again. Rain spilled across the horizon, filling the spaces between the tree and the roof, windows and glass. Circles of water formed patterns on the maroon-tiled floor of the classroom. Shutters were hurriedly closed. Students folded their arms over their chests, makeshift warmth of skin against skin. Professor Alcantara's voice refused to rise over the crescendo of the storm.

Sure.

Later that afternoon, he brought her back to his dormitory, his umbrella heavy with water. The sleeve of her blouse, where the curved edges of the umbrella dripped rainwater, was soaked. He gave her an old sweater to wear while he set about drying her blouse in front of the electric fan, painfully aware of the fact that a woman he considered beautiful was in his room, in his bathroom changing her clothes. He rushed around the small room, setting his books in order, his sheets quickly folded, and his stack of porn videos stashed in their secret place underneath the bed. Aaron, Sam's roommate of two years, was out of town for the week on fieldwork, for which he was profoundly grateful.

Lydia came out of the tiny bathroom, her hair tousled and her eyes twinkling in amusement. "So this is what a boy's bedroom looks like." Then she stepped forward, and before Sam could say another word, had traveled the space between them. A kiss, hot as dragon's fire, brushed his lips.

Outside, the storm refused to abate.

LOCAL NEWS April 12, 2006

A FIRE NEAR the seaside town of Santa Jacinta in Batangas was reported by residents of the small seaside village last night at approximately 2:34 in the morning. A hectare of dry brush on an abandoned lot near the Ines Santita beach was said to have been

burned to the ground, reducing cogon and the pale yellow grass into ash.

J u n e 2 0 0 5

“SHE’S BEEN MISSING for over a week now,” Mitchie told Sam frantically. He was coming from the dormitory cafeteria and was crossing the lobby when he saw the slight figure of Lydia’s best friend rushing towards her.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he yelled furiously, his voice rising over the noise of the television. The group of freshmen boys watching the basketball replay quietly turned it off and slunk back to their rooms.

Mitchie burst into tears. “I was scared,” she sobbed. “I didn’t know what to do. She told me, the last time I saw her, that she wanted to escape.”

“Escape from what?” he asked, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

Mitchie couldn’t answer him, couldn’t look him in the eye, couldn’t stop crying.

M a y 2 0 0 5

THE CAMPUS, NEWLY watered with the summer rains, smelled like a universe newly born. Glistening with rainwater, leaves hung heavy from the acacia branches that lined the main thoroughfare of the university. They were walking down the sidewalk, careful with the cracks in the cement. She carried her books close to her chest. His hands were shoved inside his pockets. They were coming from class.

“So what made you want to take up photography in the first place?” she asked Sam, smiling.

“Just wanted to fill up some units so I won’t be left behind,” he said nonchalantly. “It was the only class that still had slots when I went in to sign up. Still, it’s better than Math.” He shrugged. “And you?”

“I like the idea of looking at the world through a lens,” she said, looking down, watching her step. She was conscious of the puddles, the damp slippery moss. “That you can create borders around what you see, the focusing and capturing of a moment that will never happen again.” She grinned, her face lighting up. “My mother said that I’m a watcher, not a doer. Maybe it’s because I never do anything around the house—I just watch her do the chores.”

Sam laughed. “My mom says the same thing about me.”

She slipped an arm around his. The mere whisper of her skin against the cloth of his shirt sleeve was overpowering.

FROM AN INTERVIEW
April 14, 2006

“IT SWEPT DOWN from the sky,” reported old Tatang Anding, the caretaker of the Gonzaga cottage perched just above the Ines Santita beach. “I’ve never heard of manananggal in the area, but maybe those new people from Siquijor had something to do with it. Brought the curse with them.”

“Is there anything in the old stories that said that manananggal can breathe fire?” asked the newbie reporter, painfully oblivious to the folklore and old wives’ tales.

Tatang Anding paused for a moment, his wrinkled brown nut of a face slowly knitting ideas and words together into a coherent thought. Then he slowly shook his head.

M a y 2 0 0 5

THEY WERE PARTNERS in class on the final project, model and photographer, their roles silently agreed upon without any discussion. Sam was getting used to reading her mind, anticipating Lydia's actions by her inactions. She wanted to be seen, to become a mirror for his ideas, a reflection of what he saw. He wanted to use her fascination for mythical creatures as an anchor to the images. Black and white, stark skin and shadows, the dragon tattoo framed by the lines of her body. He loved to capture the curve of her back, the shallow plains of her bones giving shape to flesh, the length and flow of her legs. She agreed to pose nude.

They scheduled it over a weekend at a deserted strip of beach in Batangas called Ines Santita, staying at a small rest house owned by Sam's family. The house overlooked a patch of white sand, built on a stone shelf sheered by rock. Shallow caves dotted the cove, just by the shore. During peak season, Sam told her during the drive, they rented to cottage out to other members of the family or to friends who wanted to get away. Right now, nobody was staying there: summer was almost over, and enrollment was only a couple of weeks away. The rains were heavier now, threatening to swallow the inland cove. It was dangerous to swim at night.

"It's a beautiful place," she said once they reached it, lying spread-eagled on the bed. "I wish I could live here forever."

The cottage itself had only one bedroom, with one bed. They quietly made the bed, tucking the covers underneath the mattress, plumping pillows. He offered to sleep on the couch in the living room. She shook her head. On the first night, Lydia watched him sleep curled up beside her, his body avoiding a narrow strip of moonlight that slipped beneath the edge of the bedroom curtain.

March 2006

IT WAS THE first time he entered her room at the dormitory. She slept alone, one of the privileged few who were given single rooms. The landlady still kept it the way after her disappearance at the request of her parents. He wondered why he never used the key before—Mitchie gave him the spare a week after her disappearance. But then again, Sam reasoned, it wasn't as if they were together anyway, right? She was just a friend, a fuck, a memory. So why did he feel as though there were claws around his heart, sharp dragon-nails digging around the fluttering muscle, thumping faster and faster.

The room smelled of Glade and old potpourri. Her bed was made, pale peach sheets patterned with scarlet tulips. Her blanket was folded at the foot of her mattress. Her laundry was folded and piled neatly at the middle of the bed. Lydia's desk was neat as well—notebooks stacked together, ballpens and other colorful markers inside a ceramic mug. Books were lined up like toy soldiers according to height against the wall: a dictionary and thesaurus, books on Celtic mythology, Joseph Campbell, a dragonology sourcebook. Her camera was perched on top of the cabinet, lens facing forward, an all-seeing eye.

But the walls—Sam marveled at the walls of Lydia's room. A mosaic of photographs, developed by her own hand, judging by smudges on several of the prints. They were all in black and white, stark images taped on the wall, fluttering like a thousand butterfly wings in the almost-imperceptible breeze. The prints covered two of the four walls, and it looked like she was beginning on the third when she disappeared. The photographs were mounted neatly, row after row of glossy prints, arranged almost like fish armor, or dragon scales.

Sam stepped closer to the walls, studying the photographs, searching for something—a clue, a lead, an arrow pointing to the next step. Her disappearance, the explanation for it all, was an

itch he wanted so desperately to scratch. She loved doing close-ups, capturing the detail of an eye, a shoe, the scattering of clothes across a surface. Everything seemed familiar, somehow, a world he knew but was distorted by some kaleidoscope vision he failed to understand completely.

M a y 2 0 0 5

“LET ME DEVELOP the pictures,” she said on the way back from Batangas. Sam felt a twinge of possessive of Lydia’s body. He didn’t want anyone else to see it, particularly the one who owned it. He felt like a paradox, an undefined word. She was driving, he was in the front passenger seat, and they were driving along a deserted strip of side road, which Sam remembered was a short cut, or so his father had said before they left Manila. Cogon and tall grass surrounded them on both sides of the road. The car lurched forward, the path unpaved and rocky. An occasional stubby tree punctuated the otherwise lonely landscape.

Sam stared straight ahead, clutching his camera to his lap. “No. I’ll do it.”

“I want to see it too.”

“I’ll give you prints.”

“I want to see the ones you discard as well.”

He didn’t answer. Darkness began to close around them. Stars carefully uncovered themselves in the twilight. Lydia flicked on the headlights, illuminating the ground in front of them.

“It’s our project,” she said finally, “and I just want to see how you took pictures of—”

“NO!”

Lydia slammed on the brakes hard, so hard that they both careened forward and flopped in their seats, held back only by seatbelts. Sam brushed his hair out of his eyes and turned to face her. She was clutching the wheel tightly, her knuckles pale in the

gathering night, delicate veins tracing patterns across her skin. She seemed tinged slightly green in the weird light. They sat in silence for some time before he spoke again. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Asshole," she muttered, staring straight ahead. She flicked off the headlights. They sat in the car, the airconditioning humming in their ears, their only source of illumination the slanted half-moon, the distant stars.

"I'm sorry."

She looked up. "It's waning right now," she whispered. "Sometimes it's called the dragon's eye moon. They say that a woman's magic is strongest during this lunar phase."

"Why?"

She cast him a sideways glance. "Take a wild guess."

Sam leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. She turned her head, wide-eyed, her hair a dark waterfall framing her too-pale face. "Why," she whispered.

He leaned in and kissed her again, on the mouth, his lips prying hers open, his tongue tasting her sweet, cold flavor.

FROM A FEATURE ARTICLE
"Here Be Dragons!"
April 20, 2006

THE SUMMER FIRES are spreading, and a number of the local residents have putforth a number of theories about the recent happenings that had set the town of Santa Jacinta aflame. Some people are blaming arson, others an accident. Everything from faulty wiring to children possessed by the devil were used as reasons by the local populace. The local parish priest is suddenly well-versed in the rituals of exorcism. The monsoon season is approaching, neighbors reminded each other, so how could the damp ground suddenly catch fire?

However, the elders, Honoracio “Tatang Anding” Gonzales included, reported seeing a dark figure swooping down from the sky, sharp wings momentarily overshadowing the stars, a lithe and serpentine silhouette that always appeared before each new incident of fire. A creature of myth residing in the imagination of these poor townsfolk, or the proof of dragons finally discovered on our native soil?

A p r i l 2 0 0 5

“WAS IT PAINFUL?” he asked once, sitting beside her on the dormitory steps, watching the liquid sun set over the watery horizon. Pale strands of light dripped from the damp trees, rippling across the buildings and the sidewalks, the streets and passing cars.

She thought for a moment, sipping her iced tea carefully. “It was...like nothing I’ve ever felt before. It was painful, yes, but it was also cleansing, if that makes sense to you.” She looked at him. He noticed that her eyes were flecked with gold, and wondered if it was just a mere trick of the light.

“I don’t think I can explain,” she continued. “It’s like, you have to transcend the pain, I guess—because it really does consume you, for the moment, and then you just want to make it stop, but you can’t, and so you find a way to go beyond the pain, and then you realize it’s just momentary, that everything passes, and so all you have to do is wait for it to end. And it did.”

M a r c h 2 0 0 6

IT TOOK A few seconds before he realized that all of the photographs on her wall were of him. Grainy and off-focus, but still recognizable, the way a puddle reflects and distorts one’s features.

Pictures of Sam walking down the sidewalk with his basketball teammates, hair slick with sweat. Sam waiting for a jeepney at the shed. Sam walking beneath the trees during twilight. Sam leaning against the classroom wall, his hair in his eyes, texting. Sam's eye, peering from the print, larger than life. Sam hunched in a library carrel, studying. Sam's mud-encrusted rubber shoes, leaning crookedly against the wall.

He whirled around, momentarily dizzy. All of this—all of him—she was taking them—taking him—

He gripped the edge of her bed, frightened. Questions spun inside his head, a whirlwind of half-formed sentences, phrases all jumbled together, spliced with question marks, tremors of fears and partly-justified assumptions. He wanted to get out, stumble out into the street and inhale the cloyingly sweet smell of the rain-soaked loam. The photographs shivered, as if a cold wind had blown inside the room.

May 2005

LYDIA WAS SLEEPING at the back of the car, curled across the backseat, covered by his jacket. Her hair scattered across the upholstery, a dark penumbra around her head. He was in the driver's seat, speeding down the highway. The scent of sex coated the inside of the small vehicle. Sam could still taste her on his fingers.

She had made small, whimpering sounds of pleasure as he entered her, her body shuddering as she moved to the age-old rhythm heard by countless other lovers before them. The dragon on her body curved and undulated in its own silent dance across her skin. Sam held her until she came, finally, their sweat mingling, her skin flushed pink. Lydia curled up in the back seat, naked, afterwards, her eyes closed and a small smile of desire playing on her lips. The dragon curled around her possessively, its small inked

eyes staring at Sam as if in challenge, guarding its treasure with its own sinuous form.

He had stared at her for some time, lost in thought, the countryside wind sweeping through the open windows of the car, drying his skin. He dressed quickly and arranged his jacket around her slumbering body, a concession to modesty. It was only when his fingers closed around her bare body that he noted the green tinge of her skin, the slight row of shallow bumps across her back, past the tattoo, woman-flesh that seemed to transform into the sleek surface of a dragon.

F R O M A N I N T E R V I E W
A p r i l 3 0 , 2 0 0 6

TATANG ANDING, NOW living with his grandchildren at the town proper, said that before the rains had begun, the serpentine shadow once associated with the searing flames that had destroyed twenty homes and burned an entire field had circled the center of the town one last time.

“What did it do?” asked the reporter, shoving the microphone into the old man’s face.

“It called out something. It made a sound. Sent chills running up and down my back.” Tatang Anding rubbed his stick-thin arms with his spidery-like fingers. “It was a heartbreaking sound. And then it flew away.”

“Where do you think it had gone to?”

The old man shrugged. “To its home, I guess. To the beach. The caves.”

June 2005

"I FEEL TRAPPED," Lydia said the last time they saw each other. They were having dinner at a rundown Thai canteen just off-campus. Sam wanted something to warm his bones. "I feel like I'm growing out of my skin."

Sam swallowed a spoonful of hot spicy soup. "Maybe it's because summer is ending."

Lydia gestured to the rainshower outside, painting the scene outside the window gray. "Never felt like summer in the first place."

"True."

"I don't know." She propped her elbows on the table and cocked her head. "I feel like I need to do something, get out of here, find something else to do."

"Sounds like you want to run away."

"Something like that." She took a long drink of her Diet Coke.

"The question," said Sam thoughtfully, "is why."

Lydia paused for a moment, watching Sam wolf down the last of his meal. After he had cleaned his plate, she said, "I think...I think it's because I don't really belong here." She spread her hands out on the table and stared at them dejectedly. "I don't know. I'm just babbling."

She looked so desperate, so alone, that Sam wanted to put his arms around her and pull her to him, tell her that she was important, that she was doing something for him, to him. But he just kept his hands to himself and busied himself with looking at the rainwashed street and the damp, waterlogged sky.

J u n e 2 0 0 6

THE RAINY SEASON began with a spectacular downpour at the beginning of the schoolyear. Buildings smelled like mildew and damp. Trees dripped verdant leaves down unsuspecting pedestrians. Everyone carried an umbrella expectantly. Dark clouds obscured the merest ray of watery sunlight.

Sam moved out of the dormitory and into an off-campus apartment. He returned the key to Lydia's room. One night, he burned all the photographs he took of her. The white paper seared and crackled, disappearing into the depths of pale, pale fire.

E p i l o g u e

THE THREE PRINTS that Sam took of Lydia that were part of the final exhibit of Sam's photography class were the ones that received the highest mark for that summer semester. The serpentine shadows that Sam skillfully played with as they slithered across the bare skin of his model was lauded by Professor Alcantara, before shaking his head in regret at the disappearance of Sam's partner. In the first photograph, Lydia was seated at an angle on a flat rock inside a cave, her head draped with a sheet of white lace. Sunlight pierced through the gloom of the interior, the shadows of rocks. Her eyes were closed, lashes curling demurely on her cheeks. A hint of a smile danced on her lips. Her tattoo danced across her belly, the head of the dragon just above her pubic mound, the flickering tongue pointing downward.

In the second photograph, Lydia was still inside the cave, standing on the flat rock. Her lace headdress trailed at her feet, an abandoned heirloom. She was facing the camera, her tattooed dragon visibly encircling her torso. In her cupped hands, an offering, she held an apple.

In the third photograph, Lydia was curled up on the flat rock, her back turned towards the camera. Her arms were wrapped around herself, her fingers peeking from where she was gripping her shoulders. A knife seemed to be embedded on her side, and a dark liquid trickled from her prone form onto the sand. The tail of the dragon curled around her lower back, the top half disappearing as it seemingly climbed over the curve of her waist. Her hair was spread over the dark surface of the rock, melding perfectly with the shadows.

The Secret Origin of Spin-man

Andrew Drilon

SO YOU DON'T know Spin-man? Five-nine, lantern-jawed, starry-eyed Spin-man? Spin-man the Caped Cosmische, Spin-man the Super-Cop, Spin-man the Meta? Muslebound, brown-skinned, wrapped from beefy neck to toe in blue-and-gold spandex? Don't worry about it. It's okay. I don't blame you. Spin-man was one of those forgotten heroes of the Dark Age of Comics, just before the Image Era of big guns and chains and Spawn and bloodstained alleys. The champion of the Multiversal Continuum, balls-out science fantasy, following in the footsteps of Jim Starlin and Silver Surfer and Jack "The King" Kirby—Spin-man was the last good Space Hero of the 90's and my number one favorite super-person. I'll explain.

•

OKAY, THIS MAY seem unrelated, but hear me out first, because it's important. When I was nine, my little brother and I would go to the bargain bins of C.A.T.S. as often as we could. After being picked up from school by our assiduous driver, Manong Eddie, who had been instructed to take no detours but had a soft spot for us boys; after an intermittent car ride, owing to the long stretch of traffic circling the vast perimeter of our private school; after a half-eaten merienda of adobo sandwiches and Zesto Orange sent by our grandmother, God rest her soul; James and I would take it in turns (sometimes called out in unison) to remind our driver:

“The main entrance of Virra Mall! We’ll only be thirty minutes! Mang Eddie, pleeeese!” Then the drive past Uni-Mart, around the corner facing McDonalds, as we busied ourselves counting the money in our pockets, at times almost two hundred pesos when pooled together, until finally my grandfather’s Altis slowed outside the mall’s main entrance, and we’d slam the car doors open and hop out, promising Manong Edie that we’d be waiting there at exactly 4:45, no later, cross our excited little hearts.

Running in, ignoring the cinema schedule by the entrance, where five or six people always stood deliberating what to watch, we would brush past strangers and other boys in school uniform, our trajectories plotted through the long air-conditioned corridors of the mall and avoiding the various temptations that lined its capitalist halls (including the arcade,) until we arrived at the shop of our hearts’ desires, its windows covered with painted posters of masked men and women, sheltered under a primary-colored electric display which announced its most hallowed name: C.A.T.S. (Comics And Then Some.)

For a moment, we would ogle the comics on the New Arrivals rack, committing their covers to memory and silently promising to acquire them when we had more money, after which we went directly to the bargain bins; James starting on the leftmost end while I worked on the opposite, thumbing our way through rows and rows of titles as if in a marathon, flip flip flip, until we met at the middle, ready to sort through two piles of bargain comics. We would debate on 30-peso copies of X-men, Avengers, Batman and numerous other titles, eliminating possible purchases by creating an agreed-upon heirarchy based first upon the title’s character, then artist, then writer. On rare occasions when we came to a disagreement, we would split our money down the middle and dictate our own purchases, though most of the time, our tastes were in complete accord.

By the end of our ritual, a stack of five or six carefully-considered comics were rung up at the cash register and wrapped in the

customary C.A.T.S. plastic bag, complete with a crude drawing of Wolverine printed under its wonderful, acronymic logo. Manong Eddie would be waiting for us outside, patient as ever despite the extra quarter-hour of waiting, resulting in a drive home that transpired in complete silence, as James and I lost ourselves to the outrageous adventures of these fictional men and women.

James and I agreed: the world's greatest comic book artist was Jim Lee. I also liked Erik Larsen on Spider-man; but his replacement, Mark Bagley, couldn't draw Carnage with the appropriate menace, in my view. At an early age, I had become acutely aware of the people who worked on these comics, and in my wildest dreams I imagined myself drawing the X-men under the pen of my favorite writer, Chris Claremont. I spent hours scrutinizing these comics, copying my favorite poses, memorizing the costumes and learning the vagaries of super-hero anatomy; the intricacies of foreshortening and the convolutions of idealized musculature wrapped in spandex. James struggled to keep up with me, but in the end resigned himself to coloring my illustrations, in deference to my burgeoning drawing ability. I suppose our tastes were still far from refined, and if you had told us back then that Neil Gaiman was far superior to Scott Lobdell, we would have argued you out of the room. As a nine-year-old who could draw Superman with a modicum of accuracy, I had pronounced myself an expert on these multicolored worlds, and James was more than willing to share in my obsession.

James, in turn, proclaimed himself to be the real-world counterpart of Daredevil. He would sit in the corner of our room facing a crumbling dartboard, one hand over his eyes, a trained dart in the other, declaring: "I will hit a bullseye using only my ears!" He rarely made the center of the board, but when he did, it was a cause for celebration, and we'd jump around the room in a mock-battle between Daredevil and the vampire, Morbius. For a while, I myself was intent on developing a keen psychic talent a la Professor X, but that ambition fell by the wayside when I

failed to read my classmate's mind during a critical Science exam. Fortunately, I had gained some popularity at school for my art skills, and in the end it was this ability that I cherished as my one and only superpower.

•

IT WAS 1991, the year of the Pinatubo eruption, when James and I were invited to stay over at our Lolo Doming's house in Los Baños to finally meet with our long-lost uncle: Tito Fermin. According to my mother, he had lived in the States all our lives, hiding as an illegal immigrant, and it was only that year, when he had married into an American citizenship, that he was enabled to visit the Philippines without fear of recrimination. Both James and I were eager to meet our uncle, having heard that he was a comic book artist; one who actually made a living conjuring up the four-color worlds we were so fond of.

It was with some disappointment that we learned the specifics of his occupation: Tito Fermin was a cartoonist for neither Marvel nor DC, but for a small independent company known as Echo Comics. They produced a grand total of four titles a month, one of which was a black-and-white superhero comic that, Tito Fermin said proudly, he both penciled and inked. We were slightly more impressed when he showed us samples of his work, but though his art had the romantic quality of classic Tagalog Komiks, it lacked the inflated modern dynamism that we had grown accustomed to.

Regardless of his artistic prowess, Tito Fermin was a striking character. Long, shaggy black hair spilled down from his head and his face was rounded out by a full beard which, in retrospect, made him look like a Filipino Alan Moore. His eyes had the hint of a Chinese slant; he spoke in a low, sonorous voice that commanded attention and, as with our grandfather (who we'd nick-named Santa Claus,) you could rarely tell if he was smiling under that beard.

Tito Fermin spent most of our first dinner talking with Lolo Doming, the details of which I can no longer clearly recall; only the slurred American accent that possessed my uncle in the midst of his soliloquies on life abroad and the inscrutable grunts that my grandfather contributed to the discussion. Rain hammered through the trees outside, splashing against the windows and conversation, the warm yellow light of the chandelier washing over the lazy susan that pivoted food around the dinner table. James and I contented ourselves with fielding questions from Lola Lita, who we had insisted on calling Lolita in spite of her good-natured refusals. We asked her what superheroes were popular in her time and she shook her head as she replied, “My heroes were movie stars, ballet dancers and singers—Judy Garland, Irina Baronova and Frank Sinatra. Those three are my favorites.” And then she crooned a few lines from the song she always sang when she put us to bed, the song I will always remember her for:

*No, there's nothing to be ashamed of
if you stub your toe on the moon
Though it may be a blow to your pride,
you're a hero because, well, you tried
So don't give up too soon,
if you stub your toe on the moon*

Perhaps consequently, as we were falling asleep that night, James confessed that he had grown tired of Daredevil. “I want to be Silver Surfer now,” he said. We contemplated the means by which James could acquire cosmic power and a silver board capable of space flight. I suggested that he find a way to contact Galactus while he mused on the existence of cosmic rays beyond our atmosphere, and after a while we simply lay in our beds for the thousandth night next to each other, our thoughts racing to find the path to James’ goal until, finally, sleep overtook us.



DUE TO ITS distance from the city, Los Baños was a place that we rarely visited, and when we did it gave off the impression of being otherworldly, like a dream that never happened: bosky mountains stretching to the horizon, tiny three-floor shopping malls, the subtle incline on all the roads; sari-sari stores, the musky-sweet smell of Lolo Doming's cigars, trips to the video rental store; a rough painted cement ceiling, flower pattern bed sheets, non-cable television, wood-panel walls, kare-kare stew, marble floors and, best of all, discount bookstores with five-to-ten-peso comics.

It was there, in the Booksale beside Carmela Barbershop, that Tito Fermin began to participate in our love for comics. He was leaving for the States the next morning, and had been meaning to pick up a few Filipino Komiks to take with him. James and I were simply excited to find more back issues of *Ghost Rider* and *Wild Dog*. The bargain bins were smaller, only three rows, but we commenced with our ritual anyway, thumbing through back issues, flip flip flip, until we each had our stack of comics to choose from. Tito Fermin surprised us by taking both piles and paying for them, more than 30 comics each, and as we walked out of the store, suffused with happiness and gratitude, I silently calculated that he'd spent over 500 pesos on comics, which was a huge amount at the time, at least to me.

And then lunch at Nilda's Restaurant, where we ate mushroom burgers while Tito Fermin quizzed us on our love for superheroes. A lengthy discourse ensued on the extended line-up of the X-men, the convolutions of Peter Parker's life, the rogues gallery of Batman; about how Hulk was too boring, how the Legion of Superheroes had too many members, how the Fantastic Four had too few, how Superman and Captain America were outdated; and more besides. He shared stories of his meetings with various comics creators during conventions; of the long argument on the

art of cartooning that he'd had with Gary Groth; the drink he had shared with long time Spider-man editor Tom Brevoort; and the time he had managed to procure a sketch of the Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman from Jim Lee.

The last one fired me up. There we were sitting in a restaurant in the Philippines eating mushroom burgers—and we were right next to a man who had actually shaken hands with Jim Lee. Jim Lee! The phenomenal artist's artist, the person who'd redesigned all of the X-men's costumes, the comic creator that I dreamed of one day becoming. Tito Fermin laughed at my ebullition and promised that the next time he met Jim Lee, he would ask for a signed sketch and mail it to me.

As we made our way back to Lolo Doming's house, our uncle began to relate the difficulties he'd been having with his latest project. Echo Comics was intent on adding another superhero title to their monthly line-up, and they were looking to Tito Fermin to deliver it. This was his concept: a superhero that policed the multiversal continuum, spinning from dimension to dimension in an eternal struggle with the Forces of Chaos.

"Spin-man!" James interrupted.

Tito Fermin stopped and gave my brother a profound look. "Spin-man?"

"Spin-man. I don't know. I just thought of it. Do you have a name already?"

"Spin-man," my uncle said, enunciating the syllables slowly, as if he were tasting them. "Spin-man is a good name. I was thinking of calling him Omni-man, but Spin-man sounds much better. Would you mind if I called him that?"

"Yes!" James exclaimed, almost lost in delight. "I mean, no! I don't mind!"

It was unprecedented—my brother's idea was going straight into an actual comic book, to be published in the States. His idea was going to be the name of the superhero, if not the title of the series. I was a little jealous of his moment of brilliance, but

conceded that it was fair since he'd thought of it first. That was, of course, before things got out of hand.

"Can I be Spin-man?" James asked, pulling on Tito Fermin's shirt sleeve. We had just arrived at my grandfather's house, and our uncle seemed lost in a daze.

"You mean his alter-ego? That would be a little like Shazam, wouldn't it?"

"Yes! Please? I can be a good character. I'll fight the Forces of Chaos."

James made a spinning move, grinding his sneakers against the pavement, and ended it with a punch to the air and a shout: "Spin-man!"

Tito Fermin laughed. "Alright, alright. You can be Spin-man. What about your brother?"

By that time, I was foul-tempered and indignant. James had thrown a load of ideas at Tito Fermin, including Spin-man's name, his costume, thoughts on potential enemies and even a love interest. My jealousy was frothing at the mouth. I was an artist; a creative; I should have had more ideas than my colorist brother, but my mind was blank. I couldn't visualize Spin-man. He was merely a figment; a cipher; I had no story to hang him on. I struggled to keep my resentment in check, but when you're nine years old it's a difficult thing to hide. "No thank you, Tito Fermin. I think I'd rather draw Spin-man. At least I'll make money doing it."

"You can draw it when you're older. I'll even ink you, if you'll have me." It was a promise that I knew would never be fulfilled. With that, Tito Fermin ruffled my hair and walked off to his room. As he moved away, I caught my little brother staring at me, and this is the face that I will never forget: James biting his lips, his eyes wide open, his expression a mix of guilt and apology, as if he had done something wrong.

That night, before we went to bed, he broached the topic one last time. I had ignored him throughout dinner and he had

respected my silence, but after Lolita had tucked us in, he turned to me and asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said, obviously not.

"You can be Spin-man if you want. I can just tell Tito Fermin—"

"No thank you," I said, cutting him off.

And that was that.

•

I WOKE UP late the next day. The sun was shining, the midday heat had begun to settle in, and my first thought was that I'd somehow overslept and missed Tito Fermin's leave-taking. My second thought was of James. There was no one in the next bed, and I assumed that he must have been too bothered about my reaction the previous night to wake me up. I put on my slippers and went downstairs. Santa Claus was asleep on his favorite couch, and Lolita was in the next room, sweeping.

"Good morning," she said. "Your Tito Fermin left early. He didn't want to wake you because it's your vacation, but he said that he loves you and that he'll keep in touch."

"I'm sorry about that, Lola. Have you seen James?"

"James?" she asked. She seemed puzzled. I rubbed my eyes and thought: she must be going senile in her old age.

"James," I repeated. "My brother."

She stopped sweeping and eyed me with suspicion. For a moment, she seemed to be considering what I meant, though it should have been obvious. And then she smiled. "Perhaps when you sleep tonight, you will see him again. Lunch will be ready soon."

I frowned at her. My grandmother was patronizing me. Clearly, some sort of joke was happening that I was unaware of. I left the room and began to look for James. I had searched the living room, the terrace, the dining room and the balcony before I began to

wonder if James was playing an impromptu game of hide-and-seek with me. I pursued him through the house. I looked in bathrooms, closets, cabinets and convenient hiding places behind doors, between bookshelves and under beds. It was only when I noticed that his bag was missing; the bag that my mother had packed for him the day before we left for Los Baños; it was only then that I began to worry.

"James!" I called for him as I ran through the house. "Where's James?" I yelled at Lolita as she was putting out dishes for lunch. Lolo Doming walked in on us, scratching his head. "What is he talking about?" he asked. "Who's James?" I grew frantic; panicked. "James! My brother! This isn't funny!" I ran back to our room, looking for the pile of comics he had chosen the day before. There was only one pile. Mine.

"What's the matter with him?" "I don't know." I shouted. "I want my brother!" Lola Lita ran after me. "What happened? What's wrong?" "Where did he go?" I ran out of the bedroom and tossed my stack of comics down the stairs. "I want my brother!" I yelled. Lola Lita bent over the comics. "You have no brother." "James!" My grandfather held me down. "Stop it right now!" he said. I struggled. "James!"

I screamed. I cried. I went into hysterics. I must have blacked out, because the next thing I knew, it was nighttime. My mother was there, in the bedroom, ready to take me home. "Where's James?" I asked her. I told her that his bag was gone, and that my grandparents wouldn't tell me where he was, and how could they not remember my little brother when she had tucked us in the night before? She carried me and patted my back. "I know, honey, I know. Everything will be fine."

"I'm not fine," I sobbed.

"I know."

•

ONE INTERMINABLE CAR ride later, I was home. I had secretly hoped that James had somehow gotten there ahead of us; that by some miracle of time and space, he was sitting on his bed or on his chair, waiting for me to arrive so that he could laugh at me and confess that it was all a joke. But when I entered our room, he wasn't there. Furthermore, the furniture had been rearranged; there was only one bed set, one chair, one writing desk and a shelf where James' stuff should have been. Our superhero posters still covered the walls, but apart from that, I could find no trace of my brother.

I thought that I had already cried myself out that day, but as I stood there in our empty room, the tears began to trickle down my cheeks once more. Not tears of confusion or anger, but of grief. As I lay in my bed, my mother sat beside me, stroking my hair. "I don't know what you're going through," she said, "but I want you to know that I'm here for you. Okay?"

She pulled out an envelope from her bag. "Your Tito Fermin left this for you before he went to the airport. I hope you at least had a good time meeting him."

She left the envelope on my bedside table, kissed me on the forehead, and walked out of the room. "I love you, son. Rest well. I'll be here when you wake up."

•

I DIDN'T WANT to sleep that night. I was exhausted, but I couldn't stand the idea of someone else disappearing while I slept. It occurred to me that I might have entered the Twilight Zone; that this was some horrible subconscious dream; that I would wake up in Los Baños and James would be there and everything would be as it should have been. My throat felt raw. My eyelids were heavy. But fear got the better of me, and after some time, I sat up in my bed and opened the envelope from Tito Fermin.

My hands shook as I pulled it out. There it was, in crisp, near-mint condition: a signed copy of *Spin-man #1*, written and illustrated by Fermin de la Cruz.

The story opened with a scene featuring a young boy, James Jeronimo, reading a comic book. James was a normal boy, like you or me, who dreamed of becoming a superhero. The caption read: *At that precise moment, as James came to terms with his inflexible humanity, he felt an unearthly presence in the room.* The planets aligned. In an alternate dimension, a black mass crept over red skies, intent on devouring all life. James' eyes lit up as a display of coruscating energy erupted from his comic book, pulling him into a cosmic vortex. A wormhole opened up in the center of the universe, and from its luminous recesses, a blue-and-gold figure emerged—Spin-man, champion of the multiversal continuum!

Cloudy thought balloons rose from Spin-man's head: *Who am I? What is this place? I thought I was a boy reading a comic book, and now I have been summoned—to do what?* Then a vision appeared before him—black tendrils blotting out the sun on a world teeming with innocent life. Spin-man's eyes narrowed. *The Forces of Chaos are threatening the continuum!* He activated his cosmic powers, spinning himself from the center of the universe into an alternate dimension where, with the help of his cosmic abilities, he banished the Forces of Chaos into a black hole.

Spin-man hovered over a crowd of green-skinned alien beings; inhabitants of the dimension he had just saved. *It seems that I have found my true purpose*, he thought. *Whenever Chaos threatens to engulf meaning in the universe, it will have to reckon with the might of Spin-man!* Then a smile, a wink at the reader and, under the last panel in the last page, the words “to be continued” laid out in bold letters.

•

NOW, THIS IS the difficulty of my story. By all other accounts, I never had a brother named James. No one else seems to remember him. There is no birth certificate, no extra toothbrush, no extra bed in my room—not even a picture. But I remember him. I can see him in my mind. I remember his preferences, his lactose-intolerance, his Cyclops T-shirt and his difficulties with Math. I remember his birthday (June 15, 1983,) his favorite color (green,) his lucky number (4,) and his best friend at school (Nicolo Suarez.)

He was my little brother. He talked in his sleep. He loved Honey Stars and hated fruit-flavored toothpaste. He was always our mother's favorite, and it frustrated me that she always took his side. We watched *Ghostbusters* every Friday night and on Saturday mornings we would get the garden hose and water-blast each other. We stole a book once, from the library—*The Illustrated Monkey King*—and it was James who eventually convinced me to give it back.

I remember him. But if I position this as true, then you'll think it absurd. I'm no scientist. I have no degree in quantum physics, no academic theory in my pocket, no explicable hypotheses by which I can even begin to make you believe that he ever existed. I have no evidence; no proof. I only have what happened.

And now, even that is just a memory: limited, intangible, decaying, and wide open to contention. If I die tomorrow, there will be nothing in this world to prove that James was ever real.

•

I KEPT *SPIN-MAN #1* in a mylar plastic bag, in its own drawer beside my bed. It had become the most precious comic book in my collection. Months passed before I came to terms with the reality of my brother's disappearance. My mother was very supportive. She took me to a psychiatrist and worked with me to uncover the root of my insistence on an imaginary brother. After the first few

sessions, I learned to stop openly asserting James' existence. With nothing to back up my claims, it was a losing battle. No progress was to be made on that front.

I kept trying to contact Tito Fermin. At first, they told me that he was too busy to talk to me, but I later discovered that he had moved addresses upon his return to the States and left no numbers by which we could contact him. I searched for further issues of Spin-man, but was unable find copies in C.A.T.S. or in any of the direct market stores. Apparently, they had never carried the title. I learned later, from a 1993 issue of *The Comics Journal*, that Echo Comics had been a print-on-demand publisher that had struggled through low sales for two whole years before finally declaring bankruptcy.

•

IN THE SUMMER of 1996, I found out that Tito Fermin had died. He had quit making comics three years before due to lack of money, and had become an automobile dealer in California. One night, he drank too much and drove his car into a copse of trees, which was where they found him three days later, wide-eyed with a long piece of window lodged into his head. We held a memorial mass for him in Los Baños. His body was buried in the States. He bequeathed a number of items to the family, among them a signed sketch of Spin-man by Jim Lee, which was left in my care.

•

YEARS WENT BY. I grew up. I had two girlfriends and one bad break-up. Peter Parker separated from Mary Jane, who moved away to become a supermodel. The X-men's line-up shifted multiple times. Their Jim Lee costumes changed with each turnover until they could only be glimpsed in flashbacks and back issues. The Hulk grew smart, then dumb, then bald. Gotham City survived a

plague, a major earthquake and an army of ninjas. Superman died then came back to life. Green Lantern was corrupted, went rogue, died saving the universe, and was replaced by another Green Lantern. Spin-man never made it past issue two.

I know this because, on the day after my graduation, I found a battered old copy of *Spin-man #2* in a Booksale bargain bin. James was on the cover, hovering in the void of the universe as the telltale blue-and-gold vortex, the one which had transformed him into Spin-man, whirled around him. In the comic, a black hole had turned sentient and was trudging across the cosmos in the shape of an impossible spider. The Forces of Chaos had returned. Spin-man, valiant as ever, rushed to combat the threat, but in a critical moment, the Chaos Spider spat a web of nebulae at our hero, disrupting his celestial abilities and forcing him to spin into another dimension.

Spin-man awoke in a void, buffeted on all sides by peculiar purple rain. He bowed his head in shame. *I've failed*, he thought. *I've fallen into the unknown, somewhere beyond the far reaches of the multiversal continuum. If I don't find my way back, the Forces of Chaos will engulf the universe and all that I hold dear.* Spin-man coughed. For a moment, his visage shifted into that of James, his human alter-ego. His eyes glimmered with hope. Spin-man's course was clear. *I have to find my way back, no matter how long it takes.* With that, he launched himself into the void, away from the reader, as the words "never the end" appeared beneath him, like a promise. It was the last issue of Spin-man to achieve publication. I swear, I broke down right there, in the middle of the bookstore, holding onto that stupid little comic book. I realized, right then, that I needed to do something; anything, or else James would be lost forever.

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THESE DAYS, C.A.T.S. no longer sells comic books. They've since turned into a specialty store for action figures, and though I visit it from time to time, the bargain bins I used to thumb through are no longer there. I still buy comics every Wednesday when I have the money. I keep track of my favorite superheroes' lives. For me they affirm that, despite hardship, some things may still endure. I've taken a course in Fine Arts, and I've been applying it to my comics illustrations, working hard to improve to a professional level. As soon as I finish college, I'll send off applications to the major comic book companies. I'll get a job in the States, and when I've saved up enough money, I'll look up Echo Comics and buy the rights to Spin-man.

Then I'll publish *Spin-man* #3, and in that issue, Spin-man will be at the edge of the universe, contemplating his path home. A blue-and-gold wormhole will appear before him. With superhuman courage, Spin-man will activate his cosmic powers, jump through the vortex, and spin his way back into our world.

T h e A u t h o r s

Francezca C. Kwe has published her short stories in various anthologies and publications. She teaches at the University of the Philippines and is married to a poet.

Camsy Ocumen lives at the foot of a mountain in Taytay but she can be visited online at <http://camsyocumen.wordpress.com>.

Dean Francis Alfar is a leading advocate of speculative fiction in the Philippines. His novel, *Salamanca*, won the Book Development Association of the Philippines's Gintong Aklat as well as the Palanca grand prize. He has also earned ten more Palancas, two Manila Critics' Circle National Book Awards, and the Philippines Free Press Award. His short fiction has been collected in *The Kite of Stars and Other Stories*, and published in venues both national and international, including *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, *Rabid Transit: Menagerie*, *Latitude*, *A La Carte*, *Exotic Gothic 2 & 3*, and *The Apex Book of World SF*. With Nikki Alfar, he edits the *Philippine Speculative Fiction* annuals. He is currently working on his sophomore novel and collection.

Apol Lejano-Massebieau was originally a newspaper reporter and magazine editor before making the jump to writing fiction- and creative non-fiction a few years ago. She has since published her short stories in magazines such as *the Philippine Free Press* and *the Digest of Philippine Genre Stories*, and in book anthologies, such as the *Philippine Speculative Fiction* volumes (Kestrel), *Sawi* (Milflores), and *A Time for Dragons* (Anvil). For her creative non-fiction, she has won a Palanca Award, and in 2009 launched a collection of essays, *Provenciana* (Visionaria Publishing), currently available in Philippine bookstores.

Paolo Gabriel V. Chikiamco has placed in the Palanca Awards (Short Story for Children category) and his stories have been published in *the Digest of Philippine Genre Stories*, *The Farthest Shore* (www.farthestshore.kom.ph), *A Time for Dragons*, and *Philippine Speculative Fiction V*. He is currently an editor in *the Philippine Online Chronicles* (www.thepoc.net). *Rocket Kapre*, his digital publishing imprint dedicated to publishing and promoting speculative fiction by Filipino authors, can be found (along with *Usok*, his online Pinoy SF webzine) at www.rocketkapre.com.

Marianne Villanueva is a short story writer from the Philippines. Her stories have appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Sou'wester*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Juked*, *The White Whale Review*, *the Santa Fe Writers Project*, and *Cafe Irreal*. Work is forthcoming in 2010 from *Hotel Amerika: The TransGenre Issue* and *Necessary Fiction*. She has had two collections of short fiction published in the Philippines: *Ginseng and Other Tales From Manila* and *The Lost Language*.

Mia Tijam is a graduate of the Creative Writing Program of the University of the Philippines (Diliman) and a fellow for Creative Nonfiction in the 2007 National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete. Her work has been printed in *Playboy Philippines*, *Pulp*, *Dark Blue Southern Seas*, *the Philippines Free Press*, the *Philippine Speculative Fiction* anthologies, and *the Digest of Philippine Genre Stories*. Likewise, they can also be found in online websites like *The Farthest Shore: Fantasy from the Philippines* and *WritersConnect* (www.writersconnect.org). Her speculative fiction had been given an Honorable Mention in *The 2008 Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (edited by Ellen Datlow, Kelly Link, and Gavin Grant) and was a finalist in The 2009 Philippines Free Press Literary Awards. She is the resident critic of the Happy Mondays Poetry Readings and the co-editor of *the Philippine Speculative Fiction Sampler* (www.philippinespeculativefiction.com).

Yvette Tan is a Manila-based horror writer. Her works have been published in *the Philippines Free Press*, *the Philippine Daily Inquirer*, *the Manila Times*, *Uno Magazine*, *Rogue Magazine*, *Story Philippines*, and *the Digest of Philippine Genre Stories*, among others. Her short fiction has also appeared in anthologies such as *Sleepless in Manila* and *Philippine Speculative Fiction II & III*.

Adam David lives in Cubao, Quezon City. He has been a zinester and a bookmaker by trade since 1999. He writes criticism for *the Philippine Online Chronicles*, a Pinoy culture webzine. He is the author of *the El Bimbo Variations*, which won the Madrigal-Gonzales First Book Award for the years 2007 and 2008. His books can be downloaded through a weblog he regularly maintains called *Oblique Strategies*, which can be monitored every now and then on <http://wasaaak.blogspot.com>.

Elyss Punsalan is based in Manila and works as a brand manager for a company that sells millions of lipsticks every year. When she's not crunching numbers Elyss spends her time bonding with her family, joining Quiz Nights, and watching romantic comedies. Her other published works can be found in *A Time for Dragons*, *Philippine Speculative Fiction III*, *the Digest of Philippine Genre Stories III*, *First Love*, *Heartbreak*, *Match Made* and *Story Philippines*.

Kenneth Yu is the publisher/editor of *the Digest of Philippine Genre Stories*, or *PGS*. Locally, his fiction has been published in *Philippine Speculative Fiction IV*, *the Philippine Graphic*, and *the Philippines Free Press*; online on *AlienSkin*, *the Town Drunk*, and *Usok*. He also won *Fantasy Magazine's* 2009 Halloween flash fiction contest. He has two horror stories forthcoming, one in the print anthology *D.O.A.* published by Blood Bound Books, and another at *Innsmouth Free Press*.

Crystal Koo holds a BA in English literature from the Philippines, an MA in creative writing from Sydney, and is now working in a university in Hong Kong. Her work has been published in the Philippines, most recently in *the Farthest Shore*, *Usok*, and *Ruin and Resolve*, as well as in various international venues such as *unsweetened Literary Journal*, *RUBRIC: Creative Writing Journal of the University of New South Wales*, *Short Stories at East of the Web*, and *Salu-Salo: An Anthology of Philippine-Australian Writings*. In 2007, she received a Palanca Award for her short story “Benito Salazar’s Last Creation”, and in 2009, her play *The Foundling* was performed in the Fringe Theatre in Hong Kong. She has forthcoming publications from North America in DAW Books’ *The Dragon and the Stars* anthology and in the *Ink-filled Page Literary and Arts Journal*. She is currently working on a screenplay for a short film to be produced in Hong Kong in 2010. She maintains a blog at <http://swordskill.wordpress.com>.

Alexander Drilon graduated from the University of the Philippines with a degree in mending people and a fascination with entertaining them. He is currently pursuing the former at St. Luke’s Roosevelt Hospital and Memorial Sloan-Kettering in New York, jogging to medical codes at 2 a.m. to dispense drugs (legally) and deliver timely electric shocks under bright fluorescent lights.

Kate Aton-Osias is an auditor who believes that love, hope, and good chocolate can save the world. She has earned a Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Award for Literature and a citation in the international *Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror*. Her stories have been published in *Serendipity*, *Philippine Speculative Fiction*, *the Digest of Philippine Genre Stories*, and soon, *Bewildering Stories* and *A Time for Dragons*. She’s a proud founding member of the LitCritters writing and literary discussion group, and is happily swimming in the structured chaos of being wife to fellow writer Alex Osias and mother to their newborn son Hector.

Born in 1984 in Manila, Philippines, **Gabriela Lee** earned her degree at the University of the Philippines and completed her master's at the National University of Singapore under an ASEAN scholarship. She was a Fellow for Poetry in English at the Dumaguete Writers' Workshop, the longest-running creative writing workshop in Southeast Asia. Her stories and poems have appeared in literary magazines such as *the Sunday Inquirer Magazine* and *the Philippine Free Press*, and anthologies such as *Philippine Speculative Fiction, Vol. I, Crowns & Oranges: New Philippine Poetry*, and *A Different Voice: Fiction by Young Filipino Writers*. She currently works with teenagers in an online virtual environment in Singapore.

Andrew Drilon was first published at age 14 in *the Philippine Daily Inquirer* for an illustrated children's story about a dead bovine called "Moo Moo the Ghostly Cow." This depiction of a postmortem ruminant was lauded as heartwarming and earned him praise from his teachers, though his name was misspelled as "Andrew Drillon." Despite this oversight, he was not discouraged from making stories and continues to do so to this day via comics, illustration and prose. His most recent works have been featured in *the Philippine Star*, *Top Shelf 2.0*, *the Virtuous Medlar Circle* and in Bamboo's music video "Muli."

Charles Tan's fiction has appeared in publications such as *the Digest of Philippine Genre Stories* and *Philippine Speculative Fiction*. He has contributed nonfiction to websites such as *the Nebula Awards* (<http://nebulaawards.com>), *the Shirley Jackson Awards* (<http://www.shirleyjacksonawards.org>), *the World SF News Blog* (<http://worldsf.wordpress.com>), and *SF Signal* (<http://www.sfsignal.com>). In 2009, he won the Last Drink Bird Head Award (<http://www.jeffvandermeer.com/2009/10/04/the-first-annual-last-drink-bird-head-award-finalists>) for International Activism which is described as "In recognition of those who work to bring writers from other literary traditions and countries to the attention of readers in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia..." You can visit his blog, *Bibliophile Stalker* (<http://charles-tan.blogspot.com>), or *the Philippine Speculative Fiction Sampler* (<http://philippinespeculativefiction.com>).

Elbert Or is a comic book creator, whose most recent work includes *Lola: A Ghost Story* from Oni Press. He also conducts creativity and communication training under his company, Brain Food, and can be found at <http://www.munimunistories.com>.

Dominique Gerald Cimafranca teaches computer science and literature (with two separate departments) at Ateneo de Davao University. He maintains the web sites of Dagmay, a regional literary journal for Mindanao, and of *the Farthest Shore* speculative fiction anthology. Visit his blog at <http://www.villageidiotsavant.com>.

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