

# *A n a k S a s t r a*

## Issue 29

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## Contributor Bios

[Agnes Ong](#) is a Malaysian fiction writer. Coping with an unknown nerve condition all her life, she finds solace, escape and revelation through writing. Her short stories have been published online and in local and regional anthologies, including *Love in Penang*, an anthology of short stories by Fixi Novo; *Amok: An Anthology of Asia-Pacific Speculative Fiction*; and *Rambutan Literary*. Her latest young adult novel, *Mama's Maze*, is sold in major bookstores in Malaysia.

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

**Jasmine Reyes** is a Filipina architect. She has traveled extensively and likes to fictionalize her own travels. She has no interest in national or global politics but is constantly told her writing is too political when submitting to literary journals. To that she says: "whatever."

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

[Harry Hodge](#) (Twitter: [@hodgedude](#)) is a Canadian author living in Saigon, who often works with Vietnamese artists Jin Ng and Nguyen Van Nha. He also writes sports for *Word Magazine* and the *Saigoneer* website.

[Mai Hoang](#) is a rising sophomore at Phillips Exeter, where she serves as board member for *Pendulum*, an annual publication. She actually lives for three months and exists for nine. She lives in Saigon. Her works have been recognized by the Scholastic Writing Awards,

TeenInk and Laura Thomas Communications. She participated as a mentee in the *Adroit Journal's* 2017 Poetry Mentorship Program.

**Ariff Halim** is a fresh graduate from University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, where he discovered the crafts of writing from writers such as Chuah Guat Eng and Bernice Chauly. Currently seeking job opportunities, he spends his time reading in his room and going out for teh tarik with his friends every now and then. He recently published the poem "Night Walks" in a collection published by Englishjer.

**Victoria Crawford** is a poet living in Thailand. She has lived in the Middle and Far East for many years and as a poet, likes to share the beauty of the cultures and nature of southeast Asia. She has previously published in various journals, such as *Peacock Journal*, *Eastlit*, *Wildflower Muses*, *Hektoen International*, *The Lyric Magazine*, and *The Ibis Head Review*.

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## "Mun Mai"

by Agnes Ong

A red Mercedes-Benz stopped in front of the small wooden house, jarringly out of place in the old village. The clean-shaven man in the front passenger seat eyed the house and said, "I'm not sure—"

"Come on, Ken. Don't you want to find out what's bothering your sister?" the driver said as she checked her makeup in the rear-view mirror.

"Yes, but ..."

"I know, I think this summoning the dead thing is crap. But my aunt swore by it, and, according to her, this woman comes highly recommended for *mun mai*\*. Anyway, it's hot in here. I'm getting out."

Jin Len got out and looked around without much interest. She walked towards the house surrounded by shrubbery. It had a green door flanked by two windows. The scenery reminded Ken of a child's drawing. The only thing missing was the happy children playing outside the house. It was just a little too surreal.

Before Jin Len could knock on the door, a young girl opened it and greeted her. Jin Len turned to look at Ken in the car and raised her left eyebrow. He guessed what she was thinking—the girl knew the exact moment they had arrived, spooky.

Ken rolled his eyes and immediately came up with a logical explanation in his head. The girl was expecting them. When she heard the car and saw them through the window, she

opened the door. There was no turning back now. He grabbed the package under his seat and joined Jin Len at the door.

They were ushered into what appeared to be the living room. Stepping into that space was like travelling back in time for Ken. The clicking of Jin Len's high heel shoes on the concrete floor sounded just like the clogs his mother had worn when he was a child. A box television—the type that belonged in a museum—stood facing three rattan chairs and a table at one corner of the room. The girl named Mei Mei asked them to sit and wait.

“What? This is so seventies,” Jin Len said after Mei Mei was out of earshot. She blabbered on about the interior décor, but Ken wasn't listening. He could only stare at his reflection in the grey television screen—distorted and disfigured.

The rattan chair creaked as he shifted his weight. He could almost see the television come alive, playing his favourite cartoon from his childhood days, Old Master Q. Strangely, it was the first time he had felt at home since his return to Malaysia two months ago.

“Ken! Mei Mei is talking to you,” Jin Len's voice rang beside him.

Ken snapped back to reality. Mei Mei was smiling at him. “You want to contact your mother, right? I need her full name, place of birth, date of death and burial address.” She sounded like a florist taking down the details for a delivery.

“Oh! Lim Foong Nui, born in Batu Berendam, Malacca, died on 18 July, and buried in Bukit China.”

After writing down the information in a long, rectangular piece of white paper, Mei Mei led them through a door leading to an altar. The space was well lit, unlike what Ken had imagined. A statue of the Goddess of Mercy sat peacefully behind an urn with joss sticks, oil lamps and offerings of flowers and fruits, on the wooden altar. Just a few feet away from

the altar, a woman sat on a stool at a wooden table. Her eyes were closed. She did not move or speak when they entered.

The girl gestured for them to sit at the table. Then she took the package that Ken had brought with him and arranged its content on red plastic plates: two eggs, some rice and three apples and oranges each. After that, she placed the piece of paper alongside the items on the table and took an oil lamp from the altar to put before the woman. Without another word, she left the room.

A veil of silence wrapped around the room, cutting out any sound from beyond the walls. The whisper of their breaths filled the air and mingled with tendrils of smoke, snaking lazily away from the burning joss sticks. An invisible weight lifted from his shoulders and Ken began to relax. He looked over at Jin Len and found her staring ahead serenely, not her usual antsy self. She must have felt the peace too.

Ken began to study the woman's face. Despite her pepper-coloured hair, she had fair, smooth skin and pink lips. Dressed in a slightly faded *samfu*, she sat ramrod straight with her hands on the table. She was so still that Ken wondered if she was breathing. Then the woman opened her eyes. Two murky white eyeballs stared out of the sockets. Ken shifted slightly on his stool while Jin Len gasped softly; neither dared to utter a word.

"I'm Lan Yee. I'll be summoning the soul of Lim Foong Nui from the afterlife now. Don't be afraid. Just speak normally to her when she arrives."

With that, the woman picked up the piece paper on the table, her movement swift and sure as she directed the paper to the oil lamp, lighting it up. Waving the burning paper in the air, she began to chant in a sing-song manner. Ken thought he heard his mother's name. The words sounded familiar yet strange to him.

Ashes flew around them, dancing to the woman's song. She then took the plate of rice and dug two fingers into it. Moving her fingers in a circular motion, a spiral pattern appeared. This continued for some time when suddenly she froze.

Then Lan Yee shook uncontrollably. Ken stiffened in his seat, staring wide-eyed. The shaking subsided after a while. She hung her head low; the stray strands of hair from her bun stood on ends like they were charged with electricity. Everyone held their breath.

After a long silence, Lan Yee looked up and spoke, "Ken, you came to see me." That scratchy voice, that unmistakable Hokkien accent, Ken knew all too well. It was his mother's.

"Ma." It was the only word he could manage, his emotions in a mess of confusion, joy, sadness and disbelief.

Jin Len gaped in shock.

"You look thinner. You having headaches again? You must take care of yourself," his mother said.

Only his mother and sisters had known about his migraines. His sisters hadn't even known he was coming here. Ken didn't think that they could have spoken to this medium and give her this information.

"Ah Len, I met your father. He said he misses you and your mum very much," his mother continued.

Jin Len's face went pale. Her father had died two years ago. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Ken's mother continued, "I can't stay long. Why did you come to see me?"

That question brought Ken's distracted mind back in focus.

"Ma, Bee Hua has been sick since the funeral. She's been asking for you. Maybe you can talk to her in her dreams."

Bee Hua was Ken's younger sister. She cried for days when their mother died. Everyone thought she would stop after the burial but the episodes worsened. She became hysterical and even suicidal. Numerous physicians and psychiatrists were consulted but none could provide a cure until Jin Len's aunt suggested to contact their mother's ghost through a medium for an answer.

Being an educated man, Ken scoffed at such hocus-pocus and discouraged his elder sister, Bee Lian, from pursuing the option. Eager to help, Jin Len's aunt had stepped in to convince him with fantastical testimonies. By the end of the three-hour conversation, Ken was intrigued by the idea even though he did not believe it.

Deep down, he wished to speak with his mother. At last, curiosity and the sense of longing got the better of him, and with Jin Len's help, a secret meeting was set up.

His mother sighed. "I can't help Ah Hua. Only she can help herself."

"What do you mean?"

"She's behaving like that because she feels guilty."

"What did she do?"

"She let me go."

"What do you mean?"



“She unplugged my ventilator and watched me die.”

“She *killed* you!”

No answer came from his mother. A heavy silence settled in the room.

Is that true? How could sister do that? Why? Ken thought.

“You ask her yourself,” his mother said, reading his thoughts. “Anyway, it doesn’t really matter now. I’m dead.”

All the things that he had wanted to say to his mother were blown out of his mind with this sudden revelation.

“Anything else you want to ask me?” she continued.

He blurted out the only thing that came to mind, “Do you need us to burn anything for you—more paper money or clothes?”

“No need. I have to go now. Try to visit my grave as often as you can.”

“Yes, Ma. I will.”

Lan Yee started shaking. It lasted less than a minute before she became still again. Mei Mei came into the room at that precise moment to usher Ken and Jin Len out. He paid a fee to the girl before leaving.

The journey back to Kuala Lumpur was paved with silence. Ken and Jin Len were both buried in their own thoughts.

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“What? Are you accusing your sister of murder?” Bee Lian shouted.

“That’s what Ma’s ghost told me,” Ken answered.

“You went behind my back and consulted the medium while you told me not to believe in this nonsense. Now you are accusing your sister of murder!”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore. I just want to find out why she has been behaving like a mad woman since Ma died.”

“She’s gone crazy because she is sad. She misses Ma. I miss her too.”

He swallowed hard and remained silent. He missed his mother, too. Dearly.

Bee Lian sniffled and drew a deep breath before adding, “Do you know how Ah Hua and I take care of Ma? After she suffered her stroke, we had to bathe her, feed her, massage her and do everything for her. When she fell and hit her head, we had to stay in the hospital to care for her. It was so tiring. What do you know about that? You, living your free and easy life in Australia. Just because you’re paying for her medical expenses, you think you can say whatever you like!”

Cheeks flushed and veins pulsing at her neck, Bee Lian stood in front of her brother. Ken knew any further discussion would be pointless. “You’re right. Let’s just-”

“Hah! You think you can just take back what you said, just like that? Your sister and I have been caring for Ma all these years. Besides the money and coming back twice a year to see her, what have you done for her? Where were you when she was sick? Where were you when she needed help getting out of bed? Have you even cooked a single meal for her? How about taking her to the clinic? Your sister and I were there for her all the time. We have done everything we could for her. How could you even think of your sister as a murderer?”

Ken had no reply to that. Bee Lian's heavy breathing filled the air, blanketing him with guilt.

"He's right."

Those two words pierced the air like lightning. Ken and Bee Lian turned around to find Bee Hua standing at the kitchen doorway.

"I did it."

"Ah Hua, you're talking nonsense," Bee Lian said.

"I couldn't watch Ma suffer anymore. She was just lying there, not moving, like a corpse."

"Stop it, Ah Hua!" Bee Lian marched towards her.

"I couldn't take it anymore. So I pulled out the tube and watched her-"

Bee Lian covered her sister's mouth. "No, no, NO!"

The weight of the truth brought the two sisters to the floor in tears. Stunned, Ken sat there, barely catching his breath as the torrent of truth pushed him further down the pit of despair.

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Ken watched the Boeing 777-200 taxi into the parking space beside gate C7. He breathed deeply to ease the tightness in his chest. Another thirty minutes and he would leave this place of sorrow.

After the chilling confession, Bee Hua never said another word. She was lost in her own world. Since then, Bee Lian had avoided him and spoke to him in gruff tones whenever she needed to. Ken knew his sister was still angry at him for exposing the truth. His deed—even

though he never intended it to be that way—discredited all they had done for their mother, far more than his efforts through the years.

The jealousy towards him for being the favourite child who could do no wrong to their mother had hardened into animosity. Ken wanted to do the right thing, but he couldn't send his own flesh and blood to jail—or worse, a mental asylum.

The flight attendant at the gate called for the passengers to board. Ken collected his leather bag and got in line, entered the plane and found his seat by the window. In the last two months, he had lost everything that had tied him to this place called home—his mother to death and his sisters to insanity and hatred. There was nothing to tie him down now. As the pressure built in his ears with the plane's ascent, the burden on his back slid away. He knew he would not regret his decision to never return again.

\*Note: *Mun Mai* is the Cantonese phrase for a session with a medium usually to contact the spirits from the underworld to speak with the living.

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## **“No One Remembers the Khmer Rouge”**

by Mark Knego

The moisture in the air and the heat, washing over the jungle in waves, bring life to the tropical landscape, with its palm trees, multi-colored speckled birds, scarlet flowers and minute, buzzing insects. It is something I remember immediately. The humidity sticks to you but flies off as soon as you take a ride on a moto. The climate, with all these elements, helps create the jungle and forests, with their mystery, invitation, and fear, which I remember too. It hits me as I step off the plane onto the tarmac and rejuvenates me. I feel so alive.

I'm glad I've come back to Cambodia—I haven't been here since I left with my family thirty-five years ago to escape the Khmer Rouge Genocide of the late 1970s. I needed to return for reasons that are obvious to me; I didn't want to lose the memories of my early childhood, as awful as they are. And I wondered how much of them would I remember on this trip? Well, of course! I expected to remember just about everything. How could you forget an experience like that?

*The black dog soldiers came at night and brought with them the smoke and the fire that blacked out the stars so you couldn't hear them. The next morning, the sun did not come up, and you couldn't see, you couldn't play, everything was burning, and nothing would grow for three years. Everyone was thirsty, and it was very dark; and people spent all day looking for pictures of their family members who had disappeared or become ghosts.*

My name is Sopheary, but everybody just calls me Sophie. I live with my mom in L.A. and do software design for a tech firm. There is a Cambodian community here. As an unspoken rule we used to not talk about Khmer Rouge time because it was too painful, but recently we have come around to talk about it a little. My mom still refuses to, though. She

just says she forgot everything, but I can speak about it with my Cambodian friends. With the distance of thirty years and a few books and movies about that period that seem to validate our collective experience, we feel more comfortable speaking about it—not necessarily with others, but amongst ourselves—because no one else would ever be able to understand or relate. We need to remember our history, good and bad, right? Just like the monk said, there are good butterflies and bad butterflies, but they are all still butterflies. And it is important because the leaders of that time are on trial now, and we want them to be punished. Even after all this time, one drop of justice is better than none, and the world needs to know just how horrible they really were.

So I came back to my homeland to recover my youth and see what I could remember, and, I admit, to enjoy myself. The temples at Angkor Wat are incredible. I just finished my second day here. It has been exhausting, but what an amazing place! I especially love the large rock faces of the Bayon. They are magnificent, regal and serene. And the apsara dancers. I am proud to be from Cambodia when I see all of this.

*Old pictures of missing people were scattered everywhere, in houses and across the farmland, on the ground, in the trees, stuck in the mud, sometimes, even pictures under water. When you picked them up, flowers would grow right on that spot. And people were calling for water.*

Actually, I have brought a photo of myself from that time: an old black and white taken in a refugee camp showing a thin, barefoot, unhappy little girl in a ripped adult shirt and shorts.

*We would pick up the pictures, clean them carefully, cover them with a cloth, and hide them in a shed where the soldiers would not think to look for them. We needed the pictures as a trace of our missing loved ones, some of whom we would see again, and some of whom we would not.*

According to my map, a Khmer Rouge Victim's Memorial lies just beyond the temple complex. I'm surprised it's so close to Angkor Wat. I ask my driver about it, and he says he knows where it is. And we're off.

We spirit along a road cut straight through the jungle. A crew of female workers is laying down more asphalt to one side. They all wear hats and are encompassed in the kramaa, the traditional Cambodian red scarf.

Soon we arrive at the site. Hmm, it looks more like a rest stop for travelers than a memorial to genocide, with a restaurant with plastic chairs, swaying trees, pretty flowers, as well as a few people and dogs evaporating in the wavering heat. The white pebble parking lot makes it feel like a beach. There is no registration, no staff, no security. In the center of the venue in the middle of the parking lot is a large, rectangular glass case. That must be it, I say to myself. I go to take a look.

Inside the case there are a lot of skulls—I mean, a *lot* of human skulls. They are jumbled atop each other, bashed and beaten, cracked and crushed, smashed and splintered; neglected, forgotten, ignored. Sometimes the glass is so scuzzy you can't see inside, and in some places, it's cracked.

That's it.

I look around. There is nothing else.

This is the memorial.

I look again. A few people lounge calmly. Nobody is standing. The sun is really hot. A dog peers at me from the shade.

I pause and then sigh. There doesn't seem to be much else about Cambodia's great tragedy in which 1.7 million locals lost their lives to their fellow countrymen when the communist Khmer Rouge took control of the cities and emptied them of people to start a doomed, agro-utopian experiment.

A handwritten sign says there are 1,317 skulls in the case, and that all the people came from this area.

I look up and see that a few homes are visible beyond the tree line and fence, and I begin to construct the lives of these people whose skulls are inside the case. Did the souls in this case live in these houses right here? Who lived in that house with the yellow awning? Who lived in the one with the twin palms? Which family lived in that big three-story one? Where did the parents sleep, and where was the kid's bedroom?

Young tourists sit at the base of the memorial checking their smart phones. One beeps. Its owner smiles and shares the screen with another tourist. Their eyes sparkle with pleasure, twinkling, blue-tinted diamonds.

I look at them staring into the phone. I'm starting to get weird. I walk around behind them to catch a glimpse of their screen. Some Asian pop star in a tight black skirt is dancing around, sticking her big ass out shaking it at the screen while wagging her finger at the boys.

What is this fucking bullshit? You think this is hilarious? Go fuck yourselves. I'm getting hot; am I hyperventilating? I'm pissed, and sometimes I have panic attacks. Fortunately, I haven't had one on this trip so far, but I'm worried. However, I compose myself, take a deep breath, and turn back to the case where I notice a small skull at the bottom.

I gaze at it a second. It's brown and dirty but intact. It must be a child. Is your mommy and daddy in there with you, honey? What about your brothers and sisters, are they in there too? Which house did you live in? Are your toys still there, or did you get to take them with you? A pair of faded, pink, child-sized earrings rests on the bottom of the case.

*After the Khmer Rouge fell, people would recover the photos, write their names and "has anybody seen this person?" on the pictures, and nail them to trees, posts and buildings by the roadside.*

I see that on the left side of the display there are paintings of scenes from the Khmer Rouge era. I move over to take a closer look. The paintings are, in fact, small, intimate, nicely done watercolors. You need to stand close to the case to see them clearly, which increases their intimacy. One of the paintings shows a soldier bayoneting a man. Another shows bodies near a small stream, coloring it a lovely vermilion. They are in a primitive, yet effective, style; the shading is nicely done and is more gestural in the background. The artist has a nice variety of hues in his color choice, generally, greens and browns as befits the landscape, with off-reds and bright outlines. They are almost religious in effect. A red



aura around a soldier. A blue halo enveloping a thin girl kneeling in a field with a baby. A rotting child's corpse, orange.

There are also black and white photographs of Khmer Rouge cadre in groups, dancing in formation, eating meals together, work crews. There are also portraits and snapshots of regular people from that time, perhaps from this area and maybe even those from inside this case.

I take out the photo of the little girl from the refugee camp—who almost seems like an entirely different person to me now—and hold it up to see how she compares to the people in these pictures. She fits right in.

I am really unnerved, but life goes on without us at times. Last night while taking a taxi to a far-off restaurant, I was caught in a pack of young people on motorbikes—two per bike, the guys driving and the girls riding sidesaddle. They were all dressed up, going out on the town. The guys had tucked in their shirts, and the girls were dressed smartly, clutching their pink and white bags, sacred talismans on their laps. The guys were laughing, and the girls were kicking their feet in the air as they rode. It was a timeless, beautiful picture—going out, being young and immortal, floating up into the stars, never to come back down.

The tourists giggle. Again. For a second, I feel like I might cry since I'm not angry anymore. I myself lost three family members.

I ask my driver if I can walk through the nearby village, and he says go ahead. I'm in a foul mood as I stroll out of the parking lot. I'm seeing red, so I light a cigarette. Actually, a lovely warm breeze is blowing, and it's a nice area. It seems like a nice place to grow up as a kid—peaceful and quiet with lots of insects, pets, and animals to mess around with.

There are lots of trees and fragrant bushes. And dogs, pigs, and chickens are poking about, sniffing at nothing in particular in an eternal never-ending search for something that is never discovered. Most houses are on stilts and are quite well-kept. I wonder if the older ones date back to the Khmer Rouge's year zero. The heat curls under the awnings and smothers everything. An old woman sits on a stoop and returns my smile. I want to ask her about the memorial but think better of it.

*After the fall of the black dog soldiers, it took months to reach the Thai border. Then years and lives slowly evaporated in refugee camps. Sometimes the black dogs even followed us there, and we lived in even more fear that we would be turned into nothing more than another picture nailed onto a tree somewhere. But years later we could buy a camera on the black market and take nice photos of ourselves. This is how we escaped our past.*

In a few short minutes, I am out of the village. There is a restaurant ahead, and, feeling my hunger, I decide to check out the menu. They have burgers! I am sold. I enter and am ushered to the veranda on the second level.

The staff is nothing but waitresses in their late teens and all wearing the same uniform—dark green jeans; white polo shirts with the restaurant’s name and logo, “The Bayon,” in green; green belts; and hair pulled back into ponytails.

Modern, kinetic sculptures, they are efficient with minimal movement. One of them comes to my table and gives me a menu.

“Would you like something to drink, ma’am?”

I order a burger with an Angkor beer and glance around at my surroundings. The restaurant is a little more upscale than others in the area and has nice pictures and posters on the walls. Angkor Wat through psychedelic camera filters. Classical dancers and Coca-Cola ads with Cambodian models who stand in rice fields in perfectly pressed, traditional farmer clothing with kramaa, gleaming and robust. The paradise that never happened. Actually the Cambodian land is incredibly fertile, with a great fish-filled lake, the Tonle Sap, and the Mekong River, which floods twice a year, spreading nutrients. I remember reading that pre-war, the land was so productive, farmers would only work seven months a year, then relax with their families the rest of the time. Maybe we had our paradise but never knew it?

On a wall leading to the main room, I see a series of old photos and portraits, black and white, now vintage photography. And on the opposite wall are large, color digital prints of the fresh-faced staff beaming into the future. Their names are written underneath their photos; my waitress is named Saran. They all look great and happy, too. Saran, what do you know about Khmer Rouge time? If I tell you that I lived here then, would you be surprised?

She is back in a minute with my beer, then stands to the side in attendance to me. It feels a little strange. We are the only people on the veranda at the moment, and she's facing me while looking over her pink nails. I realize I can talk to her, and what I want to talk to her about is what happened in the past. She can help me connect with it; she can be my doorway.

"Excuse me, but may I ask a question?"

She is startled but meets my gaze happily.

"Who are those people?" I gesture to the vintage photos over the portico.

Saran turns to look at them, then shrugs.

"I don't know. Just people, old people."

"From around here?"

"Maybe, I guess. I don't know."

"Are you from this village ... do you live in one of these houses here?"

Her face crinkles as she pauses a moment.

"Do you live near here? May I ask, where do you live?"

"Oh, not near here. I live in a house kind of far away. No, it's not near here."

"How do you get to work?"

"I ride a bicycle." She smiles then returns to the kitchen, coming back with my salad and burger.

"Thank you." I take a few bites. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other.

"Did you grow up in this area?"

"No. We are from Battambang."

"So you moved here with your parents?"

"Yes, I did." She smiles beatifically with each answer, an undiscovered female bodhisattva disguised as a waitress in an above-average restaurant in a tourist site in Cambodia.

"How is the salad?"

"Great," I say then some falls on the table. I clean it with my napkin as she watches intently.

"Do you mind if I ask, do you go to school, and what do your parents do?"

Saran lives with her parents who are farmers, and their house is a couple miles away. She goes to school in the morning then works at The Bayon in the afternoon. They have a TV. Everybody has a bicycle.

“I want to go to college so I can get a good job in a hotel. If I can get a good job in Phnom Penh, then I can have my own apartment. And with the rest of the money, I can help my parents.” She dispenses all the information with a cheery demeanor.

I have more questions, and she fills me in on the details of her life. “And Saran, may I ask, do you ever go to the Khmer Rouge memorial next door? Do you know what happened in that time?”

“No, that’s the past. I’m very young” she chirps brightly.

“Do they teach you about it in school?”

“Not really. Only a little.”

“What do they say?”

“It’s Vietnam’s fault. They did everything. And China.”

I calmly eat my burger and mull over continuing our conversation in this direction while Saran stands right before me, leaning against a table, marveling at her nails again while smiling illuminatingly. A large tree frond sticks through an open window, branching right over the dining tables. It is reflected in a window that also looks into the kitchen. The angle and the light are perfect at this moment as the branch creates a gorgeous opaque silver/dark green abstract pattern on the glass.

“By the way, Saran, I’m from Cambodia, too” I tell her. “My name is Sopheary,” I say, as she freezes for a second in delight then explodes in smile. “I am from Sihanoukville.”

“Amazing. Can you say amazing, is this correct?”

“Yes, it is correct. Can I ask you another question?”

“Sure, why not? This is fun. What do you want?”

“Do your parents ever talk about the Khmer Rouge time?”

“No, they don’t. They say they can’t remember mostly.”

“I see. Interesting,” I nod.

I really need a cigarette.

“Can you remember? Can you remember the Khmer Rouge time?” Saran asks me.

“Yes, I can,” I say after a moment.

She looks at me with a blank expression, then smiles and nods.

“When I want to.”

For a second she and I lock eyes. Our gaze is interrupted by a big noise as a family with many kids storms into the restaurant. Saran leaps at their arrival, her ponytail fluttering behind her.

After I finish eating, I pay and wave goodbye to Saran. I light up as soon as I’m outside, take a deep drag of my cigarette, and walk back through the village. It’s getting dark and a few lights are already on. Two local teens on a stoop check a phone together, the screen’s pale blue light illuminating their faces. The scene would make a nice picture, I think, so I ask them if I can take their photo. They agree. I reflect again on what a nice place this is and how it wouldn’t be too bad to live here.

I return to look at the memorial case one last time. The skulls are silent. The tourists and their cell phones are gone. *Good riddance*. My driver stirs and starts up the auto rickshaw. He pulls over to me, and I climb in the back.

“Good visit?” he asks.

“Yes, very good.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you want to take a picture of the memorial?”

“Uh, not really. But thanks for asking.”

“OK, but Khmer Rouge very famous.”

“Yes, I know. Khmer Rouge very famous. Very famous all over the world, even though no one seems to be able to remember them,” I say. Besides, I don’t need another picture. I already have one, and there is forever a feature length film in Technicolor running through my brain. My voice fades as the driver wheels the buggy out onto the street where it joins the never-ending stream of motos, rickshaws, trucks, and other vehicles blasting out of the parking lots of the past into the highways of the future, taking some of what they had beheld and learned, and leaving the rest behind to be forgotten, to slowly disappear into a forgotten eternity. And as the ride cools the humid air, I think to myself, if we blamed them for that—if we judged them negatively—what kind of people would we be? Would we be better than them?

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“In a Vegas Bar”**

by Jasmine Reyes

It had been another scorching day, close to breaking heat wave records from the 1930s. The overly air-conditioned bar at the edge of an outdated casino floor, however, felt close to freezing. Not a fan of extreme weather of any variety, Sylvia was trapped. If it wasn't for the steady flow of clientele that kept her in perpetual motion throughout most of the workday, she would probably turn blue and die from hypothermia by the end of her shift.

It wasn't as if she wasn't used to extremes. Las Vegas was a land of excesses of all types. The people who populated the bar came from all walks of life, socioeconomic classes, and corners of the globe. They also came for a diversity of agendas, many of which Sylvia had a hard time rationalizing. Despite the seventeen months she had worked in Vegas, she doubted that she would ever fully understand the people who came to spend all their money and/or compromise their morals.

She missed her mother, her aunts and cousins, and, most of all, her son. Davao seemed like a world away from where she was now. Sure, the money was good enough to set some aside for her future and her son's schooling, but at times she wondered if it was worth all the trouble. After all, Uncle Sam took his unfair share of her hard-earned money every time she received a paycheck. *Bastard.*

“Sylvia, darling? It looks like Mr. Davis's drink is getting low. See if you can get him to buy another one before he leaves.”

Her boss, Chad, was tolerable, but he was a cheapskate. Most casino bars offered their patrons free drinks—comps—for being regular customers or so-called high rollers. But not Chad. He gave nothing away for free, or, at least, not without strings attached.

“Sure thing, boss.”

While Sylvia engaged in some light flirting and goading to get Mr. Davis—one of the bar's most frequent customers—to buy another drink, she heard a group of Pinays laughing and joking among themselves walk in front of the bar. They distracted her midsentence from her conversation with Mr. Davis. She took note of their clothing, their purses, the hints of their homeland in their American-English accents. These were Americans. She figured that they had never even spent more than a month of their lives in the Philippines ... if that at all.

“Are you alright, Sylvia?”

Sylvia snapped back. “Sorry, Mr. Davis. I’m a bit scatterbrained today. So what was that you said? Another martini?” She tried to recover her previous goal before having been distracted.

“No, dear. I gotta get going. Just put it on my tab, why don’t ya? I’m short on cash today.” He shook his wallet, indicating that it was empty. “It was a rough morning, but I’m planning on turning that around real soon.”

Sylvia shrugged. “Now Mr. Davis, you know Chad doesn’t like the idea of tabs. He’ll get mad at me if I tell him that.”

But Mr. Davis had already stood and waddled his obtuse body toward the casino floor. He shook his hand dismissively at her. It didn’t really matter. He would be back the next day—if not later in the evening. It wasn’t as if he would disappear completely. Still, Chad would take it out on her for sure. She just hoped that he wouldn’t notice the cash register being short of Mr. Davis’s payment until later in the evening. That would, at least, keep Chad from slipping into a foul mood until later into her shift.

“Sylvia, darling? Customers. Don’t keep them wondering if they are welcome here.”

Sylvia dropped off the empty glasses from Mr. Davis’s table in the bar’s sink and hurried over to the boisterous group sitting in the corner. She didn’t even need to look at them to know that they were the same group of Pinays who had walked by earlier. She inhaled deeply hoping that they would not be of the same snobbish variety as many of the other Pinays she had met.

“Hey ladies. What can I get you?” Sylvia spoke in a cheery tone, trying to copy the tone and timbre of other waitresses that she had heard on TV. In her mind, at least, she was successful at mimicking them.

But the women did not answer her. They stopped talking and shifted their full attention to Sylvia as if she had interrupted an important conversation. When nobody came forth with their drink order—or any sound, for that matter—Sylvia repeated herself.

“How are you ladies doing today? What can I get you to drink?”

The continued silence created an awkward situation. Sylvia wanted to believe it was awkward for these women, who seemed to lack basic socialization skills. However, she didn’t notice that any of them looked concerned by their lack of a response. She contemplated repeating herself a third time or simply telling them to call her over when they had decided what they wanted, but one of them finally spoke up.

“I don’t know yet. Can you, like, tell us what your specials are or something?”

Sylvia saw this as progress even though she had nothing to reply. Chad, in his cheapskate wisdom, decided that happy hour specials only attracted lower-paying crowds. Wanting to avoid this, he did away with specials and discounts entirely. Sylvia wasn’t sure if the higher costs compensated for the likely lack of repeat customers, but the bar was usually busy enough to not need tricks to lure people in.

“Actually, we don’t have any specials at the moment,” Sylvia apologized. “But the bartender can mix a good banana daiquiri if you’d like that.”

Again silence.

“Or pretty much any type of daiquiri if you don’t like banana,” she added.

The same woman who spoke earlier rolled her eyes. Luckily, one of the other women took the suggestion.

“What about, like, a mango daiquiri? Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“Absolutely!”

“Oh my God. That sounds so good!”

“I want one too!”

*Finally*, Sylvia thought. All it took was for one to speak up before the others followed.

“All right then. I’ll bring back a few mango daiquiris for you.” Sylvia walked off and passed their order to Chad.

“Sylvia, darling, could you give me a hand? I don’t have the mangoes cut yet. Chop some up for me, why don’t ya?”



She nodded in expectation. Chad rarely cut the fruit before it was needed since it spoiled quicker after being cut. He saw it as a risk to cut a fruit before absolutely necessary.

Luckily, Sylvia was quick with cutting fruit, a skill she had learned from her mother. She pulled out the mangoes and peeled the skin with a sharp knife before cutting large chunks off from the rind. Chad blended it all together and poured a round of mango daiquiris for Sylvia to take over to the ladies. The Pinays watched Sylvia as she crossed the floor with their drinks.

“Here you go, ladies. Some refreshing, mango daiquiris.”

As Sylvia placed the glasses in front of each of them, one of the ladies addressed Sylvia. “You were, like, really fast cutting those mangoes. Are you, like, the cook too?”

The ladies giggled.

Sylvia smiled, taking the comment as a compliment. “Oh, no. I’ve always been handy with a knife. Whenever I got hungry, I used to cut up a mango for a snack. But mangoes are so expensive here in the desert, you know?”

“Are they?” The lady asked the others.

“I don’t know. I’ve never noticed. Have you?”

“No.”

“Me neither. I didn’t know you could, like, eat them raw.”

“Oh my God. Me neither!”

Sylvia hesitated. She doubted getting into this conversation was going to enlighten anyone. But she was feeling social today.

“I remember them being so cheap. My mother would always cut up mangoes for me when I was a kid. Didn’t yours?”

Her comment was met with blank stares. She tried to cover herself.

“I mean, back in the Philippines, of course.”

One of the ladies snorted. “I thought you were from the Philippines.”

“Oh my God! I thought so too.”

“I knew it as well.”

Sylvia smiled meekly. “Yep. But I’ve been here in Vegas for a little while now. You all?”

More blank stares.

“We’re American.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Sylvia replied. “I thought you were also Pinay like me. My bad.”

The lady with the frizziest hair spoke. “For a while? You mean a few months? I bet you are, like, working here to pay for your extended family back there. A kid or two?”

Sylvia’s eyes widened momentarily, but she was able to control the spike in her temper. She had met many women like them working in Vegas. If they weren’t wealthy Filipinos on vacation, then they were American-born or American-raised Filipinos. In both cases, they acted as if Sylvia was of a completely different species from them. What was it, she wondered, they had to prove?

Sylvia excused herself abruptly by telling the ladies to enjoy their drinks. She could hear them talking about her as she walked off. She busied herself behind the bar and tried not to make eye contact. But each time she looked over at their table, at least one of them was staring back at her.

Sylvia could feel the tears well up in her eyes. She couldn’t care less what these ladies had said to her or about her. But snarky attacks like theirs—and of others—added up in her conscious. She missed her family greatly and wanted to do her best for her son for his future. And for her own. It was hard to understand why others would not be supportive of her efforts. Or, at the very least, would not refrain for nasty comments without caring to find out more about her situation. But they had her summed up to fit the stereotype of all Filipinas working abroad: a low-wage servant for hire.

“Sylvia, darling, why don’t you go back to that table and see if you can get those ladies to buy some shots or something. They look like a fun group who wouldn’t mind parting with some more of their cash.”

Chad was oblivious to Sylvia’s tear-stained face. But she knew that she was not here for them or for Chad. She was here to do a job, collect a paycheck, and hopefully improve her lot in life. She used a small, paper napkin to dry her tears and headed back over to the table.

Like every other day, she would put up with whatever shit she was dealt. And tomorrow she would do it all over again.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Love in the Midst of Distractions”**

by Lindsay Boyd

I knew she was special when I first laid eyes on her on level 1 of Da Nang’s Ho Motel 2. I had been the premise’s unofficial ‘writer in residence’ for the past month, having elected the central Vietnam coastal city as my location to knuckle down to some week’s solid writing in the midst of a four-month-long trip to Asia.

“Excuse me. Do you mind if I sit there while I check something?”

I lifted my gaze from the computer balanced on my lap to the young woman crossing my vision from right to left. “Of course not. Make yourself comfortable.”

I was on the right-hand side of a three-seater couch positioned by the back wall on level 1. The young woman took the place beside me and, without further ado, turned her attention to her phone.

I would think later it was remarkable we crossed paths. The motel’s Wi-Fi connection had worked well in my fourth-floor room for the first ten to fourteen days of my stay. But an unexpected glitch abruptly upset the smooth running of things, necessitating daily sessions on level 1, the only place in the building where I could still hook up.

It was essential I did so regularly, immersed as I was in pre- and now post-publication strategy for a novel. I supposed the one who had graced my presence had encountered similar technological problems in her room. Busy as we were, neither of us were so intent on what we wished to do on our individual pieces of gadgetry that we could find no time for each other and a different, more old-fashioned, connection.

“What’s your name?”

“Susan.”

I smiled, partial to the habit many young Vietnamese women had of adopting English versions of their names, names they feared might be unpronounceable to

Westerners. I mulled over Susan and concluded it would do fine. "Where are you from, Susan?"

"Hanoi."

In part to return the favour, I told her to call me Lin or Linds, chopping my name from the standard two syllables to one.

"On vacation?" It was a reasonable surmise on my part. The motel sat a few minutes' walk from the heralded sands of My Khe Beach. The other eleven rooms were often occupied by Vietnamese from different parts of the country, especially, as far as I could tell, the north. Susan was in the same boat, with a party of friends and/or family, though I never inquired how many her group consisted of.

"I'm just back home after four years in Taiwan. I teach Chinese."

I admired the fact that one so young could claim that experience. It could not have been common by any means, I thought.

"Happy to be home?"

"Yes."

"I can imagine," I commented, reflecting on my own experience. "I hope the euphoria lasts."

"After being away a long time, it's good to see something of where you're from," I added, a moment later. "It grounds you in a way. Puts everything you've seen abroad in perspective."

When she learnt I was a writer, her eyes lit up. "Could I read something of yours?" That was easily arranged. I delayed not in emailing her the file of a book of short stories I had self-published two years previously. The longer she remained by my side, the harder it became for me not to keep glancing at her. She reminded me of someone, or something.

"Do you speak any Vietnamese?"

I thought of the few words I had committed to memory but ultimately spared her the indignity of my butchered pronunciation, which I was sure it would have been. "I've only picked up the odd word or two, I'm afraid. Terrible, isn't it?"

Yet I was not at all shy in this radiantly beautiful one's company. Quite the contrary. I felt at peace. Another exchange set the seal on the feeling she was inspiring in me.

"Are you travelling alone?"

I had been asked the same thing numerous times over the course of more than twenty years of world travels. I sometimes hesitated to answer, for good reason. In many lands a lone wolf traveller was an enigma. Vietnam was a case in point. I had met Vietnamese unable to comprehend mystery men, or women, who roamed alone, with neither spouse nor children to speak of.

Coming from Susan, the question was a move akin to checkmate on a chess board. If my answer troubled her like it did not a few of her compatriots, my heart would go out to her more than it had already done, and I would want to allay her unease. On the other hand, if she understood ... !

“Yes,” I replied. “Travelling with someone can be good too. But I’ve gotten used to going it alone. Sometimes it’s easier.”

The look she gave me made it clear she understood. And *I* understood that for *her* to have understood, she had to have known what it was like to be the stranger in a strange land. Well, of course she knew what that was like. It stood to reason. In her way she had embraced the loneliness of the wayfaring path and emerged victorious. The eyes of a soul mate, or a help-meet, as they were called in India, were fixed on mine.

\* \* \*

In 2012 during my first visit to Hanoi, I met Hoang, aka Lucy, a single mum with two young children. She was, I knew, in the habit of soliciting liaisons with foreign men via the Internet. She would meet them for a drink or meal and, if the chemistry felt right, then offer a ‘special service’ for which she expected a tip in recompense.

Lucy and I had dinner together during my weeklong stay in the city, though I stressed beforehand that I had no interest in her post-meal service, chemistry or no chemistry.

“That’s okay,” she said. “You’ll be paying anyway.”

I thought it sad she had to revert to borderline prostitution to provide for herself, her children and, I believe, an ailing extended family member. Sadder still that she had acquired such a mercenary view of love.

“I love cash and I love cocks,” she told me. She was unashamedly upfront. She had sent me two photos: one of her ‘in the act’, the other a close-up of a sacred part of her anatomy.

I had no quibbles about treating Lucy to a meal. She was pleasant company at the table and again afterwards as we made a partial circuit of Hoan Kiem Lake. More introspective as the evening wore on, she floated a question about men—or relationships, or a particular man in her life—that I made an attempt to answer.

*He was a Frenchman who had, Lucy said, already ‘f...d’ her. From what I could gather, he was a lost soul untrusting of his feelings who had, in her, met someone as lost and out of touch with her feelings.*

Lucy and I met just the once but maintained contact for the better part of the next couple of years. She reached a point, she explained, of exasperation and fatigue with the round of being used and using and determined to change her ways. She put her hopes in finding a sounder relationship in her life. I could only hope she succeeded.

###

“I’m a little crazy,” Alice said, completing her snapshot self-portrait of her personality.

“Nothing’s wrong with a little crazy.”

Alice had doubts about that. We were in the same place where I had met Susan. Alice, like her, appeared while I was working away on my computer. Tall for a Vietnamese, she was chatty and vivacious, possessed in full measure of the trademark friendliness. A recent graduate of international relations, she was helping out at Ho Motel 1 and, from time to time, its sister venue, working diligently to repay the financial support her parents provided during her days as a student.

“I thought you were a teacher,” she said, when I explained what I was, an actuality that left her starstruck.

We had barely known each other more than a few minutes when she was declaring what a great guy I was—to herself, to me and to anyone who might be within earshot. I made up my mind when we met a second time a day or two later that I would call on her at Ho Motel 1 and perhaps invite her for a meal.

I had not yet acted on this resolve when we intersected on level 1 a third time. She was with two friends. Alice gave me an effusive welcome and then rejoined her companions. Concentrating on my work as best I could, I cocked an ear each time I heard

her repeat a line from the chorus of a song by the recently deceased Prince. She was listening to the number on her phone.

“I was going to pay you a visit.” I caught Alice’s attention as she crossed the lobby a few minutes later. “But you beat me to it.”

“You were? Why?”

“Why not? Ho Motel 1’s over by the market, right?”

She explained that she no longer worked there. She had moved into a place with friends a short distance away.

“But why would you want to visit *me*?”

I spelt it out for her. “To say hello. A social call.”

She looked at me, genuinely moved. “You’re *so* nice. Not too many people would think of that.”

\* \* \*

“I’d like to help you in Vietnam.”

Following an extended period of quiet, the mellifluous voice—the sweetest music—returned. Had one of my hands been free, I would have taken Susan’s hand and squeezed it in gratitude. Then again, maybe it was best I did not. Would I have been able to let go?

“Thank you,” I said, looking plumb in her dark eyes. “That’s kind of you. I go in about a month. Heading south when I leave Da Nang.” Susan was silent. “But I’m sure I’ll be back,” I added, smiling.

Moments later, the interlude drew to an end. “I must go now,” she said, rising. Her tone was excusatory, like the one she used when she entered my world. What was uppermost in her mind were my feelings. She was off to the beach with her fellow travellers. The mid-afternoon hour was close to the time when the Vietnamese—locals and vacationers alike—converged en masse on the Da Nang shoreline.

“It was a pleasure talking to you,” I said, in farewell.

Minutes later I watched a sunglasses-wearing figure make her way down the stairs leading from the reception to the street, one of a group of several people. Most probably it was Susan. Pictures she posted later showed her by the water in a cute large hat and knee-length cotton frock—different to the shorts she had on when she sat beside me. The portraits were those of a comely local back in her element.

\* \* \*

The memory she called up haunted me in the days afterwards. Had I dreamt her? She had come and gone so quickly. But when I took a moment to appraise her picture 'albums,' I realised I had not imagined the qualities that leapt out at me. The identical gentleness was there to behold. In two or three of the photos she looked pensive but not in a brooding or maudlin way. At no stage during our minutes together did I intuit she was a sad character. It was rather the pensiveness of a deeply sentient individual, one who took the trouble to penetrate beyond the surface of things.

On a more prosaic level, her face and stock expression reminded me of the glamorous film actress Franka Potente. I alerted her to the fact, forwarding a shot of the film star. She's way more beautiful than me, Susan responded. I can't agree with you on that, I said.

The more I studied her eyes in the photo that highlighted them best, the clearer it became. The quality, the 'something,' she cued me into was pure ethereal beauty. I had been blessed to encounter the likes of it on a couple of occasions over the years.

In a novel written years before, I had penned the line, 'no-one could have opened their eyes to the world with more beauty in them.' Such was Susan for me. She was the figure in the Dante sonnet, 'who has come down from heaven to earth to show forth a miracle.' Had I endeavoured to draw a representation of the eyes of a Divine Mother figure, I would have sketched eyes like hers.

\* \* \*

"Do you think we'll meet again?"

I was in Saigon, talking to her on the phone as she prepared to eat dinner with her family in distant Hanoi. My eleven-week stay in her country was a night away from ending. The phone connection was less than brilliant but an improvement on one obtained nights before. The melody of her voice was discernible.

"Yes," I answered, "of course we will."

We talked briefly of our respective plans. I was in flux—my perennial state of being as a writer and world traveller—and so was she as she contemplated the prospect of more time in her beloved Taiwan, truly her home away from home. How might we coincide? That was the question, and in a loose sort of way I posited ideas.



Years ago I had read Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*. Careful analysis of the book taught me a great deal. The thesis that love was not something one fell into and out of ran counter to popular culture myths but resonated. In its place, the author argued that love was an *attitude* one could learn and apply to one's whole life. Love was a verb that, like any *doing* word, required will to be enacted. It was far from a passive state that may or may not befall an individual in life. Ever since taking the book to heart I had sought to fashion, as far as humanly possible, that attitude in my life.

I was ripe for the challenge inherent in 'willing' to love Susan, which was the challenge implicit in loving in general. I had no intention of letting her stray from my orbit. At least not without a fight. Her question about our meeting again encapsulated my heartfelt wish. Was it hers too, perhaps?

I hung up the phone thinking, as I had done the afternoon we met, that I could have entrusted her with anything without bearing witness to a diminution in her love and understanding. This was not a love fated to blaze a moment and then burn out like a shooting star. This was a glimpse of something divine.

Hello, Susan!

\*\*\*\*\*

# “Terrence Taylor’s Saigon Stories”

by Harry Hodge

## Terrence Taylor's Saigon Stories

SGN  
SAIGON COMICS

STORY: HARRY HODGE  
ART: JIN NGUSEN



\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Autobiography”**

by Mai Hoang

He derived a certain (sinister) pleasure from looking at the picture.

Or

it could have been relief.

Dear Mr. M.,

*Questions or accusations?*

Did it feel good to sit between us, an arm (not bandaged) wrapped around our (not  
napalmed)

shoulders did it feel like harmony like victory like  
psychedelic-fucking destiny? Of course,

I know you are not the kind to brandish laurels

you are

more of the kind who skunked out of it & meanwhile

the orange seeped through foliage twisted some spines crushed some fetuses & meanwhile  
my to-be (agent) uncle, naked, shipped to an island.

When I see you, I see wounds & fresh bleeding, bruises in your hair, a certain timorousness  
of

tongue.

I want you to heal, more than anything, I want to grant you catharsis (a blessing), though  
you took the easy way out

didn't you?

You & your precious plane, you flew up like how

my uncle

blew up

*Definitely not blaming you for any of this.*

I have an eye for symbolism & in that picture you are sitting in the middle

70 now,

an arm around Sonny a.k.a Son, whose grandfather Comrade \_\_\_ a.k.a \_\_\_ fought for the

“Democratic Republic” (you know he’s cursing it too, right, like every good citizen does behind closed doors)

& then there’s Minh.

Saigonese before Vietnamese, Yellow before Red though neither exists anymore but in

Paris love

songs

(sold on the black market)

so what is Minh exactly?

Funny though, how we were united in New Hampshire -

North, South

& an American. Fall 2016. You would think (looking at the picture)

that neither of it ever happened. I would think

that you would like to think so, that you are thinking so, that you are

fooling yourself.

Have a nice weekend.

Yours sincerely,

M

He made three copies of the picture and sent her two. She found them six months later, sandwiched between pages ninety-seven and ninety-eight of *The Vietnam Reader*.

## “U.X.O. Sawyers”

by Mai Hoang

Aftermath: fallen sidewalk pigments = a big crate. And in the crate, an umbrella  
(or its fossil). Wooden handle buried in exhaust,  
decaying cloth consumed by moths. The cops turn over pebbles to find more objects

of the mundane kind - milk bottles, detonators, underwear,  
hugging the vacancy of a body exonerated.

A face. Shrapnel frozen in their orbits

after fleshy collisions with bent-over torsos. BOOM! Imagine sea urchin  
rays growing from bright orange, s60 typeface, though in all honesty no comic book  
explosion  
can match this one

in comicalness. Five-meter rash. He could see it at the back of his mind like an  
underthought,  
and his body, too, flying in a million directions while the street vendor chanted, existential  
*bánh chưng bánh giò đây* and free. His dad had died the same way, or

rather, his dad had been forced to die, while he ... he didn't mind it too much. Puckered  
upperlips

butchered bones bulging eyes copy pasted excerpts  
from propaganda literature. Or nightmares. Mere occupational

hazard. He didn't mind it too much  
as long as there was

U.X.O.

Lifeline.

*A bowl of blood for a bowl of rice.*

\*Note: *U.X.O.* is unexploded ordnance, scrap metal.

## “The Lesson”

by Mai Hoang

Ah-may taught me to love  
Maung Maung and Ma Ma, tender their limbs  
like my own, fetch lotus wreaths  
for raven hair. Laugh.  
But in doing so, whisper -

“Beware! The tablas are drumming.  
Look at your hands.

These hands  
can cover your chest, your saffron robe  
(wooden beads weaving  
like *rubies* between fingers). Or they can cover  
your face, as you try in desperation  
to turn from the shine of the Crescent Moon  
that ties a big star round her neck.  
Look at your feet.

These feet  
can carry you to temple Mahabodhi, where  
Gautama sat under a pipal tree (and became  
Buddha). Or they can carry you to river Irrawaddy,  
torso sinking under the blue-mixed-with-crimson  
O child! That is your blood and *flee*  
the word stitched to your unholy kasaya,  
your mantra cherished so long now torn you must be



Careful.”

So I told Maung and Ma,  
there are bloodhounds all around there are bloodhounds  
in our land there are bloodhounds  
masquerading.

Mince the mask off their face and  
tear the armour off their back and  
free Rakhine of the dirty race and  
wash your hands of the noble task.

\*\*\*

Newspaper pictures: they are floating now,  
on rickety boats in the Andaman.  
Piles of live bodies, rashes, fingernails

gulping air infected with musty seadust -  
the smell of despair. They are Pilgrims!  
(or lies of Western hegemony)

*Allah will save them.*

Ah-may taught me to love  
and I did.

But Ah-may, when the sun sinks below the Himalayas  
spilling light inwards (a black hole or a conch shell),  
when goldfish tire of rivers and grown-ups start to slumber,

I imagine us linking fingers in an *endless knot*  
town to village, valley to mountain, east to west.  
Eyes closed. Along the defiant curves of this land  
will a Barma and Rohingya kid join hands?

\*\*\*

Next day, the purge continues.  
There goes a thousand gongs, I've learned  
Saffron  
is the color of swastika, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Beginning”**

by Ariff Halim

The beginning. There is only  
darkness. Shivering.  
Hands tucked as I  
breathe in the air. Lungs

get pricked. Far, ahead – a  
spark. It is sudden. Without  
warning. Once, twice. Then  
it turns to ember.

It glows against the black. My feet rush  
to it. I stretch my hand and the  
flame rests between my fingers.  
Snug. It does not burn nor does it harm.

I see it. In the flame.  
Visions. Of things past and things  
that have yet to come. They speak  
to me through the

warmth. Stories that must  
be told. Voices that must be heard.  
It teaches and I learn from it.  
I do not know before. Now I do.

I lift my fingers. Everything becomes  
clear. The path that I should take.  
I put one foot forward,  
then the other, and my journey begins.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Dry Time”**

by Victoria Crawford

The rainy season comes soon.  
wait in breathless heat  
for the patient mountain breeze  
to toss the dusty leaves.

Sky hangs bare of swollen clouds.  
earth, cracked, parched, abides.  
Dry, dead leaves tremble downward  
the hot time endures.

City streets burn under foot.  
Bare feet, hot and quick,  
skim along the cruel road  
homeward, cool tile floors.

Cobalt hard skies, still empty,  
unkind to searching eyes,  
air leans in heated layers.  
rainy season will come soon.

## **“Wet Time”**

by Victoria Crawford

Burning melts away.

Thin white streamers sweep, slide by  
no trace left behind  
in sky, blue limitless.

Air trembles, sky cracks  
moisture charged cannonballs.  
Earth opens to sigh  
as pitta-pat drops caress.

Dancing feet rejoice  
Soft-shoeing and tip-tapping  
To rain’s singing voice.  
Puddles call to children—splash!

Umbrellas flower,  
Deluge fulfills the waiting,  
Each shower upon shower  
Acclaims the rainy season.

## **“Rice Burning”**

by Victoria Crawford

farmers burn

dry rice chaff

sun sweats

across flat sky

## **“Poet’s Luck”**

by Victoria Crawford

Ganesha garlanded

in marigolds

Poet’s luck

stoned dumb