



speculative fiction FOR THE REST OF US

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The Cold Ghost of Niue by Angela Ambroz

The chickens could always see him.

And the cats. They knew. The chickens and the cats and the roosters and the dogs and the occasional pig. All of them, with their animal intuition, saw past his invisibility and came to his porch, rooted through his bushes, meowed and clucked for food. They were always there. They followed him on his lonely excursions down the sea tracks to the limestone caves. They sat with him when he perched himself carefully on a clean, smooth rock surface and watched the ocean. The water was always turbulent in Niue. But it was sky-blue and clear and it cleansed him of his worries. That was why he had come here.

He had been six years old when he had first turned invisible. He had been growing up in Delhi, a typical middle class upbringing, full of argumentative rickshaw-wallahs and gated suburbs and Indira Gandhi on channel Doordarshan and smog. He had watched Amitabh Bachchan’s films and fallen in love: his galaxy-sized hero, whose superstardom was an asteroid crushing onto the screen from space. Dishoom, Amitabh Bachchan’s fist said as it smacked into the cheek of injustice. Dishoom, dishoom!

When he was six years old, he had turned invisible. His parents, walking with him through a crowded alley near the Jama Masjid, had been attacked. *Dishoom!* They had been stabbed, their wallets had been stolen. Lights had flickered, the muezzin had called, it had all been shoes and shins and then silent death. The day they died was the day he vanished, an orphan in the crowd.

Where could an invisible boy go? He flickered like stolen electricity. He found himself fleshy, alive, one moment, and transparent, the next. He couldn't control it. If he held his breath and scrunched his face, he would go – *pop* – and fall away from the world of the seen. It was a terrifying freedom. But he could never bring himself back so easily. It just happened.

As a teenager, he traveled the world. He squeezed past lines of people in the airport, he crawled under security desks and took planes to everywhere. He had to hide himself however; even though he couldn't be seen, he could still be felt. Once he fell asleep in the airplane's toilet and a woman sat on him, screaming. He went invisible naked, he could not make his clothes disappear, and so he favored traveling to warm, soft destinations. Rio de Janeiro. The Cotswolds in July. Rome in September. Fiji. Singapore. His English improved, and he grew lonelier and lonelier.

What does an invisible boy do? He didn't go to school, he never got any education apart from that which the world taught him. He learned to pickpocket, to let his invisibility carry him into homes and cars. When he was twenty-four, he called himself The Great Moochini. He still watched Amitabh Bachchan films then – a reminder of his former life – but even the Big B's superstar was twinkling into dim descent. No one could ever forget the dismal Ajooba, which was like watching the masala genre in its death throes.

When he was twenty-nine, he saw a beautiful girl in Perth, Australia. She was second-generation Desi, growing up with a west Australian twang to two bewildered Gujarati parents. She cut her hair short and wore tapered trousers and listened to Crowded House. She was seductive in her freedoms, and he made himself visible for her. He invented an alma mater, a degree, a life, and they tumbled through the grasses of Kings Park together. But when he failed to identify basic algebra (he was pretending to be an engineer), it ended, and he switched himself off, a sad light bulb saying goodbye.

Still he followed her around, invisible. He watched her shower and dozed on her bedroom floor, holding his breath and trying to relive what joy they had had together. But his only superpower was that – invisibility – and he couldn't have a second chance.

#

When he was thirty, having failed at several attempts at a normal life, he decided to retire. In London Heathrow's Terminal 4, he took off his clothes and disappeared. He boarded a plane to the Pacific.

He had already marked his retirement home in the library books: a place that was warm all year round. A safe place – no predators, human or animal, no disease. A comfortable place – no poverty, no water shortages, no riots. A place that was underpopulated and emptying fast: Niue.

Niue was a dot in the Pacific Ocean. A single island country, remote and untouched. He took the direct flight from New Zealand and landed at three in the morning – pitch black – in a hidden land. It was rocky, vast, silent and buzzing. It was alive, humming on a raised coral atoll while blue-blue waves sloshed and foamed at its base. A stone mushroom with a wild garden on top. Niueans called it the Rock of Polynesia.

When he lived seen, the people were kind to him. They waved as they drove past on their neat, swept roads. They invited him to church. When he lived unseen, cats, chickens and pigs hovered by his porch,

waiting for the scraps of his leftovers. He fed chicken to the chickens.

He lived in one of the many abandoned houses, the home of a family that had emigrated long ago to New Zealand. It was high up on the northwestern side, past Toi Village, nestled deep in wild, fragrant bushes. Vines crawled over its rotting wooden posts. The floorboards were damp, mossy. He could see the clear sky through the ancient window frames, and motes danced in the shafts of sunlight.

Niue was quiet. He lived there, alone, a peripheral presence in the lives of his neighbors. To him they were everything, but to them he was invisible. He followed them into their homes, leapt into their pick-up trucks, wandered around their offices. He fell in love with them, needed them, his extended Niuean family. He grew old with them, lived their lives with them. He watched as Mela, who worked in the government offices, dreamt up schemes of renewable energy plants, of solar water heaters and wind power electricity, and he stifled a joyful cheer when Mela received his grant. He watched the Tuvaluans arrive, family by family, immigrating to Vaiea village on the southern coast. He watched Sufane and Maria grow, and he wept when they left to study in overseas universities.

The tourists were his entertainment. With his thick, calloused feet, he would jump into their rented cars, naked, sitting in the back, listening to their conversations.

“...but Rosie doesn’t know her ass from her elbow, so she may as well sell.”

“Azzurro, il pomeriggio è troppo azzurro e lungo per me!”

“When’s dinner? Is any place on this island open on Saturday?”

“Love you too, darling. Pothole!”

“Trop forte! C’est juste comme *Jurassic Park!*”

The tourists were his marks for food, too. He followed the families home, the large groups, and sucked in their social energy.

He once slipped into a guesthouse shared by six Italian backpackers. They bought the expensive imported Parmesan cheese and jars of pesto in Alofi Town’s tiny grocery store, and then they complained about its quality. They cooked an enormous pot of pasta, uncorked a bottle of white wine, and lazed about on the porch while he, the invisible man, finished off what was left.

Tourists always left condiments – half-empty cans of tomato sauce, a few eggs, aging bread – in the guesthouse kitchens. For several months, he haunted these spots, a parasite.

Keeping fed, sheltered and warm were his main concerns, and he lived his tramp’s life among the relative ease of Niue and its tourist trade. Near Toi Village, in his abandoned home, he buried himself in banana leaves and palm fronds at night. Still, sometimes he shivered, the winters were hard.

He was starting to forget his name, his birthday, Amitabh Bachchan, everything.

#

Lani’s family thought she was lonely, and they begged her to move to Auckland.

“There ain’t nothing for you on the Rock, Ma,” Lani’s sons and daughters said over the phone. “It’s all going to rubbish, eh. Auckland has so much for you, for people your age. You’d be so much more comfortable here.”

But she brushed aside these promises of comfort. Wasn’t she comfortable here? And she wasn’t lonely, despite what they thought. There was her church group in Toi Village – other women her age with

whom she would weave and gossip. They would sit in the community center or the church, and they would tuck the strands of ancient palm fronds into each other, cackling over their ridiculous acquaintances. Then there were the children who rode up and down her road on their bicycles, like streams of giggles rattling by.

And then there was her invisible neighbor in the abandoned house.

She noticed a presence in the house a year after Husband died, on a day when she went there to hang up her washing. As she was drawing the line through the skeletal frame of what had been the sitting room, she sensed someone watching her. She turned. No one was there. But she could smell them; the scent of a body, the exhalations of a human being. Her suspicions were confirmed when items started disappearing from her laundry line. A pair of too-large sweat pants. A Niue “Rock Solid” t-shirt.

At first, she thought it was a ghost of the Talagi family. They had left that house long ago, before Cyclone Heta, before Cyclone Ofa even. It had remained empty and overgrown for over fifteen years. Perhaps they were annoyed that she was using their sitting room for drying her laundry? Well. She had no patience for people who abandoned the Rock and then remained territorial and possessive over it.

“If you don’t want my laundry in your house,” she said one day, addressing the presence she could feel in her goose bumps. “Then you shouldn’t have let this hole open up in your roof. With all this sunlight coming in. Hmm! You’ll just have to come right back from Wellington if you want me to stop, Mr. and Mrs. Talagi.”

A day passed. A month; a year. The Talagis never returned, one or two items kept disappearing from the laundry, and Lani conceded by roping a new laundry line to hang between the two houses – her living one and this dead one. The ghost was always there: squelching in the grass, rustling the bushes, hanging around.

Once she came into the abandoned home and it reeked of coconut toddy.

“Ghost, you’ve been drinking in here?” she exclaimed. There was only embarrassed silence. The motes swirled, disturbed by two presences. “Shee! It stinks. I didn’t know ghosts drank toddy.”

The ghost became her confidant, and she spoke to it in Niuean and sometimes English. Sometimes she thought she heard a hesitation, like the inhalation of a speaker. But there was always silence.

One evening, she sat with Ema and told her about the ghost.

“Oh, I’ve got one too!” Ema said. “Down at the motel. We always find drops of water in the shower, yeah, like someone was using it, yeah, but there was no one there. Sometimes we find the food disappearing too.”

“It must be the same one, I reckon,” Lani said.

“Well, if he’s living in the Talagi’s old house, you better tell him that he ain’t welcome at the motel. He’s scaring the guests!”

And tourism was important for Niue. As the islanders left, the palagi – white people – visited. An economy that buoyed and bobbed.

“I’ll tell it,” Lani promised.

But mostly she sat in her chair on the porch and worked on her weaving, finding new patterns on the traditional village designs. On Sunday mornings, the church bells rang. She invited the ghost to accompany her, but she never felt its presence walking with her. She wondered if the ghost was

Christian, or some vestige of an ancient, pre-Christian islander past. She began to wonder if this ghost was one of Captain Cook's men, someone who had finally landed on Niue after being terrorized away.

"Well, we're still working off that name you gave us – Savage Island, huh!" Lani said as she hobbled to church one day. "Not a very nice name, no, no."

Finally, the day came when the ghost spoke.

It was a day when thunderclouds hung low in the sky, pregnant and dark. A chilled breeze swung through the trees, rustling their leaves, and a mist of rain fell. The palm trees, like green fireworks caught mid-burst, dipped with weight. It was a cold day.

Lani was outside between the two houses, quickly packing away her laundry before the heavy rain fell, telling the ghost about the upcoming dance in the village hall. She had been tasked with making the traditional costumes, but if they all became wet with this rain, well –

"Excuse me."

Lani screamed. It was a man's voice. A foreigner's accent.

"Sorry – sorry – it's me!"

"You?" Lani swung around, frantic. "Who's 'you'? Oh my goodness, where are you?"

"It's me – your – the ghost."

"The ghost?!"

"Yes – I'm not really a ghost."

"Where are you?"

"Here." There was a knock on the ancient doorframe. Lani turned to it, terrified, holding a bathrobe forward in defense.

"Who are you?" Lani's voice trembled.

"I'm – I'm a man. I'm not a ghost, I'm not dead."

"What do you want?"

"I – uh, I'm cold. Towel?"

Without thinking, Lani threw the bathrobe in the direction of the doorframe. Something caught it in mid-flight, and it hung, suspended in the air.

"I didn't know ghosts got cold," Lani said.

"I'm not a ghost," the ghost said. "I'm not dead."

"Why can't I see you?"

"I can't – I, uh. Sometimes I can be... unseen."

"What!"

"Don't worry! I can be seen too, sometimes."

"Well – do it! Show me!"

"No."

“What?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Mister, you had better be-seen yourself right now or I will alert the police.”

“No! Okay, okay.”

She heard him inhale sharply and then hold it. She waited. Nothing happened.

“Nothing’s happening,” she said.

“Huh – oh. Let me try again. Sometimes it doesn’t... it has been a while...”

Again – an intake of breath and then tense silence.

“All right, all right,” Lani said, “Don’t pop a blood vessel.” She paused, considering, and then turned towards the door. “You’d better come inside and have some tea, Ghost.”

“Look!” The bathrobe wrapped itself around something and then hung on an invisible man’s frame. The bathrobe had daisies on it. “I can wear this.”

“Right. Thanks. Come on.”

Inside, Lani poured the daisy bathrobe a cup of expensive tea – hiding her cheaper stuff – and took the seat opposite. The kitchen became fragrant with Earl Grey. They sat in silence. Lani looked around the room. A bunch of small bananas leaned against the sink, yellow and brown, like fat fingers splayed. A postcard of Auckland was pinned against the refrigerator.

“Now, Ghost – ”

“I’m not a ghost.”

“What should I call you?”

“Uh...”

“Now, Ghost, how long have you been living in that house?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I remember when we first met, you and I. It’s been almost ten years, Mister.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t you think it’s a little rude to be hanging around people’s homes like a tramp?”

“I was not really counting on being found out.”

“Well, you’ve been found out. And now what?”

“Uh?” Ghost’s voice was raspy.

“And where are you from? Your accent’s not from here.”

“No, I’m not from the Pacific region. I’m from India.”

“India! Oh. So what’s a ghost man from India doing so far from home? I didn’t know you people could do that.”

“No, no, I’m the only one. I think. I’m here because... It’s nice. Just so.”

The teacup was, meanwhile, raising itself into the air.

“Try that trick again. I want to get a good look at you.”

The sounds of a struggle, and then giving up.

“I can’t – ”

“Try again, go on! I think I saw some hair then.”

“Okay.”

He gave up several times, but they tried and tried again, and, after an hour, Lani found herself staring at a grizzled, skinny man. He had an unkempt beard and wild hair, an explosion of grays and browns. His skin was weather-beaten and scarred. And his eyes were innocent and hesitant. Like an elderly boy, or a tousled, mangy bunny.

“There you are...” Lani breathed. “A miracle!”

Ghost blushed, darkening. “It’s not a miracle...”

“Can you turn yourself off?”

With a soap bubble pop, he was out. Lani laughed.

“Now come back on again.”

He struggled with it, making sounds as if he was lifting a weight, and then reappeared.

“That is so difficult,” he admitted.

“Looks so! Tired?”

Ghost nodded.

“Well, have some tea and I’ll start making some food. You can go root through Husband’s drawers and see if anything fits you, if you haven’t already. Hmm, he was much fatter than you. Dinner’s at seven. Tonight you sleep in the house of the living!”

“Aren’t you worried, I’m, thank you, but I – ”

“After ten years, Ghost, you would have tried something already.”

“Well, yes, true.”

#

For a long time, Ghost existed only for Lani. At the slightest sound of a bicycle or a car or a bird, he would blink out. She urged him to shave and to shower and to eat, and he filled out, gaining substance, but he never left the house as a visible member of society.

On the night of the dancing in the village hall, Lani brought Ghost along and introduced him to her friends. He was just a timid shimmer, the memory of a shadow.

“Girls, this is Ghost. Say hello. You’ll have to excuse him, he’s shy.”

The girls acknowledged him with gentle Fakalofa lahi atus. He sat on their mat and watched them fan themselves while mosquitoes whined nearby. The children had put on a Christmas dance, and they twirled their wrists and ankles and hips, swirling like water across the floor. They had decorated their hair in flowers, their bodies in palm fronds. Ghost, starved for human company and culture, watched

them, transfixed. Sometimes he thought he caught Lani's eye, watching him from the side, but then he would turn and see that she was winking at someone else, someone sitting on his other side. She was looking through him.

On Sundays, Ghost accompanied Lani to church. He sat in the last pew and listened idly to ministers who spoke in Niuean, promising cosmic justice. Maybe Jesus had just disappeared? But when the singing began, he could almost be swayed. The beautiful harmonics of the church music was something beyond this world. It transported Ghost out of himself, tugging at his cardiovascular system and threatening to drag him up into heaven. Once, he found himself slowly turning visible, fingernails first. He was carving a place out for himself, reflecting light again, but, when he caught himself, he switched off in an instant.

Ghost and Lani watched *M\*A\*S\*H* on the couch.

"Ghost, if you're still living, what's your name, then?"

"I don't know. Can't remember."

The voice of Alan Alda, tinny, from the television.

"Can't remember at all?"

"It's been a long time since I've heard it. Or said it."

"Oh, hmm," Lani stretched her toes, arching her flip-flops away. "Well, it took you some time to turn yourself back on. It'll take some time to remember your name. Keep trying."

"It's Ah-something."

"Good! Maybe tomorrow we'll get another letter."

Canned laughter.

Lani urged Ghost to cook her some Indian food, a curry or something, but Ghost found himself confused by the kitchen. He had always stolen food; he had never made it. Lani watched him from the kitchen table, eyes sympathetic.

"Hmm. Well, didn't your mother ever cook you food? And you just watched her?"

There was a glimmer of a memory. Ghost went pop – turning invisible again.

"What?" Lani exclaimed. "Was it something I said?"

Sometimes they took walks through the Huvalu Conservation Park, a forest thick and green, dappled in sunlight. Some parts of the Park were dark as night. They explored the caves, touching the stalactites in the cool, damp air.

"You've never been married? You're a handsome man, when you let yourself be seen."

Ghost blushed again. "I have a long face. And I'm a tramp."

"Oh," Lani made a sympathetic noise. "Well, you've cleaned yourself up now. You should be catching them like flies to honey."

"I don't want to. I want to stay with you. I love you, Lani," Ghost said. "You're like my mother."

"That is nice of you to say, Ghost, but not very healthy."

#



Lani had a plan: get Ghost a girlfriend.

They pored over women's magazines and Australian TV chat shows. They studied the fashions and went shopping in Alofi Town for new sandals, new aftershave. Ghost examined himself in the mirror, made kissing faces.

"Now, Ghost, you are a very good listener, and women appreciate that. Remember what it said in *Cosmo*? What you need to work on now are speaking skills. You've got to know how to make conversation with a lady."

"What do I talk about?"

"Gosh, I don't know, you're the one who's seen the world. Tell me something about it!"

Ghost practiced remaining seen. He sat in the up-market hotel's outside restaurant, watching the whales at sunset, and he listened to people having normal people conversations. Tentatively, he began to say *hello* and *fakalofa lahi atu* to passing strangers. Every snubbed greeting was a hole in his heart.

The months passed, and he began the terrifying ritual of Courtship.

"How'd it go, G?" Lani was sitting in her favorite chair, reading under a single lamp. The night-bugs buzzed in the bushes outside. A rooster was crowing, confused.

Ghost rubbed his eyes. "She said something I didn't understand. She talked about her high school reunion, and I didn't know what that meant."

"Oh, dear. Well, you've got a peculiar background. What name did you use?"

Ghost shrugged. "Ghost."

"Good. Remember, that is the first rule of meeting new people: You do not lie."

One day, Lani came home smiling. She found Ghost napping on the porch and shook him awake.

"Ghost, I have found you a nice Indian girl!"

Not a girl, a woman. And not Indian, Indo-Fijian. She had come from Suva, Fiji, for a research project investigating Niue's energy supply. She had flowing hair and a ready smile and the sparkle of a successful mid-career do-gooder. Her name was Kareena, and she was recently divorced.

Lani made Ghost put on his Sunday tie. She dragged him to the car and drove them down to Alofi Town, where the Kareena woman was supposedly staying. All along the way, Ghost fretted, "Lani, I've been to Fiji. They speak a strange Hindi there; I can barely understand it. What will I talk to her about? I don't feel ready!"

But Lani just shushed him, "If you don't meet this woman, Ghost, so help me Jesus, I will kick you out of the house and back into the Talagi abode!"

"Tomorrow! Can't we go tomorrow?"

It was too late. They found Kareena coming out of one of the cafes. It was a sunny, clear day. The cliffs of Niue's coast could be seen on into the horizon. Kareena was juggling a laptop case, a smoothie and a pack of documents. She was pretty in an approachable way, oozing maternal sympathy and elegant sexiness. Ghost felt himself grow hot. Lani parked the car across from the cafe and pushed Ghost out, pinching his thigh as he clumsily got out of the car.

Ghost walked to Kareena, straightening his tie, feeling the sweat crawling down his back. His hands

shook, his knees felt weak. The Kareena woman was too busy balancing her smoothie to notice his arrival.

Finally, he was in front of her. He coughed, clearing his throat. Lani's Second Rule of Dating: Always make sure the first thing out of your mouth is a compliment.

"That's a very nice," Ghost said loudly, causing Kareena to raise her head, "drink."

Kareena arched an eyebrow. "Thanks."

"My friends call me Ghost. Though I'm not dead or anything. I'm alive."

Kareena said nothing. She was watching him warily. Ghost turned back to look at the car, Lani nodded with a smile. *Go on*, she mouthed. He looked back at Kareena. Lani's Second Rule of Dating: Smile. Tell them your name. Don't lie.

Ghost inhaled. His given name had just come back during his afternoon nap, where he had dreamt of Delhi and the cheek of injustice. *Dishoom!* Now this little pearl of knowledge was sitting, sheltered and protected, ready for the light. If this woman was really as perfect as Lina promised, Ghost knew that she should be the first person to hear it.

"My real name, though," Ghost smiled, "is Amitabh Bachchan."

## **Shadow by Tade Thompson**

I met a man with no shadow today.

He crossed into the village limits near dusk, furtive but resolute. He wanted to find the Mamman. He did not understand my description of the route, partly because he spoke gutter Yoruba learnt from leather traders and partly because I have a stutter.

I decided to take him there because I thought it would be a very sad thing losing one's shadow. He was grateful, but fell silent after our initial conversation. I told him to wait while I checked my traps, for I am a hunter.

I had caught one bush rat and the leg of an antelope who had chewed his limb off in order to escape my pot. I reset the traps under the studious gaze of the man with no shadow.

The sun hid beneath the horizon, and even my shadow did not survive. We crossed the brook of tears without getting our feet wet and waved greeting to the three drinkers at the palm wine bar, men with whom I had been circumcised, but whose features had been blunted by ogogoro, their bodies the harvest of a misspent youth.

We walked past my house and I handed my puzzled wife the bag with the bush rat and my belt of charms. I kept the rifle slung over my shoulder. The Mamman had magic, but gunpowder and lead would work on anything that had a heart, shadowed or not.

#

"Your shadow is born when you are," said the Mamman, "but it outlives you. You should cast a shadow until your body rots."

She was fat, with massive swinging breasts which held intricate tattoos and she had a sensual carelessness about her near-nakedness.

“You may go,” she said to me.

I shook my head. “I want to hear what he has to say.”

“Very well.” To the man she said: “What have you brought for me?”

The man unwrapped a small package and laid a dried, blackened object at the Mamman’s side. “This is the trigger finger of the greatest warrior my village has ever known.”

“Did you kill him?” she asked.

“No, but it is mine to give away.” He offered no further explanation.

The Mamman put it away and licked her lips, sat back down. “I’ve known two others who lost their shadows in my time.”

“I did not lose it,” said the man. “I drove it away.”

“Explain, outlander. I get bored easily and when I’m bored I amuse myself by sucking the brains out of the eyeballs of mouthy customers.”

#

It was a story of war.

The man’s village had been outnumbered by invaders from the north. Fair-skinned, heavily-clothed warriors with curved swords and strange customs. They outnumbered the indigenous people two to one and had mounted cavalry and bows and arrows.

“The witch doctor had a solution. He would bring alive our shadows, in the process doubling the army strength, but we had to win the battle before sundown because he could only hold the spell from dawn till dusk of one day. We also had to fight alongside our counterparts so that they could find their way back to merge just before sundown. As it turned out the invaders were so afraid of the dark warriors that they fled, but the shadow-selves were more...dishonourable.”

There was a massacre, with the slaughter and sodomization of unarmed men in the process of surrendering.

“Most of my villagers allowed this, encouraged it even, but I objected. My shadow wished to continue, but I tried to prevent it. It tried to turn on me, but I fought it off. It hissed and sputtered, and slinked away and I did not see it again before sundown. I have not cast a shadow since. It made my wife and family uncomfortable and I had heard of the Mamman here. I loaded provisions, left my kinsmen, and here I am.”

#

The Mamman was silent for a long time. Then she scratched herself absently. Our shadows flickered in the candlelight, with an eerie gap where the stranger’s should have been.

“It’s not such a bad thing to lack a shadow self,” she said.

“Then give me yours,” said the man.

The Mamman laughed. It sounded like many jackals at once, and spittle sprayed around. I dared not wipe it off my chin. The woman stood and crumbs of something dropped to the floor. “There are two

ways of solving this problem. We can find your errant shadow or take one from a recently-deceased person. The latter will not look like you and may not move at exactly the same moment as you, but nobody will notice who doesn't observe closely. Chose wisely."

#

This is how I came to be a resurrectionist, digging into the grave of one Saliu Ogunrombi, who died in the last wave of Yellow Fever.

There was no moon. There was the rhythmic digging of myself and the man with no shadow. The Mamman sat on a stool waiting, smoking.

The ritual itself was undramatic, and consisted of holding Saliu upright and lighting torches behind him. The Mamman said something to the resultant shadow and it detached from Saliu and bobbed over to the stranger.

#

At dawn I settled at my wife's side, freshly showered and with no intention of doing the day's hunting. Her hand drifted between my legs, but grave digging is tiring work and there was no oak tree for her to climb, just a willow.

Before I fell asleep I remembered the last words the Mamman said to me as the man walked away with his new shadow.

"In a year he will return to us. To me. He will tell me to release him from this shadow."

"Why?" I asked.

"He will say his wife has left him and the people of his village shun him. He will say the new shadow self has changed his behaviour and he cannot control himself."

I said nothing.

"And he will be right."

"What is a shadow, Ma?" I asked. I did not stutter when with her.

She did not answer, but walked into the twilight. Presently, I went home.

I looked at the walls of my bedroom, at the shadows receding with the rising sun, and the rise and fall of my wife's chest.

I slept.

## **Hunger by Lisa Poh**

I'm lying in this yard. It's raining, and I'm wet and muddy. Fog is everywhere. Don't remember why I'm here. I try to get up but something yanks me down. It's a cuff. Somebody's handcuffed my wrist to a garden pipe. Leaning on the pipe, I get up again on two feet. When I try to walk away, my hand gets stuck half-way through the metal ring. Wriggling it doesn't work. Kicking at the pipe doesn't work either, and I fall over again.

The grass smells like mud. The rain makes me slippery. The fog lifts, and I make out the shape of the house in the rain. A tall white square with a pointed green roof. Green shutters and a green door.

The door, it calls to me. Then I remember. *I'm staking out the house.*

*Because there are people inside.*

*Tengo hambre. I'm hungry.*

I jangle the handcuff on the pipe. This time, I don't fight the cuff. I pull the hand up for a closer look. One of the fingers has a ring with a shiny stone on it. *A diamond*, that's what it's called. But that's not the finger I want. I take the short finger, the thumb, and snap it off at the base. It makes a loud crack. I'm good at breaking bones. Now the thumb hangs loosely by its skin. I fold it over the other fingers and my hand squeezes out of the cuff.

I hobble, one step after another, to the house, to the green door. But when I get there, I can't go in. The door-lever doesn't turn no matter how I shake it. I feel the jambs for a way to get in but the door is hard and solid.

"*Por favor, I'm hungry,*" I plead as I rattle the lever, thump against the door. "I'm so hungry." Nobody comes.

All round the house, I grope at the windows and the siding for a way in, until I come to a veranda. There's another door there, up some steps. It stays shut although I knock and knock. In the door, there's a small glass panel. Through it, I see a hallway leading to dark rooms, and at the end, more steps going up.

*They must be upstairs, my mind tells me.*

Then I notice the things left on the side of the veranda—a square can, a sheet of paper, a blanket. The tin weighs my hand down. Its label shows a cow, but my eyes can't focus on the words. I feel giddy trying to read. But anger rushes out as I stare at the picture of the cow.

They're mocking me. I can hear it—the sniggering. High, giggling laughter.

*Niños.*

*I'll give them something to laugh about.*

With all my strength, I swing the heavy can back and then smash it against the door. The glass pane at the top of the door cracks, but stays in place. I slam my body against the door. Twice. Three times. The door doesn't budge.

They're laughing at me now. I take the sheet of paper and rip it to shreds. The blanket is harder to destroy. My broken thumb flops about in its sac of skin trying to tear the cloth. I jab holes in it, and then throw it aside.

Only the can is useful. I hurl it at the windows, all around the house. The glass breaks but still I cannot get in. White grills block every single window. All I can do is press my face against the bars to shout, "I'm hungry! I'm so hungry!"

From far inside, I hear noises. It takes me a long time to remember it, the sound of crying.

#

*Someone is coming.*

In the back of my mind, I recognise the rolling crunch of gravel. It's a car. I decide to hide. The long grass in the yard slopes downwards from the driveway. I lay down there, out of sight.

A white car turns into the yard. It spins a circle to face the way out. A man wearing blue and black gets out, gun in hand.

“Hello?” he calls out. “Nina? Anybody there?”

I arrange my body in the grass to look broken and injured, start moaning a little.

He turns his head. I moan louder. The man comes closer, sees me lying in the grass and mud. “Nina?”

“Help me,” I croak. Words I remember to be magic.

“Nina, what happened?” he asked, coming closer. The gun remains trained on me. “Did they get you? Where are your children? Are they safe?”

“Help me. It hurts,” I whimper, reaching my right hand up to him.

He lowers his gun and leans over. In that moment, I grab at him, tripping him down into my arms. His gun goes off into me as he falls, but it doesn't matter because finally, it's time to eat. I bite into him—the taste of flesh is electric. All my senses light up. Hot blood gushes into my mouth, overflowing, dripping. As he jerks and twitches against me, I rip his shirt open and bury my teeth in his chest.

#

The sun had set, and I was sated. With the feeding, I had started to regain some sense of myself. At some point, I looked down on the face of the body I had been feeding on, and realised that I knew him.

A name floated to mind, grew stronger.

*Eddie.*

I remembered picnic tables, balloons, a barbecue. Janet, his wife in a flowered dress. A birthday cake with trick candles that lit back up after he blew them out. The candles had been my idea.

*Eddie, my friend.*

With that memory came another realisation; that his blue uniform, now soaked with dark, drying blood, was the same uniform that I was wearing, under the mud and grime. Emblazoned on his chest was a large badge of a river flowing under a star, and the words that I could now read: FALSE CREEK POLICE DEPARTMENT, FLORIDA.

I pushed the body away and scrambled to my feet. I wanted to retch, but it wasn't something my body did anymore. My body liked what it had just ingested.

Instead, I remembered more things. Like why I was lying in the back garden, with my wrist cuffed to the garden pipe.

It was my set of cuffs, and I was the one who had cuffed myself there.

Now I recognised the house as my own, the two-storey farmhouse Joe and I picked out years ago, when we moved up north from Miami into False Creek, when times were happy. The house where we raised the kids together, where I raised the kids now, alone.

The glass in the door didn't break because it was storm-proof, installed after the close shave we had with a tornado two years ago.

The grills had been more an act of a single mother's paranoia last summer, when my house was spray-painted with obscenities calling me spic, puta, dyke. As a cop, I'd heard worse before. But whoever it was had come to my house and frightened my kids, and that spooked me. We weren't close enough to our neighbours to get help quickly if anything happened.

*The kids.*

None of the lights in the house had been turned on, but I knew they were still inside, still awake. My children: Luisa, Nadia and Javier. They were probably watching me, had probably been watching it all.

#

I found the blanket on the front steps, the can of corned beef lying in glass beneath a window. The label was gone, and it was almost dented beyond recognition. I spent the night gathering up and piecing together the scattered shreds of the letter my children wrote to me.

As the sun started rising, I tried to read it. I didn't get the giddiness now. Maybe because I wasn't so hungry. Maybe it was the blood. Some parts of the letter were missing, or had disintegrated in the damp, and most of the words were no more than smudged markings. But still I pored over them, to make out isolated words: "Mom," "scared," and "help."

I cradled the dented can and blanket to my chest, and cried. I understood that the food could no longer feed me, and the blanket could no longer give me warmth. But what mother would hunt her own children?

Eddie's corpse was still lying there in the front yard. I made myself go back to it to search his body. His phone was useless by now, the batteries soaked. His walkie-talkie was still working, but no one responded, even when I tried all the channels. It was the same when I used the radio in the patrol car — just the empty crackle of static.

His gun was where it had fallen after he'd shot me — False Creek PD standard issue, a .40 caliber. I had the same one, but had thrust mine into Luisa's hands, together with the keys to the house and my store of hunting guns and ammunition. By then, I was in the throes of the change, and there wasn't enough time to explain what was happening.

I touched my bullet wound — a small dark circle in my abdomen. *I should be dead.*

One small bite on my upper arm had changed everything. The girl we pulled over on the highway had been hysterical, in panic, desperate to escape. It was such a small bite. Just part of the job. Driving home in my own car that day, I hit a concrete barrier. I was usually a good driver. I should have known then that something was wrong.

Eddie had come for us. He knew my car was in the repair shop and that we couldn't get away. And look at how I repaid him. *Que Dios me perdone*, my mother's old words came to mind. But my faith was faded, and my guilt insurmountable.

Still, I whispered the words, "Forgive me," as I pressed the gun to Eddie's head and pulled the trigger. Nothing I could do would help Eddie now, but so long as I was here, I had to keep my children safe.

#

In the backyard, I washed myself at the pipe with the useless cuff hanging from it, trying to rinse what blood and mud I could out of my hair and uniform. I knew I couldn't wash away what I'd become, but

I didn't want to face my kids caked in gore.

Dripping with water, I approached the back of the house again and called out, "Luisa, Nadia, Javier! Can you hear me?"

I didn't know if they had woken up. I didn't know if they had slept at all.

"If you can hear me, stay on the second floor! Stay upstairs where you're safe! But come to the window so you can hear me. I don't know how long this will last."

Three pale faces appeared at the window. Their features were indistinct, but I knew their shapes by heart, knew that it was my eldest, Luisa, who had her arm over Nadia, who hung back, half in shadow. My heart tightened as I saw the smallest face, with little hands pressed against the window. My baby, Javier, was only five years old.

Luisa opened the window. Her long black hair was tied up, and her eyes and nose were red. "Mom? Is that really you?"

"*Sí, querida*, it's me—for now. I don't know how long this will last. Have you called your father?"

"We tried, but he's not answering. We called everyone—Grandpa, Tío Ramón, Tía Inés — no one's picking up." Luisa's voice trembled as she spoke.

"*Estate tranquila*, help is on the way. I'm sure of it. Your father must have lost his phone." For the children's sake, I hoped Joe was alive, was fighting his way here.

"But listen to me, Luisa. You're in charge now. *Por si acaso*, and I mean just in case only, if Daddy doesn't come, you need to find the maps, study the interstate routes, and find your way to safety. Take all the guns. You'll have to use—" I forced myself to choke out the words, "Use Uncle Eddie's patrol car. I've left the keys in ignition."

Luisa was crying. "Mom, I only just got my learner's license. I don't know if I can do this."

"*Claro, puedes*. You're a good driver. Stay strong."

My sixteen year old, she was too young for this. But what choice was there?

"Listen, kids. This is the last time I'm going to talk to you as Mommy, all right? I'm sorry, I'm sorry for everything that happened. The change was too sudden, too fast. I didn't have time to say goodbye, so I'm saying it now. Where is my Nadia? Show me your face again."

Nadia leaned forward out of the window. She brushed her long bangs out of her eyes.

"You look after your brother, never let him out of your sight! *¿Entiendes?*"

"Okay," Nadia said. She never spoke much, but she always kept her promises. Nadia was my tough eleven-year-old cookie. When Joe and I got divorced, Luisa was distraught, but Nadia kept going on, demanded that we carry on with daily life. I called her my little cop. Nadia would keep Luisa strong.

But for Javier—oh, my baby—I couldn't control the sob that came. Luisa lifted him to the window so I could see him better.

"Javier, *mi hijito*, be a good boy, always listen to your sisters okay?"

"Mommy!" Javier said, trying to wrestle his way out the window. "Why can't you come inside?" He didn't understand that I wasn't human anymore.

"Listen, kids, this is very important. I'm not your Mommy anymore. Don't let me or anyone like me



into the house, whatever we say. I'm dangerous, and I will kill you if you come near me. Do you understand? I won't care who you are.

"If anyone gets close, shoot him first, in the head. Remember this, always in the head."

#

I didn't tell them where I was going but I think they knew. I walked away from the house onto the road to be out of sight from the children. I didn't want to waste any more time. The hunger was coming back.

The sun was high in the sky. The town road ran straight down from the hill past my house towards the river crossing. There was not a single car to be seen. A small breeze rustled the trees. It was like any peaceful Sunday afternoon.

The barrel felt warm in my mouth. The last words I exchanged with my children echoed in my mind. *Les quiero. Les quiero. With all of my heart, I love you.*

I was going to shut my eyes. But a silhouette appeared against the bright horizon, stumbling over the top of the hill. It was Eddie's wife, Janet, dishevelled, shoeless.

I put the gun away and ran towards her. "Janet!"

"Where's Eddie?" she said. "I can't find Eddie."

Her eyes were unfocused. She didn't recognize me. I didn't know how to start apologizing, until she said, "I'm hungry." Then I knew it was too late.

Past her shoulder, more people were coming. Ten, maybe more. They were no longer human. They were like me.

They would want my children. Together, they could break down the door and enter the house.

"Janet, I'm so sorry. For Eddie. For this."

She shed no blood when I shot her in the forehead, just fell heavily without another sound. I made my way towards the mob, fighting to stay focused on my aim. I'd pick off individuals first, with the bullets I had left. And then it'd be hand-to-hand.

Every one I killed was one less for Luisa to deal with. And if they killed me, I'd at least have died doing what a mother was meant to do.

#

It's dark now. So many bodies lie around me, but there's nothing to eat. My left arm is gone. I don't feel any pain. The only thing that hurts is the hunger.

A light comes on in the house, on the lower level. Yellow spills out a side window, shining on wet grass.

I snap stiff. The house. That's what I'm fighting for. The prize belongs to me. I creep towards the light, near the back of the house.

*The room is called a kitchen*, I remember. It is full of shelves and cabinets. Through the broken glass, I watch the little boy. He's standing on a chair, reaching for a box on a shelf. He takes the box, tucks it under his arm, climbs down.

With both hands, he swings open the door of the fridge, takes out a carton. His cheeks are pink. His

little hands are fat and soft. He turns around, sees me in the window, and freezes.

“*Mijo...*” I said, faintly remembering the words to coax a child. “My baby...”

“Mommy?” asked the boy.

“My baby,” I said, touching the bars between us. “My baby, help me... I’m so hungry...”

He hesitates. The fridge stands open behind him. Then he holds out the things in his hands.

“Do you want milk and cookies?”

“*Sí, sí...* Come here.”

He comes to the window but he is too short. So back to the chair he goes. He puts the milk and cookies on it, and drags it over, inch by inch, to me. All the time I am waiting.

The boy scrambles onto the chair. One arm scoops the boxes. The other arm leans on the back of the chair for balance. I wonder which one tastes better. Just a bit closer, and my one good hand will pull his little arm through the rails to my mouth. It wouldn’t be much. Not nearly enough. But I’m too hungry to care.

Steadying himself on the chair, the boy straightens his knees and begins to hold out the things in his arms to me. I throw out my hand—catch his wrist, pull it to me—but at the same time, someone jerks him back with force. I pull, but the person on the other side pulls harder. As the boy’s arm breaks free from my hold, it scrapes hard on the broken glass of the window pane. He cries out with pain. I shriek back with frustration. Then the hunger takes over. *Eat whatever there is*. I fall to licking up the bits of flesh and blood on the glass and over the windowsill.

#

The taste in my throat brings a sharp tinge of shock. I look up. Javier, his arm streaming blood, was sobbing. Nadia, her arms around him, had backed up against the opposing wall. Her fingers were locked together, white-knuckled. Her face twisted in revulsion as she looked up from Javier to me.

Milk had splashed across the kitchen floor. In the middle, the box of cookies lay where it had fallen from Javier’s giving hands.

Luisa burst into the room, gun in hand; she saw me, saw the kids backed away against the wall. “What happened?”

“Javier slipped away while we were sleeping. He came down here, because you wouldn’t let us take all the food up,” Nadia said in a clenched voice. “Aren’t you going to shoot her?”

Luisa glanced at me, stepped forward and then back, away from the spreading puddle of milk. She had rings around her eyes; she looked like she hadn’t been sleeping much, looked ashamed for having been caught sleeping at all.

“Shoot her!” Nadia said. “Like she said!”

“She protected us!” Luisa snapped back. “You saw them. There were so many. She fought them for us. Inside, she still knows who we are.”

“She just tried to attack Javier!”

“She can’t help what she does! That doesn’t mean we should kill her. She’s our mother!” Luisa turned to me, “Go! Or I’ll shoot you.”

Before I could respond, a car horn blared, loud and strong, from the front of the house. The kids started. Moments later, someone started rapping on the front door.

“Nina, kids, are you there? It’s me! Open up!”

Joe had made it after all. He was finally here.

“It’s Daddy!” Nadia said.

Luisa jerked her chin in the direction of the door. “Take Javier. Make sure it’s really Dad, and that he’s... still normal. Then find the first aid kit, and dress the wound.”

Nadia scrambled up, stopping only to grab a towel off a hook to wrap around Javier’s arm. Casting a last wary look at me, she carried Javier out of the kitchen.

“Go!” Luisa shouted, firing a shot past me.

I stumbled from the window. But I didn’t leave. I made my way to the front of the house, and crouched there in darkness near the door, listening to Joe tell the kids, “It’s going to be all right now. It’s going to be all right.”

#

I wanted to be happy. Joe cared. He had come back. And now he was taking the children. And I would be left alone with the house, a rotting corpse wandering its empty rooms.

I’d already lost everything. Joe had no right to swoop in and take the children away from me.

*They’re my children. Mine.*

*I want revenge.*

*I want flesh.*

The bodies in the yard. There’s a knife on one of them. And I know what to do with it.

#

I hear them carrying things to the car. They’re calling instructions to each other. Someone slams the hatch shut. Everyone is getting in, shutting the doors. The car engine starts. Wheels start rolling, then stop.

The car doors open again. The crunch of boots on the gravel as the man gets out to inspect his car.

“I don’t know why I didn’t notice this. Both the back tires are almost flat.”

“Can you change them?”

“Stay in the car!” A pause. “They may have been pierced.” A longer pause. “I only have one spare.”

“Can we take a tire from the other car?”

“I’ll take a look. We might take the other car instead, if it runs.”

The footsteps are slow, wary. I know there is a shotgun out, ready to shoot. I hear him opening the driver’s door of the patrol car.

“Doors are unlocked. Keys are here.” The engine starts to hum. “The car’s in good condition. Fuel tank’s nearly full.”

He gets out, leaving the engine running, starts walking around the patrol car. “The tires look okay.” He comes round to the trunk. The lid is stiff. He takes a breath and heaves it open with both hands.

This is when I lunge out at him. My only arm pushes back the barrel of the shotgun before he can reach it, and then I’m ripping out chunks of soft tissue and cartilage from his neck. My legs clamp around him. My mouth fills with the taste of meat. I don’t notice when we hit the ground. He fights me, but I’m too hungry to let go. He weakens, losing too much blood. I’m lapping it up as the juices run down my chin. I feast like never before.

Then I become aware of a screaming that goes on and on.

It’s my little boy, in the backseat of the other car, his mouth an open O, his eyes transfixed. His sister is holding him to her, white-lipped, silent.

I look into the eyes of my oldest, who is standing steps away from me, her gun aimed dead centre on my forehead. Her face is a hot mess of tears, but her hands are steady, just like I taught her.

She hesitates. I never told her how much she was like me, never told her that she was my secret favourite. She’s got to grow up now. Everything counts on it.

“Please,” I say.

## **Betamax for Starters by Katya Oliva-Llego**

“Would you like some coffee?” asked Garay, pouring a sachet of instant coffee mix into her mug.

“No thanks, Ga,” said Rudy, her older cousin, playing with the toaster latch. “How’s *lola Mely*?”

Garay poured hot water into her mug.

“She’s still breathing, but she’s getting tired of it. She said she can’t die until *mama* takes the stone from her, or someone does,” said Garay, setting her mug on the table. “Would you like to take it?”

“Me? No way! I’m so handsome. No way I will become an *aswang*,” said Rudy. “Why don’t you take it? You’re her favorite grandchild anyway.”

Garay bowed her head and clasped her hands together in deep thought.

“Besides, you already look like an *aswang*,” said Rudy, bolting out of the house through the kitchen door, laughing.

Garay took the *tsinelas* from her left foot, and aimed at the fleeing Rudy, but failed to hit him. It hit the wall instead. She got up, retrieved it, and looked outside through the half-open door. It was a bright day outside. Children were playing in the hot sun, getting sweaty, enjoying their summer vacation. Some adults were huddled in front of a *sari-sari* store, betting on *Jueteng*. They were all oblivious to the plight of her grandmother, a dying *aswang*. She closed the door. Inside their small concrete, unpainted house, it was cold and gloomy.

What Rudy meant, though, was true. Garay was ugly, not to the extreme of looking like an *aswang*, but almost. “You don’t need bangs, your eyebrows are your bangs,” the local hairstylist had told her. “Without your boobs, you could pass for a burly guy,” one of her neighbors had said. Garay, at twenty-two, had never even been out on a date. Not even the blind bachelor from the next *barangay* would date her.

Her grandmother, Mely, had been in her deathbed for almost a week. “I’m so tired. Ilya, somebody, anybody, please take the stone from me,” she said, begging her family.

Garay’s mother, Ilya, was the eldest child and was supposed to receive the stone according to tradition, but Ilya did not want to become a supernatural creature. When she was younger, a mob had come to their house bearing torches and long, pointed wooden sticks demanding that they turn in her grandmother, Juana, suspected in the disappearances of several small children in their area. They got out of that fiasco through the mediation of their *barangay* captain, and promised to move out of that place. Unfortunately, similar instances ensued in the other places that they moved to, until her grandmother expired.

Garay went up to her grandmother’s bedroom and peeked inside. It was also true that she was the favorite grandchild, probably because they looked so much alike. The rest of the family looked good, probably took after her grandfather, who some relatives had said was the most handsome man in his hometown. They said her grandmother had put some sort of a voodoo love spell on him, which was why he married her.

Her grandmother saw her and motioned for her to come inside.

“Garay, *hija*, I’m so tired. I don’t even know how long I’ve been lying here, waiting for death. Has it been a year? It feels like a very long time.” Her voice was deep and eerie.

Garay sat on the edge of the wooden bed and took her grandmother’s hand. If her grandmother were not moving or talking, she could pass for a corpse. Holding her hand felt like sticking her arm inside a freezer and squeezing frozen meat.

“Where is your mother?”

“*Lola*, I-I don’t know eh.”

“I knew this would happen.”

Garay kept quiet, not sure of what else to tell her.

“Garay, please have pity,” said Mely, followed by a bout of cough.

Garay’s chest pounded hard. She wanted to run, suspicious of what was coming her way. She cannot be the receiver. She did not want to be the receiver. She did not know the details of being an *aswang*. She had never seen her grandmother turn into one, and her mother had never talked about it, except for her grim determination not to become one. She once saw a movie wherein an *aswang* turned into a big dog, then to a pig, then back to a dog, but her mother had since prohibited her from watching such films. She had the same amount of knowledge as the public about *aswangs*: that they are bad and scary. Sure, her grandmother was an overall nice person, when she was human. She did not know how her grandmother behaved as an *aswang*.

She was ready to drop her grandmother’s hand and run away like her mother, but after taking a good look at her, she felt that she could not bear to see one more day of her suffering.

“*Hija*, take the stone from me, so I can finally go in peace,” Mely said, followed by another bout of cough. After her fit, she pushed something from her mouth with her tongue that she pursed between her lips. It was the dreaded stone. She had been coughing to regurgitate the stone out of her body.

Garay stared at it, mesmerized by its beauty. It looked like one of those tanzanite gems sold on home TV shopping. It glowed from white, to blue, to purple, to pink, to red, then to white again.

Garay's fear shortly subsided. The stone that was making her grandmother a supernatural creature actually looked like a nice piece of jewelry. She figured she could take it from her grandmother and sell it to a jeweler in Manila for lots of money, or, maybe just keep it as remembrance of her.

She lifted her hand to remove the stone from her grandmother's lips, but she slapped her hand. She had a lot of strength for a dying woman. Garay furrowed her unibrow. Her grandmother pointed to her lips in reply to her confusion. "Oh," Garay said. She did not want to do this, any of this, but she could not back out now. The stone was out, and her grandmother was ready. Garay drew in her breath, bent down, and then took the stone, brushing lips with her grandmother, feeling her coldness and sensing her damnation.

"Now, swallow the stone."

Swallow? Garay shook her head, the stone firmly pressed between her lips.

"*Hija*, you have to swallow it."

Garay shook her head again. She did not want to swallow the stone.

"Stubborn child," said her grandmother, pulling Garay closer to her then pushing the stone into Garay's mouth.

Garay sat quietly for a while, with her eyes closed and her right hand on her throat, expecting to feel different, to turn into a dog or a pig like in the movies, or something, but nothing happened. The stone slid smoothly down her throat. No water required.

When she opened her eyes, her grandmother's body had stiffened significantly and her skin had darkened to some degree.

"Ay, now, be a good *aswang*," said her grandmother before exhaling her last breath.

#

"Ga, did you take the stone?" asked her mother, Ilya.

"N-no *mama*," said Garay, shaking her head while folding her grandmother's clothes for storage. They had buried her three days ago.

"Then I guess she took the stone to her grave like I've asked her. I knew if no one would receive the stone from her, then she'd have to pass away with it. *Hay*, thank God, no more *aswang* in the family. B-but I will miss *mama* very much," said Ilya, caressing her mother's knitted scarf.

#

Three months post swallow, Garay was still waiting for any changes to her body. She had also tried coughing to eject the stone, to no avail.

She tried asking her mother about *aswangs*, but Ilya rebuked her and made her swear never to talk about it again. She tried asking her uncle Ipit as well, but Rudy overheard her and started teasing her, so she dropped it. Besides the ability to shape shift into animals, the other thing that she knew about *aswangs* was that they eat fetuses and small children, with emphasis on the heart, the blood, and the liver. She cringed at the thought.

#

One evening during dinner at her Uncle Ipit's house, Garay felt her tummy grumble. She was still hungry. She did not want to get more food because it was already embarrassing. "Slow down, Ga. The

living relatives of that cow you're devouring might come after you for sadistic consumption," said Rudy.

The thing was, she ate the leftovers from lunch an hour before dinner and ate so much during dinner, but still felt hungry. Her body seemed to be craving for something, but she did not know what.

#

"Ga, hurry up, we're going to be late," Ilya said.

"I'm coming *mama*," said Garay, closing her skirt with clothespins instead of the sewn in hook and eye. She had gained more than a few pounds within the last couple of months.

They were going to the church to witness the christening of the newborn child of their neighbor, Tricia.

#

Garay stopped at the church entry and dipped her fingers into the marble angel's cup, brimming with holy water. She raised her dripping fingers to her forehead, below her chest, to her left shoulder, then to her right, ending the ritual with amen. The cold, blessed water felt good on her warm forehead.

It was festive inside the church with colorful, fragrant flowers all round the altar and with the choir singing, "All Hail". Garay and Ilya hurried over to the seats reserved for Tricia's family and guests.

After the baptism, Tricia handed her baby to Garay. It was the first time Garay had seen the baby, since she had been seated three rows down, behind seven pairs of godparents. She smiled upon seeing the child. The baby had pink lips and a cute, little nose. She took the baby in her arms, rocked her a bit, and sniffed her baby smell. Then her stomach grumbled. Garay held the baby tightly with her right hand, and raised her left wrist to see the time. It was 11:30 in the morning; almost time for lunch.

She rocked the baby again and sniffed her, and her stomach grumbled even more.

"You're so pretty," she said to the baby. "So pretty you make me hungry."

Garay tried to ignore her hunger. In half an hour more, they would be going to lunch. The parents and the godparents just had to wrap things up. Her stomach grumbled again. She suddenly had a weird thought: if the baby smelled good, she probably tasted good, too. No, that was crazy. She shook her head and fought hard to keep such thoughts out of her mind. She did not want to eat the baby, of course, not. She was just delirious from hunger. She sniffed the baby once more, and her mouth started to water. She rocked the baby in her arms, swallowing like mad to keep saliva from running down her lips.

"My turn with the baby," said Ilya, taking the baby from her. Garay fought, holding the baby tighter and stepping away from Ilya.

"What's wrong with you, Ga?" asked Ilya. "Give me the child. I want to hold her, too."

Garay looked at her mother and felt a little embarrassed. She loosened her hold and allowed her mother to take the child. She swallowed another gulp of saliva, and felt a prickly sensation that started from her foot, up her torso, to her arms. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, trying to maintain her sanity. She then opened her eyes and looked up. A large crucifix loomed. She looked to her left, and the image of the Our Lady of Perpetual Help was looking at her. She looked to her right, and the statue of Saint Joseph was looking at her. She felt sick. Garay ran out of the church, with the choir in the background singing, "This is The Day".

Bright sunshine and moderate traffic noise greeted her outside. She breathed in the warm, polluted air,

and felt better. She shielded her eyes as she scanned the vicinity outside the church: candle vendors, *sampaguita* vendors, rosary vendors, palm readers, and street food carts.

“Uy Ga! Want some Betamax?” It was her Uncle Ipit, waving his left hand at her and holding a stick of grilled chicken blood cubes, shaped like Betamax tapes, in his right hand.

“Uncle, oh, yes, I am so hungry,” said Garay, running towards the food cart, and then grabbing the stick of Betamax that Ipit was about to bite into.

“T-that was mine, Ga,” said Ipit.

Garay paid no attention to him. She finished the stick of Betamax in record time.

“You want some more?” asked Ipit.

“Yes, yes, give me some more. I’m so hungry,” said Garay.

“Ga, maybe you should see a doctor. You’re always hungry. You probably have worms in your tummy,” said Ipit, exchanging money and goods with the street food vendor.

“Mmm... good... mmm,” Garay said in between chewing.

Ipit stroked Garay’s hair, worried about her condition. She smiled at him, grilled chicken blood stuck between her front teeth.

#

“Garay, what happened to you?” said Ilya upon seeing her outside the church.

“Eh, *mama*, I got hungry,” said Garay.

“Hungry? *Ay sus!* There was going to be a luncheon after the christening. Why didn’t you just wait?”

“Ma, I was really hungry. Uncle Ipit bought me Betamax.”

“Okay. Ipit, what are you doing here? Do you want to come with us to the luncheon? It’s for Tricia’s child.”

“No thanks, Ilya. I’m good,” Ipit said, biting into his last piece of Betamax.

#

At the reception, Tricia went from table to table with the baby for pictures with the guests. Garay was worried that she would salivate again at the sight of the child, but to her relief, she experienced no such thing. I was just pure hunger that brought out the earlier incident at the church, and nothing more.

#

For several days after the christening, Garay’s appetite returned to normal. She did not have any unusual hunger or cravings, but it did not last.

Late one night, Garay woke up feeling as if her stomach was churning the rest of her organs because of extreme hunger. She dressed up and went outside to look for food, knowing there was no more food in the kitchen to eat.

Although it was quite late, Garay found a couple of eateries that were still open, catering to call center employees who got off at unusual hours. They were serving typical dishes like *adobo*, *sinigang*, and *mechado*, but she did not want the typical. She ventured on, hoping there were other eateries that would serve something else, but instead, she found herself in front of Tricia’s house. Her lips slowly formed a



smile. She sniffed the air and began to salivate. It was like that bizarre day at church all over again. A prickly sensation traveled from her foot up her body. This time, she did not fight it. She felt her senses heightening, especially her sight, her hearing, and her smell. She sniffed the air once more, and her hunger grew to a delirious degree. All she could think of was the baby. She could feel the taste of the infant in her mouth — her warm blood, her beating heart, and her juicy liver. Adrenalin shot through her system, and she felt physical power she had never felt before. She finally knew what she had been craving for, what she needed, what she wanted. Her whole body tingled with anticipation. She was ready and willing to risk everything to get her meal, and was about to, when a huge, black dog with glowing red eyes appeared out of nowhere and stopped her in her tracks.

“Stupid, stray dog,” said Garay.

She stamped on her feet hoping to scare the dog, but it did not budge. She did not want to waste time with the dog. It was her mealtime. Garay ran to the front door with the agility of an Olympic sprinter, intending to break it down, but the dog outran her to it, growling. She wondered why the dog seemed adamant in keeping her away, and then she figured it was probably Tricia’s dog. She was an intruder, so it had to keep her away. Well, not for long. She reached for the dog’s neck, hoping to strangle it to death, but her hands slipped as the dog turned its head. Her nails dug in and ran across the dog’s neck, but she was not able to grasp it. She attacked once more, hoping she would be able to grasp its neck this time, but the same thing happened. Even with injuries, the dog was not backing away. It was not fighting back, either.

It also seemed to have grown in size, to as big as she was, but even that did not matter; she had to get rid of it. There was no other way. She was about to lunge toward the dog with all her weight, when she heard footsteps approaching. The dog, too, seemed to have noticed the sound, and ran away. Despite the power and the fury she had, she still worried about somebody seeing her. Utilizing all four limbs, she ran away from the scene so quickly that the house was far behind her in a matter of seconds.

#

Bad news broke out the following morning: Tricia’s baby was missing. She had just disappeared from her crib. There were no signs of forced entry, and nobody had heard anything throughout the night.

“Rudy dropped by earlier,” Ilya said, “and informed me that your Uncle Ipit was mugged last night. He said he didn’t see who mugged him. I’m going to check on him later, after I visit Tricia. *Hay naku!* What’s the world coming to.”

“It’s probably nothing serious, but I’ll go see him now, mama,” said Garay.

“Wait, Ga, don’t you want to have breakfast first?” asked Ilya.

“No, thanks *mama*. I’m still full.”

#

The sky was downcast, but Garay barely noticed. She felt bright and she felt good. She skipped and whistled her way to her uncle’s house. She felt a kind of satisfaction that she had never felt before. She was not even worried about her uncle. It was probably just a little bruise. She tried not to think much about Tricia’s missing baby, either.

Rudy was smoking at the gate when Garay arrived.

“Ga, *papa*’s been waiting for you,” he said. “He’s at the backyard. Go straight there.”

“Okay,” she said.

“And Ga, don’t eat all our food.”

Garay just smiled at him. Any other time, she would have kicked him or thrown something at him, but right now, she was in a good mood. A damn, good mood.

#

“Uncle, what happened to you?” said Garay, now feeling guilty for dismissing his condition earlier.

Ipit had several deep scratches running from his neck up to his left chin, and lighter ones on the right side.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. Where were you last night?” he asked.

“I was at home. Have you seen a doctor?” she said.

“I don’t need to see a doctor. So, you were home the whole night? Just home,” said Ipit.

“Yes, yes. I was home. I was home last night,” she said, nodding her head and swallowing hard.

“You didn’t go out? You just stayed home?”

“Out? I-I’m not sure,” she said, rubbing her right palm on her nape.

“You’re not sure? You’re not sure if you went out or not?” said Ipit, pulling Garay inside the house through the back door, and then slamming the door behind them.

Garay started shaking.

“Ga, for the love of everything that is holy, tell me the truth. Did you go out last night?”

“Yes,” said Garay, breaking down in tears. “I went out. I was hungry,” she said in between sobs, “I went out to get food.”

“And where did you get food?”

“The eatery for the truck drivers at the next barangay,” she said. “I ordered liver steak. It was really good.”

“The next *barangay*? Oh, poor girl,” said Ipit, pulling Garay close to hug her. “So you didn’t eat Tricia’s baby?”

He released Garay from his hug and looked her straight in the eyes.

Garay felt the room spin. She clutched Ipit’s arm to keep her from collapsing.

“How d-did... I didn’t, but how did you,” managed Garay.

“Ga, I was there too,”

“What? Where? When?”

“In front of Tricia’s house, the same time you were there.”

“You mean, you mean, you were the—”

“Yes.”

“And you ate Tricia’s—”

“No, I did not. Didn’t you?” said Ipit.

The back door opened.

“I didn’t,” said Garay.

Rudy stepped in.

“If you didn’t, and I didn’t, then,” Ipit looked at Rudy.

“Don’t look at me like that, *papa*. You would have eaten the child too, if I didn’t beat you to it,” said Rudy with a smirk on his face.

“No, Rudy, I wouldn’t have,” said Ipit, straightening up to his full height.

Garay raised her unibrow. She looked at Rudy, then at Ipit, then back at Rudy.

“Oh c’mon, *papa*. I’ve been following you for several nights and you were always ending up at Tricia’s house. You were going to strike.”

“How could you accuse me of such a thing?” said Ipit. “I’ve been advocating our consumption of substitutes precisely to avoid such troubles.”

“Then what were you doing there?”

“Waiting for Garay!” exclaimed Ipit.

Garay slumped to the floor.

“I’ve been going there not because I wanted to strike, but because of Garay. I had a feeling she was going to strike, and I wanted to stop her,” he continued.

“What? Oh shit!” said Rudy, running his hands through his hair, head bowed. “You mean Garay is also, oh shit, I’m so sorry, *papa*.” Rudy walked towards Garay and helped her get off the floor and onto a *monobloc* chair. Ipit pulled out another chair and sat on it. Rudy lit a cigarette.

“Uncle, how did you know that I’ve become, you know,” said Garay, weak and shaking.

“I had a hunch when you started eating so much, but I wasn’t sure. Then the day you ran out of that church from the christening hungry and salivating, I became even more suspicious,” said Ipit.

“Then why didn’t you just talk to me?” asked Garay.

“Well, I wasn’t sure that you’d become one,” Ipit replied.

“All this time I’ve been searching for clues, for answers, and I felt so alone,” said Garay, tears running down her cheeks again.

“Ga, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t sure and I didn’t want to worry you needlessly.”

Garay buried her face in the palm of her hands and sobbed. Ipit signaled for Rudy to get her a glass of water, which he did. She accepted the drink and started to calm down.

“So, what now?” asked Garay.

“Well, we have to get you on a diet. A diet of substitutes,” said Ipit.

“Substitutes?”

“Yes, substitutes for the real thing. That meal you had at the eatery last night—”

“The liver steak?”

“Yes, that’s a substitute, and the Betamax we had at the church, as well. You can use the liver, the heart or the blood of any animal, cook it however you want it,” said Ipit.

“So you and Rudy are also *aswangs*. Where did you get your stones?”

“We got our stones from Auntie Zeny and Auntie Sonia when we visited them about ten years ago. They were old, sick, and they had no kids,” said Ipit.

“What about Tricia’s baby? What do we do about that?”

“We do nothing,” said Ipit. “What can be done?”

There was a long and awkward silence.

“I’m so sorry about that, *papa*,” said Rudy, “I really thought you wanted it for yourself.”

“I know.”

“Uncle, I-I’m sorry about the scratches,” said Garay. “I didn’t mean to. I didn’t know it was you.”

“Whoa, whoa. You did that to him?” asked Rudy with eyes wide open.

“She turned into a very big cat and scratched me,” said Ipit.

“Really? I did? So, that’s why,” said Garay, looking at her hands and understanding better the events of the previous night.

They remained quiet for a while. Each one buried in his or her own thoughts.

“So Garay, do you want to stay here for lunch?” asked Ipit finally. “I’m making a substitute: *dinuguan*.”

Garay smiled and remembered her grandmother’s last words to her about being a good aswang. Maybe this was what she meant.

“*Dinuguan*. Sounds good,” she said.

## **Issue Eighteen Contributor Biographies**

### **Angela Ambroz**

Angela Ambroz lives and works in Hyderabad, India, as a development economist. She has previously published in [Strange Horizons](#), [Reflection’s Edge](#), and Expanded Horizons. When not writing fiction, she reviews films at the [Post-Punk Cinema Club](#).

### **Tade Thompson**

Tade Thompson lives and works in the United Kingdom; however, he grew up in Nigeria where he received most of his education. He is Yoruba and tends to bring this sensibility to his fiction. His speculative fiction has been published in [Ideomancer](#) and [Twilight Times](#), among others.

## **Lisa Poh**

Lisa Poh is a Singaporean freelance writer who has previously worked as a teacher and a corporate communicator. She writes mainly fantasy, with occasional skirmishes to other territories, and is a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop 2009. You can find her at <http://lishwrite.livejournal.com/>.

## **Katya Oliva-Llego**

Katya Oliva-Llego was born in the Philippines, and currently lives in California with her husband. She discovered the joys of reading speculative fiction early last year (she read mainstream fiction before that). She also reads and writes speculative poetry and has been published in a few speculative poetry magazines.