

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

## Issue 21

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## Contributor Bios

American [Suzanne Kamata](#) (Twitter: @shikokusue) has lived in Japan for over half of her life. She currently teaches at Tokushima University and writes.

Born and raised in India, **Susheela Menon** has lived in Singapore for 16 years. She currently teaches creative writing, and dabbles in fiction often. One of her recent travel essays on the Maldives was published by a South Asian literary journal.

[Tina Isaacs](#) (Twitter: @isaacs\_tina), a Malaysian litigation lawyer, is currently pursuing a Masters of Fine Arts in creative writing (fiction) from the University of Tampa. In 2015 Tina had short stories published by Malaysian pulp-fiction publisher Fixi Novo in the anthologies *Cyberpunk: Malaysia* and *Hungry in Ipoh*. Her short story, "Dash" (a literary fictional piece), was recently long-listed for the 2015 D.K. Dutt Memorial Award for Literary Excellence. Tina is presently working on her debut novel, a dystopian/social science fiction.

**Robert Pettus** has taught English abroad for the past few years, most recently in Thailand. While there, he had the opportunity to go to Myanmar for a week, which is what he has written about here.

**Cindy Stauffer** was born in Switzerland but raised in Turkey by her Swiss parents. Since obtaining her degree in HR management in 2009, she has been working as a humanitarian aid worker and has done missions in places, including Haiti and Myanmar. She currently lives in Turkey.

**Reed Venrick** teaches English at Chiang Mai University in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and has traveled many times to Laos, including a boat trip down the Mekong to the city of Luang Prabang.

**Razif Nasardin** (Twitter: @RazifNasar) is a banker by day, poetry lover and aspiring fiction writer. He is a 30-year-old Malaysian.

**John Schneider** is a writer and psychologist living and working in Berkeley, California. His poems are published in a number of magazines, most recently in *Glassworks*, spring 2015.

**Fariq Yusoff** has been working for over 4 years in an advertising company. But his passion is in writing poetry. An avid traveler, Fariq finds inspiration from nature and hardships of reality. He believes in a world of sharing. Be it in material items or even experiences. This belief has set him on a path of gratitude, kindness and an imploding feeling of oneness with everything. Writing to simply share his thoughts and feelings with people of the world. His piece, "The Reflection", was published on *Bananawriters.com*.

**James Dott** is a retired elementary school teacher who taught in Oregon, USA and Malaysia. He has traveled throughout SE Asia and now lives and writes in Astoria, Oregon. His chapbook, *A Glossary of Memory*, was published in 2015.

**Melissa Garcia Criscuolo** is from Florida and teaches writing at Florida Atlantic University. Her work has appeared in print and online with *Alimentum: The Literature of Food*, *PALABRA: A Magazine of Chicano and Latino Literary Art*, *Nibble*, *Subtropics*, *iARTistas*, and *The Acentos Review*. Her poetry chapbook, *Things in My Backyard*, was published with Finishing Line Press.

**Koay Ee Ling** is an editor by day but a daydreamer and an aspiring writer by night. She has written largely for commercial purposes in various corporate communications positions. She has also served as a ghost writer for the managing director of one of her previous employers, where she wrote opinion articles for a local press and entries for his high-profile blog. She has a degree in teaching English from a public university in Malaysia.

**William Miller** has published in over 300 journals, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, and *The Southern Review*. He lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

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## "Longing"

by Suzanne Kamata

This will be a test, Christine told herself as she boarded the Thai Airways jet. She glanced back, hoping ridiculously, that Hideki might be running after her, that he might beg her to stay. But no. He'd promised to write, and then he turned away. Now there was only a steady stream of Japanese businessmen and young families gearing up for a holiday in Phuket or wherever.

She found her window seat, unloaded her backpack and stuffed it in the overhead bin. Then she buckled up, overcome by a sudden weariness.

*I am going to do something important*, she reminded herself. In Japan, where she had lived for the past two years, no one had needed her. She'd been like a doll on display. A talking doll. An amusing diversion between the business of grammar and spelling. None of the students at the high schools where she'd taught had truly wanted or needed to learn to speak English. Why should they? Japan, as everyone knew, was set to take over the world. Those girls, with their Chanel watches and Louis Vuitton bags, those boys who shaved their eyebrows and grew out their fingernails, only cared about appearances. Christine had tried to interest them in the AIDS crisis and poverty and the devastation of wars in nearby countries, but their eyes had glazed over, or sometimes, they'd even fallen asleep. At the end of her tenure, Christine had begun to hate them a little for their lack of concern, for the pampered lives they assumed to be their birthright.

Once, hoping to inspire them, she'd brought a newspaper photo of a starving child. One girl – an impossibly thin girl herself – had turned to her friends and said, "*li, na*. If I was like that, I wouldn't ever have to diet." As if that wasn't bad enough, the head teacher had admonished her after class. "It's better to talk about fun things," she'd said. "It's against the rules to be political." As if talking about the problems of the world was political. Christine had read somewhere that Japan had the highest rate of anorexia nervosa in the world. It

was as if, in peaceful, prosperous Japan, there weren't enough problems, so they had to be created.

Of course things were much more complicated. At the night school, where Hideki taught, the students were from the dregs of society – children of prostitutes, destitute single mothers, prisoners. Maybe she could have had an impact in a posting like that, but the board of education would have never assigned her to the night school. The night school was where they sent brand new Japanese teachers, for a kind of hazing, or older ones who'd never quite fit into the system – the hopeless cases.

At the Cambodian refugee camp where Christine had volunteered to work for six months, everything would be different. Her days would be filled with purpose. She fantasized about starving brown children plumping before her eyes, their mouths filling with protein bars and English, their futures as doctors and lawyers and teachers, the thank you notes she would get years later. In the meantime, she was heartsick, already composing the first letter she would write to her lover in her head.

She brooded until the plane took off, then shook off her gloom. If she and Hideki had something precious and true between them, it would last. If not, he would go along with the arranged meetings that his mother was trying to pressure him into, and find a suitable bride. Christine imagined someone bland and kind. And she, well, maybe she would never marry at all. She'd keep going around the world, to India and then on to Africa, and then maybe to some war-torn Eastern European country like Bosnia. At some point, she might adopt an orphan.

When food service came around, she ate a plate of noodles in peanut sauce, and then braced herself for the landing. There was supposed to be someone waiting for her at the gate. Another volunteer named Sven. He would help her get to the refugee camp. She'd heard there were close to 150,000 refugees.

From the cool of the plane she could see the heat waves rising from the tarmac. Japan had been steamy, but the weather in this place looked brutal. She quickly slathered sunscreen on her face and arms then grabbed her backpack and deplaned.

There he was, that scrawny blond guy holding a sign with her name written on it in bold, black strokes. Sven. She waved and caught his eye. He grinned. "Welcome to Thailand." They shook hands. His fingers were moist.

“Got a lot of stuff?”

“No, just this.” She’d sent a crate of clothes and souvenirs back to the States the week before. She was ready to live like a monk.

The jeep bumped through the jungle, throwing up dirt behind. They passed a man leading a water buffalo, palm trees, rice paddies. Christine saw some children playing by the side of the road. They were dressed in mismatched T-shirts and shorts, probably from some missionary grab bag. One little girl waved a stump as they went past, her good hand hanging at her side.

Sven caught her eye. “Landmines,” he said. “You’d better get used to it. You’ll see people like that everywhere.”

She nodded and tried to compose herself. She thought of the picture books she’d tucked into her duffel bag – Curious George and Amelia Bedelia and Clifford the Big Red Dog. She looked down at her own two hands, the Swatch watch encircling her wrist. Suddenly she felt ashamed.

Sven drove her around the camp. Long houses were arranged like barracks. The whole place was surrounded by barbed wire fences. Lush green mountains rose in the background. They arrived at a recently constructed wooden hut. “This is where you’ll be staying,” he said with a sweeping gesture.

It was simple and clean. She inhaled deeply. The wood was fragrant, like sawdust.

“You can get water at the pump between six and seven in the morning. And be warned – there are a lot of black outs. Make sure you have fresh batteries in your flashlight.”

She wrote a letter to Hideki, then went to bed early. She wanted to be alert for her first day as English teacher at the Site Two refugee camp, but the noise and sticky heat and nerves kept her awake. Some of the other volunteers had gathered a couple of huts down. Sven was among them. He’d invited her to join them for a beer, but she’d declined.

“Well, whenever you’re ready,” he’d said, and she wasn’t sure if he meant later that night or sometime in the not too distant future when she would need release from the sorrow and hardship of living among people who had nothing left to lose.

On the long drive from Bangkok, Sven had rattled off facts and figures: two million Cambodians dead between 1975 and 1979 due to torture, execution, starvation, and disease; 38,000 intellectuals slaughtered; ninety percent of artists killed; ninety percent of all books destroyed. There were no more teachers among them. The Khmer Rouge had used the National Library grounds to raise pigs.

“Don’t expect too much,” Sven had said. “Most of these people are starting from zero.”

She lay there in her bunk, eyes wide open, listening to tinny Thai pop music and laughter from a few yards away. She heard voices – a man’s and a woman’s – outside her window – and then a wet, smacking sound, heavy breathing. Even in this place, there was desire.

She thought of Hideki. What was he doing right at this moment? Was his mind full of her? She pictured him sleeping, his arm flung over his head, his mouth half open. It had only been two days, but her longing for him was an agony. Her thoughts skittered over all of the things they’d done together over the past two years, and then, somehow, she drifted off, and then a harsh light was blazing through the flimsy curtains, and Sven was banging on her door.

“C’mon, wake up! Time to get water! The pump’s only open an hour a day.”

She grunted her reply. There was no time to eat breakfast or mess with her hair. She quickly pulled on some shorts and a T-shirt, splashed water on her face, and grabbed her jerry can.

Sven was waiting outside, next to two rickety bikes. “You can have the blue one,” he said. He lashed her water can to the bike and pushed the handlebars toward her.

“Thanks,” she said. She knew that the next day she would be expected to do everything by herself. As far as she could tell, the other volunteers had already gone on ahead.

“Sleep well?”

“Mm.” She scratched at her neck. Her legs were blistered with mosquito bites. Must remember to check the net before I go to sleep, she told herself.

Sven took off in a cloud of dust and she pedaled furiously after him, determined to keep up.

Two hours later she was at the camp, standing at the center of a patch of dirt, surrounded by about fifty Cambodians of various ages. A young mother swathed in scarves rocked her baby, her gaze latched on Christine's face. A trio of boys sat off to her left. Even through their shirts she could see the outline of their ribs. They'd brought long sticks, and they were already sketching in the dirt. There were no notebooks, no sheets of ruled paper, no number two pencils in this place. She would have to make do. She wondered if the boys would consider breaking their sticks into smaller pieces so that others would be able to write as well. And then she wondered if the man missing both arms would be able to write with his toes.

They watched and waited. In Japan, classes were regimented. The students stood in unison, bowed to their teacher, then sat down. Here, on this patch of dirt, Christine wasn't sure of how to begin. She looked around at the sea of worn, solemn faces – even the children had a world-weary look about them – and took a deep breath. “Good morning,” she said. She pointed to her chest, then to her nose, as the Japanese did. “My name is Christine.”

They stared. Flies buzzed around her head, as loud as helicopters. She smiled and patted her chest. “Christine.” Then she pointed to a boy sitting in front of her. “What's your name?” He dropped his eyes, embarrassed or ashamed. Christine repeated the gesture, the question, gently and persistently. He finally opened his mouth and whispered, “Kong.”

Over the next few weeks, she met them at the same spot. She asked their names and drilled them with flashcards: “apple,” “dog,” “car.” There were no apples in that place. She doubted that any of them had ever had a car. And yet she kept going. She drew letters in the dirt with her fingers or with sticks. She sang the alphabet song over and over, and sometimes they chimed in. But then one day the boys with the sticks stopped coming. And then she lost Kong, and also the man with no arms.

Christine popped open a can of beer and took a long swallow. The brew was lukewarm, but she didn't care. She just wanted a buzz. She'd been at the camp for almost

four months, and she'd yet to get a letter from Hideki. The only person who'd written was her mother: *My roses are blooming. Your cousin had a baby! When are you coming home?*

Sven watched her from across the room. He unfolded his long legs and moved to sit beside her. "That bad, huh?"

She attempted a smile. "I don't know what I'm doing here. English is so beside the point for these people. They don't need me. Or maybe I'm just bad at teaching. They keep dropping out of my class."

"Well, think about what they do need, then." He brushed a strand of hair from her face. "And try to lighten up a bit. If you don't pace yourself, you'll burn out by the end of the month."

Compassion fatigue. She'd read those words in a novel once. She hadn't truly understood their meaning until now. She hadn't known that one could go numb from helping others, and for just a moment, she wanted to have Sven inside of her, in order to feel something, anything. But she wouldn't do that to Hideki.

"I don't have enough empathy," she said. "For all of these people."

Sven shrugged, his arms brushing hers. "Then just pick one."

She flashed on Kong, his grim, gaunt face, his feminine hands. Then, the ones with the missing limbs, the giggling girls, the boys with sticks. The mother with the baby. She would choose her. The mother, Chanira, had lost her husband. He'd had his head blown off right in front of her eyes, so that every night she dreamed of a crimson explosion. Chanira had survived. Every day, she came to Christine's class with a smile on her face. In that smile, there was hope for the future.

In the afternoons, Christine tried to help out at other stations. She went where she was needed, sometimes dishing out spicy soup in the dining hall, sometimes rolling bandages at the infirmary, like a nurse in a Hemingway novel. In spite of her lack of artistic ability, she helped to design posters warning against the dangers of unprotected sex. At the end of the day, she was exhausted, too tired for recreation. But then one evening, Sven rapped on her door and said, "C'mon. There's a puppet play in the south quarter. Let's go watch."

She couldn't help thinking of Japan. In Naruto, Christine had visited the site of a World War I POW camp where German soldiers had been held. There, in the green hills, among monkeys and dragon flies, the men had managed to produce plays, publish books, and put on concerts. Nothing, it seemed, could truly quell the creative spirit. She splashed some water on her face then, revitalized, went out to join Sven.

They picked their way through the camp, past children playing some complicated game with stones, past windows seeping incense, past a man sitting on a mat selling cigarettes.

"American brand," he said, holding up a single cigarette. "Cheap, cheap. You want?"

His face was shaded in the dusk, but there was something familiar about him.

Christine leaned closer. "Kong!"

"Hello, Miss Christine," he said. "You want?"

She waved her hand. "No, I don't smoke. Why don't you come back to English class?"

He didn't answer, and she didn't really expect him to. Clearly, he had all the English he needed for commerce in this place. What did he need with "apple" and "dog"? What did any of them need with "apples"?

As she sat watching the shadows of puppets dancing against a backlit sheet, she gave in to exhaustion. She let go of her ambitions, and let her thoughts settle on home. Hideki, she finally admitted to herself, wasn't going to write to her. She'd go back to the States, take a break until she came up with a better plan. A mixture of relief and shame washed over her. Kong would never go to Harvard. She would have to find another way to save the world.

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## **"The Deal"**

by Susheela Menon

Yama -- the God of Death -- sat near cabdriver Tan, who wished the man would get out and walk instead of wasting his time. "Sir, it's against the law to travel without a seat belt! You'll die if I crash into something!" Tan shouted. He had circled the city twice.

"Where do you want me to go now?" Tan asked, his voice rising a little. The man's eyes bulged out of their sockets as he ordered Tan to drive on. He carried a mace and noose, and looked as if he was dressed for a fantasy drama. Tan eyed the mace with suspicion. His irritation increased as the man spoke, his words reverberating inside the cab.

"I am in this cab for a reason. I don't want to go anywhere."

The man's eyes reminded Tan of the fish head curry his wife often cooked with a sauce that smelled of chili padi. He brushed the thought aside and realized he was hungry.

"How about some chicken rice or char siew pau?" Tan asked his passenger. The man sighed and looked at the driver with melancholic eyes.

"Do you really not know who I am?" he asked.

Tan shrugged and looked for a place to park. "I haven't eaten anything since last night; it's a miracle I am still alive," he said, laughing at his own comment.

"There's no such thing as a miracle," the man declared. "You perish when your time comes." Tan opened his mouth to say something when the man's voice boomed again. "I rob human beings of their souls; I am the God of Death."

Tan stepped on the brakes and glared at the man. He had greenish-black skin, bulbous eyes and a craterous mouth. His head touched the roof of the cab. Tan eyed the mace again. "You are next," the man said. Tan stared open-mouthed while his passenger played with the noose. "I don't really like this job. Would you be happy dragging screaming souls out of their bodies every day?" he asked. "I am tired of all this karmic gobbledygook. I am bored of death and disease. I want out." The driver froze in his seat.

The man leaned toward Tan. The driver could hear his heart thumping against his chest. "I will let you live if you do me a favor," he whispered. Tan's throat felt dry. "I don't want to kill human beings anymore. Help me die, and I'll help you live," the man added, his face beaming with hope.

Tan was speechless. He finally swallowed back his fear and sat upright in his seat. "Undo your seat belt," he mumbled, as he tightened his own. The man undid his seat belt and braced himself.

With a silent prayer, Tan revved his engine, stepped on the accelerator and zipped toward the highway like a maniac, his eyes focused on the blazing asphalt.

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## "Scars"

by Tina Isaacs

"Hey, dude. Don't forget to clean up your shit. You'll get me in trouble with the boss, *jǎh.*"

Blai shook his head and gave his factory mate, Ice, the thumbs-up as the guy removed his protective gear and settled his worn yellow helmet into the cubby hole bearing his name, a couple of spaces left of Blai's own spot.

"You sure you don't want me to stick around? Bump uglies. Get a jiffy stiffy, maybe? We could make it an orgy, you and me, *jǎh.*" Ice made a crude gesture with his tongue in his mouth, eliciting a groan from Blai.

Blai shook his head again, a smile playing at his mouth as he considered his friend's antics. Ice's Thai was always mish-mashed with corny American phrases. The older steel worker was obsessed with the latest American TV shows, which he watched from stolen cable wired from a neighbor's household, although Blai doubted Ice understood more than a handful of English phrases that weren't sex related.

"Told you already, it's not a party. I'm just meeting someone."

Ice responded with a scowl, his grimy hands stroking the black-grey scruff at the end of his chin that was so sparse, you couldn't even call it a beard. "I thought you said you were meeting a girl, *wá.*"

"No, not a girl. You asked if a woman was coming. I said yes."

Ice paused, his eyes wide. Then he burst out in laughter, almost maniacal in nature. "You sly dog, you! A MILF izzit? Never thought you had it in you!"

Blai chuckled and shook his head. He grabbed his tube of facial wash and a towel, and stored his protective gear in its place. He moved over to the small sink at the end of the corridor. In the small rusty mirror which sat over the sink, he saw what an untidy mess he presented; the edges of his face were reddened by the heat of the furnace contrasted

against the paleness of the skin protected by his work goggles; his curly black hair flattened by the moisture captured under his helmet after hours of non-stop work. There wasn't enough time for him to take a shower.

Blai gave himself a mental shrug. He was who he was; there was no changing it. She'd have to accept him for himself.

"Can't thank you enough, *jǎh*." Ice called from the other side of the corridor. "Ma missus will be so happy I don't have to stay and lock up. Gettin' me some extra some-some tonight!" He ended with a loud whoop. "*Klangkhun!*"

Ice slithered off, like the lizard that Blai sometimes compared him to, out the door at the end of their common area. Blai finished his toilette and followed the softly lit path Ice had taken toward the entrance. He checked the guard station and was pleased to see it was empty. They'd both gone out for their dinner break on Ice's assurance that Blai had it covered.

He glanced at the wall clock of the guard station. 7:15 p.m.

She was late.

He hoped she would arrive soon so that they could spend some time talking before the guards returned. Ice had assured Blai he'd buy them a couple of hours at least.

Blai had offered to meet her at a restaurant in Uptown Bangkok or somewhere nearer to her home. But she'd insisted his working place was preferable. The steel factory where he toiled his days was smack in the middle of the urban thoroughfare area of the Khet Khlong Toei area of Bangkok where various factories had set up and thrived since the '70s. Now it was just another old industrial area of Bangkok.

He was just about to head back to the common room when a massive black Mercedes Benz drove into the factory lot, its big tires crunching a fuss over the gravel as it slid up to the entrance.

Blai expected a driver, in full uniformed attire, to emerge from the luxury vehicle, but the driver's door opened instead to reveal a slender calf, foot tipped with dainty nude colored heels with a bright red undersole.

His mother.

A perfectly coiffed head emerged. "Blai?" she asked, her voice as soft as an angel.

He nodded with a timid smile.

She alighted from the massive vehicle, her slim body dwarfed by its colossus. Then, she glided up to him in a silent sashay while Blai leaned against the wide entrance door, observing her for the first time. She was a tall slender lady with fine-boned features, not unlike his own. In fact, his friends always chided him for being a pretty boy, and now he knew where he'd gotten those cheekbones and narrow nose. For a forty-two year old, she was simply spectacular, very much in her prime. She was dressed in a soft pastel-green dress which was clearly expensive and clutched a tan handbag that Blai figured cost more than his annual salary.

As she approached him, he could see she was nervous. There was a slight tremor in her hand as she removed her sunglasses, sliding them up to form a band over her glossy, long hair. Then she stood before him, her chin lifted in a determined—or was it high-strung?—manner, her eyes searching. He stood staring back at her, allowing her the luxury of scrutiny that he'd just been paying her.

After a few moments, he stepped away from the wall, inclining his head. "Thank you for coming. It's a pleasure to finally meet you," he said in English, as he had spoken to her on the phone before. He hid a proud smile, once again detecting her surprise at his good command of the language. She'd commented on it the second occasion they'd spoken via telephone. Blai had his second foster parents to thank for that; they insisted that all their foster children learned passable English so that they could assist in the running of their small budget hotel, which, being in Central Bangkok, was patronized mostly by backpackers from the West. Blai had taken it one step further by devouring the books and cassette tapes his foster siblings had used to educate themselves in the language, then moving on to thicker novels and non-fiction material, using whatever of the measly earnings he could spare at the old secondhand bookshop at the end of the street where their cramped apartment was located. Ironically, it was the plot of a favorite American spy novel that had given him the idea to hire a private investigator to search for his biological mother. He'd saved almost four years of his salary at the steel mill to afford the fees the private investigator had demanded, insisting that cutting the red-tape, and unearthing birth and foster records from twenty-five years ago, cost a ton of money.

Without ado, he moved toward the inner factory area, pausing at moments to ensure she was following closely behind. When he reached the door of the common room, he

turned to face her. Before she masked herself, he glimpsed the revulsion on her face as she gawked about his dirty work environment.

“We can sit in the common room while we chat,” he said, his hand indicating behind him, “or I could give you a tour, if you’d like.”

She hesitated, her eyes wide. He stayed silent, his expression impassive as he waited for her response. He was determined to keep his emotional scars hidden from her, knowing it would take very little for her to twist the dagger that had been inserted into his heart the day she’d abandoned him all those years ago.

“A tour, *dó-aay*.” she replied.

He nodded and walked on ahead. His hands waved toward the fifty-foot structure of the furnace where the workers melted the iron ore and recycled metal scraps. As she stood alongside him, he explained how his duties involved manning the section where they separated the melted steel from impurities, before it was processed further into steel sheets. “The pure iron ore goes through these pipes toward the molding chamber. The impurities—*khya* we call it—is burned in that giant cauldron over there, where it’s mixed with limestone, then reused to fuel the furnace.”

He stared at the massive structure before him, almost forgetting the purpose of his after-hours visit. The mechanics of the structure had filled him with awe from the moment he’d been a scrawny teen desperate for any bit of work they’d throw him. And Blai had always been the curious type, intrigued about what made things tick. He’d been a smart one in school, although his health always preventing him from attending regularly, and it had been inevitable that he quit just like many others at the age of twelve.

But now he no longer needed to save money for the private investigator’s fees, perhaps he could go back to school. Blai contemplated the possibility of finally obtaining a high school diploma, regardless of how many years it would take him.

“Blai...” a soft voice called, startling him out of his thoughts.

He turned, stared at her—his beautiful biological mother who had abandoned him as a baby.

“I want you to know how proud I am of you.” Her eyes pierced his.

He nodded, not saying a word. A sparkle of optimism sprang in Blai’s chest. He didn’t trust his emotions not to overtake him, afraid he would make a fool of himself, fall down

onto his knees begging for her to take her back into her life. To introduce him to his step-siblings. To finally give him a family.

“I never thought after I handed my baby to the clinic twenty-five years ago that I’d ever see you again.”

Her brown eyes seemed to gleam in the darkness.

He stepped toward her, tempted to give her a hug, feel for himself that she was real.

To his surprise, she took a step away from him.

He frowned. “So, maybe, I can come to your house. For dinner, maybe... One of these days?” he asked, not willing to relinquish that final kernel of hope.

She blinked rapidly, her countenance brimming with disquiet. “Maybe...” she said, nodding.

He detected a ‘but’ in her sentence and searched her eyes, attempting to assess her genuineness. She would not meet his scrutiny. She turned to face the furnace structure, her cheeks red, her pupils glittering against the embers of the cooling metals.

He felt resentment boil up within him. He should have known. Clearly his mother was nothing but a forked-tongued snake, just like the orphanage workers and the series of foster parents he’d had to deal with before he earned the freedom that came upon attaining adulthood. These snakes said the sweetest things to placate him, get him to do things for them. Like his first foster father, who liked to pay Blai nightly visits for what he called “male bonding”.

After a few moments, she got her expression under control.

She faced him with a smile plastered on that perfect face. “I’d like to spend more time getting to know you, of course. We can meet here or somewhere private. I’d like to know how you’ve made a success of yourself. You’re clearly an intelligent and hardworking young man.”

Her attempt at placating him just got on his nerves. Now he’d seen her mask in action; he knew the truth. She was just like the rest. He was merely a mistake of her past, one she firmly wanted to remain there. A scar that, despite all the expensive creams doctors could prescribe, would not quite heal, not quite go away.

He met her eyes, his regard incensed. “My success was achieved with no thanks to you,” he stated in a voice he was happy to note was sufficiently flat and unaffected.

She released a soft cry, her eyes tearing up immediately.

“But, you have to know I had no choice! I was pregnant at sixteen! My parents wanted me to abort you, but I refused. There was no way I could have raised you by myself!”

Her plea fell on deaf ears. He turned his back to her, his fists bunched tight by his side.

“So what now?” he ventured, still curious. “Obviously, you regret me contacting you.”

She was silent behind him. He turned back, his eyebrows raised in query as he saw her lower lips tremble, a slow trickle of tears move down her fair cheeks.

Her dramatics made him want to puke.

“I— I thought I might help you along the way, see that you’re a bit more comfortable.”

Blai watched in detached fashion as his mother unclasped her handbag. From it, she removed a black leather checkbook folder. She resealed her bag, hitched the straps over one shoulder, and then turned to him. The checkbook remained clasped in her hands.

“Don’t insult me!” Blai exclaimed, slapping the offending checkbook aside, causing it and her handbag to fall to the floor.

He left her scrambling for her things to head to the common room. He was going to pack up and go home. This had turned out to be an utter waste of time and money.

Well, at least now he knew.

There would be no more wondering, no more dreaming at night of how wonderful his reunion with his birth mother would be. No more trying to belong in a place where he never belonged anyway.

He returned his toiletries to his cubby hole, grabbed his jacket and motorcycle helmet from his hook, and headed out.

She was waiting for him just inside the entrance, that tall wraith-like woman who’d once borne him in her womb, her soft skirts billowing about her legs from the breeze that swept in from the factory entrance.

“Blai...” she called as he neared, her smooth face distressed. Her hands were clasped together before her torso, the fingers twisted pale. “You... you won’t be contacting my husband, will you?”

It hit him with clarity: her absolute terror at being discovered.

He was nothing but her huge, embarrassing secret.

And he saw red.

Before he realized what had happened, she was lying on the ground, a trickle of blood appearing from a cut on her forehead. He looked at his hand and realized one side of his helmet was gripped in his palm so tightly that his knuckles were almost white. And the top of the helmet was smeared with blood.

Blai broke into a cold sweat, panic thrumming through his veins. But he forced his mind to remain calm as he assessed his options. He'd have to get rid of the body, then drive her Mercedes to some abandoned forest at the edge of Bangkok where no one would think to look; perhaps tip it into a ravine or abandoned water quarry somewhere. He wondered how much time he had before the guards returned from their dinner. In her determination to conceal her embarrassing secret, surely it was unlikely she'd informed anyone about her visit today? She hadn't even brought her driver along, one Blai was sure usually would accompany her on trips around the city—such a large car was not intended for personal driving. If he was lucky—surely he'd paid his dues and was deserving of some *chokh*, some luck, some karmic blessedness—hopefully there wouldn't be anyone knowledgeable enough to lead her disappearance to him.

Blai dropped his things and scooped up the woman, careful to keep her bleeding forehead away from his clothing. He was surprised at the slightness of her weight. Then again, she was a slender lady. He'd read the initial bio the investigator had sent him that his mother had been a successful ballet dancer when she was younger. It was evident that she still kept up the exercises to maintain her figure.

With her body draped over his arms, her personal items placed in the curve of her body, Blai climbed up the series of stairs leading up to the mouth of the furnace. Most of the ore and metal recyclables were wheeled in through an entrance at the top level, but he was climbing up via the workers' access. And it was five stories high.

By the time he reached the top, he was sweating, not just from the exertion of carrying his burden up the stairs, nor the adrenaline which now filled his veins, but also from heat emanating from the furnace which was in close proximity.

To take a breather, he slid her onto the surface of the top platform, beside the four-foot-tall protection rail which prevented workers like him from accidentally falling into the furnace.

Well, this wouldn't be an accident, would it?

After taking a few deep breaths, he leaned down and lifted her again into his arms. Keeping one arm across her chest, he used the other to raise her legs one by one over the railing. He watched in detachment as her handbag and one of her nude heels slipped off to disappear, swallowed by the bright red molten iron awaiting them at the bottom of the giant vat.

Suddenly, there was movement. The figure in his arms was struggling.

She was still alive.

If he stopped to consider it further, he'd realize that his subconscious had always known she may have been alive. But anger and panic had overtaken his actions. Years of hurt and disappointment had culminated into this event. He knew now that he needed to be rid of her in order to move on, shame and baggage free. And there was none more culpable in his physical and emotional scars than his birth mother who'd started it all.

He stared down at her face, still beautiful despite her *deshabille*. Her eyes were bright, and her mouth opened in a voiceless wail as she gained consciousness, turning her head to and fro, trying to ascertain where she was. The bruise on her forehead had begun to lump, hints of discoloration to follow.

"This is what we do with our *khyā*, mother. This is how we deal with our scars. We recycle," he explained softly, as if placating a small child. He ignored her widening eyes, and he let her body slide off his hands over the railing. He watched the shocked expression on her face as her body fell down, down toward the molten ore. She didn't even have time to release a scream. There was a tiny splash before her limbs were engulfed in the liquid metal. A small flame caught on her clothing but was instantaneously put out once her body was entirely submerged.

And with a small smile, his heart said goodbye and good riddance.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Taking the Train from Yangon to Mandalay"**

by Robert Pettus

The plane began its descent into Yangon. It had been an incredibly short flight from Bangkok, and I was very anxious about getting off the plane. I had been living in rural Thailand for the last half year or so and had become very comfortable there. But Burma was an unknown that without a doubt racked some nerves within me. As we stepped off of the plane and onto the soil of what used to be the 'second most isolated county in the world', I saw many people holding signs with the names of people they were waiting for written on them. I was traveling with my coworker from Thailand--we were both English teachers at a rural countryside school. The airport was small but nice enough. I wasn't sure whether or not to exchange my USD into Burmese currency (kyat), as I had been informed that USD was regularly accepted as long as it wasn't bent or worn in any way. I decided it would be a good idea to have some kyat on me anyway, so I went ahead and exchanged for some, and eventually stepped out of the airport and into the heat of the day.

We were immediately swarmed by people looking to give us a ride. Some were licensed cab drivers, but most weren't. Basically everyone was wearing a longyi—a cloth that is tied around the waist and extends all the way down to the ankles. We accepted the best price we could find and walked off with a random guy toward his car. His mouth was stained red from chewing betel. The road was also stained in many places from people spitting betel juice all over it. I looked over at my colleague: "We've gotta find some of that stuff later."

The driver took us straight from the airport to the train station. We were planning on taking the slow train from Yangon up through the middle of the country to Mandalay. I was incredibly excited about seeing the Burmese countryside and the small towns and

villages along the way as I had read a lot about Burma. The ethnic diversity and tension combined with the political instability of the past (and present) really interested me. Along the way to the train station, we saw a bit of inner-city Yangon. There were many roads that were very big and open in comparison to other places in Southeast Asia. There were also lots of colonial buildings from the era of the British Empire.

The train station and railway had also been built by the British. We bought our tickets, which were handwritten by station employees, bummed a cigarette from one of the locals, and went to sit down and wait for our train. There was a sign at the station that said 'Myanmar Welcomes Tourists!' I guess it was there to make tourists feel a little safer while visiting a country notorious for random acts of violence and shutting out all foreigners. When the train arrived, we were immediately ambushed by a group of men who grabbed our bags and hurriedly escorted us onto the train. When we were seated and our bags were put away, they looked at us and said, "Money! Money!" I was a little flustered, so I quickly reached into my wallet and gave them what I later realized was \$5 worth of kyat. This was definitely a rip off, but oh well. The train was crowded but comfortable. We bought a couple of beers and relaxed on our bunks in the sleeper room where we were staying while waiting for the train to depart. The room had four bunks, but no one else had dropped their bags off on the other two bunks. I had hoped that we would be the only two staying in the room.

I only saw two types of beer while I was in Burma: Myanmar beer, which is a standard lager but still pretty good, and ABC (Ayutthaya Brewing Company), which is a stout. I found it pretty cool that a locally brewed stout beer had become so popular in Myanmar. It was probably another remnant of British cultural influence.

The train moved slowly through the slummy outskirts of Yangon. Many of these suburban villages were composed of makeshift aluminum buildings, dirt roads, and elevated, narrow wooden planks which wound through terrain that would be unfit to walk on. The ground was often completely covered in garbage, to the point that it was nearly impossible to see it. That had been one of the most eye-opening aspects of my trip. I had,

without a doubt, never witnessed poverty anywhere on a level even close to this magnitude.

Eventually, a group of people opened the door to our room, walked in, and placed their bags on the other two beds. It was a family of three with a very young child. The mother's face was covered in *tanahka*, a golden facial paste many women in Burma use for cosmetic purposes. The family introduced themselves and even offered us a bottle of water and a couple cheroots as a gesture of goodwill. We readily accepted these gifts, as we both already knew very well that declining gifts and generous offers in many Southeast Asian cultures is extremely rude. I was unaware of how to smoke the cheroot and, as a result, began smoking it in the wrong direction, which was fairly embarrassing. The family didn't speak much English, but one thing that I remembered was the father saying, "I very like Obama!" after I had told him that I was from America. Obama had recently visited Myanmar—the only American president to have ever done so.

As the train crept completely out of the urban areas near Yangon, it entered the beautiful Burmese countryside. There were lots of rolling hills and farmland, and although there was plenty of forested areas and jungles, there was also evidence of a massive amount of deforestation. Eventually someone approached us who spoke some English and stated that he was a university student in Mandalay and that he was working in the restaurant car on the train for his summer job. He wanted to know if we would be visiting the restaurant car at any point in the evening. We let him know that we would most certainly be there later and would definitely sit in his section of the restaurant car. We were both eager to try some Burmese food anyway, so we drank a few more beers and then headed over to eat dinner.

The restaurant car was decently crowded, with most of the tables being taken by groups of men drinking beer. We sat down at a table in the corner and our friend from earlier immediately came over to talk to us. He informed us of the dinner specials they had for that night and asked us what we would like to drink. We ordered a couple of beers and sat staring out of the open window into the Burmese sunset. It was beautiful. There was a

nice breeze coming into the train and, even though it was getting dark, you could still easily see off into the distance. I noticed that one of the groups sitting at another table were chewing betel and decided to go over and ask them for some. They eagerly gave some to us. Quite soon after I placed the leaves into my mouth, it went a little numb. The longer I chewed it, the number my mouth became. It was pretty enjoyable, really.

After dinner we drank a few more beers and then went back to our bunks. I slept through most of the rest of the trip, but I did wake up once in the middle of the night. I left our room and went to go try and find some water. It was then that I noticed that the train had stopped in Naypyidaw, the country's capital city. Many local people were quickly jumping aboard and swiftly walking up and down the aisle, trying to sell random items: corn, eggs, rice, water, betel, cigarettes, etc. I bought a bottle of water and went back to sleep. When I awoke, we were on the outskirts of Mandalay. The surrounding villages outside Mandalay, not unlike the ones outside of Yangon, were deeply impoverished. I had wondered what the downtown and inner-city areas would look like. As the train came to a stop, we grabbed our bags, said goodbye to our roommates, and started our next adventure.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Stateless Applicant: A Recruitment Session in a Sittwe Camp"**

by Cindy Stauffer

(January 15, 2014, Thet Kae Pyin)

My morning interview session at a camp on the outskirts of Sittwe town was the most poignant experience I'd ever had in over three years of practicing human resources management. The memory of Ahmat and that day's recruitment initiative are carved into my heart as the point where normality converges with abnormality and hope and hopelessness exist in the same moment. On one side everything seemed standard. Yet on the other, nothing was normal, nothing was acceptable.

"Ah, you are coming to the camp," the expatriate nurse said with a surprised and amused look when I climbed into the van that morning.

"Yes, we are going to do interviews and tests," I replied with a smile.

I had been working in Sittwe town for a month but had not yet had a chance to go to the camp in which the NGO I worked for ran a clinic. Therefore when Stefan, the logistics manager, informed me that he needed to recruit a field logistician for the clinic site, I was thrilled at the opportunity to go meet our staff that worked there. Recruitment was one of my favorite duties as HR manager.

We drove past the airport and into the countryside. My face was glued to the window until the vehicle stopped fifteen minutes later at a military checkpoint. The driver handed a list containing our names, nationalities, passport numbers, and functions to the authorities.

A different reality began to sink in as I stared at the concrete blocks and barbed wire fence. Few ever passed this gate . . . either to go in or to come out. The travel authorization and NGO ID card in my handbag felt like a passport to the dark side. This was a side that no tourist transiting through Sittwe on their way to visit the ruins in Mrauk-U would ever see.

We continued along a single-lane, paved road that turned into sand when bamboo houses came into sight. It looked like a small fishing village, except that it was not on the

sea or river. Children were running around and started chanting, “bye, bye, bye, bye,” as soon as they saw us foreigners. They looked about 8 or 10 years old and appeared to be going to some type of school as some of them carried books and notebooks.

It puzzled me that “bye-bye” was the first word of English that people in Myanmar seemed to learn. In other countries, it’s usually “hello” or “hello, what is your name?” In a horrible way, “bye-bye” complements the image of “the abandoned people.” The Rohingya have had to say bye-bye to so many things, including most of their freedoms. Their citizenship had been denied, lands confiscated, houses destroyed, movement restricted. Even Microsoft Word’s spell check doesn’t recognize the word “Rohingya.”

I followed Stefan into the “clinic,” where we would meet Ulashwe, the clinic non-medical responsible, or administrator. The “clinic” consisted of areas partitioned off by flattened and woven bamboo walls to make up the various wards, such as the TB ward, recovery ward, and maternity ward. I caught a quick glimpse of a few patients lying on bamboo mats. The new surroundings were disorientating. It didn’t feel like a clinic, perhaps due to the bamboo palm trees and absence of white, concrete walls. The women wearing dark hijabs and long-bearded men with taqiyahs (caps) reminded me of my visit to Pakistan. Tropical island, Pakistan, Thai backpacker’s camp, *Survivor* – no, this was an IDP camp clinic in Myanmar.

“Where will we do the interviews? Are the candidates here?” I finally asked as I tried to refocus on the task at hand.

“In the guesthouse. Yes, they are waiting.” Ulashwe replied.

“Guesthouse” sounded pleasant. Yes, more along the lines of “Thai Backpacker Camp.” Twenty-five meters further I discovered the two-storied wooden structure. It had no beds. There were actually no walls around the ground floor either. I walked up the steps on its left side. The room had been prepared with five tables and a dozen chairs. Each of the five candidates was seated at a separate tables; pens and erasers were handed out and the test’s purpose and time allocated explained.

“When you are finished, please hand me your test paper. You may then leave the room. When the testing time is over and tests marked, each candidate will be called one by one for the interview part of this session,” I explained.

During the next quiet thirty minutes, I observed the collared shirt-wearing, black-haired candidates toil through the exam. I could have been administering a test anywhere in the world--that exact moment would have been similar anywhere. Maybe in some places we would have been in a yellow-painted, air-conditioned room with red plastic chairs or somewhere else in a white-painted, heated room with black leather chairs instead, but the human factor would have been the same--the silence, the breathing, the ink on the paper, the effort, the concentration, the ambitions.

One candidate stood out. Ahmat's resemblance to my Turkish friend Ali was striking: a round face with dark stubble about his mouth and rectangle reading glasses, thick lips that could easily produce a warm smile, and curly black hair. His English even sounded the same as I listened to him explain his work experience and motivation in a modest, warm tone. I felt as if I were conducting interviews in Ankara. He had achieved the highest score on the test and clearly had a bright mind.

"I studied mathematics at Sittwe University," he explained, "at the time we were allowed to attend university."

When I questioned him regarding his choice of major, he explained that there had been only certain majors that "they" had been permitted to study.

It was like a slap in the face that brought me back from Turkey to Myanmar. The "they" referred to the Rohingya students. While the Ali's and Mohammed's of Turkey could attend school, since the 2012 riots, the Muslim minority group could not set foot on the Sittwe University Campus. Ahmat was fortunate to graduate before that date. His coffee-colored eyes were still filled with hope, the hope that he would be able to use his knowledge and skills following a career path with one of the NGOs that operated in the camp in which he was a prisoner. I thanked him for his time and told him that we would be informing him if he had been selected for the position.

"I wish you all the best; keep up the good work in your current position in the meantime," I said with all my heart.

Children greeted us with "bye-byes" again as Stefan and I walked from the guesthouse to the clinic. They were probably on their way back from school. The village of Thet Kay Pyin had the only government-designated school that the Rohingya in the region were allowed to attend. This school was said to have over 2,000 elementary to high-school-

aged students, meaning up to 90 children were crammed in each classroom. I smiled back, but my heart was crying as I wondered if these children would ever grow up to be able to attend university and if the boundaries of segregation would be erased. As our vehicle passed the gates, I felt as if the fate of all these people that I had seen and now was leaving behind seemed bleak.

On that day I had shared a moment of a life, one in which there was ambition and hope even amidst all the misery and injustice. It was an important moment for us all. Later that week Ahmat was offered the position. Even though our NGO was forced to cease its activities in the camp just a few months afterward, Ahmat was able to gain employment with another NGO.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"The Fish Ponds of Laos"**

by Reed Venrick

On top of Vang Vieng's morning hills, peering through  
the foggy nightmare of history's pock-marked valley

and searching further east across blazing greens, I  
gather the broken fragments of the broken Plain

of Jars, where gargantuan hawks flew  
with demonic power and shit oceans of bombs

for another generation to pass to memory—  
I ride the old Honda motorbike again to the summit

to feel the shock of monsoon lightning that broke  
the jars that spilled the water—oozing from the Mekong.

Ah, but history designs its irony in the circles  
of perfection that mark the horizon's fields today,

and if one peers far enough, the weekend children  
jumping and diving and splashing until dusk

when the old farmer comes to shoo them away,  
hanging out the bamboo pole, wetting a fishing line

in the fountain of the Mekong watershed

for minnows to again swim inside

the vicious circle of blueprints targeted and turned  
to ponds of water where generations

reincarnate and priests whisper prayers  
on full moon nights when the jars of Laos

will be glued together and again  
hold the ancient water.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Sister"

by Razif Nasardin

Sister, draw the shutters  
and commit our mouths  
to bunches of nay,  
just for this morning to dusk  
and we hope not past tonight.

Subdue your heart  
play all the same – laugh  
like only you can with giggles  
that trailed.

This will come to pass  
with hidden ruckus  
and careless nothings  
by day old bursts,  
our brawls  
that wait in fray –  
will bite.

This will come to pass -  
I do know.

Then back to bicker -

back to laughter.

We hold today  
noise of slumber,  
stirred porridge  
and fear -  
Ma is unwell  
for today.

## **"Glimpsed in a Commuter's Eye"**

by Razif Nasardin

This peak is hollow  
its pavements routine,  
steep in rudiment my eyes wander  
and sight waver  
all voices now  
mere distant thunder.

These murmurs a coat with fabrics all strewn  
each strain peeks ah but a flicker,  
threads hung thin with the thrift of bustle  
protect suffice this whim in veer.

Thoughts rise in rustle  
half adrift, half at flight -

these rustlings run wild.

A stop here - amok abridged

stops there- ideas alight

yet this journey wakes

as nostalgia drips naught.

This peak already knows my name,

adamant in the *ordinaire*

this travel has reached

one half an end.

In time, in time

a turning will come

for steps to breathe

anew.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Vibul"**

by John Schneider

He was the lucky one smiling  
As we shivered outside  
The jungle ruins  
On the paths of Angkor Wat  
In driving August rains.

He was the lucky one born  
Of peasant farmers  
Just common laborers  
Tilling Pol Pot's soil  
Not of the New People

No need to pretend or hide  
Books inside pockets  
No thoughts to suppress  
Or dreams to erase  
No education but suffering.

Born on some day  
His mother could not recall  
While Nixon emptied bombs  
From the belly of a B52  
Near the Ho Chi Minh Trail

She holding her belly

He bulging to be born  
Bombs drowning her screams--  
Hiding in the family hole  
Deep below the rice paddy.

Hungry children crying  
Pinned in bamboo huts  
Necks craned through slats  
Mothers slaving dawn to dusk  
For a cup of gruel.

Filling his pockets  
With crickets and bugs  
And a frog to roast.

He was the lucky one who stood  
In terror  
While others marched by  
Killed by the Khmer Rouge  
Their organs eaten by soldiers.

Machine guns growling  
Rain turning the paddy red  
Leeches swimming in blood  
Farmers chasing dogs gnawing bones  
To be burned at the monastery.

He was the lucky one running  
Through fields  
Where brown cows huddled  
Flared nostrils twitching

Staring at bodies buzzing with flies.

He is the happy-go-lucky one

Who picked his own birthday

10-11-73

“Make me 2 years younger.

Easy to remember

Help to forget.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"I Do Not Believe in Wasting Time"**

by Fariq Yusoff

If the Sun should shed its light upon my eyes,

Do I falter into depression and my demise?

Or Should I enjoy this light in reprise?

Naive, I would take it as blatant trials.

Over the fact of the ever-changing dials.

To welcome a new, of this ranging miles.

Be where it flows as divinity is disguised,

Everywhere it goes, as proximity is devised.

Loathing from past while The Future will compromise.

In fear of this end, I will now never be surprised.

Even in nothing, there are thoughts and its prize.

Vividly taking us into the next. We are revised.

External change from eternal burns, we will rise.

I am. Therefore it shall and will.

Never a dull moment, with each sight we pillage and seal.

Wonders and dreams are merely reality of the soul.

Asking infinity for reasons to be told.

Spending indolence as if it was gold.

Traveling to educate, wearing off the sole.

In spares of moments, growth never takes a toll,  
Notion of sensory idioms unknowingly gets hold.  
Gregarious explosion within is always the goal.

Tales of innate fairytales showing nothing less than youth,  
It's never the protagonist while always a sleuth,  
Merging connections of vital evidence and proof.  
Every moment is a teacher. Every moment is truth!

\* \* \* \* \*

**"Stars Have Fallen"** (Thu Bon River, Old City, Hoi An, Vietnam)

by James Dott

Stars have fallen from the sky  
and float now on dark water,  
each a candle in a paper-hulled boat.  
They float together in flickering constellations  
past strolling travelers  
and boats that watch with painted eyes.  
The heavens are empty  
yet the river teems with light:  
warm yellow from windows,  
cool white from street lamps,  
red, green, blue and gold  
from garlands of lanterns  
illuminating cafés and bars.  
The star boats glide out of black water  
through the bright rippled reflections  
and back onto blank darkness.

Older women perch  
at the paved edge of the river,  
each with her own glowing fleet for sale.  
One star slowly spins on an invisible eddy.  
Another nearly gutters out,  
then flames to life again.

At the foot of a bridge a young mother cradles her baby

and hawks her wares, Sir, madame: lanterns, lanterns.  
The infant, bundled against the night,  
sleeps crooked in her mother's arm.  
Mother and child are radiant  
in the blaze of the candles fanned before them.

We each buy one, set them afloat,  
push them away from the bank.  
They are caught by the inhaling tide  
and pushed into line:  
Orion's belt, the great bear's tail.

Upriver, where it widens, a cluster of three bob gently  
on the water's undulating breath  
drifting further, fainter, dimmer  
until their light is drawn and held entirely  
within the night, the water.

### **"A Year in Fire" (a pantoum)**

by James Dott

A fire smolders in the garden on the hill above the final house,  
The smoke pillars up, meets the rain, drifts into the trees.  
We test our courage, try commitment, clear away the unwanted,  
With fire, comes the chance to tame, transform, be consumed.

The smoke pillars up, meets the rain, drifts into the trees.  
Dancers enter from the dark, torches whirling like snakes of light,  
With fire, comes the choice to tame, transform, be consumed,  
They swallow fire, pass torches' flames over naked skin.

Dancers enter from the dark, torches whirling like snakes of light.  
A fire-walker steps calmly onto the hellish-red path of coals,  
They swallow fire, pass torches' flames over naked skin.  
He walks the path of embers, through waves of heat, unharmed.

A fire-walker steps calmly onto the hellish-red path of coals,  
In his trance the horse-man tramples the fire, kicks it away,  
He walks the path of embers, through waves of heat, unharmed.  
Coconut husks skid across the floor, scattering sparks into the dark.

In his trance the horse-man tramples the fire, kicks it away,  
Soot and sweat, the gamelan, the smoke, the voices surround him,  
Coconut husks skid across the floor, scattering sparks into the dark.  
He collapses, others lift him, cool him, await his mind's return,

What keeps us at this constant burning, trying to come 'round right?  
We test our courage, try commitment, clear the unwanted away,  
The year's circle closes and still we search to feed the embers,  
A flame leaps up in the garden on the hill above the final house.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Tsunami"**

by Melissa Garcia Criscuolo

The tide rolls in like Sanskrit R's,  
pushes its watery, weather-worn tongue  
of fragmented sentences, silence and sand  
across the Indonesian harbor,

engulfs the beach in lurid language—  
a tidal wave of foreign sound—  
it swallows cityscape and ground,  
peeling building façades like an orange;

it leaves only backslashes,  
commas, colons in its wake—  
metal scraps washed up in the breaks;  
the tide recedes in sullen crashes

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Truth in Dance"**

by Koay Ee Ling

Feel the beat  
The rhythm's heat,  
Seep into your very core  
Bring your rawness to the fore

Let the pure  
No more demure,  
Truest essence of you free  
For in truth we're born with glee

Tap your toes  
As your blood flows,  
Faster through your bridled bones  
Finding joy in changing tones

Bob your head  
Remove that lead,  
Society's leash put on you  
Feel yourself reborn, renew

Shake your hips  
Unpurse those lips,  
Loosen up and shake your hair  
Swing your arms without a care

Bend those knees  
Become a tease,  
Coiling like a snake in mist  
Let it loose, unleash the beast

Let them run  
With Earth you're one,  
Rejoice in dance, come to life  
Nothing less on edge of knife

Now alive  
Let hell arrive,  
For nothing can take from you  
The freedom, strength inside of you.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"A Dream in Vietnam"**

by William Miller

Soldiers in tents read about  
fast cars, faster motorcycles.

The new bikes were light,  
built for speed, not cruising  
to a road house.

And these bikes had their  
own name: "choppers."

When they rotated back  
to the world, they had  
to find something loud  
and dangerous to replace  
the trail mines, firefights,  
they'd grown used to.

They dreamed of open,  
desert roads, riding  
beyond the law, the last  
speed limit sign.

And they'd never look  
back, even when  
the war was over,

the war that made them.

Vets all, they were a gang  
like they were in  
the jungle, living for  
that adrenaline high  
when death was near.