

LONTAR

THE
JOURNAL OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN
SPECULATIVE FICTION

#6



LONTAR

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EDITORIAL: THE ART OF ASKING

Jason Erik Lundberg

It has now been four years since I first established this journal, and we've made it to our sixth issue. Huzzah! A lot has happened in those four years, and it has rarely been a smooth journey, but we're still here (a claim that not all newish journals or zines can make), largely because Edmund Wee, publisher of Epigram Books, believes that what we're doing here is worthy of continuing, even if we are not (yet) a commercial success. And this belief has been amplified by the support of the National Arts Council of Singapore, who has awarded us a publication grant for each issue starting with #3 (for which I am eternally grateful). When I say that the journal could not continue to exist in the absence of NAC's support, I am being literal; without those twice-a-year grants to cover our printing and overhead costs, Epigram Books could no longer publish *LONTAR*; it is as cut and dried as that.

However, even though NAC has funded each issue thus far, the months in between the application of the grant and the announcement of whether it has been successful are always filled with nail-biting anxiety. If rejected, one is allowed to resubmit after addressing the reasons for rejection, but all of this pushes back the release date for publication, which is not an option for *LONTAR*; I have been committed since the beginning that new issues would come out twice a year, each Spring and Autumn, come what may. This steadfast regularity has been one of our production hallmarks (in addition to the high calibre of writing that we publish, and the retro-futurist design of our cover art), and I am keen to see this continue. In addition, I don't want to exclusively rely on government funding to publish the journal, even if NAC has never been anything but supportive of our efforts and has not once tried to dictate our content.

So, what to do? Sites such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo enable creators to raise funds for a given project, and if *LONTAR* were an anthology or another kind of one-off, either one of those would be perfect. But a project-based crowdfund is not what I'm looking for; we need a way to fund the journal (or supplement the funds) on a continual basis, so that it doesn't just limp along from one issue to another, but remains healthy and robust from year to year. Hence: Patreon.

In case you don't know what Patreon is all about, an explanation: as opposed to the sites mentioned above, which are project-based and only move forward if they're fully funded, Patreon is a way for people to support an artist or organisation (in this case, a literary journal) on an on-going basis. Patreon takes its cue from the patronages of old, but instead of Leonardo da Vinci relying on the largesse of the Medici family and the King of France, this new model utilises smaller pledges from many people. The readers and supporters of *LONTAR*, including you reading my words right now, can directly support the efforts of our journal, and have a stake in its continued production and (hopeful) expansion.

The title of this editorial was appropriated from musician Amanda Palmer, who used it for her 2013 TED talk, and then again for her subsequent 2014 memoir on the creative life. Palmer was an early adopter of Patreon, and is one of its most successful users, with over 7,200 patrons paying her almost \$35,000 USD for each thing she creates (as of this writing), whether that be a song, a music video, a piece of animation or a tribute EP to David Bowie, which averages to about a \$5 pledge per person (although some people obviously pledge less, and others much more). This patronage model enables her to work as an artist completely independent of corporate commitment, and she can deliver her art directly to her fans.

We at *LONTAR* are hoping to raise \$2,500 USD (~\$3,500 SGD) to independently fund each issue; this will allow us to move beyond government funding and take firm control over our production schedule. Any money above

and beyond this initial goal will go toward increasing the payment for our contributors to SFWA-qualifying rates, expanding our marketing and publicity budget, and maybe one day even paying yours truly. This is an obtainable objective, and you have it in your power to make it happen. There are also specific rewards for each pledge level, and the more you pledge, the cooler the stuff you'll get in return.

If you love *LONTAR* as much as we do, please go to [patreon.com/lontarjournal](https://www.patreon.com/lontarjournal) today to make your pledge, and spread the word, so that we can continue for many years to come.

In other news, congratulations to Christina Sng; her poem, "The Woman in the Coffee Shop", published in *LONTAR* issue #5, has been nominated for a 2016 Rhysling Award! The Rhysling is one of the highest honours in speculative poetry, and we're all very excited about Christina's nomination. To celebrate, we have posted the poem in its entirety on our blog at lontarjournal.com.

Congratulations also go to contributor Eliza Victoria (L4), whose creepy and suspenseful novel *Dwellers* won the Philippine National Book Award for Best Novel in English! In addition, her new novel, *Wounded Little Gods*, has been announced for publication in 2016 by Visprint in the Philippines.

These accomplishments, and many more, can now be found in one place at the *LONTAR* website, on the Our Contributors page, which collates the author bios for all of our contributors to date.

This issue of *LONTAR* presents speculative writing from and about Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia and Laos. Inside these pages, you'll find: the high cost of cheap footwear by celebrated novelist

and translator Ken Liu; the consequence of domesticating mythical beasts by rising star Eka Kurniawan (translated by Tiffany Tsao); a mind-bending familial space opera by Victor Fernando R. Ocampo; the connection between a talented girl and the toys she brings to life by JY Yang; a break-up that descends into artistic oblivion by Jennifer Anne Champion; an academic examination into the legend of Bukit Merah by award-winner Ng Yi-Sheng; a comic on the consuming danger of the manananggal by Budjette Tan & Kajo Baldisimo; and speculative poetry from Jonel Abellanos, Ang Si Min, Russ Hoe, Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé, Christina Sng, Sokunthary Svay, Krishna Udayasankar, Brendan Walsh and Marco Yan.

This is another strong issue, but I'm particularly excited to include fiction from Ken Liu and Eka Kurniawan. Ken is a masterful short story writer, and his novel *The Grace of Kings* is a wonderful silkpunk epic that examines a historical period in China through the lens of a secondary-world fantasy; his story "Running Shoes" will simultaneously break and uplift your heart. I have just finished reading Eka's phenomenal novel *Beauty is a Wound*, and absolutely love the way that it tunnels through both its characters' lives and recent Indonesian history, just as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* did for Colombia; his tragic story "Caronang" appears here in English (skilfully translated by Tiffany Tsao) for the very first time. I'm proud that we can now count these amazing writers among our already considerable stable of contributors.

And for the first time, I am happy to reveal that *LONTAR* has a couple of first publications in this issue: Russ Hoe's poem "I See Clouds" and Jennifer Anne Champion's story "See It Coming". Jennifer has already published poetry (including a fantastic collection called *A History of Clocks*), but this is her first piece of published fiction. It is exciting to think that we have become a venue in which writers are entrusting their debut creative works, and I look forward to seeing much more in our submissions queue in the future.

RUNNING SHOES

Ken Liu

Ken Liu (China/USA) is the author of *The Grace of Kings* (2015), *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* (2016) and *The Wall of Storms* (2016), all published by Saga Press in the US. His stories have appeared in numerous places, including *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Lightspeed*, *Clarkesworld* and *The Year's Best SF*. His short story "The Paper Menagerie" is the first work of fiction of any length to win the Nebula, Hugo and World Fantasy Awards. His English translation of Liu Cixin's novel *The Three-Body Problem* won the 2015 Hugo Award, and was shortlisted for the Nebula, Prometheus, Locus and John W. Campbell Awards. "Running Shoes" was originally published in *SQ Mag* issue #16 (September 2014) and selected for *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror: 2015 Edition* edited by Paula Guran.

"You're under quota again!" Foreman Vuong shouted. "Why are you so slow?"

Fourteen-year-old Giang's face flushed with shame. She stared at the angry veins on the foreman's sweaty neck, pulsing like fat slugs on a ripe tomato. She hated Vuong even more than she hated the shoe factory's Taiwanese owners and managers. One expected the foreigners to treat the Vietnamese badly, but Vuong was from right here in Yên Châu District.

"Sixteen hours is a long shift," Giang mumbled. She lowered her eyes. "I get tired."

"You're lazy!" Vuong went on to spew a stream of curses.

Giang flinched, anticipating a flurry of strikes and blows. She tried desperately to look contrite.

Vuong considered her, his lips curling up in a cruel smile. "I'll have to make you stronger through punishment. Run five laps around the factory, right now, and you'll stay as long as you have to tonight to make up your quota."

Giang was thankful. It was a hot and humid day, but running was a mild punishment compared to being beaten. Besides, it allowed her to stay out of the factory a bit longer, where the buffeting noise never ceased, and the big machines frightened her with their brutal and careless strength.

The first lap around the compound was easy. Her bare feet pounded lightly, rhythmically against the packed dirt. Vuong shouted as she passed. “Faster!”

Even though Giang worked in a shoe factory, she preferred to go barefoot as much as she could, like she used to when her family still lived in the countryside. Back then she had loved to run along the soft muddy trails next to the rice paddies, wiggling her toes in the earth, and looked forward to a sweet fried *bánh rán* sticky rice ball that her father might buy for her at the end of the month.

But then her father had decided to move to the city, where he thought he could make more money as a labourer and give his family a better life. Here, the air was thick, the rooms were crowded, and the streets were full of broken glass and nails so that she had to wear cheap plastic sandals.

Halfway through the second lap, she started to feel light-headed. It was now like breathing under water. Her shirt stuck to her skin, and black spots danced before her eyes. Her calves and lungs burned.

“Faster! Pick up your pace or you’ll have to do an extra lap.”

Giang wished that she could run away from Vuong and the factory. She imagined herself wearing the shoes that she made: sneakers that felt as light as air but were as strong as steel boots. She often admired them, thought they would protect her feet against the roughest ground, but of course she couldn’t afford such shoes.

Running in them probably feels like flying, she thought. Wouldn’t it be nice to run all the way into the sky and become friends with the birds?

But Vuong’s foul curses brought her back to earth, back to the present.

It was getting harder and harder to lift her legs. Her feet hurt as they struck against the ground. She couldn’t catch her breath. The sun was so hot and bright.

“If you don’t run faster, you can leave right now and never come back. And don’t ever expect to find any work in any other factory in this town either. I know all the foremen.”

Giang was ready to give up. She wanted to stop and just walk away. She wanted to go home, where she would be able to cry in the warm embrace of her mother and fall asleep against her shoulders.

But then she imagined the scene around the bedroom after she would have fallen asleep. There would be her father, confined to his bed after he lost the use of his legs because of that construction accident; he would stare hopelessly at the ceiling, biting his lips and trying not to moan from the pain. Next to him would be her mother, who would have to get up before the sun was out to walk to the shirt factory on the other side of the city; the money she earned there paid for her father’s medicine. Giang’s wages paid for their food, and allowed her brother to continue in high school at the provincial capital. But with Giang fired, what would they do?

Her mother would only hug her tighter, of course, but Giang remembered that she was no longer a little girl.

She forced herself to run faster.

A few girls looked up as an exhausted Giang stumbled back into the factory, but most ignored her because they were too busy. Vuong impressed the owners by running the machines so fast that the girls could barely keep up.

The cavernous hall was filled with noise: the constant staccato *dik-dik-dik* from the stitching stations, the *whoosh-slam* of the stamping and die-cutting machines, the hissing from the workbenches with the rubber moulds and hot glue.

Giang made her way back to the die cutter, and tried to keep up with the frantic routine of feeding sheets of plastic to the hungry blades of the machine. She was thirsty and hot. The dust and fumes—chemicals, glue, plastic—made her cough and gag. Tears blurred her eyes. She wiped them away roughly, angrily.

She tried to comfort herself by thinking of the end of the shift. She would get to go home, where her mother would be ready with a pot of hot tea even though she was always even more tired than Giang.

“Faster!” Her partner Nhung interrupted her daydream. “You’ve already made me fall behind. I don’t want to be punished!”

Giang’s legs were so sore that she could not stand up straight. The room seemed to spin around her. But she tried, really tried to speed up. She threw her weight forward, hoping to use the momentum of the stack of shoe uppers she carried to move faster.

Her foot caught on something on the ground. She dropped her load and barely avoided banging her head against the machine in front of her by grabbing onto it with her hands. The girls had often complained about how dangerous it was to leave broken machine parts around the factory floor, but Vuong just said they were careless.

I’ll just take a little break, she thought.

Time seemed to slow down, each moment lingering in her consciousness like a memory of childhood.

She felt the pressure on her fingers, and then a brief moment of unbelievable pain as the cutter blades sliced through.

Nhung’s shouts and screams seemed to come from a great distance. *Sorry*, Giang thought, *I didn’t mean to get you in more trouble*.

As she fell, she saw a broken, rusty spike at the foot of the machine rushing up at her face. She closed her eyes.

Shadows gathered around her. More shouting. The loudest voice belonged to Vuong: “Back to work! Back to work!”

Yes, Giang thought. *I have to get back to work. I’ll get up in just a second, Mama*.

But she could no longer feel her hands, her legs, her body. She felt herself

soaking into the stack of uncut uppers under her. She willed herself to grab onto the fibres, to entwine herself into the soft material. She couldn’t just fade away. She had work to do.

“Why throw these away?” she heard Vuong speaking impatiently to someone. “They’re perfectly usable! Just a little blood. You want me to take it out of your wages?”

And then she felt herself lifted onto the conveyer belt, sensed the sharp blades of the die cutter slicing around her, endured the metallic, heavy punch of the pneumatic press, bore the sting of needle and thread, and tasted the bitter flavour of hot glue. She wanted to scream, but could not.

I’m sorry, Mama.

Enclosed in a dark box, Giang remembered little of her journey across the Pacific, over the highways of this new continent, into the warehouse of the shoe store. By the time she finally woke up, she had been taken to a new home in this suburban house in Massachusetts, where she was wrapped in shiny paper and placed under a tree with many other wrapped packages.

She didn’t understand the language spoken in the house. But she did understand the happiness on the boy’s face as she was unwrapped and taken out of her box. He flexed her and put her on his feet, and bounded around the house.

She also understood the look on the faces of the parents as they looked on: Giang’s father used to smile at her just like that as he would hand her the sweet *bánh rán*.

With time, she learned that the boy’s name was Bobby, and that he wanted to run fast and long.

Every morning, Bobby took her running. She loved moving in the crisp, cold air. It was so quiet here, different from her home back in Vietnam. Bobby

ran at an even, effortless pace, and she liked the graceful, rhythmic pounding sound she made against the pavement. Sometimes she imagined that she was flying, skimming, dipping over the ground, like a pair of fluttering sparrows.

The pounding also allowed her to speak. *Thwack, thwack, thwack*, she sang to the dew-speckled grass and sun-warmed sidewalk. *Crunch, crunch, crunch*, she greeted the gravel in the driveways and the pebbles lining the road shoulders. She observed the comfortable, large houses around her, the clean streets, and the wide, open spaces. She listened to Bobby's breathing, even and deep, as though he and she could run forever.

Giang tried to not feel sorry for herself. Sure, she was no longer a person, but a thing. But in her old life at the factory, she had often felt that she was little more than an extension of the machines, a lever or belt made of flesh and bone instead of metal and rubber. Cradling Bobby's feet as he ran made her feel almost more real, more alive by comparison.

She did miss her mother, and often wished that she could get a message to her: *Mama, I'm fine; I don't worry anymore about money, food, quotas, pain*. She hoped that her father was feeling better, and that they had found a way to keep her brother in school.

Spring turned to summer, then to fall and winter. Giang liked the challenge of finding her footing in the ice, but running in the snow was hard on her body. Cracks appeared in her, and water seeped in. She could feel that she was losing traction, her grip on the ground.

It was spring again. Bobby opened a box and took out a new pair of shoes.

Giang looked at the newcomer with dread. As Bobby kicked her across the floor, squeaking, she whispered to the new shoes, but they were not like her, not alive. Bobby laced the new shoes on his feet, and hopped around to try them out.

Then he bent down and picked up Giang, lacing the two parts of her together. Her heart leapt. Bobby hadn't forgot about her. She wasn't being replaced. They would go on running together.

Being draped around Bobby's neck as he ran was a different sensation. She liked being high up, being able to see things. It was a bit like when she was little, when she rode on her father's shoulders to watch the parades at the festivals.

Giang wanted to sing an old song that her mother used to sing. She wished she still had her voice. She wanted to tell Bobby her story, about the dusty noisy factory, the chattering girls, the sweet-smelling tea at home, her mother's calming voice. Bobby would be interested, wouldn't he? In a way, hadn't his desire for good and cheap running shoes called her across the Pacific into this new life?

Bobby stopped by the side of the road. Dark electric wires stretched overhead.

And then she really was flying, high into the air. She reached the apex of her arc and began to fall, but her laces caught on the wires, and she dangled high over the road, which was empty as far as she could see in both directions.

Bobby was already disappearing down the shoulder of the road. He didn't look back.

Giang sighed and settled down. She imagined the years ahead, the rain, the sleet, the snow and the sun. She imagined herself growing old and falling apart.

But a powerful gust of wind tossed her about, whistled through the holes in her sides and the cracks in her soles. Up here, the wind was strong.

"Hello." Giang tried out her new voice and startled the sparrows dozing on the wire. She was now loud, louder than she had ever been.

I've finally run into the sky, she thought. *I'll become friends with the birds*.

As the wind continued to howl and groan through her decaying body, she began to sing her story.

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