

LONTAR

THE
JOURNAL OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN
SPECULATIVE FICTION

#10

DOUBLE-SIZED
FINAL ISSUE



LONTAR

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The logo for Epigram, featuring a large, bold, white letter "E" inside a black square. Below the square, the word "EPIGRAM" is written in a bold, sans-serif font, followed by "SINGAPORE · LONDON" in a smaller font.

EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON

“I like to think of myself as tolerably well-read for an American. *LONTAR* reminds me how what we take for granted about ourselves in the West is actually based on ignorance and vanity. After reading the table of contents in that dusty galactic backwater known as the United States, my provincial prejudices were exposed by the editors rather painfully; each of the authors was new to me. In reading *LONTAR*, the greatest pleasure was the discovery that such an imaginative world exists in the universe: a place populated by fiction writers, poets and graphic artists of such a broad range of integuments, interests and talents.”

—Eric Thomas Norris, *Singapore Unbound*

“All the writing is surprising and fascinating. As a reader, some knowledge of the region helps, but is not necessary. The great thing about *LONTAR* is the broad range of speculative fiction showcased here with a guaranteed burst of Southeast Asian culture. *LONTAR* has produced quality, intricate and original work that entertains and distils a yearning in the reader for more.”

— Zara Adcock, *The Review Review*

“A relatively new publication, *LONTAR* nonetheless publishes high-quality works by award-winning authors. Diverse and under-represented characters and settings are a mainstay of *LONTAR*'s fiction, opening the genre to fresh themes and voices, and introducing readers to the rich culture and atmosphere of Southeast Asia.”

— Nicky Magas, *Tangent Online*

“Learning real things about a region of the world relatively unknown to me is an unexpected bonus of the great stories in *LONTAR*. With each tale, I was allowed a view through the eyes of someone whose experiences and orientation are so far separated from my own and yet so similar that the journey is wondrous.”

—Andrea Pawley, *Weightless Books*

“I thought I was going to pick this up and read a story or two and instead I blew off everything else I was doing and read the issue cover to cover. I'd love to be able to pick out a favourite story and talk about it but there wasn't anything here I didn't like, there wasn't anything that didn't make me think or see the speculative possibilities outside my own small sphere of experience. Oh, the *stories*, the wonderful stories.”

—Rain Prior, Goodreads reader review

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EDITORIAL: ON KINDNESS AND FAREWELLS

Jason Erik Lundberg

It's not easy to remain kind nowadays. Many parts of the world are engaged in far-right-wing xenophobia and tribalism, with reactionary ruling strongmen displaying a widespread denial of empathy and common decency on the global stage, a repeated circling of wagons around so many national borders. Hatred and bigotry are very much out in the open once again, fanned by the flames of populism and nationalism. On a more personal level, individuals are concerned with themselves and their immediate intimates; everyone else can go to hell. Selfishness and closed-mindedness rule the day. "I've got mine, and you're on your own."

I paint an exaggerated picture, of course, but there is an increasing number of days when my faith in humanity is greatly tested. In the last year, I suffered three fairly devastating betrayals of friendship that left me feeling used and discarded, as though those friendships never even mattered at all, and it seemed all of a piece with the age we are living through now. With such a loss, it's difficult to even trust people after that; the first instinct is to throw up those protective walls, that thick layer of mental armour, so that you can't be hurt like that again. You retreat into yourself, question every interaction, suspect every request for help. You obsess over the action that injured you, playing it over and over in your mind in order to attack it from every angle, to prove to yourself that you were *right* and they were *wrong*, all the time unaware that every new examination of the incident harms you emotionally, a fresh, repeating wound on your psyche. We are often our own worst critics, and so this hurt and rejection often turns into self-loathing: maybe you deserved to be betrayed because you're a pathetic excuse for a human being.

But then, at some point (hopefully sooner rather than later), you start to let those toxic feelings go. You realise that allowing yourself to be trapped in an endless cycle of resentment and pain is not a sustainable way to live, and that the first step to moving on is to be kinder to yourself. Once you can look yourself in the mirror and honestly declare that the person who hurt you no longer has a hold on your thoughts and emotions, you become much more open to seeing the everyday kindnesses around you. And then, instead of brushing aside the begging auntie near the train station you use every morning, you might slip her a couple of dollars now and then; or you answer someone asking for a favour with a positive and possibly enthusiastic response; or you recognise someone else in a similar spiral of hurt and reach out to them with an offer of support.

The thing about kindness is that it can grow like a virus, passed on from person to person, until what seemed like small actions can have large consequences—but it is not something that happens on its own; it must be tended, constantly and considerately, with vigilance. As George Saunders said, in his convocation speech at Syracuse University for the class of 2013: “Kindness, it turns out, is *hard*—it starts out all rainbows and puppy dogs, and expands to include...well, *everything*.” So, while the Trumps and Dutertes and Orbáns of the world hope to divide us into smaller and smaller tribes, one of the most important things we can do right now is to keep the light of kindness lit within ourselves and remember that all of us, no matter where we’re from, have far more similarities than differences. This is an active and self-aware process, and it’s not easy, but it is so needed.

This issue of *LONTAR* is the last. It is a bittersweet moment for me. I had grand plans for this literary journal when founding it back in 2012, and we did actually manage to accomplish some of them. I have had the very good fortune to be on the receiving end of countless acts of kindness through my

own life, and that of course extends to *LONTAR*. I have to thank Kenny Leck for initially agreeing to publish us through Math Paper Press, and Edmund Wee for then enfoldng us into the Epigram Books stable in 2014; most journals are either completely independent operations or attached to universities, but *LONTAR* has benefited greatly from being associated with book publishers, most notably with regard to distribution and support.

I must thank Kristine Ong Muslim for agreeing to be our poetry editor with no other assurance than that the journal was an interesting prospect; she has been there from the very beginning, and her discerning eye has curated a wealth of incredible verse for our pages. My good friend Adan Jimenez came aboard at a later point, and he has also been a wonderful collaborator and enthusiast for comics by regional creators; and I thank him for bringing his visual eye to our otherwise typographical leanings. One of the most important parts of editing a journal like this is doing so with like-minded people who have their own particular strengths, and *LONTAR* has gained greatly from Kristine’s and Adan’s editorial idioms.

The journal would also be nothing without its contributors, and I need to extend my heartfelt gratitude towards this group of phenomenal fictionists, poets, essayists, comics creators and visual artists. You have shaped the tone and feel of this journal from the first issue, and I am extraordinarily proud to have had the opportunity to showcase your outstanding creative work. You have shown, without a shadow of a doubt, that Southeast Asia is a region ripe with story, and that these stories deserve to be shared with the world. Your imaginations and ways of seeing have enhanced and added to the collective culture of such a varied regional society. Though *LONTAR* is coming to an end, I implore you all to continue spreading awareness of the marvellous plurality of Southeast Asia with your words and images.

In terms of financial backing, Singapore’s National Arts Council funded issues #3–8, and even though they made the decision not to help subsidise the cost of our last two issues, I must thank them all the same (very frankly,

the journal would not have continued past the second issue without their assistance); especial thanks go to Kiruthiga Mahendran and Lo Hwei Shan for their enthusiasm and cooperation within the Literary Arts department. Also, we saw direct monetary pledges from our Patreon patrons since issue #7, and these generous folks in fact rescued this issue and its predecessor from cancellation with their surge of support; this patron list is once again displayed at the end of the issue, and I thank everyone on it for wanting to take a personal stake in *LONTAR*'s continuation. Additionally, and unexpectedly, we received a last-minute \$500 donation from a group that wished to remain anonymous, and a \$1,000 grant from The Awesome Foundation that put us over the top for our stretch goal and allowed us to print the artwork in this issue (namely Drewscape's comic "Rewire" and Sonny Liew's illustration for Victor Ocampo's "To See Infinity Inside the Pages of a Book") in beautiful full colour, as it was intended; all of these awesome people have my eternal gratitude.

Lastly, I have to thank all our readers who took a chance on us. Though all of our issues are available as ebooks, *LONTAR* has from the start been primarily a print journal, and enough people bought and read each issue that we were able to continue all the way to ten issues. I was extremely heartened to hear from y'all, after I made the announcement online of *LONTAR*'s end, about how much the journal has meant to you, and that it fit a very specific niche not previously serviced; that it was a shame something so unique and important for the region was going away. Working on such a project means much time spent in a bubble just trying to assemble each issue and make it available, and so it meant a lot to me to hear, sometimes from virtual strangers, that the journal actually did make a lasting cultural impact.

This tenth and final issue of *LONTAR* presents speculative writing from and about Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Korea and Vietnam.

Inside these pages, you'll find: sightings of a strange astronaut in an infinite library by Victor Fernando R. Ocampo, illustrated by Eisner winner Sonny Liew; the meeting between weretigers and Sang Nila Utama by Manish Melwani; the enlightenment of a politician's wife by Cyril Wong; weaponised merlions in WWII-era Singapore by Kevin Martens Wong; an unexpected offer of omniscient immortality by Eliza Victoria; gods and mango-tree spirits united in song by Vida Cruz; post-apocalyptic satay cookery in Marina Bay Sands by Wayne Réé; domestic strife and changeling tigers by Natalie Wang; the magic of folding origami cranes by Topaz Winters; a panadería that guarantees pregnancy by Gabriela Lee; surrogate speaking to the dead by Patricia Karunungan; a dating app for inter-dimensional monstrosities by Marylyn Tan & Graeme Ford; a Pygmalion-esque tragic romance by comic artist Drewscape; and speculative poetry by Kevin Minh Allen, Davian Aw, F. Jordan Carnice, Genevieve DeGuzman, May Chong, Lawdenmarc Decamora, Joses Ho, Judith Huang, Sithuraj Ponraj, Bronwyn Sharman, Lakan Umali and Natalie Wang.

Also included is a special supplement: the exciting conclusion of Dean Francis Alfar's brilliant novel *Salamanca*, winner of the Palanca Award Grand Prize for the Novel and the Gintong Aklat Award for Literature. I must thank Dean publicly for allowing me to serialise his incredible novel, which has meant so much for Philippine speculative fiction and for me personally, and I hope that its readership has increased as a result. It deserves to be read all over the English-speaking world.

This is goodbye for now. It is hoped that *LONTAR* will show up again in some form or fashion in the future (I retain the strong sense that, at some point soon, I'll very much get the urge to edit a periodical again), and if this happens, I hope you'll rejoin our efforts. Regardless, thank you all for your kindnesses. Onwards.

SEJARAH LARANGAN; OR, THE FORBIDDEN HISTORY OF OLD SINGAPURA

Manish Melwani

Manish Melwani (Singapore/USA) attended the Clarion Writers' Workshop in 2014, and currently lives in New York City, where he daydreams about tropical thunderstorms and sambal stingray. He recently finished a Master's degree in science fiction and empire; along the way, he wrote a whole bunch of Singaporean supernatural stories—including this one. His fiction can also be found in *Shadows and Tall Trees, Vol. 7* (2017) and at ManishMelwani.com. His first published story, "The Tigers of Bengal", appeared in LONTAR issue #7.

I.

Maybe you've heard this story before. It's an old one, the tale of the Great Prince who founded Singapura.

His name was Sang Nila Utama and he sailed far and wide with his followers on the hunt for new territory. One morning, he sighted a jungle isle called Temasek with sandy shores like white gold, and decided to land there. But the skies and seas would not have it: lightning struck, thunder roared, blue waves roiled to black, and the prince's boats began to sink. Frantic, his men emptied the vessels, bailing out water, throwing supplies and weapons overboard. The storm would not abate. The waves grew more ferocious, threatening to devour them.

Finally, the prince stood up and cast his crown into the stormy sea. The skies cleared. The ocean calmed. Sailors and soldiers cheered, forever remembering that this was the day they knew they served a great leader. For who but a true king would sacrifice the symbol of his own divine royalty to save the lives of his men?

As they approached Temasek's golden shore, they glimpsed a strange shape in the forest: striped fur, barrel chest, a great mass of orange and black.

A monstrous creature, and yet somehow like the shape of a man. Was it a tiger? Or perhaps a jingga, one of the orange-haired men of the woods? We will never know for sure, because Damang Lebar Dawn, the prince's father-in-law, said it was a *lion*. A royal animal, favoured by the gods. This was good enough for the prince. He threw his dagger into the sand, just as he had thrown his crown into the sea. He renamed the island Singapura—Lion City—and proclaimed it his new capital. The men cheered and toasted their liege, calling him Sang Tri Buana, the Lord of Three Worlds: Earth, Heaven and Hell.

So the story goes. And stories are powerful things. They unfurl sails in their listeners' minds, raise armies, conquer kingdoms. But all stories change with the teller, and history's no different. Some say the prince's mother was a descendant of Iskandar Shah, whom the Europeans called Alexander-King. Others say his mother was a sea-nymph, that he was born on the waves, naked and bobbing in the split stone of a fruit. Others still say there was no prince, no divine ruler, only a treacherous usurper named Parameswara who invented the grand tale to cover up his foul origin.

But what about the truth, you ask? The truth, my friends, is as elusive as oyster-grit, as murky as a mangrove swamp. Understanding it is like holding sand underwater. Something always slips through your grasp.

II.

Sang Tri Buana, heir to the House of Srivijaya, Prince who would be King and Lord of Three Worlds, slammed his boat onto the shore. His men leapt out, salt water surging around their feet, kris-daggers drawn. The day was conspicuously bright after the storm. From the deck of the royal boat, Sang Tri Buana narrowed his eyes at the dazzling sand, and the dark thicket beyond.

One. Two. Three. The other boats slammed into the sand, and more men dismounted with spears and daggers. The prince's eyes gazed at the jungle's edge and saw—something. Something moving fast, with powerful, muscular motion. A dark orange blur, rippling against the trees like a procession of

shadows. Its growl raised hairs and opened bladders.

The great prince shuddered in fear, nearly dropping his weapon. But he clenched his fist (and his bladder), grateful that all his men were in front of him, including Bija, who pissed himself unceremoniously into the ankle-lapping waves. But no one noticed the prince's hesitation, no one but his Menteri standing behind him on the boat.

The prince steeled himself and jumped from the boat's prow onto the gleaming sand, screaming up the beach, spear angled for the tree line. The men, heartened and emboldened, followed their Lord of Three Worlds into battle. The prince hurled his royal spear. An animal howled in pain and crashed away through the undergrowth. By the time they reached the forest, the beast had long fled.

After nightfall, the men sat around the fire, boasting and laughing. Bija-who-pissed-in-the-waves bore the brunt of the laughter. Sang Tri Buana, the great prince, sat alone away from the fire, staring into the forest night, thinking about what he saw.

His Menteri, his chief minister and grand vizier, a commoner raised to the highest station by dint of his brilliant mind, approached slowly.

"That was no boar or goat, O Prince of Three Worlds," the Menteri said, kneeling beside him, picking up a twig to draw idly in the sand. "The men think it was a jingga. One of the Orang-Hutan."

"Jingga are strange creatures. Almost like people," the prince mused. "But I do not think that is what we saw."

"Nor do I," the Menteri agreed. "Jingga do not howl like that. I think it was a harimau. A tiger. We should be careful tonight."

"No. Not a tiger either. Something like it, but...different. I think it was the creature from my dream. The dream I had last night, before the storm."

"*Singha*," the Menteri said, remembering their conversation that morning. A *lion*. The fabled king of animals. Never before had a lion been seen this far south, so far from the land of kings and brahmins. "You may be right, my liege.

That creature had golden hair, did it not? Like a singha."

The prince nodded, but did not reply. He remembered his dream: being chased through the forest by a great golden beast with hair long as a sea-raider's. In his dream, Sang Tri Buana ducked under tree branches and sprinted over streams, until he reached a clearing full of scattered stone heads. He crouched behind the faces of his ancestors; the rulers of Three Worlds. He hid behind his lineage, but the dead kings could not help. Sang Tri Buana heard the soft pad of paws, smelt hot rotten breath. The great maned monster had cornered him, and the last thing he heard before waking was its roar—

"—my lord?"

"...eh?"

"I said: first you had this dream, then you appeased the storm with your crown, now we see the creature from your dreams on the beach? Signs upon signs, lord. The heavens favour you. Perhaps *this* is the place for our settlement."

Signs upon signs.

"We shall see," the prince sighed. "Tell the men to rest, but organise sentries. Tomorrow, we explore this place."

"At once, my lord. And I have no doubt you will see the great beast of your dreams again."

This idea caused much discomfort to the prince, but he kept quiet. And in the Menteri's mind wheels and gears began to turn, sharp as daggers.

III.

That night, when the men were filled with drink and the prince himself slept kris-in-hand, his chief minister disappeared into the jungle, his mind hungry for secrets. We shall follow the Menteri, and learn what he learned, for this is more *his* story than anyone else's.

He scaled the beach, sand slipping beneath his feet, and entered the looming, yawning forest. The jungle smelt of many things—soil, rot, grass

beaded with night-water. Now, the Menteri could not smell all these things. Not yet. He had in his nostrils only a jumble of scents. But the beast he tracked could smell all this, and more. Deeper into the forest the Menteri went, past a steeply sloping hill, dodging branches and brambles, until the sound of the waves was inaudible over the song of cricket and cicada. He tracked the beast by its trail of bloody grass, its wounded, heavy footfalls. He hadn't done this in years, but was amazed how quickly it all came back.

You see, the Menteri's people had been massacred when he was a boy. But before that, they'd been hunters. His father had taught him how to track a beast by its sign and spoor. He did that now, following the bloody trail till it led him out of the jungle again, towards the sound and smell of clean, rushing water. A riverbank. He knelt here, tracing the wounded, muddy footfalls as they transformed from paw prints to toes, and gasped, for he knew now that this was no ordinary animal he stalked. No, this was something else, something he'd heard whisper of on his mother's knee. People who could turn their human-skin inside out, exchanging smooth flesh for striped fur.

Tiger-people.

Soon enough, he found his quarry, thirty paces in from the riverbank; no longer an animal, but a man who lay naked, bloody and exhausted at the foot of a banyan tree. The prince's spear, half-broken though it was, seemed suddenly huge now that it skewered a human leg. The wounded man's calves were enormously muscled, but the rest of him was scrawny. And he was completely hairless, not a sign of orange fur. Only a wiry black beard, caked with dried blood. The man who was not a man, but a harimau jadi-jadian, a man-tiger, moaned softly, clutching his speared leg.

The man-tiger saw the Menteri approaching, and tried to pull himself inside the banyan's dark heart. But the minister had other plans. He knelt down on the man-tiger's wounded leg, pinning him, and pressed a blade to his throat.

"You wish to live?" the Menteri asked, in the language of his tribe, people who had lived in the jungles north of Temasek.

The man-tiger responded only with a hiss, so the Menteri put his weight on the broken stump of spear, pushing on it like an oar, making wood bite into flesh until the harimau jadi-jadian screamed.

"Quiet," the Menteri said. "I asked you a question. Do you wish to live?"

The man-tiger nodded. He did not scream when the Menteri pulled out the spear-haft; only grimaced.

"My mother told me that if you come across a tiger in the forest, you should speak to him as you would your father, or a respected uncle," the Menteri said. He drew his knife slowly across the length of his captive's body, the blade hovering over the gaping spear-wound. "But unfortunately for you, my mother and father died when I was a boy, and I had no uncles to teach me respect. So tell me. Where are the rest of your people?"

"There are no others," the man-tiger snarled. "Only me."

"I don't believe you. Harimau jadi-jadian hunt alone, yes, but they build villages. Everyone knows that." The Menteri pressed down on the wound with the flat of his knife, slowly turning the blade so the sharp point dug into flesh. The man-tiger's body twisted in pain.

"Stop! Please!" he gurgled. The man-tiger and the Menteri locked eyes, and in that moment the power shifted from beast to man, from claw to intellect. "I will take you to my people."

"Good," the Menteri said without withdrawing the knife. "And while we walk, you will tell me how you learned to be a tiger."

"It'll do you no good, foreigner. You're far too old to learn."

"That's never stopped me before," the Menteri said, grinning as he pulled the wounded tiger-man to his feet.

Now, stories from other places will tell you about people who turn into wolves and bears, and that anyone bitten by such a creature becomes one. Were-wolves, were-bears; the terrible plagues of lycanthropy and ursanthropy. But were-tigers are different. The bite of the harimau jadi-jadian does not transform the victim, not unless you count being killed as a transformation.

No, becoming a harimau jadi-jadian is a matter of magic, not of infection. The Menteri's captive revealed those secrets as they walked through the jungle. He told him of the rituals, the transformative potions, the long lifespan of tiger-people and the temptation of giving in fully to the beast, of surrendering human intellect to sinew and claw.

All the while they limped across streams and over sloping jungle hills, the man-tiger leaning on the Menteri's shoulder, until they reached a clearing in the trees: a village, its wooden houses rusty red in the dawn light. Men and women, harimau jadi-jadian, stumbled sleepily between huts, smelling of the night: dew-wet grass and fresh blood. Some hauled carcasses of deer and boar over their shoulders. One by one, they turned to eye the newcomer, sniffing warily.

"I've brought you here," the man-tiger grunted. "Now let me go."

"I want to treat with your headman," the Menteri said, prodding his captive's leg with the flat of his blade, aware of the hungry eyes all around him.

"You're a fool," the man-tiger growled. "Our chief will devour you for how you've treated me." But he led the Menteri down the winding mud path between the houses. The villagers stared, and whispered to each other in a strange, snarling tongue that the Menteri, for all his learning, had never heard before.

At the village's heart stood a wooden platform, a raised dais thatched with leaves. On it dozed an enormous tiger, old and grey-whiskered, purring deeply as two young women fanned it. As the Menteri approached, one of the young women rubbed the great cat's furred flank. An orange eye flicked open to regard him. The young woman too looked at the Menteri with eyes of piercing amber. She bent and whispered in the tiger's ear.

The tiger began to change. With each heavy breath, its muscular form receded and shrank. Striped fur turned to chestnut-brown skin, mottled in places; sharp claws turned to long, dirty nails. Whiskers gathered and drooped. When it was done, the tiger had become an old, old man: the oldest man the Menteri had ever seen. His orange eyes were rheumy and bloodshot, and his

upper lip had no cleft in the space between his whiskers. He wheezed as he spoke to the young woman in that same, snarling tongue.

The woman regarded the Menteri with a predator's gaze and spoke to him in the language of his youth: "Welcome, stranger. My Pa wants to know why you've come."

"Tuan," the Menteri said, bowing as he addressed the old man. "I am the Chief Minister of the Great Prince of Srivijaya, Sang Tri Buana, the Lord of Three Worlds."

Father and daughter had a whispered conversation in that language of throaty growls and torn flesh. She snorted laughter as she spoke again. "Ha! Lord of Three Worlds? More like Lord of Three Boats. I saw you yesterday morning, caught in the storm. We wondered whether your bodies would wash up."

"Are you disappointed?"

"No. We prefer living prey. And you've delivered yourself to us as an appetiser. How courteous."

"It would be poor form to eat an *emissary*," the Menteri said.

She whispered something to the old man, who laughed. "Perhaps. Choose your words with caution, emissary. Convince us why we shouldn't simply devour you now, and devour your comrades come nightfall."

"You could devour me," the Menteri admitted. "But my prince wishes to establish a settlement here on this island—"

"*Our* island."

"—*your* island," he agreed. "If I don't return, his men will come looking for me. They will find your town and burn it to the ground, and kill everyone here."

"A few men with torches do not frighten us," she said, baring sharp, sharp teeth.

"What about men with spears? We wounded your friend rather easily," the Menteri said, inclining his head towards the jagged gash on his scowling guide's thigh. "And our force on the beach is but a small scouting party. My

Lord wishes to control the seas to the south. We will return with more men, more boats, more weapons. It is inevitable.”

“And how many boats and men does your Master have?”

The Menteri flinched at the word *Master* but he calculated. Sixty ships would come from the south at the prince’s call, each bearing ten men. One hundred ships, if the prince’s father’s wars went well.

“One hundred ships. One thousand men.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she smiled. “All the more reason to kill you then,” she said. “We certainly don’t need one thousand soldiers invading our land.” Her sharp teeth glinted with the stain of old blood, and something ferocious flickered behind her eyes. Something hungry. He recognised that hunger, for it was kin to his own. *Ambition*.

“They’ll not invade your lands,” the Menteri said, keenly aware that the foremost thing he negotiated was his own survival. “The prince and his followers are sailors. He only wishes to control the waterways to the south. As long as there’s no threat from the jungle, he won’t bother you. He’ll stick to the beaches and mangrove swamps.”

“And are you one of your prince’s *followers*, emissary?”

“I am his *advisor*. Much like you advise your respected father.”

The Menteri looked from her to her father. The scrawny old man stared back with sleepy yellow eyes. The headman had not spoken since they began negotiating, and the Menteri saw that his daughter was the real power here.

“How do we know that your prince won’t stumble upon us some day?” she asked. “Princes are known to be great hunters of boar and deer. Much like tigers. It would be a shame if he were to go out on such a hunt and...end up hunted.” She licked her lips.

“The prince is young and inexperienced. It’s my hand that steers his ship. If you don’t come looking for us, we shall not trouble you. He will never hear of this village. I give you my word.”

“And what does your word mean to us?” she asked, sniffing the air. “You

come here with a knife at our friend’s throat, whispering of treachery. Whose emissary are you? Your prince’s? Or your own?”

“An understandable concern,” the Menteri said. “I represent all our best interests. Let me give you some surety. We are traders, with valuable goods: precious stones and sea-treasures. Silk from China. Weapons, like this one.” Slowly, so as not to alarm, he drew his kris-dagger from his waistband, turning it in the dawn light so they could see the eastern glow reflected off its wavy copper blade. “My plan is to establish a trading post here. There will be far more riches like these, in years to come. And they can be yours.”

The young woman considered. Then she said: “Very well. You will give us my father’s weight in such treasures. And we will have a deal.”

The Menteri inclined his head, shifting his gaze again between the young woman who spoke for her people, and her old father, the chieftain who had again begun to doze off.

“My father’s weight in his *tiger* form,” she added. “Obviously.”

“Obviously,” the Menteri agreed.

IV.

And so the Menteri returned to the Great Prince Sang Tri Buana with a tale of adventure and discovery. He’d tracked the beast but lost its trail deep in the jungle, where after a night of wandering he’d found no sign whatsoever of human habitation. What he *had* found was a river, fertile land for crops, plenty of boar and a great hill not too far from the shore, which might house the prince’s new capital.

The Menteri led Sang Tri Buana and his hunting parties into the forest, on three separate expeditions, careful each time to avoid the tiger village. All they found was wild boar, lots of them.

That night, as they basked in the firelight, exulting in the smoky scent of roast pork, the Menteri told the prince of his plan for the settlement. They would build a royal fortification on the great hill, overlooking the golden shore

where they'd first landed. The prince's navy would secure the waters, making them safe for merchants. He knew from his study of history that Temasek had once been a port-of-call for traders from distant lands.

So it would be once again.

"Marvellous," the prince said, biting off a strip of meat and chewing loudly. "I have been thinking of a name for this new settlement. You were right about the creature on the beach. The one from my dreams. It was a portent. We shall call this island Singapura, the Lion City, and it shall be my kingdom, and the kingdom of my heirs, for all time hereafter."

And as the prince rhapsodised about the future of his domain, the Menterī felt unseen amber eyes watching him from the forest depths.

Thus the great Kingdom of Singapura came to be. Sang Tri Buana built his palace atop the great hill, which he called Bukit Larangan, the Forbidden Hill. The Menterī oversaw the construction of a new type of fortification around its base: a great stone wall (for it was, after all, the Forbidden Hill). Clan after clan of the Orang Laut, the sea-nomads who knew the waterways like their own knuckles, were now sufficiently impressed by Sang Tri Buana to swear him their undying loyalty. They swelled the prince's ranks—fishermen, sailors and scouts—as did his countrymen from Srivijaya. The navy nested in the river mouth. They tore down trees to build boats and controlled the waterways to Singapura's south. They drove away the pirates, and traders began to flock to Singapura's shores like bees to honey-flowers.

Soon merchants, slaves, fishmongers and craftsmen thronged the riverbanks, selling their wares in the shadow of the great wall and the prince's Forbidden Hill. They came from Yunnan and Siam and Chola and Ceylon. Some even journeyed from far-off Arabia. The royals did not profane their sacred fingers with coin—only plunder and tribute—but that did not stop

anybody else. The prince's followers traded their sea-treasure and kris-knives for jewel and coin, while the Menterī exchanged his loot for maps, books and ancient scrolls. He'd spent his boyhood in slavery, a scribe in Siam's court, and there he'd learned a smattering of languages and a thirst for knowledge. Now, as chief minister, he walked through the market and sharpened his tongue with the foreigners, collecting the prince's tribute as he did. The Menterī thrived here, and so did the settlement. It grew from sleepy fishing village to bustling port, and the prince became a king.

The town of harimau jadi-jadian prospered, too. The Kingdom of Singapura was flush with treasure, and the Menterī was Master of Accounts; so nobody noticed the discrepancy. It was not unsubstantial: over time, the missing goods would add up to a tiger's weight in gold, gems, shells and sheathed daggers. Once every new moon, the Menterī slipped out into the forest with a sack of treasures. He took them to the tiger-town, where the new headwoman had taken a liking to him.

Her name was Rima, and after her old Pa died, she became Chief of the Harimau Jadi-Jadian. The Menterī intrigued her, as did the world beyond the waves. He told her of kingdoms far beyond the mangrove forests and the salty seas, of places where the sand stretches in every direction without a drop of ocean in sight; of impossible hills that rise higher than the clouds. He told her of Siam; the sprawling gardens and walled temple libraries where he'd been taken by the raiders who orphaned him; of India, where the Raja of Kalinga kept mines of gleaming diamonds; and of China, where the Heavenly Emperor and his ministers built walls as wide as the ocean.

Rima could not read—none of the harimau jadi-jadian could—and so they struck a bargain. She taught the Menterī the secrets of tiger-transformation, and in return he taught her the secrets of letter and language. He would come to her late at night and return to the kingdom in the mornings, covered in brambles and smelling like the jungle.

But nobody ever noticed. The Menterī realised that he was beginning to

smell and hear things that others could not. The way bits of chewed nut got caught between King Sang Tri Buana's front teeth, whistling softly whenever he spoke. The unwashed, awful odour of his royal guard. The scent and sound of a wild boar, making water in the jungle not a hundred feet away from the king's Forbidden Hill, sacred Mount Meru in miniature, where the mortal, lowborn Menteri, for all his wise counsel, was still allowed to sit only grudgingly. The Menteri's mind was already the sharpest in the kingdom. Now his nose, ears and eyes were beginning to match.

Night after night, he practiced tiger-transformation, and one night, he succeeded—hands to paws, skin to fur, teeth to fang—and slunk off into the darkness. In the moons to come, the Menteri and Rima became friends, confidantes and then lovers. One night, they brought down a wild boar together, and before carrying it back to the tiger-town they sprawled lazily on the forest floor, each tracing bloody letters in the other's furred chest.

"Your king does not know where you go, on nights like this," Rima said. "Or what you become."

"No one knows. I leave my human mind, and all its turning wheels, back at the settlement every night. It is my heart that I bring to you."

"That's sweet as fresh honey," Rima said. "But I want your mind as well. I want you to help my people thrive and prosper, just as you help your king."

"Would you have me join your clan, Rima?"

"I would."

They were not wed, for that is not the custom of the harimau jadi-jadian. But the Menteri spent more and more time in the tiger-town, where he would hunt with Rima until the earliest hours of dawn. Some nights they slept in her hut, other nights in the wild, lush jungle. The Menteri and Rima counselled the tiger-people not to show themselves too close to the human settlement. He taught them to build furnaces and smithies to make kris-daggers, to shave bark off trees for boats. The boats they built in a narrow inlet at the island's northwestern tip, hidden from the prying eyes of the king's royal navy.

"Perhaps one day," Rima mused, "we might unite our peoples. Imagine: tiger-people and sea-people all working together. We could establish a great kingdom here, and rule far beyond the waves."

The Menteri had been thinking this as well, but he bit his tongue, for he knew Sang Tri Buana would not forgive him such a revelation.

In time, he and Rima had a litter of children. Three of them: Adi, Dia and Hania. The Menteri loved his children. He doted on them, he taught them the same lessons he taught the king's royal heirs. In fact, he taught them more, for he did not hold anything back. Maps, languages, trade and accountancy, sailing charts and the history of every kingdom he knew. The five of them became a family, a pack. Even as the young kingdom on Singapura's shores prospered and grew, the Menteri found himself and his loves at its jungled heart.

And when each child turned six, Rima oversaw their change. One by one, on a moonless night in the middle of the jungle, the children turned their human skins inside out and became harimau jadi-jadian. Their parents were proud. They both hoped that one day, these cubs would rule the island's jungled lands, and all the waves beyond.

V.

Now, perhaps, if the king had not been so concerned with heroic deeds and making his own legend, he might have noticed something suspicious. For his chief minister would come and go, disappearing into the jungle for days on end, returning satisfied, lean and relaxed. And perhaps if the king had a mind for numbers, for profit instead of plunder, he might have noticed the inconsistencies in his treasury.

But Sang Tri Buana was a warrior; a world-conqueror, and so spent much of his reign abroad. Battling pirates, raiding Siam and Majapahit's most minor fiefdoms; *these* were the tasks suited to a king. And while the royal personage was out adventuring, the Menteri ruled in his stead: providing counsel, directing trade and economics, helping the settlement prosper. The Menteri

was trustworthy, of course. Beyond reproach.

So it went, until King Sang Tri Buana's hair turned grey, his skin wrinkled and sun-leathered, while the Menteri never really seemed to age.

"Some day, old friend," the old king would say. "You must take me on one of these long jaunts through the jungle. For they seem to fill you with such vitality."

"Some day, my liege," the Menteri would agree, but of course, that day would never come, for the jungle belonged to him, his beloved and their children.

When death finally came for the Lord of Three Worlds, the Menteri was there, overseeing the funeral and succession. He tutored and counselled the royal heir, and *his royal heir*, the third king of Singapura, Paduka Sri Maharaja. Sang Tri Buana's successors knew the Menteri as a sprightly old man; a man who had been old even when their fathers were young. They did not think to question this. After all, were they not of the royal blood of Alexander? And hadn't the illustrious founder of their line been born bobbing on the waves, sprung from the stone of a fruit? Hadn't the Menteri taught them these things when they were young? And didn't he give them sound advice on statecraft and strategy, trade and warfare?

Yes, of course. The Menteri was indispensable. Above suspicion.

Above suspicion from all but one man: Badang.

Imagine a man whose chest is wide as a casuarina tree, his biceps solid as the greatest boulders. A man who carved his spears from tree-trunks and launched them one-handed, sinking enemy ships as they approached the harbour. A man so fiendishly strong he once bested a forest-demon in single combat, and for his troubles received a boon of his choosing. *Badang!*

Imagine if you received such a boon. What would you ask for? Enough gold to fill a dozen ships? Immortality? Power to rule the entire world? Badang, muscle-brained champion that he was, asked to become *even stronger*, so that he might better serve his king, Paduka Sri Maharaja. Badang bested a spirit in the forest, added the creature's infernal strength to his own, and became the

strongest man in the world, so strong he could even alter geography.

(There was once a famous rock that stood at Singapura's southern tip until the Europeans dynamited it. It had many names: Batu Berlayer, Sail Rock; Long Ya Men, Dragon's Tooth Rock. Perhaps it should have been called Batu Badang, for Badang put it there. During a contest of strength against the Raja of Kalinga's champion-at-arms, Badang launched the rock across the entire length of Singapura, causing earthquakes and tidal waves for days afterwards.)

Badang!!

Even if he wasn't the sharpest spear in the boat, Badang was the king's prized weapon of war and diplomacy, his champion. He had single-handedly averted war with the Raja of Kalinga through a feat of sheer strength. For what fool would dare enter battle against a man *that* freakishly strong, whose fists reduced hills to rubble, who uprooted trees by leaning on them, who drank whole streams dry when he was thirsty?

Badang!!!

Thus, backed by Badang, Paduka Sri Maharaja, King of Singapura, grew in regional influence and esteem. And thanks to this human superweapon, the Menteri suddenly found his stratagems and statecraft slightly less valuable to the king.

But make no mistake, for all the muscle packed between his ears, Badang was clever in one regard: he did not trust the old Menteri. Perhaps because of the supernatural influence on his own physical development, he sensed something similar in his rival. A strength that came from *somewhere else*, a power that shifted under the old man's skin, like orange-black shadows rippling in dark foliage.

Badang had voiced these concerns to the king—that there was something unnatural about the Menteri, that the old man was up to no good in the forest, and did Your Majesty's father not die when he was suspiciously young?

The king listened patiently, but the champion's words carried far less weight in councils of state than on the field of war. And of course, the silver-

tongued Menteri talked circles around Badang, providing detailed alibis for his jungle-jaunts, and telling parables of other muscle-bound champions whose unthinking charges had led them to an untimely doom. Embarrassed, Badang stewed in his mistrust.

Meanwhile, the Menteri had a portion of Badang's rock broken off and transported to the riverbank, where he carved proclamation and praise to the king in every language spoken on Singapura's shores. The ancestral court-tongue of Srivijaya, the trade-speech of the Orang Laut, and the myriad languages of India, China, Arabia and Siam. The traders saw the stone, and flattered King Paduka Sri Maharaja in ten different tongues.

The king, for his part, observed his advisors' simmering rivalry. He was not overly concerned, for he had known both men since boyhood. And in any case, he now had an insurance policy against ministerial disloyalty, for Badang was *unquestioningly* loyal and strong as a bullock, and if the Menteri showed even a hint of betrayal, Badang would crush his head without a second thought.

And so an uneasy truce existed between Minister and Champion. But the Minister had a secret goal. He'd been driven by pain and ambition to learn new languages, to understand history, geography, statecraft and magic. He'd even learned to transform himself into a tiger. He'd spent two lifetimes *bettering* himself, outliving two kings in the process, and he was sick of living in the shadows of lesser men. Why? All because he did not have royal blood? He could *smell* blood coursing through veins now. Royal blood smelt no different.

Sang Tri Buana and his heirs styled themselves the Lords of Three Worlds, but the Menteri knew the truth. His king was really just Lord of a Tiny Tract of Land and a Slightly Larger Strip of Sea, beset on all sides by hostile waters and greater kingdoms: Siam, Majapahit, Kalinga, Chola, Imperial China.

But perhaps the Menteri could become something far more powerful, true master of shadow and sun, ruler of the Earth, Heaven and Hell. The Earth he'd rule by eliminating Badang, making a shadow-puppet of the king, and joining the harimau jadi-jadian to the sea-nomads. Hell he could influence by trafficking

with dark powers, gaining secrets from bird and beast: the culmination of his long life as a were-tiger. And the Heavens? Ahhh, he did not know if the gods were real; but if they were, he would find a way to treat with them, to become more than just their vassal.

He would become the true Lord of Three Worlds.

VI.

One night, the Menteri was in his third form, neither man nor man-tiger; a shape that makes even true-tigers tremble. He'd devised this form himself, after years of study. It allowed him to speak with jungle-spirits, to commune with beasts of burrow and branch. He prowled the undergrowth, belly slung low to the dirt like a serpent's or a lizard's. He hissed at trees, sniffing at the frightened scents of birds and forest-spirits.

One spirit was not frightened of him. He saw it watching him through the leaves, a pale shroud stretched tight between trees like a spider-web, six black eyes and a sharp wet mouth at its centre. Straightening his spine, the Menteri approached, feigning caution.

I know you, the spirit whispered in his head. *The man whose mind glints like a dagger. The human king's treacherous advisor. Badang's nemesis.*

The Menteri did not respond; he glowered and pawed the earth, as though about to pounce.

Ha! For all your bravado, that tiger-blood's gone cold as deepwater, Minister. The treachery in your heart rustles like sailcloth in a sea-breeze. I know your design. You seek to usurp your king, and murder his champion.

"What concern is it to you, demon?"

Your rival is my concern. Who do you think turned Badang's sinew strong as stone?

"And how exactly did you do that?" the Menteri growled.

I vomited up some of my self-stuff, regurgitating it like water on sand, and Badang ate of my essence. He was strong before, but now he is stronger than

storms and mountains. Imagine what you could be, if you ate of me. I could lift the years off those old and tired bones.

“I desire not to be in your debt,” the Menteri hissed. But now he began to wonder what might happen if he ate a bit of Badang instead.

Debt, the demon laughed. Don't speak to me of debt. For since Badang bested me and took my strength, I'm sworn to be his slave.

“What if we made an equal trade instead? I free you from Badang's dominion, and you give me power over life and death.”

I can give you that, inasmuch as it is mine to give, the demon said. But you'll have to act quick. Like I said, I'm Badang's slave, and even now, I'm about to run back and tell him everything.

Like a slingshot stretched to snapping, the shroud of white leapt from the trees, fleeing towards the shore. The Menteri growled and gave chase, tearing through the jungle on five-clawed feet. As he neared the settlement wall he rose up on two legs, shedding fur and tooth until he was an old man again.

The Menteri approached the king's Forbidden Hill through its north gate. The guards uncrossed their spears to let him pass. He strode through the clearing, inhaling the scent of night-dew on grass, hearing the rustle of the royal fountain. Beneath an ancient tree at the foot of the hill, Badang stood guard, massive and motionless as the landscape.

“Menteri,” he rumbled, inclining his head ever-so-slightly.

“Champion Badang. Where is the king? I would speak with him.”

“Our divine liege is in his palace, of course, taking supper with the Queen,” Badang said, moving slightly to block the Menteri's advance. “You should know his whereabouts. Are you not his *minister*?”

“Of course I am,” the Menteri said, hands clasped behind his back. “Now let me pass.”

“No,” Badang said. “A little friend from the forest came to Badang, not long ago. It warned Badang of an old man with treachery in his heart.”

“Oh?” the Menteri said. But behind his back his arms were beginning to

change: fingers lengthening to claws; hands to paws.

When lightning strikes it does so without warning, cracking the sky and leaving smouldering patches of soil. So did Badang move, sudden and violent. He reached overhead and snapped off a massive tree branch, swinging it down in a furious, pulverising arc towards the ground where the Menteri stood.

But the old man was quick: already halfway to fur and fang, he darted like a shadow in flickering torchlight. The great branch smashed harmlessly on empty soil, where the Menteri had stood just a moment before.

“You fool. I'll have your head!” the Menteri hissed through jaws that were widening, crowding with sharp-sharp teeth.

Badang hefted the tree branch off the ground and roared for help. The Menteri heard the patter of their feet before he saw them: the rest of the king's guard, running down the hill with spear and shield, the two guards from the North Gate approaching behind him.

“Traitor!” Badang shouted, loud enough for his fellow guards to hear. “You would murder Badang, and then our king! Look at you! What are you? Tiger? Demon? You're not even a man.”

“I'm far more than just a man,” the Menteri growled, slipping fully into the beast. He heard Badang's immense heart, felt it beating through the soil, pounding like a war-drum; the heartbeats of the royal guard like lesser rhythms in thrall to it. The Menteri stalked around the clearing's edge, slipping in and out of shadows. Badang rushed forward with a yell, swinging wildly with the tree branch. The Menteri dodged, and the champion's momentum carried him crashing into a banyan tree.

The Menteri circled back behind Badang, darting in like a serpent, biting a raw chunk of flesh from the back of the champion's leg. Badang screamed, and the guards formed a nervous circle around the combatants, huddling for bravery as the slavering, orange-black monster paced in front of them.

One guard, Alok, rushed forward, and was swiftly murdered. The Menteri

leapt to meet him with chomping jaws, bringing him down by the neck. Alok's body shuddered on the ground.

Emboldened by righteous anger, the others yelled war cries, stabbing at the tiger-beast that danced snarling between their spear points. And behind the Menteri, Badang, wounded but far from finished, staggered to his feet like an avalanche in reverse, clutching his man-sized bludgeon in thick hands.

"Die, traitor!" he yelled, swinging the branch to brain the Menteri—

He should have succeeded, should have splattered the Menteri's devious brains all over the wet grass, should have ended their duel there and then. But the Menteri was no longer alone. His three cubs, fully-grown harimau jadi-jadian now, burst out of the treeline to defend their sire. Adi and Dia fell upon Badang, tearing into the meat of his wounded leg, snapping at his flank. Hania stood by her father, snarling in opposition to the wall of spears. The guardsmen came two at a time, and died in their pairs until only one remained: young Ketut. He dropped his spear and bolted, but Hania hunted him like a wild boar, bringing him down screaming into the royal fountain.

Spring-water gurgled red.

Badang, bloodied and savaged, thrashed on his stomach, struggling to dislodge Adi and Dia's hungry mouths from his flesh. When they fell away from him, he looked up, surprised, then glared glittering hate as he saw their father padding towards him, hungry tongue lolling. Badang tried to shriek an obscenity, but the Menteri pounced upon him, tearing ragged chunks from his throat, killing him dead.

The Menteri gulped down a piece of Badang, a small morsel. Already he felt more powerful.

"Thank you, beloved children," he rasped in a tongue halfway between tiger and human, shedding his blood-stained animal form so that he might make an appearance before the king and decry the foul murder of the Champion and guards—

—except the king, Paduka Sri Maharaja, stood at the base of his royal hill,

hunting bow nocked and drawn. "*Sorcerer*," the king accused, his voice full of betrayal and malice.

"My liege," the Menteri said, through teeth still too big for his mouth. Adi, Dia and Hania slunk behind him, growling, wary of the king's weapon. "There is an explanation."

"There will be no explanations," the king hissed. "Not till I have your treacherous head on a pike."

VII.

And so began the long, bloody war between the followers of King Paduka Sri Maharaja of Singapura, and the Harimau Jadi-Jadian, the Tiger-People of Temasek.

Even without Badang, the king's forces marauded furiously into the jungle. They ransacked the tiger-town, burning huts and murdering toothless old grand-tigers and young cubs. The survivors, led by the Menteri and Rima, launched counterattacks with grim resolve. Guards on jungle patrol were snatched away into the trees, war-boats capsized, men and women devoured on the golden beaches. Spurred on by vengeance, both sides did terrible things. Blood splattered on tree roots, soil and sand turned crimson. The island burned.

At the river mouth, traders packed their wares hurriedly onto ships and fled as soon as the monsoon allowed. But the Menteri still had friends among the merchants. He sent word to the Majapahit Empire, that if they attacked now they would find Singapura's navy weakened, the king's army occupied, and a guerrilla force in the jungle ready to aid their conquest. The tiger-people doubled their assault, laying siege to Forbidden Hill with the monsoon rains, forcing Paduka Sri Maharaja to recall his ships to shore.

Rima had begun to understand that her consort's machinations, the many-wheeled mind that she had loved, would soon cost her people more than she was willing to bear. She made her own plans. If Majapahit did not arrive

soon and end the war, she would flee north with her followers to the jungles across the water. They could lead quiet lives there, uninterrupted by trade and bloodshed, except of course for the violence of the hunt.

After six months of ceaseless war, Majapahit attacked.

VIII.

There is a famous tale about the last King of Singapura. The story goes that the kingdom was attacked by a school of swordfish, leaping from the waves and spearing fishermen, until a young boy saved the day with his net. Instead of celebrating the lad as a hero, the paranoid king had him put to death. Soon after, the boy's vengeful parents let the king's enemies in through the fortress wall. And that was the end of Singapura.

There's an echo of truth there. But there were no murderous swordfish, no plucky fisher-lad. No, after the Menterī sent word to Majapahit that Singapura was ripe for the taking, that mighty empire broke the tide of battle. They landed in swordfish-headed ships, painted with eyes and bristling with blades that gored ankles and ruptured stomachs, churning the surf bloody red. Majapahit's soldiers surged over sandy beach and stone wall. They carved their way up Forbidden Hill, leaving corpses in their wake like the tide leaves driftwood. The tiger-people took care of the rest, hungrily encircling the king's remaining forces.

King Paduka Sri Maharaja himself, embattled, outnumbered and pierced by arrows, screamed for his family to be taken to safety. His wife, who was a great warrior and sailor in her own right, grabbed the children and broke for the eastern beach, where she'd readied a small boat filled with food and weapons for a day such as this.

"Farewell, husband," she whispered, hands clapped over the prince and princess' mouths to keep them from crying.

Then the king was alone on the battlements, surrounded by a handful of troops and a score of enemies. They fought Majapahit's invading forces as

best they could, but their back was to the jungle, and the jungle was filled with ravenous tigers. When the king's guard had fallen, the Menterī stepped forward, a rueful smile on his face.

"You traitorous wretch—"

"Forgive me, *Lord of Three Worlds*," the Menterī said as he stabbed his former liege through the stomach. But this was a mistake. He *should* have slashed the king's throat, because even if Paduka Sri Maharaja was not truly Lord of Three Worlds, the words of the betrayed have great power:

"I curse you...traitor, you and all your...*family*," he spat. "You wish to be a king? Then be king in the forest. May you lose your mind, that treacherous devious mind that you love so much. May you and your children be trapped here forever...chained as tigers...nothing but animals...traitor..." The king fell to his knees and died, the blood gurgling out of his stomach louder than his words.

The war was over. The Menterī had won, but a chill had fallen upon him. He peered over the battlements, where on the beach-facing side of the hill, Majapahit soldiers were slaughtering the last of the king's men. He wiped cold sweat from his face, but his bloody hands left his forehead smeared crimson.

Afterwards, the Menterī and Rima went to swear their fealty to Majapahit. A big man received them on the beachhead, an emissary, well-fed and handsomely dressed.

"Majapahit thanks you," he said.

"We've lost many sons and daughters for your victory," Rima said.

"Such is war," the emissary said. "But I offer you my condolences. How might we recompense you, now that we are allied here in victory?"

The Menterī said nothing, for he was slaving at the emissary's jowled cheeks, the fat of his belly, the tantalising flesh of his arms and legs. Rima frowned at her consort, but replied with regal calm: "Give us this island to rule," she said. "Give us the run of the forest, let us drink from the streams. Let this be our kingdom, and we'll swear fealty to you and protect these waters on your behalf."

The emissary from Majapahit nodded, and he was ready to accept the offer, but the deal was never struck. Alas, the Menteri, in a sudden fit of animal hunger, rushed forward; distending his jaws to reveal a red wet maw full of sharp, sharp teeth. He bit the man's head off at the shoulders, chomping and chewing even as his skin sprouted fur and he fell to all fours, rippling orange-black; a tiger.

Rima howled in frustration and anger, but she had no choice but to change her skin too, transforming into a tiger as Majapahit's soldiers rushed forward with sword and spear. As they escaped into the jungle, they both knew the king's curse had taken hold.

They felt their minds slipping away from them.

IX.

Thus began the dark ages of Singapura. Majapahit's soldiers found they could not easily hold the island, for it was swarming with ravenous tigers with a taste for human flesh. They soon abandoned the fortification, letting the jungle reclaim the walls and huts, marking it on their maps as a hungry, toothed maw.

The dead king's children, spirited to safety by their mother, now resided in Melaka. She'd arranged for the prince's marriage to the daughter of the Sultan of Pasai, and he'd taken on the name Sultan Iskandar Shah, like his mythical ancestor Alexander-King. His reign lasted many years.

The tigers, for their part, began to feud and fight. For though their minds began to cloud and revert to pure instinct, they remembered what it was to be human, to have ambitions of wealth and power, and they blamed each other for their plight. The tiger who had once been the Menteri suffered these attacks most often from the tigress who'd once loved him. And though he was ancient and strong and blessed with the infernal strength that had once been Badang's, he retreated to the tall hill at Singapura's centre to lick his wounds and repent.

The many tribes of the Orang Laut continued to ply these waterways, but they had heard Singapura was no longer safe, and avoided going ashore.

Some, intrigued by rumours and youthful foolishness, paddled close to the mangrove swamps on the island's edges, coming close enough to see amber eyes that blazed like campfires in the dark beneath the trees.

In the centuries after Singapura was ransacked and its port turned to rotten wood, the boats hacked to pieces and the dynasty of the Lord of Three Worlds brought to a close, pirates began to capitalise on the island's deadly reputation. The most murderous gang of them established a base just off Singapura's southern tip, not far at all from the Dragon's-Tooth-Rock, planted so long ago by poor dead Badang.

But the Menteri, Rima and their clan still lived there. Stripped of their calculating minds, they lived furred, clawed and fanged, rustling through undergrowth, pulling boar and deer into streams that suddenly ran red with blood. They weren't human at all, except for their souls. Even the new cubs were born with human souls—the true tragedy of the curse. And though the tigers had forgotten human speech, something deep still called them to the voices and drunken pirate songs across the southern strait. One by one, they decided to investigate.

Tigers, after all, are excellent swimmers.

X.

In time, they began to keep their distance, to become less intrigued and more afraid of fire. They stayed clear of human places, and lived in the deep jungle, near a bone-strewn hill ruled by an ancient, enormous tiger.

Slowly, the Orang Laut began to return in small numbers. They set up camp once more in the shadow of Forbidden Hill and its ancient tombs. And though the line of the Lord of Three Worlds was extinguished, and the line of his treacherous Menteri no longer walked on two legs, the waves still broke on the sand and the sun still gleamed on those waves. Life continued in this way until the Englishmen landed on Singapura's southern shore.

But that is a story for another time.

FLIGHT

Topaz Winters

Topaz Winters (Singapore) is a poet, editor, actress and entrepreneur. Her work has been published in *Cosmonauts Avenue* and *Rust+Moth*, profiled in *India-West* and *Cicada Magazine*, and commended by the National Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and the National YoungArts Foundation, among others. She is the youngest Singaporean ever to be nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She serves as the editor-in-chief and creative director at Half Mystic Press; her latest book is *poems for the sound of the sky before thunder* (2017); her latest film is the award-winning *SUPERNOVA* (dir. Ishan Modi, 2017). She enjoys peonies, 1940s French pop songs, and the colour of the sky when nothing is dreaming of it. Find her online at topazwinters.com.

After Benjamin's funeral, Joyce makes tea, then sits down at the dining table and folds the 1,990th paper crane.

It's the folding that keeps her grounded. At the funeral, Lily's face was crumpled in heartbreak, but she didn't cry. Joyce cried for her, even though it felt like a betrayal, both of Lily and of Joyce herself. Now she folds so she doesn't keep crying.

She feels a soft nudge on her cheek and turns to see a paper crane floating, expectant, near her ear. "Not now," she says, and turns back to the one she's folding.

Another nudge.

"I said, not now."

She feels it again on her cheek and, before she can snap, hears the doorbell's chime.

Joyce looks up at the crane, which appears overly smug for a creature without a face.

"You win," Joyce says, and stands up. Walks to the door.

She isn't quite sure why she's so surprised to find Lily standing there, face empty. Numb.

"Hi," says Joyce.

"Can I come in," says Lily, and it's not a question. The floating crane follows her to the dining table; Lily regards it with a hint of wariness, but says nothing.

"Tea?" says Joyce, when the silence has become so overpowering it feels like a fist clenched in her throat.

Lily sighs, places her head on the dining room table, and does not respond. The 1,991st crane in Joyce's hands, now completely folded, stirs and floats over to Lily. Perches comfortably on her mess of hair.

Joyce doesn't actually know Lily that well, didn't even when she and Benjamin were together. Lily was, of course, someone Joyce fantasised about to no end, but nothing beyond that—Joyce was careful to be only as polite to Lily as one is to one's boyfriend's sister. She hid her crush well, she likes to think.

In the beginning, Joyce had known Lily only as the girl who sat in the seat just in front of her in their Foundations of Science class at Yale-NUS, and who tore off the corners of her assignment papers and folded tiny origami cranes. Joyce can't pinpoint exactly when in freshman year her feelings for Lily became less idly curious and more longing. Perhaps it was the first time Lily came up to her after class and said, in a voice like honey and gossamer, that she'd loved the question Joyce had asked of the professor that day—that it had helped Lily, an Arts and Humanities major, understand the concepts that rolled easy as a waterfall from the mouth of Joyce, a Mathematical, Computational and Statistical Sciences major. Or when Joyce looked up from one of the doodles in the margins of her notebook and realised the girl she'd been drawing—shoulder-length dream-black hair, nose just a bit too small, eyes wide as a flower mid-bloom—looked suspiciously like Lily. Or the time Joyce overheard Lily confronting a senior who'd made a joke in class about how many faggots there were at this goddamn school, voice shaking yet so true.

That was before Joyce had started folding her cranes, when the word *bisexual* was still unfamiliar on her tongue. And, more importantly, it was before Benjamin.

Lily raises her head. The crane startles and flutters off of her hair.

"I just," she says, and stops.

"I know," says Joyce, even though she does not know. The just-folded 1,992nd crane floats out of her hands to eye level, glares at her accusingly, sharp as a nosebleed. She bats it away.

"He didn't deserve it," says Lily.

Something brutal and knowing scratches against the inside of Joyce's throat. She coughs. Can't bring herself to agree.

Benjamin was Joyce's first serious boyfriend, and even in the beginning, it had been perfect in ways that had made her feel uncomfortable. They'd met at a party through mutual friends, and Benjamin had been tall and charming, familiar in that lilting, too-good-to-be-true way, the kind that meant Joyce shaved her legs before every date and felt her voice catch the first time she'd had to say, *I love you too*. Joyce had felt alone around him in ways that loomed heavy in the edges of her vision and that she refused to think about in the light.

But they'd been so good for each other. That was what people always said—Joyce's parents, the first time she'd brought Benjamin home to meet them ("Such a polite boy," her mother had remarked, "and he's already done with NS, too!"); her friends, all of whom seemed endlessly jealous ("What a *catch*," her best friend had muttered. "How come all the good ones always like you?"); the distant relatives she only saw at Lunar New Year, who delighted in

poring over the photographs of him on her phone and endlessly questioning Joyce as to when the marriage would happen ("You need grandchildren," her grandmother had cackled, "to take care of you when you get old and grey like me!").

Joyce supposes, looking back on it now, that she stayed for Lily. She hates the way this sounds in her mind, as if she is somehow weaker for it—but there it is, unflinching in its truth. Even in the beginning, when things were perfect, she spent too much time glancing at Lily when Benjamin wasn't looking, savoured every casual conversation she was able to steal. The crush that had barely crossed Joyce's mind when she'd only known Lily as the girl in front of her in Foundations of Science flourished when Joyce came over to the apartment Benjamin and Lily shared and gazed at Lily painting, watercolour paints strewn over the coffee table, while Benjamin watched television; when Joyce cracked jokes with Lily while Benjamin was in the toilet and marvelled as Lily threw her head back and laughed like a sunrise; when Lily flashed Joyce a thumbs-up and mouthed *jia you* as Joyce met Benjamin's parents for the first time and Joyce felt a stirring in her chest that had nothing to do with nervousness, brimming with notions of warmth.

Lily picks up the 1,993rd paper crane, its wings trapped in her fist even as it struggles to get away from her. The action scares Joyce, seeing how Lily refuses to let the desperate crane go. Reminds her too much of Benjamin.

They both stare at the crane, valiant in its struggles, until finally Joyce taps Lily's clenched fist. Lily looks up.

"Here," Joyce says quietly, and hands her the 1,994th crane.

Lily opens her palm, throat moving around something she doesn't say. The 1,993rd crane, now crumpled, flutters crookedly out of reach, settles on Joyce's shoulder.

“Sorry,” Lily says to the crane. “I didn’t mean it.” As the 1,994th crane takes the place of the last in her hands, she starts crying.

He’d started hitting her after they’d moved in together.

Joyce wants to keep that straight in her mind. She hadn’t agreed to live with him after the violence had begun. She might have been stupid, but she hadn’t been *that* stupid.

An HDB flat in Toa Payoh, after Benjamin graduated and Joyce was in her senior year, when they’d been going steady for three years, when everyone around them was just waiting for him to propose, when the horrible love poems Joyce wrote in the margins of her notebook in more boring classes were still addressed to a *she*. Lily and Benjamin had roomed together before then—an arrangement Joyce never complained about—but Lily, no matter how close she was with her brother, was perfectly amicable to finding another place to live. So it had been Joyce and Benjamin, alone and together.

She can’t remember what they’d been talking about the first time it happened—just that they were watching television in the evening and she’d said something he didn’t like. It started as one of his furious, ranting episodes, the ones Joyce had become used to happening occasionally in their relationship, where she nodded placidly, murmured apologies and tuned him out as he accused her of flirting with the muscled senior boy in her Dante and the European Middle Ages class, or of cheating on him, or of not loving him, or of hating him and wanting him to die.

This time, though, instead of working himself up, storming off to another room and stomping around for twenty minutes until he’d cooled down, he grabbed Joyce by the chin in the middle of one of her distracted nods, hissed, “You *listen* to me when I’m talking to you,” and slapped her, hard, across the face.

All noise bled out of the room. Her cheek stinging and mind fleeing, somersaulting, tripping over itself in terror. In isolation.

She looked into his eyes and recognised the person she saw there. It was not a monster, some creature beyond Joyce’s wildest imaginings—it was just Benjamin, and that scared her more than anything.

That night she went into their bedroom, sat on the bed trembling and staring into space and, bizarrely, thinking of Lily. Thinking of how much it would shatter Lily if she walked out now.

And before morning came and Benjamin apologised with tears in his eyes, before he begged for her forgiveness, before he promised that he had no idea what had gotten into him and it would never, ever happen again—before all of that, Joyce walked to the desk and took out the origami paper left over from the sophomore art class she’d taken just because she’d known Lily would also be in it, and, with shaking hands, she folded the first crane.

Lily’s tears fall on the 1,994th crane. Joyce stands up, grabs the tissue box from the kitchen counter, and passes it to Lily.

“He always seemed invincible to me,” Lily says, voice hollow. “Nothing could ever hurt him. I can’t believe...”

“It was a shock for all of us,” Joyce says, hoping her own voice sounds as anguished as Lily’s. Her hands tremble. She picks up a piece of paper and starts folding.

After a moment, Lily tilts her head. Tears are still running down her cheeks, but she sounds calmer when she says, “I didn’t think you liked origami. Why do you fold them?”

Joyce’s hands freeze for a moment. It is the first time anyone has asked her that question.

She finishes folding the 1,995th crane. Takes a deep breath as it comes

to life in her hands. Thinks about one thousand cranes and wishes granted, peace from the blows, not being alone anymore.

“They keep me company,” she says.

The second time he hit her had been weeks later, and the third time six days after that. Afterward, Joyce stopped counting.

She thinks she should probably be in therapy. At the very least, she should tell someone. Her mother, or her best friend. Lily, even.

But she hasn’t told anyone and she knows with a sickening certainty that she probably never will. After all, she reasons, it’s half her fault anyway. For not standing up to him, or for talking too loud around him, or for having her friends over, or for not cooking dinner the exact way he wanted it, or for watching the wrong television channel, or for wearing a shirt that was too tight. It has to be at least partially her fault. It’s not like he wanted to do it to her—he always told her that, how he was sorry, he really was, but couldn’t she see how he didn’t have a choice? Couldn’t she understand that if she was just a better girlfriend, he wouldn’t have to do it?

Joyce folded cranes after each time he hit her. The first time she only folded one, and the second time four, and after that dozens each time. She kept a running count in the back of her mind, bought more origami paper at Popular when her supplies ran out at home. She tucked them around the house where Benjamin wouldn’t think to look—nestled in her nightstand drawer, beneath the mattress of the bed, in the cabinet below the sink, between the couch cushions, a few scattered here and there so she always had one at hand when the blows began. She doesn’t remember at which number they began coming to life and keeping her company—only that they were still when Benjamin was at home, but fluttered back up the moment he stepped out the door. She was grateful for them then and she still is now, even if she doesn’t understand them.

“I used to fold these all the time in class,” Lily says, picking up the 1,995th crane, holding it with infinite gentleness. “I couldn’t concentrate when my hands weren’t making something. Do you remember?”

“I remember,” says Joyce.

“They made me think of flight,” says Lily, voice quiet and sad. “I thought maybe I could fly away from this place one day. Benjamin told me I could. He said I could do anything I set my mind to.”

“He was so encouraging,” says Joyce. Tenses at how disingenuous it sounds in her ears, tries again. “He always knew the right thing to say.”

“He was my big brother,” says Lily. “What am I going to do without him?” She’s crying again. Joyce does not know what to do but give her cranes number 1,996 and 1,997, as if they might serve as comfort.

She remembers the day she snapped with perfect clarity. It was one of their good days—going through boxes of old school work, sorting out which papers to keep and which to recycle while Linying crooned from the stereo, laughing with Benjamin at inane essays for Chinese class and doodles in the margins of chemistry notes, him exclaiming over finding his Yale-NUS acceptance letter. It was one of those days that tasted so much like the old ones, back when they were just as perfect of a couple behind closed doors as in public, back when she didn’t feel so alone, before she started folding cranes or became a master of *Oh, I fell again, I’m so clumsy* and dabbing concealer over fading bruises. One of those days when Joyce felt like her shoulders were coming down from around her ears. When the desperation faded, even if only slightly, from her every breath.

Until she threw him a teasing question (“So tell me, are you as much of a

physics prodigy today as you were in Sec 5?") and received no answer.

Immediately Joyce knew something was wrong. She thought it was because of the joke and hastened to cover it up, apologising profusely, turning down the stereo lest he complain that the music was too loud, reminding him how intelligent he was. He said nothing. That was how she knew it would be bad.

Eventually she fell silent, too. Waited for the thunder.

"What the fuck," Benjamin said finally, "is this."

He was holding one of her pages of notes from the Dante and the European Middle Ages class. She'd hated that class, though she'd taken it initially because her best friend had persuaded her that it would be fun. Something to break her out of her favourite computer science classes.

"What are you talking about?" Joyce whispered.

Benjamin stalked up to her and jammed the paper in her face, finger shoved into the margin, where Joyce had penned—*Oh god*, she thought, stomach dropping—a poem. A terrible poem, as most of hers were. A poem for Lily.

When he finished with her that night, she ached all over. Cherry-purple bruises lined her throat, wrists, arms, chest, legs, too many to cover with dabs of concealer. Her eye swelled.

When the night began, she'd been on the 899th crane.

By the next morning, working through the night, she finished folding the 1,000th. Around her, the flat hummed, charged with something Joyce didn't know how to name.

Hours later, Benjamin walked out of the apartment and, on his way to work, was hit by a cement truck and killed instantly. A freak accident, the police called it.

When Joyce heard the news, she took a deep breath. Looked at the paper cranes folded all around her.

"Thank you," she whispered, and began folding the 1,001st.

Lily stirs. Picks up her untouched cup of tea, peers into it, takes a sip though it must be cold by now. "I should go," she says. "I'm sorry for barging in like this."

Joyce is so tired of being alone. She wants to say, *Don't go*, and instead folds the 1,998th crane quickly, almost desperately. "I wish it didn't have to be this way," she says. "It wasn't fair."

"I'm going to miss him," Lily says.

"I think we all are," Joyce says as she folds the 1,999th crane.

Lily gets to her feet, slowly and—Joyce wants to believe—unwillingly. Starts walking towards the door. "Thank you," she says.

"For what?" Joyce says.

"For taking care of him."

Joyce doesn't laugh, though she wants to. Instead she folds the 2,000th paper crane. It feels like something inside of her is breaking and coming together all at once. Around her, the flat hums like it did the morning Benjamin died, the cranes rustling against each other, floating up into the air. Lily pauses as she reaches the door, then turns back and suddenly is squeezing Joyce into a hug. Joyce hates herself for enjoying it.

"I'm so sorry," Joyce says.

Lily searches her face. "I think it's going to be okay," she says, with the most sureness Joyce has heard in her voice since the funeral. "I think..." A dull ache spreads through Joyce's chest as Lily pauses, smiles hesitantly—not happy, but something else. "I think we're all going to be okay."

Then she is walking out the door.

The 2,000th crane brushes against Joyce's cheek. Soft, like a kiss.

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