



speculative fiction **FOR THE REST OF US**

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## **I Am the City by Eliza Victoria**

In the city was a man who rode the train every day. There was nothing remarkable in this — everyone rode the train, maybe not every day but at least five days a week, workdays, office employees congesting the air-conditioned coaches with their wet hair and unlined eyes, shirts untucked, ties hidden somewhere in the linings of their laptop bags, stockinged feet cushioned by flip-flops because heels could kill you. And the man wasn't even thinking about that joke they always say about stilettos (Could one really use them as murder weapons? Are they sharp enough?) — he was thinking of the woman he saw last month, who was wearing pumps and tripped on her way into the train. It wasn't her fault, the women behind her were jostling her. It was perhaps a week after the train administration approved segregation: women, children, and the handicapped in the first car of the train; everybody else in the other cars. The train administration thought they were doing something smart, throwing the young, the expecting and the broken into a crowd of women. They thought the women would take care of them, they thought the women would be gentle. But the women were employees, too, beating the clock, dealing with colleagues they wouldn't even consider as friends, running late for an appointment,

waking up cranky. The man wondered if he were being sexist. No, he was thinking not only of the women. He was thinking also of the men, maybe even the drivers, the guards, the people sitting behind the glass, breaking bills and handing out the cards with the punched-out hole and the President's face. It's true, he thought. The train turned everyone feral.

No. No. Not the train. The train was a resting place, a sanctuary — unless there were too many passengers and you had no choice but to stand, or be pinned to the doors, someone's pelvis cutting the circulation in your leg. But if you were sitting beneath the air-con the train ride could be glorious. So it wasn't the train, no. No. It was work. Schedules. The night shift. Not ever arriving at home to find your children awake. Stupid, irrational bosses. The city. She broke her leg, the woman who mistakenly wore heels to the train and tripped. There was a sharp crack and the other passengers drew away, wincing, horrified. The woman didn't die, the man supposed, it was just one leg, one bone; she didn't die but she screamed as though she were going to. Everyone in the station was late for an hour, and they didn't feel bad for the woman, they didn't feel any pity at all.

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He was old enough to remember the city before the trains came. The horrible traffic jams, the smoke. They were still there, he knew; sometimes he had to stay late at the office, and before the train administration extended the train schedules he was forced to take the bus. It could be as comforting as the train but the ride wasn't as swift, or as silent. In the bus the noise of the other vehicles came in unfiltered, every honk like a signal for an impending death. (Almost always false, but once the man was awakened by a sudden noise, and up ahead he saw a pile-up. One car lost its break, or just veered into the wrong lane. It's those stupid pink fences, people said. You can't see the pink fences in the dark. A family died, he learned later. Two children. This was the reason he didn't drive anymore, he remembered. Also, the gas prices were incredible.)

The rudeness also was more pronounced. The man would think that since most of the passengers were on their way home they'd be too exhausted to scream at each other. It must be the long travel time, cruel in its extension; the congested streets, the ride home like a second shift at work. It must be worse in the mornings, with the heat and the evangelists clambering up the steps to deliver their speeches and their Bible verses in the aisle, telling the listless, possibly heatstoked passengers that they loved them and that they were damned.

He was old enough to remember these days, the lack of alternatives to maneuver the streets. But he was also young enough to be considered "young". Gen X, he believed. Alex Garland and *The Beach*, Bret Easton Ellis and — well, practically all his books. Especially the one that got turned into a film, the successful one, the one with the handsome young man and an axe. Chuck Palahniuk, that movie with Brad Pitt, all that anger. The man tried to think of a Filipino novel that could serve as counterpart, but with Marcos to hate even years after his death, who had the time to be jaded and cynical? He thought of Gen Y. What is Gen Y? He read there was now a Gen Y but he couldn't see the difference. Weren't all "young" people the same? Disillusioned, world-weary, bored out of their minds? That constant need for an adventure, that constant need to ridicule suburban life and jobs that keep you deskbound and microwavable food and comfort. Everything was fake, and every day had to be a day closer to finding the genuine, or else just stop bothering and jump off a bridge. They were always single, these "young" people, childless, unattached, maybe rich. Selfish. Maybe Gen X just grew up and gave birth to Gen Y. Soon Gen Y would get tired of backpacking across Southeast Asia and settle somewhere, have children, cement himself or herself to a single place. Everyone had to move on.

He remembered that, being "young", and being horribly, horribly selfish. How infinite he felt. Now he

found comfort in the predictability of the train. But he didn't miss his old self. Even then he knew he was lost.

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He was still lost, even inside the train, despite the certainty of its destination, the one direction to which it proceeded. He found a constant for a little while, but there were so many people in the train station and their surge made even the constant slippery. When was the last time the train arrived on schedule? Never. The trains didn't even have a schedule. The only certain thing was when the station opened, and when it closed. Whatever happened in between was indefinable. For example: he thought the train ride last month was just any other train ride, but there was a sharp crack and a crowd drew away and all of a sudden there was a woman howling on the floor.

For example:

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What?

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There were other examples, the man thought.

He was sure of this.

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Another thing he was sure of: A man could be allowed in the first car of the train, if he had a child, or a pregnant companion.

The train administration saw this exemption as a privilege.

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Wait, the man thought; what happened in between — from the time the station opened to the time it closed — could also be defined. Ride the train often enough and you would find a pattern in its apparent randomness. Sundays. Holidays. Weekdays between twelve noon and three in the afternoon. These were the times when the train could breathe, when passenger volume fell. According to the latest surveys, more than half a million people rode the train every day. Half a million. Every single day. Half a million walking across the platform, riding the cars, changing the landscape like a steady raindrop inside a cave. It was a wonder the train had not yet buckled beneath all that weight, had not yet fallen like a decaying raft to the concrete sea below.

Sundays. Holidays. Weekdays between twelve noon and three in the afternoon.

After the train administration extended its office hours, the man added *midnight to two a.m* to the list. At half-past one every day the cashiers pulled down the blinds in their stalls; at exactly two a.m. the trains stopped running and the station would be closed. So few people came to the station between the hours of midnight and two a.m. that the man was sure the train was losing money. The man was sure that in a few weeks the train station would go back to its old office hours. If it insisted on being open longer it would go bankrupt.

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One Monday night he went to his office building, but not to work because he was on leave — he had been on leave for almost two weeks now. He went to the office to eat dinner with a friend. How are you

doing, his friend asked, It's so nice to see you up and about. They were in a coffee shop where all the lights were yellow and almost everybody's face was obscured by an open laptop. It was a sight to see, the faces awash in blue-white light, hanging suspended in yellow. Earlier he had given the coffee orders to a young barista, who smiled as brightly as the others behind the counter, but with half the spunk, her brightness dimmed by a flicker of worry. Doublemint Choco Ice Blended Tall, he heard her muttering to herself, Macchiato Over Ice Tall –

“You're new here?” he had said to her, trying to sound friendly and sympathetic, but he did not get the intended reaction. She looked even more worried and flustered, and did not bother to return his smile.

The man was concerned. He did not mean to hurt her. He imagined her sitting on the train, already in uniform, nervous about her first day. He did that sometimes, study the train's other passengers. Willing them to have a good day, to not worry too much. Wondering about their lives. Wondering if they were happy.

“Who's staying at home with you?” his friend asked when they sat down.

The man frowned. “Just me.” Who else would be staying at home with him?

His friend's face dropped. “You're alone,” he said. This seemed unacceptable to him. “I thought you went to your brother's house.”

“I didn't want to impose.”

“He invited you. You should stay with him.”

“I'll think about it,” he said, just so his friend would shut up.

After dinner he walked with his friend to the parking lot. He watched his friend throw his car keys in the air and catch them. The man ached for that, a moment with no worries, the confidence of the gesture. His friend said, “Come on. I'll give you a ride.”

But it was close to midnight, so of course the man said, “That's all right, I'm taking the train.”

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This was what the man was trying to do: He was trying to find a way *into* the city.

He was trying to pierce through its surface. Its grime, its buildings, its dirty water.

He was not trying to find a way *out* of it, as most of his friends had assumed. He had tried that before but didn't find satisfaction in it.

He wanted to ask it a question. How could it answer if he chose to run away?

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On the face of the clock in the train station, the minute hand swept past 12. It was now Tuesday. There were at most eight people in the station. The man was at the first station, the origin. The train route had thirteen stations. The man bought a southbound ticket. Being at the starting point he had a myriad of stops from which to choose, but only one direction to go to. He really had no choice.

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The guard didn't hassle him when he entered the first car — the car reserved for the women, the handicapped, the children, the pregnant. With less than ten people in the station, it just wasn't worth it; the guard was standing on his little podium, comfortable, drinking coffee. The other passenger in the

first car was a young female nurse wearing enormous headphones, who glanced at him when he entered and sat down at the far end, but she didn't seem to mind that he was in the car with her. The rest of the passengers were men and were law-abiding, and so entered the non-restricted cars. The man saw them through the glass, and felt a little ashamed.

Just five stations later, the train was already empty. It did not pick up any more passengers in the other stops. *Bankruptcy*, the man said to himself, and it sounded like a spell. He wondered what he would do if the driver suddenly decided to strike up a conversation. It must get really boring, driving a nearly deserted train that merely proceeded in a straight line. The train was colder now, and the man pulled his jacket tighter across his chest. He stared at his reflection. He soon got tired of this, and he just stared at his hands.

The thirteenth station was fast approaching. "Last station," the train driver informed him, using the microphone just for the heck of it. Before the train fully stopped, the driver advised him to check his belongings, not lean on the doors as the other passengers alighted, and have a good day. "Last station," the train driver said again, and stepped out.

The air-con died, and the lights went out. The man sat in the darkness and waited for a janitor to come in and clean the car, waited for a security guard to bark at him to get up and leave the station, we're closing. The train doors remained open, but the man didn't move. Nobody came. The last station appeared to be empty.

The train doors closed. The man remained where he was, waiting. Seconds later, the air-con came back to life with a whir, and the lights crackled like plastic and shone. The train doors opened. At the far end of the car, near the driver's nook, a young boy of fourteen or fifteen entered and sat down. The boy was wearing jeans, a dark-green shirt, a black jacket, a pair of dirty Chucks that could have been gray once. The boy looked tired, like a worker ready to turn in after a long day. Why wasn't the man surprised that the boy looked so much like his son?

Only when the train began moving again (it was the last station, no driver came in, but the train began moving again) did the boy look up and notice him sitting there.

The man wondered who would say the first words. But the boy just looked at him, so it had to be him.

"Hello," the man said.

The boy blinked.

"Hello," said the boy. "You're not supposed to be in this car."

The man glanced out the window. He couldn't see anything. It was too dark.

"This car's for women and children," the boy said. "And the handicapped."

The man looked at the boy.

"I used to ride in this particular car," the man said. "I used to have an excuse."

"I see," the boy said. The boy stood up and held onto the back of the bench and the hanging hand straps to support himself as the train swayed. Eventually the boy reached him and sat across from him.

"What's your name?" the boy asked.

The man told him.

The boy seemed to commit this to memory. Or perhaps he was sifting through a pile of information he

already had, and was just trying to connect some details to the name. “I am the city,” the boy said after a moment.

The train whined to a halt, creating a sound like that of a large, very old animal in pain, and stopped at a station that looked identical to the last station.

The man reached into his jacket and took out a foldable knife. He flipped it open, and the boy jumped slightly.

The lights of the train flickered. Only the man looked up.

“Wait,” the boy said, holding out his hands.

“Get up,” the man said.

“Wait,” the boy said. “This isn’t neces — ”

“*Get up.*”

They were frozen in their respective poses for several seconds, the boy’s arms outstretched, the man’s knife glinting in the light of the train.

“You don’t have to — ” the boy began to say. He eyed the man’s knife, checked himself for sudden movements.

The man and the boy stood up at the same time, by degrees.

“We’re getting out of here,” the man said.

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The platform was well-lit, but empty. They did not meet another person as they made their way down the stairs and out of the station.

The man and the boy stood on the sidewalk. No cars or buses or taxis passed on the street in front of them. A soft breeze blew, and it was cold.

The man still had his knife out, pointed at the boy’s back, but the street was as wide and as deserted as an airport runway; the boy could have escaped him so easily. And yet the boy didn’t move. He stood in front of the man, surveying his surroundings.

“Walk,” the man said, but didn’t tell the direction because he didn’t know where they were.

The boy turned to his right, and the man followed. They passed by a building renting spaces to several establishments. The shops’ accordion doors were closed and locked, their signage curiously blank.

More buildings.

All of the buildings felt abandoned.

They came upon the entrance of what seemed to be a residential subdivision. The man and the boy moved to the center of the road. On either side of them were houses with lawns and flower gardens. The houses were all lit from within, but all of them were empty.

“I come here often,” the boy said, and the man nearly jumped out of his skin, still unaccustomed to the eerie silence. “For the quiet.”

The man tried to calm his heart, and said nothing.

“Where are we going?” the boy asked.

“Just walk,” the man said. Then: “I used to have a son.”

The boy nodded. “What happened to him?”

“The city took him,” the man said.

They came to a park. Beneath them the soil was soft and wet. Around them were trees, and the man and the boy passed them in silent awe, as though the trees were sacred.

They came to a bridge, its existence announced by a lamppost. The boy walked on the bridge. After a few steps he gasped and stopped.

Either the bridge had been destroyed, or was unfinished. The man didn't care. From the edge of the almost-bridge was a steep drop to a river.

The man raised the knife higher so it would be pointing at the boy's nape. The boy hunched his shoulders, feeling the blade.

“Where is my son?” the man asked.

In the silence following the question, the man heard the boy say, “Gone,” before collapsing into sobs.

“He was eight years old,” the man said. *Is*, he corrected frantically in his head. *Is is is*. “I was with him, on the platform. We were going to the mall.” *I was going to buy him this toy helmet that could change his voice because he dropped the last one and we couldn't fix it, but he didn't know that because it was going to be Daddy's surprise. It was going to be Daddy's surprise. I woke up that morning waiting to see the look on his face the moment he got the toy, and I never got to see it.*

Last month, on the train. His son standing beside him on the platform with the women. The loud crack, the woman on the floor howling. The crowd pushing back and away. His son gone.

The boy had stopped crying. If the man was facing him he could have seen the boy frown.

“That's not how it happened,” the boy said, facing him now, but with his arms still raised, the victim of a stick-up. As the boy turned, his shoes scraped off pieces of cement from the bridge. These fell into the river. The river was so far down they didn't hear the sound the cement made when it reached the water.

The man backed up a step, the blade of his knife now pointed at the boy's neck.

“That's not how it happened,” the boy repeated. “You didn't lose him when he was eight. You weren't there on the platform when he was eight. He was with his mother. It was your wife who bought the toy because you were away on a business trip. But you did see his face when he received the gift, your wife took a picture and you had it printed and framed on a desk in your office — ”

“Shut up!”

“You didn't lose him last month,” the boy said. “You lost him two years ago, when he was fifteen. He was in high school; he took the train to get to school. Last month your wife left you and you couldn't handle it. At work you were always in pain — ”

“He was eight,” the man said. “My son was eight. I should have held his hand but he was a big boy, he didn't want his hand to be held all the time — ”

“No, that's not how it happened.”

“I lost him in the crowd. The security guards couldn't find him. The police couldn't find him — ”

“He was fifteen,” the boy said. “He took the train to go to school. There was a box in one of the cars

with an improvised explosive device.”

The man’s hand — the one holding his weapon — had started to tremble. He lowered his arm and fell to his knees.

The boy looked at him with pity. “He was among the dead.”

The man remembered taking the bus, the evangelists, the pile-ups. Then the bombs inside the buses, kept in boxes in the bus stations. When the trains came, the bombs found their way into them as well, hidden beneath the seats, strapped to warm bodies. There were bombs outside the trains. Hidden within homes, safe inside the schools. The soldiers taking control of a hotel in the city, rigging the city’s landmarks with bombs. His wife saying, I understand their frustrations, but nothing they say can excuse the bombs. But maybe they found that the placards were useless. You see, everything is better with bombs. When a bomb says Say yes, you say Yes. Those moments when the air was tense and the city was at a standstill. The talks of a second Martial Law Era. Distrust and fear. He lay at night imagining his wife pregnant, giving birth, his child growing, his child holding a placard in a protest march, burning in the sun, minutes later losing a shoe in a chase, minutes later bleeding to death on an unfamiliar sidewalk. Or else walking along a sidewalk, carrying no hatred toward anyone else, and being stabbed to death. Or else riding a train, nervous, fearing to enter a car and hear a bomb say, Say yes. Fearing that he would never be given the time to respond.

Why have a child at all, why let a child live with all this fear?

“I lost my son before my wife could even carry him to term,” the man said, and felt a happiness wash over him, felt relief. *Yes, this feels right. This must be it.* “My wife fell down the stairs and — ”

“No,” the boy said, lowering himself to the man’s level. They were now both kneeling on the ground, the boy’s back to the precipice. “No, that is not your life.”

Tears rolled down the man’s cheeks. “I am a backpacker in Malaysia — ”

“No,” the boy said.

The man cried.

“I have a son,” the man said, slowly. “I have a son and he was fifteen and I lost him.”

“Yes,” the boy said.

“The explosion peeled the skin off his face. We still couldn’t find his right arm. We buried him with just one arm.”

“Yes.”

“You should have just given yourself to them,” the man said, sobbing, “to those people who left the bombs. They wanted you; you should have just given yourself to them.”

“It’s not that simple,” the boy said.

What was stopping the man now to believe that the woman who last month (and was it last month?) fell howling didn’t just break her leg? He heard a crack, it could have been a gunshot. There were people who carried firearms in crowded places, there were those who hurled themselves in front of speeding trains.

“Everything is so impossible to clean,” the man said. “You have no hope at all.”

The man waited for the boy to contradict him, but the boy just looked at his knees.



Eventually the boy helped him stand up. The man thought of wars, of cities burned to the ground, of preemptive strikes, of salt scattered on the soil to prevent the plants from growing.

“You have no hope at all,” the man said.

The man aimed for the vein in the boy’s neck, but the boy deflected the blow. “No, no, please,” the boy said, wide-eyed and scared, and the knife shot out of the man’s hand and over his shoulder, down to the water below. The boy’s hand was bleeding. A portion of the remaining half of the bridge cracked beneath them and in reflex the man moved back quickly, pulling the boy with him. The cement collapsed and fell into the river. The man tried to push the boy off the broken bridge. The boy clung to him, to what’s left of the bridge, his grip hurting the man’s arms.

“Let me go!” the man shouted, and pushed the boy sideways. The boy landed hard on his right shoulder and screamed.

Somewhere in that unfamiliar landscape, lampposts lining a street flickered and died, and a house crumpled unto itself and turned into rubble.

The man stood up, watching the boy writhe on the ground. Just one kick and the boy would fall off the bridge, like the knife, like the portion of the bridge, like the loose pieces of cement. The boy was lying on his side and was trying to sit up, but he couldn’t move. He could only scream and cry, the tears washing his face. The man stayed where he was. After a few moments the boy stopped trying to get up and just lay there, sobbing, his face turned to the ground.

The man knelt, moved closer, and the boy flinched as he raised his arms. “I’m sorry,” the man said. “I’m sorry.” Gently he placed his arms around the boy’s waist (the boy whimpering as the man brushed against his broken right arm) and helped him up.

The man took off his jacket and made a sling for the boy, and tried his best to stop the boy’s hand from bleeding. They walked back to the train station. The train was still there, empty and waiting. They sat in the first car for what felt like hours, then the air-con came to life and the doors closed, and the train moved toward the sunrise.

“I lost my son last month on the platform,” the man said. The boy was leaning against him, almost asleep. The boy stirred when he spoke. “He’s only eight. I hope he’s all right.”

“He’s all right,” the boy said in a soft voice.

“You think so?” The man placed a hand on the top of the boy’s head, brushed back the hair from his damp face. The boy did not reply.

“I hope he doesn’t get too cold,” the man said, his voice trailing away, the rocking motion of the train lulling him. “It gets too cold at night here, sometimes.”

## **My Soul to Free by Veronica Henry**

I smell them before I see them. It took nearly two hundred years for me to smell anything but the smothering stink of blood and sweat. There was the blood of a recent kill in the jungle and there was the other—the one you could only smell if you set your mind to it. That blood was centuries old.

But the others taught me. All I needed was patience — something I couldn't muster in them early decades. I had to be still, to feel what was around me. Down here, so far back in this hole in the side of the mountain, the wind visits, faint and wan and deadened, but it comes. In time, those gentle wisps of essence seemed more like heavy bouquets of drift and I was as good as any of them that taught me.

In this dark, my eyes only just make out the curve of the flat earthen walls, there ain't nothing else to see, but I hear the varmints and little jungle creatures that care to venture this deep. My nose and my memory help me see everything else, even outside. Carried along with the swirl of the ocean breeze, I know a monkey peed, some ways back from the opening to this place, that monkey pregnant too. It rained last night, the earth still carrying that moldy dankness. Them people — they can't take this heat, they sweatin something terrible, salt mixed with must.

There are probably ten or so in this group. The guide, Ibrahim, he bring them closer. I stopped getting too worked up after fifty or sixty of these groups had come and gone. I would cry my dry tears for months after they left. Still, every time Ibrahim comes, my heart leaps a little and I don't try to stop it.

They have passed through the outer wall, stumbling and coughing their way through the chambers. I ease back into a corner where I can get a good look at them when they come into my hold. I can't remember when I started to think of this place as mine. I don't want it to be.

What *was* mine is so muddy now. I was only thirteen when they come. My father had just put on a new roof of freshly chopped palm leaves. I was promised to Komba, and with all the visiting we would have with the wedding, he didn't want rain falling on anybody's head. But they took my Komba and I never seen him again.

I wonder why they come. I know some of them come because they hear our call. But them others . . . Do they search for a spectacle? Do they not believe what happened here? I wonder if they feel proud or shamed. I hope they feel something for us that suffered.

They close now—they almost here. I blink in the dark, my eyes adjusting to the light Ibrahim shines here and there for them.

She came!

Yes, one of mine finally came home and I am free. She tall like a Mandika, but the poor thing got my bony legs and thick ankles. Her skin is a shade too light for my liking though, but I shouldn't complain. She got a kind face. She did not sob and holler like some of the other kin—no, she just look around, taking it all in, listening, but not listening to Ibrahim drone on.

Her eyes keep shifting my way. Does she see me? Or does she just have a wandering eye? My aunty Salleh had a wandering eye. She had a club foot too, but this kin does not.

“They came in chains from all along the west coast,” Ibrahim drawled in his Krio accented English. “Here in Sierra Leone, they came from as far east as Kenema, as far north as Fadugu . . .” That old fool Ibrahim just make up something different for every group. They never bought people from Fadugu to this castle. They were closer to the border and the Portuguese took them through Guinea. He is right about them chains though. My wrist never did heal up right.

My kin look over here again, she got my daddy's eyes. At least I think she does, so many centuries, so many people, sometimes they all run together and I can't make out one face from the next.

Her hair is nice enough, not all ironed and flattened like the rest of those lost souls. They return here, looking for something, some part of them they know is missing. But they lost. They souls is in another

place, they not here. I may be stuck but I ain't lost.

I'm the last one here and I'm ready to go.

I blow out a tired, decayed breath, it rustles up the dust and as usual, the people get a little jumpy, twitchy. My kin though, she just stares. She is lonely. There is a sadness in her eyes I recognize. You see, I been lonely too. It took my kin four hundred years to come get me.

I been calling . . . calling my line since the wind told me they was free. My last companion left maybe eighty years ago. We were the last of us — the souls that died in the slave castle. I been alone since, though sometimes I still hear the wails of them that died in the ocean. Sometimes I join in with them, my soul howling for the babies I never had, for my family, scattered, for my village — gone.

Now she come. I wonder where she live. I wonder what her people—my people, like in that place. Whatever and wherever it is I don't care. I'll settle in and make myself comfortable. I won't bother them too much if they let me alone. I just need to be free. I been cooped up in this place for too long.

I slide over, kick a chain with my crusty old foot. That skittish one scream then. Ibrahim ain't trying to be hurried though. He know the longer he talk, the more he can bleed these folk for that tip money he spend on the liquor that oozes outta his pores. I think I should be paid for my part too. This place sure took enough from me.

Finally, they shuffle towards the door — more like a round hole in the wall. I follow. I've come to this door before but could never pass through. I would just stand here, peering out at more walls. The people stoop down and pass through in a line.

I'm gone walk right through this door. It is finally my turn. All these centuries past, all the other souls left me here. I remember when Brima left. He really felt bad, we hoped our kin would come at the same time. But we should have known better. He got to the doorway, right where I'm standing now and he just stared out. I told him to go on, don't worry bout me. He glanced back once and darned if that old soul didn't run out of here. I wasn't mad at him though, I understand.

I can go now, but I'm still standing here. Maybe I should set those chains right for the next group. Maybe this old fool won't be able to sell his tours anymore without me here to rustle up a little mischief.

My feet shuffle forward two steps and then I jump back like the new air was gone burn me. I can't go no further. I tell my feet—my feet that haven't shuffled further than these few steps in hundreds of years, to move.

The little group is moving farther away from me. And I stand here with my legs frozen like tree stumps. I had cursed others who acted like they couldn't leave this place, now here I am, standing here scared like them. Only a true slave don't know how to leave when he set free.

My kin — she don't know why, but she look back this way. She tilt her head and walk back over. She stand right in front of me, looking over my head — she so tall. Slowly, her eyes move downward. At first I don't know what she looking at, but she looking right in my eyes. She reach out her hand and I move back.

Ibrahim call out to her. "Ms. Ellis, time to go now," he say. *Ellis*, that ain't her name. That don't even roll off my tongue the right way. Our people real name is Kamara — a proud Mende name. Now that I can say.

My kin — I will not call her Ms. Ellis. I think I call her Khadija, after my baby sister, she look past me

again and turn to go. And I have to go with her.

I poke out my hand first and the air don't burn me. I lift up my right foot — starting out on the left would be bad luck. Something in me break. I stumble forward and fall on my face like a newly dead soul, don't know how to move around yet. But I get up. I take another step, then another. I won't look back. I feel proud, being the last to hold the fort. But my time is here. My kin, Khadija is a good soul to go home with. I hope she got kids. I like kids. I want my line to go on.

I'm outside now and shards of bright light stab at my eyes. I squeeze them shut, but open them bit by bit. When I can see again, Bunce Island is mostly the same as I saw on my way in here, except the castle walls have crumbled. Vines and trees and shrubs crowd what remains. The jungle reclaiming its space. Them black cannons still sitting there. I remember hearing them go off, I think them Portuguese was fighting the English over us. I can't help it, I look back at the hole that I came from. I can't see inside, it is just black, small, round, forever.

I turn from that place, I won't look back again. I guess the centuries have softened me up some because I ain't mad. They didn't know any better.

Khadija is crying, so I put my hand on her shoulder and she jump. She not used to me yet. But she will be. She just need time to get used to this old soul.

## **A Memory of Ice by Bint Arab**

Emily stepped onto the frozen pond, and the ice cracked under her weight. “Just hold on!” she yelled, trying not to shift.

Jackson was on his stomach and sliding further into the hole behind him. Scrambling for purchase, the boy kicked his legs in the water. His red mittens had no traction on the slick surface.

“Ma!”

“I'm coming, baby!”

Jackson's teeth chattered in a tiny percussion she could hear from the edge of the pond. The blue hue of his lips showed up even against his dark black skin. Brittle sound erupted around Emily as ice snapped. Abandoning caution, she ran to her son.

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The woman on Emily's porch wore a green sari and carried a child in her arms, his head draped over her shoulder. The boy couldn't have been more than ten years old. Worry creased the young woman's face. “Please help us. He's very sick. I came because they told me you do healing miracles.”

“They told you wrong. I'm sorry.” Emily turned to close the front door, but a small hand slipped into hers. She gripped it and looked down at her son. He met her gaze with sparkling eyes.

“It's okay, Ma,” Jackson said. “I can do this.”

Emily swallowed. *So innocent*. His strength and purity burned so brightly, it humbled her. She turned to the stranger and nodded. Emily's knees creaked as she took them upstairs to the guest bedroom.

The woman introduced herself as Rupa. She laid the boy with sunken eyes and yellowed skin on the

bed and kissed his forehead. “His name is Sanjiv.”

Jackson stayed with them all night as the mothers took turns sponging the sick boy down with ice water. In the morning the boy’s temperature was normal, but Sanjiv did not open his eyes.

“It’s not just a fever, Ma,” Jackson told her.

Emily whispered so the other woman wouldn’t hear. “Do what you can, honey.”

Jackson nodded and frowned in concentration.

Two days later, Sanjiv awoke. Pillows propped him up, and he laughed weakly while Jackson jabbered away at him. The sight saddened Emily. Her boy was lonely.

“Thank you.” Dressed in jeans now, Rupa took the window seat next to Emily’s rocking chair and set to braiding her thick hair.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You did. The doctors couldn’t help. I heard — I thought maybe...” After a moment, Rupa turned to the boys. “How old would he be now?”

Emily didn’t question how Rupa could see Jackson. “Forty-two.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.”

## **Twin Cities by Catherine Batac Walder**

One of my city’s twins in the list was Scuro, in Wok.

I was sitting in Trafiko for a quarter of an hour, trying to occupy myself with the advertisements, when this poster listing twin cities caught my eye. Twin towns or cities are pairs to promote human and cultural relations among the places. While the other names sounded familiar, Scuro was clearly amusing.

The ticket queue flashed my number in red, my turn to come up the desk. A nice middle-aged woman said “Hiya!”, and I told her I wanted another monthly transportation pass.

As she filled in the small card that was to be my pass, I couldn’t help but ask.

“Miss, where is Scuro?”

She looked up from the half-filled card and told me as if it were the most normal thing in the world, “Scuro is in Wok.”

“Wok? Do you mean Woking in England?”

“Wok. Balangay boats? The queens and servants? Don’t tell me you haven’t heard of them?” She squinted, eyeing me as if I was strange not to know where Wok was.

I started to laugh. Of course I’d heard of Wok. When I was little I had heard stories about it. “Nice joke. Twinning with a fairy tale city.”

The woman frowned, now looking so annoyed with me. "I've been to Scuro a long time ago. Actually, a few of my classmates, as fate had it, were left behind."

I didn't want to think there was a nutty woman working at Trafiko who believed Wok was real.

"What are you, lower, upper secondary school student? she asked.

"Upper. I'm actually graduating this year."

"Oh, don't worry about Wok then. Come back here before graduation. Then you'll be in Wok soon enough." She leaned across me, curling her nose as if to scare, whispering, "Sooner than you can imagine." She winked as she added, "But remember, when you get there, don't get carried away with the celebrations."

I took it as a whole joke at first, but as soon as I got hold of a world map book, I checked out if there was really a Scuro on it. I combed the places from cover to cover but there was no mention of it. I closed the book and thought if it was just a little Trafiko propaganda, and that it was really lame of them to hope to pull such a stunt. They could advertise traveling to an existing place at least, if they wanted for their business to boom.

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It was a few months before graduation when I started to worry whether or not I would join Buss. Buss is how secondary school students in our city observe the few weeks leading to graduation. The celebrations are huge, streets are closed and people (who are not part of it) refuse to leave their houses. The clothes. The clothes deserve to be celebrated on their own. They are worn for three weeks without being washed, adorned by every dare a student can accomplish. To carry out dares means belongingness for most students. The highlight of this tradition, and I'm guessing how the name "Buss" came about, is every group has the chance to buy its own bus.

"Why do we need to buy a bus?" we asked the Buss organizers.

"You don't want to go walking to Scuro, surely?" was their vague answer.

My sister, with whom I was staying at that time, was not too keen on me joining. "You never know what to expect from these high school parties," she said. Like other older people, she was critical of today's young people's way of celebrating Buss, saying it was a bit excessive. I wasn't too fussed about joining, either, but more because of the money involved.

My good friend Rebecca said, during lunch time, that she would ask her parents to sponsor me, but I said not to worry, I would think of something. Another classmate overheard Rebecca and me talking, and shouted to me, "If you don't have money to buy a bus, go to Trafiko and they will hire out a bus for you."

So that was how I came back to Trafiko, and finally believed one could get to Scuro in Wok. But if Wok was the same as it was in the stories, then surely it wasn't safe to go there. And certainly it was impossible to go there by bus. I guess that was the only reason why I chose to go. To find out how to get to a fairy tale city, by bus.

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No one knows how Buss started. Rebecca said even her nan had Buss so it might have been a long, long time since its inception. When I saw off Rebecca just this morning to her bus, I saw theirs was awesome as compared to my Trafiko-rented one. Most of the students in her group wanted everything to be extravagant. They went over the top, choosing the most expensive furniture with the most hi-tech

sound system and in the process had to raise a lot of money to buy the best bus. Out of desperation, they negotiated with Dino, the famous porn star, to join their group and film acts in their bus to help raise money. The group even summoned one politician's help, promising they would back him up in the next elections. That politician was known to be corrupt and could promise you anything just to win – say, for the Metro to come every 10, instead of 15 minutes.

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Even after reading the guidebook, we still knew very little about the trip to Scuro. All we knew was it was for the Buss celebrations. As I mentioned, I was really curious how an ordinary bus would take us to Wok so I secured a window seat to get a good view of the areas we would pass.

Sadly, the windows were tinted but I became naughty at one point and started scraping the tint to make a hole big enough to get a good view from where I was sitting. This I did while Miko, a nice chap occupying the seat next to mine, was fast asleep.

Still, with the hole so small, I could not make out what we were passing – the bus traveled as fast as a bullet fired from a Colt 45. My eyes got tired trying to make out what was outside. I saw nothing but a quick succession of different colors – green, gold, white, orange, yellow – so in the end I was left with images of horizontal lines.

That is, not until the figure appeared out of nowhere, eerily clear amidst all those split-second images I got used to when looking out of the window. It was the first of the series of times I would see her.

She was a headless woman wearing a long, white beaded dress. I couldn't really tell if she was a woman if not for the dress.

She was looking at me, riding whatever it was she sat on with grace, possibly a horse, and at the same time trying to keep up with the speed of our bus. The vision lasted for about a minute or so and after that she disappeared into those horizontal lines that my eyes got used to.

Inside the bus it was different. It felt as though we were not moving at all. The other students walked back and forth in the aisle. They were as relaxed as they would be inside a house. There were boys shouting and singing from the back of the bus.

It must have been half a day's journey when the bus suddenly stopped. We waited for any announcement from the driver. Miko whispered to me to look to the front. I could see some of the students getting off.

"We're stopping here for the night," the driver yelled.

We gathered our things and as we left, I wondered if we were in Wok already. When I stepped out of the bus, the sign read "Clock Town."

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The residents of this town were extraordinary, but at the same time they all looked the same. They had bodies and arms and legs like us humans but they had only clocks as faces. As I looked at each of them, it seemed they were all the same clocks. Nothing was special about the hands of their clocks. (For example, Swiss Railway clocks are deemed special because of the clear and concise design. They have very thick 'hour' and 'minute' hands, almost rectangular; the 'second' hand red in color and round-ended.) I thought it must be difficult to live in a place where you couldn't distinguish anybody. The clockpeople wore different clothes so that was probably how they recognized which one was which.

"Here! Here!" I turned and saw a clock person was talking to me. It was a clockwoman. She wore a

white floral skirt so I knew it was a she. “How much time would you like to borrow?”

I frowned, not understanding what she meant.

“Here,” she handed me what looked like an old scroll. When I unrolled and spread it to look at the contents, I realized it was simply a calendar. I concluded this must be their calendar in Clock Town. However, it was different as they had eight, instead of seven days in a week.

“That is my very own calendar,” clockwoman beamed at me. Seeing I still looked clueless, she continued, “I have lots of time in my hands. Not as much as McNode, he’s very young and has lots of time in his hands, 10 days! When I was younger I had the same.” I was amused at the way the hands on her clockface moved. The hand telling the seconds worked as her mouth and therefore it kept turning as she talked. I tried to follow her lip movement and almost felt dizzy doing so.

“Really looks like a lot of time,” I observed, glancing at her calendar up and down. “How do you make most of it?”

“We lend them to visitors, like you,” she beamed again.

I thought of all of the schoolwork I had to finish before this trip and thought she could have been a lot of use to me that time. I handed her the scroll. The group was now entering the town, almost leaving me behind. I thanked the clockwoman and said I would think about borrowing time.

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That evening, after supper, we made a campfire outside our tents and sat around it. I had been looking for Rebecca but noted the only people in this area were those from our bus. Her group must have stopped somewhere else.

We didn’t have anything planned for this brief stop so we just sat in small groups, talking about what we saw during the day. At one point I looked towards the woods and had to give a second glance when, among the trees, appeared the same headless woman I saw from the bus. I patted Miko’s hand to make him look but as soon as craned his neck to the direction I was looking, the headless woman was gone.

“What is it?” Miko asked.

“There was a squirrel. I didn’t think they would have squirrels in Clock Town,” I lied.

One of the boys seated on the other side of the fire started tapping the stainless steel pot he was holding with a spoon. He spoke in a loud voice, addressing everyone. “I learned a few things from one of our clock friends this afternoon. One is the Trafiko Buss Bus makes a stop in this town every year. Our clock friend said he was once a student who went on this journey like us, a few hundred years ago.” Seeing he now had the full attention of everyone, he raised his voice even louder, “Our clock friend came on the last of the Balangay boats.”

There was a murmur of excitement from among the group.

Then one raised his hand, asking the very question every one of us must have been dying to know, “Why do they have clocks for heads?”

The student who started with the story just shrugged. “I didn’t get around to asking him that. But he did warn us to be careful when borrowing time.”

At that he got back to talking to his small group, with the rest of us disappointed not to have heard the end of a rather interesting story that would have told us more about the beginning of Buss traditions in Wok.



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We were waiting outside the bus the next day, wondering what it was that was taking our departure such a long time. I regretted that instead of waiting, I could have got back into town to look for clockwoman to arrange to borrow some time.

Some boys were already getting ready to board the bus, with the others irritated now about whatever it was that was keeping us. It appeared we were waiting for one or two boys.

“Let’s just leave them,” somebody joked, and the rest, including the driver, laughed.

This light joking couldn’t in any way prepare us for the next turn of events.

“Here he is,” one of the girls said.

It was Miko. He ran to us and was out of breath as he came closer.

“Nikolas is still there,” he said, pointing back to where he came from. We heard the boy whose name was Nikolas screaming.

“He’s after him!” another girl exclaimed, terror in her voice.

The sun was blazing hot and shining so bright I couldn’t make out what the girl was frightened about. I squinted and saw the boy we were waiting for, a clockman on his heels.

“He borrowed five days from that clockman yesterday. Now it seems the clockman doesn’t want to let him go,” Miko said. He was now crying.

“Go get him, driver,” one of the boys yelled. “Help him!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do anything. These clockpeople aren’t that clear about the payment they wish when you borrow from them.”

“No,” Miko said. “He clearly just wants for Nikolas to stay five more days here but Nikolas told him that wasn’t in their agreement and they started arguing.”

From what I could see from where I was standing, the clockman held on to Nikolas’s hand as if he would never let go. Without any warning, he took the hour hand from his clockface. The hand was shaped like a sword with a very sharp blade.

It was a nightmare.

The girls started running to get into the bus, wailing. Most of the boys were screaming. I gasped as the clockman lifted his hour hand/sword, its blade glinted against the sun. And he struck the back of Nikolas’s neck with it.

I closed my eyes just in time to see blood spurting and Nikolas’s head rolling on the ground.

“He’s replacing Nikolas’s head with a clock, look!” somebody said. I don’t know who it was, I couldn’t think anymore, must have been the same boy last night who told us to be careful when borrowing time. I wanted to throw up. I didn’t want to look and squeezed in among the throngs of people trying to get into the bus.

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The tragedy at the previous town changed the atmosphere in the bus. Or so I thought. As I turned around to look at the others, they all seemed... serene to me. The rowdy boys at the back didn’t sing any more songs but you could detect half a smile on their faces. An idea occurred to me, that Nikolas’s

fate was all part of the fun, but I brushed the thought away.

Lift, the next town where we would spend the night, boasted of something to offer, possibly more time to borrow, and most likely at an awful price. As soon as we started walking around town, I noticed the rows of shops advertising a product to keep one's youthful looks for a long time. The shops weren't very transparent as to what this product was.

I kept up with the driver as we walked. "How far are we from Wok?" I asked.

He turned to me, saying, "My boy, we have been in Wok since yesterday."

I wasn't really surprised, as Clock Town certainly looked as if it would be located in Wok. So I asked instead, "How far are we from Scuro then?"

"Five miles, a little bit of turning and whipped cream on top," was his strange answer. He walked much faster then, leaving me wondering how to convert that in distance according to the language I speak.

I was glued to that spot when, upon turning to my right, who else would it be but that same headless woman. Her body, her dress, everything about her was all clear. But on all counts, the manner in which she appeared and disappeared, brought to my eyes merely a blurry vision, like a dream. She seemed to float as she passed me now, closer than she ever did before. I thought I wasn't really sure if she was indeed riding a horse. But I could make out a brown pattern around her, which I thought was that of a horse. Was she some Wok princess who was decapitated in Clock Town and died even before getting a clock to replace her head? I thought you could die being decapitated, you know, if the clockman wasn't quick enough to replace your head with a clock.

I wondered if she also appeared to the others. If not, what did she need from me? What could I give her, I who couldn't even afford to go on this Buss trip if Trafiko hadn't rented a bus for us?

As she vanished, all my thoughts returned to the business at hand in Lift. At first, I noted there was nothing extraordinary about the residents of this town. They were dressed and looked like us so I guess they didn't notice we were strangers.

I took one long look at two women sitting at an outdoor table of a cafeteria and I noticed there was this... greasy look about them. Now understand, it was not a cold day, but it was not sweltering, either (in fact, right after I made this observation it was spitting fine rain in that very place). Such nice, cool weather would make you think people would look fresh. These Lift people looked as if they were all covered in oil. I know some people's faces are naturally oily, but these people, it was just too much, it was as if there were layers of oil on their faces. Imagine how it is on a cold night and fat solidifies inside a jar, and it becomes so thick and white. That was how the oil on the faces of these women looked to me.

I didn't mean to be rude, but curiosity got the better of me, so I approached the two women and jabbed a finger into one of their faces to prove my point.

The woman seemed surprised at first but laughed as she saw me looking at the oil that now covered my forefinger. "You should try it on your face, that thing around your finger was mined from Lift's biggest oil reserve. It will keep you young for several decades."

"What brought you to this town?" asked the other woman, who, by the look of dry skin on my face, concluded I wasn't from around Lift.

"I'm on a student trip," I said.

They seemed to have lost interest and got back to sipping what appeared to me as some sort of oil as

well.

“Is this town rich in oil then?” I asked, as dumb as it might sound, in an effort to get back their attention to me.

“Oh, don’t you know?” asked the woman whose face I poked. “Lift has oil reserves not found on any other land in Wok. The oil brought so many jobs to all of Wok. Why, we think we are even richer than Scuro. All of them over there only care about showing off white and gold. No, sir, we don’t care about material things. We take good care of our faces, and that’s it. There’s so much oil that can last constant application for a lifetime, at a very low price,” she raised her cup of oil at me, beaming with pride.

“And that’s why all of us here are young-looking,” the other woman said.

And oily-looking I wanted to add, but I thought they were hospitable enough not to throw me out after I jabbed at one of their faces.

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Nothing much could be said about our stay in Lift. Several of us were offered to try putting the oil on our faces but we declined, worried about the repayment (I could bear my face being covered with oil but what if repayment included being enclosed in an oil bubble all my life? That would be dreadful!)

We were finishing our lunch dessert on the bus, strawberry with whipped cream, when the driver announced we were in Scuro already.

“Where is the Wok City? I’d also like to visit it,” said one girl.

“It’s not very far. We’ll see if we can have a wander over there once you survived your Buss celebrations,” cried the bus driver who was far from reassuring as to what awaited us in Scuro.

I looked out of the hole on my window. As we had come to a full stop, I could properly see outside. In between bites of my dessert, I savored the grand city that lay before me.

At first I thought the city was covered in snow. As we got out of the bus I realized what it was. The whole city was painted white. The buildings and pavements were (and allow me to use this description as I am not sure if there ever was such a thing) in varying colors of white. Even the trees and plants were white, and as far as I could tell they were real. People paid for purchases with not gold, but what looked to me like white metal. Men and women wore white suits and dresses. White beads, sequins and other embroidery adorned their clothes. “This is cosplay at its best,” one of the girls from our bus marveled.

Probably the best part about Scuro was that it was an island surrounded by water.

One curious thing, though, was how our bus managed to get to this place. The island was in the middle of the sea and to get to it, our bus must have been transported by boat – something that didn’t happen, and of this I was absolutely certain, even if it was difficult to see anything from the hole on my window. But then, that must be how you get to a place in the middle of the sea by bus – five miles, a little bit of turning and whipped cream on top.

As we walked, we couldn’t help but remark how clean and shiny everything looked. We knew Scuro was a very rich city, and it showed from how the place was presented. I looked up, impressed by the twinkling white lights adorning the magnificent billboards. There were pictures of young people everywhere.

“Self-contained,” Miko, who was walking with me, said. Unlike most of the students in my bus, he

looked weary and since that incident in Clock Town, didn't look pleased to be on this trip. "They do look as if they don't need anybody. Such a self-contained little city." He now sounded more annoyed than ever. As we turned around a corner, he pointed at a poster on one wall that looked too out of place. At first I thought someone had vandalized the wall but as we walked along and saw more of the same poster, we concluded they were put on that clean and shiny white tiled wall on purpose.

The poster was of the Alpin, who, as far as my knowledge of Wok stories was concerned, was the current ruler of the Wok City. I had to look twice to check if it was really the Alpin. A big X covered most of the image in the poster.

I was surprised, when on our next turning, I saw a tramp. I thought it snobbish of me not to expect that such a wonderful place would allow a tramp about. I thought Scuro cared so much for appearance that if there was someone such as a tramp wandering its streets, a city as vain-looking as Scuro would have this sorted out as soon as possible.

The tramp called for Miko's attention. Miko kept walking, ignoring him, so he called to me instead.

I stopped, not out of politeness, but curiosity.

He looked like a happy tramp, laughing as he introduced himself to me: "I'm Gentle Tramp, the first ever resident tramp of Scuro." Laughter. "Do you know when I came here 10 years ago, there was no tramp in this town?" Laughter, like that of a hyena. "I've been honored in some occasions for being the first tramp here. Unfortunately, all the honor came from outside of Scuro. They still couldn't accept me here, or us, there have been many tramps who arrived since I came. The Scuro people tried so hard to change us, to dress us in fancy white silk, but no, that would mean being a tramp no more so we kept refusing. I've had dinners in my honor, in Clock Town, Lift, even in the Wok City. "Gentle Tramp, the first ever tramp who settled in Scuro," the banners said about me." Laughter.

I chatted with Gentle Tramp, hoping he could tell me more about Scuro if it was true he has lived here for 10 years "From outside, it looks perfect. People live freely here. The city is rich. Old people are taken care of. There are no crimes... rather, that's what appears so."

With this, his expression transformed into that of a grave one. "Scuro is good at concealing its true face by its many riches. Just white glitters, mostly with no substance. Many times I've had a taste of what could be done to me if I continue as I am in this town. Only last year, a good tramp friend of mine, Jumping Tramp, became the object of the celebrations. His body was found next to the bus of young students who came to Scuro."

Gentle Tramp sobbed for a while and I let him be. After a minute or so, he turned that sorrowful expression into a gleeful one as he continued to talk about Scuro, as if telling a fairy tale to a child, and it stunned me to see the quick transformation.

"Five years into his leading the Wok City, the Alpin became very, very unhappy. He didn't realize what responsibility he took up until he was seated at the throne. The Wok City continued to prosper, the city obedient to his rules, but there were some places, unbeknownst to the Alpin, that remained indomitable.

"Scuro is one of those places. Probably the biggest asset of Scuro is its young people. The young are paid much reverence to and their coming out in society is commemorated like in no other town. It is beyond anybody's imagination, young people's freedom in Scuro, it is. They invite people from different places to celebrate with them, from twin cities here and beyond."

I wouldn't deny I could understand and sympathize with the Alpin's misgivings about such merriment which sounded to me like our very own Buss. Before our group came to Scuro, as limited as our

resources were (our bus Trafiko-funded and all), the organizers still tried to squeeze things out of us by making us wear all our best clothes and buy the most prohibitive food and drinks for the journey. At first, I wanted to view the Alpin's attitude from the point of view of someone who was a part of the Buss celebrations. To see us young people as maybe only misunderstood. For people like the Alpin, the tradition had become a venue for flaunting riches, not for the good behavior Buss had promoted ever since its inception.

"These activities came to the knowledge of the Alpin only after the first year of his ruling. He wasn't happy about the extravagance and the dares, so in the following years he tried to limit the celebrations. This made the Scuro youngsters very angry, insisting that this is the practice, the tradition, and the Alpin had no power to stop this. They warned for him to never set foot on Scuro or they would cause trouble for the Alpin and the residents of the Wok City."

With that, Gentle Tramp waved his hand at the posters of the rejected Alpin on the wall, ending his story.

He now looked at me again, saying, "You'll be safer in your bus."

By now, the students from the other buses had all arrived in Scuro, and most of the students were very excited by what they saw. Some had already changed into eye-catching clothes the locals offered to them. Others ran to the beach, some stripping naked and swimming further. I saw Rebecca. She now also had changed into a pretty long white dress. She was away from the water but was walking barefooted on the sand. She waved to me. Maybe it was the dress, but seeing her wear that dress reminded me of the headless woman I kept encountering.

"The Balangay Queen has returned!" the tramp yelled. I looked at him and saw he was looking at Rebecca.

He got up but almost lost his balance in the process and held on to me. "Save her, save the Queen!"

I didn't understand what he meant but something just swept all over me. Do you know that feeling, when you suddenly feel as though you're going to get ill, or maybe that someone you care about is in danger? Those times when you can actually tell? I felt that way. I ran to Rebecca. She was in gay spirits, happy, twirling in her dress, showing it to one of the girls from her bus.

Rebecca turned and turned and when she stopped, she was surprised to see me in front of her. "I'm dizzy now," she told me, laughing. "I better unturn myself now," she said as she prepared to turn the other way around. "It never works, does it, unturning yourself," she added.

Before she turned again I took her hand and pulled her. I started to run and she tried to keep up, one of her hands holding her skirt as she ran. "What are you doing?" she yelled.

I must have run so fast, my shoes soiled from kicking up sand while running, I must have hurt Rebecca with my pulling. In a minute, we were in front of the Trafiko bus, panting.

"Why did we run away?" Rebecca asked, half-smiling. That's how she was. I couldn't remember her getting angry even if sometimes I did silly things.

I looked back, noting the air of celebration as all the young people were now heading towards the sea.

Rebecca looked at the whole vista with me. "I'm glad I came," she said with a sigh.

Young men and women jumped and played in the water. Such a pretty scene it was at first I didn't notice them tumbling down. The next minute it was all chaos. The ones who were further out to sea kept jumping up and down. It didn't look good. From where we were standing I couldn't see what was

causing the fall. But whatever it was, the minute those people got in contact with the water seemed like a douse of awakening.

I now turned to Rebecca, her eyes were wide with amazement, then fear. Those who managed to get up came running to their buses. I saw students from my group running towards us. "We better get on the bus, too," I grabbed Rebecca's hand, leading her to our bus.

We felt exhausted as we settled in, as several other students swarmed in. Some were crying, others still shouting for the names of their friends. "I'm coming back for Artur!" one boy yelled.

The doors of the bus closed.

"What's the matter? Don't close it, some people are still trying to get in," another boy said, addressing the driver.

"I didn't," the driver said. He tried to open the door but with so much difficulty.

There was a blinding force of light and all of a sudden the tint on the bus windows was gone and we could see outside. It was like watching something progress on film as we saw people falling down after being struck by something.

From the bus we could see the City Hall which earlier was the brightest part of the city. Now I could see there were five or six people who were standing in front of the building struggling to move but somehow they remained in their respective places. It was as if each of them had been enclosed in a standing coffin with invisible sides. I could see them groping their way out of the box, as if blinded. I wanted to scream and tell them, "there are no barriers, you are free, just try to get out." It must have been too bright in that part they had lost their sense of sight.

There were several other images. On one part of the shore I could see naked people, one on top of the other. Under different circumstances I would have concluded the scenario must be part of the celebrations. But as I stared longer I felt certain these bodies were limp, almost lifeless.

These were images so clear, so real that if we ever got out of this alive we wouldn't forget this nightmare. We couldn't understand what was going on, of what befell us, worse, of what befell those poor creatures who couldn't get into their buses. These images came as abrupt and unexplained but their coming was a validation of that feeling of doubt some of us had about the reason why we were in this twin of a place.

Then came the headless woman, appearing as if the daughter of the sea, floating towards our bus in all of her glory.

Floating must be the correct word. She floated on (and now I realized what looked like a horse was in fact) an old Balangay longboat.

As she approached I recalled who she was. She was the same servant written in those Wok stories I enjoyed as a child. She had been decapitated and buried with her queen in a Balangay boat to serve as her companion into the spirit world. She had been decapitated just to be able to tell, if and when their bodies were exhumed, which one was which.

As I looked out I felt myself shaking. It couldn't be. I could see myself out there in the sea. I was running towards the headless woman, trying to keep her from taking Rebecca. The servant believed Rebecca was her Queen and they should always be together. I saw myself drowning before I could reach Rebecca.

I looked around me and forced myself to believe I didn't drown. I didn't. Rebecca and I made it to the

bus on time. This bus didn't merely bring us to the twin city; it also kept us safe. Such a reliable bus, its engine would be worthy of a study, taking us all the way to Scuro. It must have been in the new wheels. The flashy lights, the clean windscreen, the wide, comfortable seats. The smooth way it ran, never screeching to a stop, never hurling us forwards and sticking our noses to the glass up front. Must be a thousand times more costly than those Balangay boats our forefathers had used. But it kept us safe. What a reliable bus this was, letting us honor and continue these rituals and traditions that date back through time.

## **The Oak Prison by Kendare Blake**

When she first saw him, she thought the forest had come to life. For he was tall, and green, and moved with a rickety creaking, as though his legs were woven through with veins of thick, bitter sap. As he approached the water, she watched him like a bullfrog, her brown, wet seaweed hair hidden beneath a lily pad; her eyes protruding from the surface, wide and white and blinking. He could not see her as he bent his aged back to sit upon the husk of the rotting log. He did not notice her as he spoke to the stones, ordering and reordering them, making them tremble and shift. She watched as he licked the quartz from meaty chunks of granite, his muscular tongue grating against the beaten surface, as he bathed stone after stone, like a great mossy cat.

She had never seen anything like him, she, who had grown amongst leaves and limbs and the brown loamy earth; she, who ran with the sleek-furred stag, racing at his side as they followed the glimmer from beneath a crow's wing. And now, in her innocence, in her curiosity, she rose from the water with a cock of her head like that of an animal, seeking only knowledge, and unaware of the nakedness of her body.

She crept closer, and he, a hunter to the core, remained motionless, until they were face to face, and palm to palm. Until she was close enough to smell the sweet mold in his beard. Until she was close enough to see how his eyes had begun to burn.

He was a man, he told her, and more than a man, but she didn't understand, and only gleefully offered him icy droplets of water to drink, wrung out from her soaked tendrils of hair. She danced forward, and back, on the velvet pads of her feet, teasing the searching tips of his fingers as they slid upon her pale skin. Her laugh was an echo of the bubbling of the stream. She was no fledgling, no child newly hatched; she knew a mating dance when she saw one. But the man made of trees bore no scarlet feathers on his chest or tail, he had no horns or antlers to push and lock. He did not croon, or bellow, but only made weak, whimpering noises from his wet, red lips, hidden behind a tangle of gray-green beard.

But he had many tricks. He waved his hand, and wind came like a shock through the branches, stripping the leaves and laying them in piles before her feet. He spoke fire, and the piles burned, curling in on themselves and sending their smoky blood into the sky in wordless letters, and she clapped her hands in wonderment even as she heard them screaming. Yet still she leapt away from his touch, and in a moment of frustration he spread his arms, and erupted into a flock of crows, cawing and flapping and smelling of moss.

She was not to be outdone; she knew her share of tricks, and she threw herself against the wet rocks, slicing herself into a dozen silver fish, darting into the stream to evade the black, piercing beaks. He

chased her until dusk, by wing and fin and hoof, piecing himself together and breaking himself apart, always too slow, and she kept him coming with glimpses of perfect white flesh, fleeing into the trees.

She licked dew from the bellies of leaves and tore mushrooms from the ground with her teeth, but still, when night came, she was exhausted, exhilarated, and brushing salt off of her body flung herself down beside him on the bank of the river, where he lay spent and smoldering. Before she slept she entwined her fingers in his beard, parting it to see the softness of his lips; she pushed back his cloak hood to prod the furrowed lines of his face.

In the hours of the gray dawn she awoke joyous, covered in a bridal dress of spider's silk, bound to the earth in glittering layers of translucent gauze. Her tinkling laughter roused the groom, and he fell upon her in the half-light, tearing away the finely spun garment, sending spiders skittering into the grass. Now he found his bellow, in a victory that shook her bones. Her cries startled the birds.

The day came, and he would not move; he would only lie, panting and pawing at her, so she left him to run with the stag when it came to rub its bloody velvet on the branch of a tree. But she returned. She would always return, breathless and ready to lie with him, a nymphet's mute smile on her fair cheeks, and dying leaves strung through her hair.

He showed her how to call the quail, miming a reed flute with his fingers, and she clapped when they came, bobbing along on tiny feet. Then he broke their warm, feathered necks and placed them on heated stones to burn. And she wept, and moaned, and thrashed upon the ground. She shrieked when he put the meat to his lips. So he waved his hand, and the drippings turned to blood, and the crisp skin to fat, and feather by feather the quail once again became quail. And she laughed with joy as he parted his robes, saying, "bewitched, bewitched," from his wet, hungry mouth.

Days came and went, as she ran through the forests and splashed in the streams, and he grew thin, leaned up against a great oak trunk. Night after night she returned to him, and he spent himself with her, and she did not notice the ivy twined around his ankles. She squealed at the roughness of his hands, but in the dark did not see the flaking bark that spread across his palms like cracking gray scales. She left him with the sun and returned with the dusk to wrap herself around his heavy body. She didn't notice when he grew stiffer and ceased to speak. Theirs was a strange marriage.

And then one morning she woke, and blinking against the light sent searching arms across the grass for her beloved. What she found instead was an oak tree, strong and twisted and covered with moss and vine. At first she was filled with wonder, playing her hands over the surface of the bark, until her fingers found the familiar furrows of his brow. All that day she did not run, only beat against the oak until her small white fists were ruined and raw, and her young bride's tears had saturated the soil.

## **Contributor Biographies**

### **Eliza Victoria**

Eliza Victoria lives in the Philippines, where she has published fiction in various publications ([Philippines Free Press](#), [Philippine Graphic](#), [Story Philippines](#), Very Short Stories for Harried Readers, and [Philippine Speculative Fiction IV](#)). Visit her at <http://sungazer.wordpress.com>.

### **Veronica Henry**



Veronica Henry is a 20 year IT professional, turned writer and web entrepreneur. She is a member of [The Carl Brandon Society](#), [The Las Vegas Writer's Group](#) and [The Black Science Fiction Society](#). Her short fiction will be published in the January 2010 issues of [Golden Visions](#) and [Strange, Weird & Wonderful](#) magazines. In 2007, she traced her African ancestry to Sierra Leone and made the pilgrimage back "home" a year later. A visit to the Bunce Island slave castle served as inspiration for this story.

### **Bint Arab**

Bint Arab is a new writer, an Iraqi American born in Baghdad and raised in Brooklyn. Today she lives in Texas, where being a New Yorker makes her more of a stranger in a strange land than being Arab American ever could.

### **Catherine Batac Walder**

Catherine Batac Walder left her home country, the Philippines, in 2005 for a two-year European MPhil. scholarship program at the University of Oslo, Norway. The program had period studies in Finland and Portugal. Her work has appeared in [Philippines Free Press](#), [Practical Boat Owner](#), "A Taste of Home" (Anvil Publishing, Phils.), Study Abroad, "Youngblood 3" (Philippine Daily Inquirer and Anvil) and Inscribed. Catherine lives in Berkshire, England.

### **Kendare Blake**

Kendare Blake's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in [The Momaya Press 2007 Annual Review](#), [Tower of Light Fantasy](#), [Arkham Tales Magazine](#) and [Mirror Dance](#). She enjoys veganism, red meat and contradictions. Her debut novel, *Sleepwalk Society*, is to be released in late fall 2009.